



FAQ: Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education

The California Community Colleges are exploring Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education (Direct Assessment-CBE) to expand access, support timely completion, and strengthen workforce readiness in alignment with Vision 2030. This FAQ answers common questions about what Direct Assessment-CBE is, how it works, and whom it is designed to support. It is intended to provide clear, consistent guidance for faculty, staff, system partners, and others interested in learning more about this flexible, mastery-based pathway. We appreciate the work of our pilot colleges in designing and offering Direct Assessment-CBE: Coastline College, Southwestern College, Shasta College, Bakersfield College, East Los Angeles College, Merced College, Mt. San Antonio College.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education?

Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education (Direct Assessment-CBE) is a flexible, mastery-based model that focuses on what students know and can do.

In this model, students earn credentials by demonstrating mastery of clearly defined skills and knowledge rather than advancing based on a term schedule or time spent in a classroom. Progress is based on demonstrated learning, not seat time.

Faculty define the competencies and directly assess student learning to ensure rigor, consistency, and alignment with academic and workforce expectations. Direct Assessment-CBE is an additional pathway that expands access while maintaining high academic standards and supporting Vision 2030 goals.

How does the Direct Assessment-CBE model work?

Direct Assessment-CBE brings together two core elements: competency-based education and direct assessment. Each plays a distinct role in how learning is organized and measured.

Competency-based education: How learning is organized

Competency-based education organizes learning around clearly defined competencies: the knowledge, skills, and abilities students need to demonstrate.

Students progress based on mastery rather than a fixed course sequence or term schedule. Faculty define the competencies and learning expectations, ensuring they reflect academic standards, transfer requirements, and workforce relevance.

This structure allows learning to adapt to students' lives while keeping expectations clear and consistent.

Direct assessment: How learning is measured

Direct assessment measures learning through direct evaluation of demonstrated mastery rather than credit hours or seat time.

Faculty assess student work using meaningful, applied assessments, such as projects, simulations, reflections, or hands-on tasks, that show both knowledge and the ability to apply it. Students advance only after they have demonstrated mastery of each competency (above 80%).

This approach maintains rigor by ensuring students move forward based on readiness, not time.

How is Direct Assessment Competency-Based Education different from traditional credit-based programs?

Traditional credit-based programs and Direct Assessment-CBE both offer rigorous, high-quality pathways for students. Traditional programs organize learning around courses, credit hours, and term schedules. Direct Assessment-CBE offers an additional pathway that organizes learning around mastery of competencies. Instead of progressing through time, students advance when they have demonstrated specific skills and knowledge through applied assessments.

This approach creates more flexibility for students who need it while keeping learning and mastery at the center. Direct Assessment-CBE does not replace traditional programs. It expands the system's ability to meet the needs of working adults, caregivers, veterans, and others who benefit from a model that adapts to their pace and prior learning.

What does Direct Assessment-CBE look like in practice? (How do students progress through a Direct Assessment-CBE program?)

In a Direct Assessment-CBE program, students progress by demonstrating mastery of specific competencies that faculty design and assess. They engage with learning experiences and assessments at the pace that works for them. When a student has shown they fully understand and can apply a competency through real demonstrations of learning, they move on to the next one. This means students can accelerate through skills they already know or take more time when needed without being tied to a term schedule.

In practice, this can look like:

- An early childhood education student completing projects and reflections that show understanding of child development and inclusive teaching.
- A working parent in a health care program demonstrating skills they already use on the job while focusing learning time on new competencies such as anatomy or medical ethics.
- A career changer in IT building a website or responding to a simulated cybersecurity issue to show mastery.
- A learner in automotive technology diagnosing and repairing equipment to demonstrate applied skill.

In each case, faculty assess mastery directly and students move forward based on what they know and can do.

Whom is Direct Assessment-CBE designed for, and how does it support them?

Direct Assessment-CBE is designed for any learner whose life does not fit traditional term schedules, including working adults, caregivers, returning learners, and others who need flexibility to balance education with jobs and family responsibilities. Time-based learning models that require learning to follow a fixed pace underserve this group of learners.

Direct Assessment-CBE supports learners with prior learning by allowing them to progress at the pace that works for them and by honoring what they already know. Students can advance quickly through competencies they have already mastered and spend more time on new material without falling behind a cohort. The model pairs this flexibility with strong faculty engagement and

built-in supports like coaching, clear progress tracking, and connections to resources. This creates a pathway that is rigorous, personalized, and designed to help more learners reach their goals.

How does Direct Assessment-CBE maintain academic rigor and quality?

Direct Assessment-CBE maintains rigor by requiring students to demonstrate mastery of every competency before they move forward. Faculty design the competencies, create meaningful and measurable assessments, and directly evaluate each student's performance. This focus on mastery sets a high bar because students must show both knowledge and the ability to apply it — not simply complete a set number of hours or assignments.

Quality is also strengthened through alignment with real workforce needs and transfer expectations, combined with consistent faculty oversight of each student's progress. Students advance only when they have proven they are ready, which creates transparency in what they know and can do and ensures each program meets the academic standards that faculty uphold.

What role do faculty play in designing and assessing Direct Assessment-CBE programs?

As with all educational programs, faculty are central to every part of Direct Assessment-CBE. They design the program, define the competencies, create the learning experiences, and determine what mastery looks like. Faculty also develop the assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning, and they evaluate each competency directly to ensure consistency and quality.

This model creates space for faculty innovation and deeper engagement with student learning. By shaping the competencies and assessments themselves, faculty maintain the institution's academic standards while creating more personalized and meaningful pathways for students. Their leadership is what ensures that Direct Assessment-CBE is rigorous, student-centered, and aligned with the realities of today's learners.

How are employers involved in Direct Assessment-CBE, and why does it matter?

Faculty engage employers to help identify the competencies and skills that are most in demand, which ensures that programs stay aligned with real workforce needs. By working with faculty to validate what matters in the workplace, employers help ensure that the competencies that students master reflect their industries' expectations.

This alignment strengthens workforce readiness and gives employers confidence that graduates have demonstrated the abilities needed to contribute on Day 1. It also helps students earn credentials that clearly signal their skills and preparation for high-demand careers.

How does Direct Assessment-CBE support Vision 2030 goals around equity, completion, and workforce readiness?

At the heart of Vision 2030 is a commitment to reimagining access so we are no longer waiting for students to come to us. With 6.8 million Californians ages 25 to 54 who have a high school education but no degree, Direct Assessment-CBE helps meet learners where they are by offering a flexible pathway built around mastery rather than rigid term schedules. This approach creates new access points for working adults, caregivers, veterans, returning learners, and others whose lives do not align with traditional seat-time requirements and helps advance equity in access and baccalaureate attainment.

Direct Assessment-CBE also supports timely completion because students can accelerate through competencies they already understand and avoid excess credits or delays tied to limited course availability. Because competencies are aligned with workforce needs and informed by employer input, students gain skills that translate directly to high-demand careers. Together, these elements help strengthen workforce readiness, support completion, and move the system closer to the governor's goal of 70% postsecondary attainment.

Resources to Learn More

There are several resources available to help faculty, staff, and system partners learn more about Direct Assessment-CBE. These include introductory materials that explain the model, examples from early pilots, and guidance on implementation planning and program design. As programs grow and new lessons emerge, we will add additional resources.

To explore resources, visit:

- [Implementation Blueprint](#)
- [Direct Assessment Competency Based Education Landing Page](#)

