

2025 REPORT TO THE OREGON LEGISLATURE:

Oregon Revised Statute 350.125 Competency Based Education



Photo Credit: Rogue Community College

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COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN OREGON

OVERVIEW

Competency-Based Education (CBE) in Oregon's public postsecondary institutions is an evolving approach that prioritizes student mastery of essential skills, enabling progression based on demonstrated competency rather than adherence to traditional academic calendars. While implementation of CBE remains limited, targeted work, especially within Emergency Medical Services (EMS) programs, has showcased its promise for providing more flexible, relevant pathways to workforce readiness, particularly for adult learners and working students.

This report, prepared pursuant to ORS 350.125¹, defines CBE as a system where instructional success is determined by students' demonstrated proficiency in specific competencies, allowing for individualized advancement and adaptable learning experiences. The report focuses primarily on community college EMS programs and provides a statewide overview, including key barriers (such as funding misalignments, regional accreditation requirements, and equity gaps) that hinder broader CBE adoption.

Oregon's commitment to CBE aligns closely with state workforce and education goals, particularly the Adult Education Attainment Goal of 300,000 additional degrees, certificates, or credentials by 2030 (OAR 715-017-0002²). By emphasizing equity, supporting prior learning, and addressing regional accreditation needs, the report offers specific policy and funding recommendations to guide the expansion of CBE and ensure that new investments contribute to increased access, quality, and workforce alignment across Oregon's postsecondary system.

ALIGNMENT WITH OREGON'S ADULT EDUCATION ATTAINMENT GOAL

Competency-Based Education (CBE) and Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) play a central role in advancing Oregon's Adult Education Attainment goal, which seeks to have at least 300,000 adults complete new postsecondary degrees, certificates, or industry-valuable credentials by 2030 (OAR 715-017-0002). CBE's strength lies in its flexibility: it allows adult learners to progress at their own pace and demonstrate mastery of specific, workforce-relevant skills rather than being bound by traditional academic schedules. This flexibility is particularly crucial for adults balancing work and family obligations, many of whom bring significant prior learning and job experience into the classroom. By leveraging Competency-Based Assessment, often built on Credit for Prior Learning frameworks, CBE acknowledges and awards credit for existing knowledge, making credential attainment faster and more affordable.

Oregon's CBE models are strategically implemented in programs that directly meet labor market needs, most notably in high-demand fields such as emergency medical services and other Career and Technical Education Programs. These programs ensure that students earn credentials that translate immediately to family-wage jobs and economic opportunity, directly supporting the state's economic development objectives. CBE is also a powerful tool for equity: its personalized approach and accelerated pathways have proven especially valuable in reaching adult learners from historically underserved populations, including first-generation students and rural residents, thereby helping to close persistent gaps in educational attainment.

¹ ORS 350.125 - https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors350.html

² OAR 715-017-0002 – [Adult Education Attainment Goal](#)

Furthermore, CBE-driven programs have demonstrated that students can complete credentials more quickly by focusing solely on competencies not yet mastered, an essential benefit as Oregon works toward its ambitious annual completion benchmarks. By aligning CBE with stackable, industry-valued certificates and leveraging Credit for Prior Learning, Oregon can maximize the number and diversity of adults positioned to earn high-value credentials. In sum, continued investment in and policy support for CBE are critical to meeting Oregon’s adult education attainment goals while promoting workforce competitiveness, equity, and economic resilience statewide.

PUBLIC POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The Oregon EMS Consortium is a group of public colleges, universities, and private training providers offering EMS training, including EMT and Paramedic. In Oregon, programs are governed by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC), responsible for accreditation, and the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), responsible for licensure³. The agencies collaborate to ensure programs comply with federal and state laws, standards, and licensure requirements. OHA’s Oregon EMS and Trauma Systems Section is the designated entity that oversees education and testing for EMS providers and sets the standards for curriculum, instructor qualifications, and course administration for initial EMS provider courses. They designate Oregon colleges, universities, and other accredited programs to provide training, instructors, and testing to qualify EMS providers for state licensure⁴.

