

A Holistic Perspective to Creating Successful CBE Programs at Scale

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Abstract

University of Phoenix has continuously sought ways to support working adult students to meet their educational needs by offering different learning modalities and strategies as a central tenet to its philosophy that an adult university cannot be campus bound, but rather its borders must be defined by the lives of its students. To continually evolve and make good on this philosophy, the University innovated to design, create, and implement a new Competency-Based education (CBE) learning model as an option for its students in specific programs. The new CBE model was engineered to fit into a non-term academic structure by redesigning the program's courses from the ground up, and by leveraging multiple sets of learning tools and technologies to decrease the cost of delivery and improve student support. This framework created the baseline structure in which the University could deliver a graduate degree program in less than one year for less than \$11,000. Agile methodologies were leveraged to test the model while modifying services and support structures in real-time, using continuous improvement strategies leveraging student and faculty feedback. Using these feedback loops, the University was able to make improvements to its CBE programs holistically, which resulted in expansive growth to the programs where the University has now conferred over 5,000 graduates in a little over 6 years.

Introduction and Philosophy

University of Phoenix has long been committed to meeting the needs of working adult learners by designing educational experiences that align with their professional and personal lives. Historically, the University's standard academic model characterized by structured course schedules, and predictable pacing, has served as a strong foundation for delivering accessible higher education. These programs, typically offered in five-week (undergraduate) and six-week (graduate) formats, allow learners to engage in one course at a time, mostly through asynchronous online delivery.

While this model continues to be effective for many learners, shifts in workforce expectations and the increasing prevalence of experienced professionals seeking accelerated pathways for career advancement provided further opportunities for

innovation. Many adult learners entering University of Phoenix programs already possess significant industry experience and practical knowledge. For these individuals, traditional progression models, where all learners are assumed to need the same content consumption strategies, can present unnecessary barriers to advancement, limiting the learner's ability to efficiently translate existing competencies into academic credentials.

Recognizing this gap, University of Phoenix developed, and applied continuous quality improvement principles to refine, an effective learning model which honors prior experience and provides a more flexible and efficient pathway to degree completion at a lower price point—while maintaining academic rigor and alignment with workforce needs.

Adding Competency-Based Education to the University's Portfolio

In response to these evolving demands, University of Phoenix began creating a Competency-Based Education (CBE) learning model in the summer of 2019, to be launched early in calendar year 2020. This model represents a strategic shift from time-based instruction to outcomes-based learning, where learner progression is determined through demonstrating competency rather than through fixed instructional time within each course content area. Competency-Based degree programs emphasize the development and validation of skills and proficiencies directly aligned with specific industries, occupations, and professional roles. Within this model, students engage in applied learning experiences—such as projects, case studies, and authentic assessments—that require the student to demonstrate their understanding of curricular concepts in practical, real-world contexts. This approach enables learners to produce tangible outputs that reflect their readiness to address current business challenges and opportunities.

The design of the CBE model was intentional and multifaceted. It sought not only to create a flexible learning pathway for students, but also to ensure academic quality, employer relevance, and institutional scalability were maintained. By aligning competencies with existing course outcomes, as informed by industry advisory councils and embedding them into course design, the University created a framework that bridges academic theory and professional application for students who may already be bringing professional expertise to the table.

Target Student Population

The CBE programs at University of Phoenix were specifically designed to serve a distinct working adult student population. Ideal candidates for the University's CBE programs typically share several characteristics:

- Students are actively working in professional settings and bring relevant industry experience
- Students prefer career-relevant and malleable learning environments
- Students possess strong organizational and time management skills
- Students value flexibility in pacing while still benefiting from structured faculty support

For these students, the CBE model provides an opportunity to leverage prior experience, accelerate degree completion, and engage in learning that directly aligns with their career goals.

Design Principles and Structural Innovation

A distinguishing feature of the University of Phoenix CBE model is its integration into a credit-based, non-term academic structure. Unlike traditional term-based programs, where students progress according to fixed start and end dates, the non-term structure allows for greater flexibility in how students schedule courses and progress during the academic year. Within this framework, courses were further made flexible by generating a content consumption strategy whereby students can work at a pace that aligns with their individual schedules and that leverages their prior knowledge, while still meeting the academic requirements associated with credit-bearing programs. This hybrid approach preserves the integrity of established academic standards, such as alignment with the Carnegie unit, while introducing greater autonomy into the learning experience, with the support of faculty members for guidance.

Courses within CBE programs are designed to run concurrently over extended periods (typically 16 weeks), allowing students to pursue multiple competencies simultaneously if desired. This structure supports acceleration for students who desire to progress quickly, while still accommodating those who may need to balance academic work with professional and personal responsibilities. The model also incorporates a dual-faculty approach, in which students are supported by both practitioner faculty who focus on subject matter instruction and assessment, and by faculty mentors, who provide guidance across courses, support goal setting, and help students maintain momentum throughout their program. This structure balances both academic rigor and personalized support by giving students more agency over the learning experience.

Development of the MBA-CB Program

The first program developed under this model, the Competency-Based Master of Business Administration (MBA-CB), began formal development in June 2019, and launched following approval from accrediting and regulatory bodies. The development process was completed over a six-month period, culminating in the program's launch in January 2020 and the start of the first student cohort in February 2020.

