

Exploring the value of competency-based education



BY MADELINE PATTON MAY 4, 2021

In their May 12 [AACC Digital](#) conference presentation about the need for and value of short-term courses, Amardeep Kahlon and Kerry Mix will focus on the distinctive attributes of competency-based education (CBE), its value to students beyond mere course condensation and its potential to boost enrollment and credential completion.

“It’s the way you develop materials. It’s the way you teach it. It’s the way you assess it ... (and) the big thing about CBE is that it’s never done in isolation, particularly for workforce programs – it always has the [employer involvement](#),” said Kahlon, a CBE leader in Texas and professor and administrator at [Austin Community College](#) (ACC). She will become dean of the new Technical Institute of Environmental Professions at Unity College (Maine) in May.

Kahlon summarizes the key values of CBE:

- “Students can work at a pace that works for them.
- Students are tested for mastery at frequent intervals.
- Students can accelerate even in a short five-week course.
- CBE course curriculum development is also different – it is a backward design as opposed to the traditional forward course design.
- A traditional course focuses on the topics; a CBE course focuses on the topics and the skills.”

During their presentation, Kahlon and Mix, who is executive vice president and provost of [Lamar Institute of Technology](#) in Texas, will provide highlights from CBE implementations at [Amarillo College](#), Texas A&M University-Commerce, [South Texas College](#) and ACC.

They will also talk about the [challenges of adopting the pedagogical changes](#) that underpin CBE, as well as adjusting learning management systems and student information systems to document credentials based on student mastery of skills taught rather than seat time.

[Register](#) for the [AACC Digital](#) conference, which runs each Wednesday and Thursday in May.

“There is no one formula” for doing all of this, Kahlon said, adding, “In fact, there’s no one definition of competency-based (education). Everybody is doing it differently. ... It’s moving toward standardization. The Department of Education has a definition, but everybody is doing it based on their constraints of their technology, based on constraints

of their accreditation, and the constraints of their institution, and their faculty and their students.”

Kahlon – whose 25 years as a computer science professor and administrator at ACC included directing the Fast Track to Success project to expand CBE across Texas – will share findings from the two CBE reports she did for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Kahlon completed her career at ACC on April 30 as assistant dean for distance learning and external relations.

Tapping into TAACCCT

CBE became the focus of Kahlon’s career in 2013, when she and colleagues used a U.S. Labor Department **Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training** (TAACCCT) grant to convert 25 courses for competency-based delivery.

“At that time, we only knew how to spell competency-based education. We didn’t know anything beyond that,” Kahlon said.

The format for the **Accelerated Programmer Training** (APT) program that she and colleagues developed – and the ACC continues to offer – allows for accelerating course completion, awards credit for prior knowledge and allows students flexibility for scheduling in-person and online learning. APT results have been tremendous: it tripled the number of computer information technology/computer science degrees and certificates that ACC awarded and increased the number of female, African-American male and Latino women graduates.

The success of APT led to Kahlon’s involvement in other innovative programs at ACC including Women in IT, the Career ACCelerator, Information Technology Academy, the bachelor of applied science degree in software development and a Perkins State Leadership grant for the Fast Track to Success project that helped other Texas colleges develop CBE programs. Since organizing the first Fast Track to Success Conference in 2016, Kahlon has grown the annual meeting into a valuable forum to discuss higher education innovation.

Ready to restart

Lamar Institute of Technology (LIT) is one of the Texas colleges that participated in Fast Track to Success. Mix described LIT as being in the “infancy” of its CBE journey. LIT was building capacity among faculty and staff to transform programs to CBE prior to the pandemic. It’s an effort he hopes will restart in the future, perhaps in fall 2021.

“The schools that are doing it (CBE) and the manner in which they’re doing it is truly phenomenal and might be the next way that we become increasingly vital in the future as higher education,” Mix said.