Oregon’s transition to competency-based assessment in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) education continues to be shaped by coordinated leadership from OHA and HECC. The statewide shift was prompted by a redesign of national EMS certification exams, replacing traditional standardized skills testing with a state-approved program focused on verifying student competencies. This new model is grounded in national education standards and Oregon’s EMS scope of practice, ensuring that assessments authentically reflect real-world readiness for licensure and employment.

Recent feedback from college EMS instructors and students confirms that CBA enhances skill mastery and student engagement. Programs at Chemeketa and Central Oregon Community Colleges have reported that students demonstrate the core competencies for EMT licensure earlier in the 11-week term, freeing up class time for immersive, scenario-based learning. Faculty have observed that tracking progress through performance outcomes, supported by modern learning management systems with outcome trackers, promotes individualized learning and provides both instructors and students with real-time data to adapt instruction and target additional skill development. Students report greater ownership of their learning and more genuine preparation for “thinking and acting like EMTs” in the field.

OHA and HECC have broadened their collaborative approach in 2024–2025, engaging college staff from e-learning, curriculum, and assessment offices alongside EMS faculty, further integrating the statewide CBA program into institutional practices. This collaboration ensures that program-level outcomes can be adopted for college-wide assessment initiatives, supporting quality improvement and systemic accountability.

Key elements of the current Oregon EMS CBA program include:

³ OHA – [Education and Training for EMS Providers](#)

⁴ [Oregon Health Authority : Education and Training for EMS Providers : Education and Training for EMS Providers : State of Oregon](#)

- Assessments mapped to five competency areas: patient care, clinical rationale, systems knowledge, communication/interpersonal skills, and professionalism.
- Course activities and assessments tied directly to performance outcomes based on established educational taxonomies.
- Regular review and revision of course and assessment strategies by instructors, with ongoing technical guidance from OHA.
- Use of Canvas LMS outcome trackers to support longitudinal assessment and inform instruction.
- Revised administrative rules from OHA for EMS education that align policies with modern assessment and accountability principles.

The upcoming academic year will see the launch of statewide data collection and quality improvement processes, with the first comprehensive reports on outcomes anticipated by mid-2025. This investment in robust data systems is expected to inform policy, improve program effectiveness, and further differentiate CBA's impact on student achievement and workforce readiness.

In summary, under OHA's direction and leadership the Oregon EMS CBA program is progressing toward statewide, data-driven, student-centered assessment models that offer a template for other workforce-aligned disciplines. The system's emphasis on collaboration, flexible teaching, and robust accountability is positioning Oregon to achieve its ambitious attainment and workforce goals through a focus on real-world competencies and modern education practices.

BARRIERS TO EXPANSION

Key barriers to advancing Competency-Based Education (CBE) and Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) in Oregon's community college EMS programs and other programs include:

Funding Model Misalignment: The prevailing state funding structure is tied to credit/clock hours rather than actual demonstration of competency. This misalignment limits the incentive and the feasibility for colleges to broadly implement or scale CBE/CBA, as current reimbursement requires rigid adherence to traditional seat-time, even as instructional practice shifts toward mastery-based approaches.

Infrastructure and Technology Gaps: Successful CBE/CBA implementation relies on robust learning management systems with outcome tracking. While some colleges have invested in these systems, many lack the technology or resources to support individualized, longitudinal tracking of student competency attainment, limiting the effectiveness and reach of CBE/CBA models.

Faculty and Staff Capacity: Expanding CBE/CBA requires ongoing professional development in assessment design, competency mapping, and the use of new technologies. Current resources for training and capacity-building are insufficient, putting strain on faculty tasked with implementing new instructional and assessment models.

Data and Accountability Limitations: Annual reporting requirements from OHA have increased, but colleges are still developing the infrastructure and practices needed for high-quality, systemwide outcome tracking. This limits the ability to produce comprehensive evidence on the effectiveness and workforce impact of CBE/CBA, which in turn affects policy and funding decisions.

Pace of Broader Adoption: Outside of EMS, and a handful of technical and workforce programs, adoption of full CBE remains rare due to these interrelated structural and resource barriers. Further expansion to other fields will require policy changes, pilot investments, and institutional coordination.

These barriers are not unique to Oregon but are well-documented in the national CBE landscape. Addressing them will require legislative action for funding reform, targeted technology investments, expanded professional development, and regulatory clarity, as well as support for pilot programs that test competency-based models outside the traditional seat-time structure.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

The Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) does not currently track which programs or courses are explicitly competency-based, and because CBE offerings remain limited, primarily in Emergency Medical Services (EMS), there isn't enough statewide student outcome data for meaningful analysis or policy evaluation. This lack of systematic data makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of CBE compared to traditional models across different disciplines.

To address this, HECC's Office of Research and Data is considering strategies to compare year-over-year outcomes for EMT courses as more programs implement the competency-based assessment (CBA) model. These initial comparisons may establish a foundation for understanding changes in outcomes such as skill mastery, licensure rates, and workforce readiness, and may pave the way for collecting more detailed, student-level and course-level data statewide. Building this data infrastructure is essential for evaluating CBE's impact and supporting accountable, data-driven program and funding decisions in the future.

Meanwhile, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) is requiring colleges and universities offering EMS programs to submit annual reports on student competency attainment in five core areas: patient care, clinical reasoning, systems knowledge, communication/interpersonal skills, and professionalism. OHA is standardizing data collection by supporting the use of outcome-tracking learning management systems like Canvas, enabling longitudinal monitoring of student progress at the individual and cohort levels. These efforts are further reinforced by new administrative rules to ensure data is actionable for both regulatory oversight and continuous program improvement.

Through this collaboration, outcome data from EMS programs is being integrated into institutional and statewide accountability systems, supporting broader assessment and future policy development. The 2024–2025 academic year marks the first comprehensive, statewide rollout of these reporting and quality improvement processes, with robust results expected by mid-2025 to inform ongoing evaluation of CBA's effect on student success and workforce readiness.

These pioneering efforts by OHA in partnership with HECC will provide a strong foundation for eventual statewide CBE data collection and opportunities for quality improvement. OHA's rigorous data protocols, use of learning management systems for outcome tracking, and new annual reporting requirements are producing detailed, meaningful information on student mastery of workforce-relevant competencies. This approach not only enhances educational accountability within EMS programs but also offers a roadmap for HECC as it develops a broader data infrastructure for competency-based education. As these practices become fully integrated in 2024–2025, Oregon will have the tools to monitor student outcomes more closely, inform evidence-based policy and funding decisions, and provide a scalable model for expanding CBE into additional

high-need fields, ultimately supporting the state’s goals for educational attainment, workforce readiness, and equitable student success.

REGIONAL ACCREDITATION CONSIDERATIONS

As colleges and universities consider adding or expanding CBE and CBA, there are important accreditation considerations from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities⁵ (NWCCU) that may impact program design decisions.

Alignment with Accreditation Standards: NWCCU requires that all educational programs, including CBE models, demonstrate clear, measurable learning outcomes and show evidence of student achievement. Institutions must ensure their admission, completion, and graduation requirements are clearly defined and accessible. Faculty play a central role in establishing curricula and assessment, maintaining academic standards, and institutional learning outcomes must be regularly assessed for currency and quality.

Approval of Substantive Changes: If a college or university plans to initiate or expand CBE, especially when 50% or more of a degree is awarded based on assessment of competencies (as opposed to traditional credit hours), NWCCU classifies this as a major substantive change. The institution must submit a substantive change proposal and receive explicit approval from NWCCU before implementation. This review process ensures that new CBE programs or changes do not adversely impact the institution’s resources, mission, or capacity to meet accreditation standards. Comprehensive reviews, including self-assessment and possible site visits, may be required.

Direct Assessment Programs: CBE programs relying entirely on direct assessment (not credit/clock hours) require NWCCU approval, as well as approval from federal and state regulators. Institutions must demonstrate the sufficiency of instructional resources, detail how competencies equate to credit hours, and ensure that all regulatory requirements, such as substantive instructor-student interactions, are met.

Continuous Quality Improvement and Equity: NWCCU emphasizes continuous, data-informed self-assessment to improve educational quality, promote equity, and close achievement gaps. Institutions must demonstrate that CBE programs support equitable student outcomes and that changes enhance institutional effectiveness.

Title IV and Financial Aid Compliance: Regional accreditation by NWCCU is crucial for institutional eligibility for federal financial aid (Title IV). Changes to CBE program delivery or structure must remain in compliance with these regulations, which are tied to NWCCU’s accreditation status.

Advance planning for substantive change approval, alignment with learning outcome assessment standards, and ongoing monitoring for compliance and equity will support successful implementation and scaling of CBE within a regional accreditation context

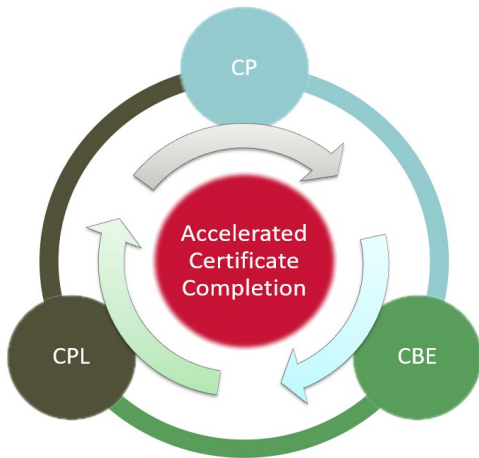
⁵ Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities – Accreditation Standards, <https://nwccu.org/standards/>

FUNDING STRATEGIES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To fully realize the benefits of competency-based education (CBE) across Oregon’s public postsecondary institutions, strategic policy action and sustainable funding are essential. The following recommendations are designed to align state resources and policy frameworks with the unique features of CBE, ensuring expanded access, equity, and workforce relevance for all learners. These proposals aim to foster statewide innovation, strengthen institutional capacity, and promote the successful scale-up of CBE programs in alignment with Oregon’s adult education and workforce goals.

As noted throughout this report, Oregon’s current funding model for public higher education is focused on seat time or clock/credit hours. In order to expand CBE/CBA practices, student outcomes-based funding models would need to be established that reward mastery and credential completion, rather than relying on traditional seat-time formulas.

Developing CBE programs and competency based assessments requires staff time, professional development and other resources. Establishing dedicated state innovation grants can catalyze new CBE program development and strengthen existing ones by supporting curriculum redesign, faculty professional development, technology upgrades, and program evaluation. It is also essential to provide institutions with flexibility in how funds are used, including the ability to blend resources from workforce, financial aid, and instructional budgets, and to allow for financial aid disbursement based on achievement of competencies, which can better support working and non-traditional learners.



All funding and policy actions must be grounded in equity, requiring new investments to prioritize historically underserved and adult learner populations, support culturally responsive teaching, and reduce non-academic barriers like childcare and scheduling constraints. Additionally, funding should support programs that align other equity-based acceleration strategies such as Credit for Prior Learning, and short-term stackable certificates and credentials to ensure credential attainment can be accelerated and affordable.

Finally, sustained support for faculty professional learning and strong stakeholder engagement, including collaboration with workforce partners, will underpin successful statewide CBE implementation and ensure alignment with labor market needs. This will need to be done in conjunction with engaging and developing institutional champions who are willing to take on local leadership needed to convene stakeholders and change the culture to accept models outside the traditional credit hour model.

These recommendations are intended to build the infrastructure, flexibility, and equity focus needed for CBE to contribute meaningfully to Oregon’s goals for postsecondary attainment, workforce competitiveness, and economic resilience.

CONCLUSION

Advancing competency-based education (CBE) and competency-based assessment (CBA) within Oregon's public postsecondary institutions holds significant promise for enhancing student access, success, and workforce alignment. Through strategic policy alignment, targeted funding, and sustained institutional collaboration, grounded in principles of equity and continuous improvement, Oregon can ensure that more adult learners, particularly those historically underserved, achieve meaningful and accelerated credential attainment. Moving forward, it will be critical to uphold rigorous regional accreditation standards, foster professional learning, and proactively engage stakeholders at all levels to support the ongoing evolution and scale of CBE. By investing in these efforts, Oregon is well-positioned to meet its adult attainment and workforce development goals, building a more responsive, equitable, and resilient postsecondary system for the future.