This MBA-CB program development initiative required extensive cross-functional collaboration across the University. Teams from the academic organization, student services, financial services, and information technology worked together to adjust curriculum, align systems, and create an integrated experience for both students and faculty that met the goals of a CBE program design. The objective was to ensure the new learning model would be not only academically sound, but also operationally scalable and responsive to the needs of students seeking a more flexible way to pursue a graduate degree program.

A key component of this process was the alteration of course curriculum to align with CBE principles. Academic leadership within the College of Business and Information Technology partnered with faculty, instructional designers, and external consultants to adjust course content so that the authentic assessments tied to in-demand workforce skills in the standard MBA program could be attempted by the student, as they felt prepared to do so, under the guidance of their faculty member. These assessments were designed to measure not only conceptual understanding, but also the ability to apply knowledge in practical scenarios in demonstration of competency.

In parallel, significant effort was dedicated to ensuring that student interaction data could be captured and leveraged effectively. Systems were developed to track engagement, monitor progress, and generate alerts and notifications to support student success. This integration of curriculum, technology, and support services laid the foundation for a cohesive and adaptive learning ecosystem.

Leveraging the skills-aligned curriculum already adopted by the University made the transition of adapting the standard MBA program into the CBE format easier. Under the skills-aligned curriculum, one course student learning outcome is aligned with one skill and equates to one semester credit hour. Using this format, the course student learning outcome/skill was translated into an authentic assessment for competency, which helped facilitate the creation of the CBE program design.

The standard MBA program was 33 credits, which translated to 33 competencies in the MBA-CB program. By bundling each of these competencies into 3 credit courses, while

scheduling students concurrently for 3-4 courses over a 16-week block, a graduate degree program was created that a student could complete within 12 months. A visual representation of the original MBA-CB program design as an example academic progression plan is represented in Figure 1.

Total credit hours: 33 Estimated program length: 11 months CB programs are structured into 16-week blocks. Each block is comprised of domains or topics. Each domain is comprised of courses related to that topic. The following table shows the recommended MBA-CB path.		
16-week Block	16-week Block	16-week Block
DOMAIN: Management & Leadership	DOMAIN: Business Functional Skills	DOMAIN: Business Technical Skills
MGTCB/526	ECOCB/535	DATCB/565
ORGCB/535	ACCCB/543	DOMAIN: Business Strategic Skills
LDRCB/535	FINCB/571	MGTCB/576
DOMAIN: Business Technical Skills	MKTCB/574	STRCB/581
OPSCB/574		

Figure 1: MBA-CB Course Domains and Program Sequencing

Under the guidance of their practitioner faculty, once students are enrolled in their 16-week block they can pursue any of the competencies in their courses in an order of their choosing. Students have the flexibility and agency to consume more content one week over another toward satisfying course competencies, if doing so fits their schedule or learning needs. This structure affords students the ability to move faster through content areas in which they may already possess knowledge and experience, and to balance out their time to dive deeper into new competency areas they may need to devote more time to. Because the University's CBE programs are credit-based, students are still expected to engage in classes regularly through the entire 16 week block, but the Competency-Based structure of the learning design creates a process by which students (with guidance from faculty) can best choose when and where to invest their time over the 16 week period to meet course objectives.

University of Phoenix CBE Program Hallmarks

Several key CBE program hallmarks were developed for the MBA-CB program and have carried forward to other CBE program offerings. These hallmarks have helped to distinguish the University of Phoenix CBE model and have contributed to its effectiveness.

Skills-Aligned Curriculum Design

Courses and assessments are developed with input from industry advisory councils, academic leadership, and faculty to ensure alignment with real-world expectations. Learning objectives are directly mapped to competencies that reflect skills, and assessments are designed to simulate authentic professional tasks. This approach ensures that students graduate not only with theoretical knowledge, but also with assessed skills that can be applied in the workplace.

More Personalized Learning Experience

Students work collaboratively with faculty to develop a pacing guide that maps their progression through competencies. This flexibility allows students to determine how and when they engage with content, while still benefiting from structured guidance and feedback. The learning management system and integrated tools support a dynamic experience where faculty can focus on mentorship, feedback, and student development to meet students where they are, based on the student's competency progression.

Data-Driven Student Support

Integration of data analytics into the learning environment enables proactive support strategies. By analyzing student engagement and performance data, the University can generate alerts, identify potential risks, and deliver targeted communications to help students stay on track. This approach ensures that flexibility does not come at the expense of accountability or support.

Program Efficiencies, Cost, and Value

A critical goal behind the creation of the University's CBE model was to reduce the cost of higher education while maintaining quality and rigor for a targeted working adult student population. The MBA-CB program achieved this through a fixed, transparent pricing structure of \$300 per credit hour, resulting in a total program cost of approximately \$9,900 (\$300 per credit, 33 total credits). The CBE pricing model includes all required learning materials, thereby streamlining the fee structure and creating more clarity for students.

The model also introduced efficiencies in program delivery. By leveraging a flexible learning structure where students have more agency over their schedule, alongside a dual-faculty model to keep students on track, the University is able to support larger course sections

while maintaining high levels of student engagement. Additionally, because students must have professional or academic experience in their program's discipline, the faculty member and the student can directly target areas of need and support, which streamlines program delivery. Ultimately, by balancing student needs to maximize learning flexibility while decreasing friction in an environment surrounded by faculty and student service support, a sustainable model emerged that allows the University to deliver a rigorous degree program to a specific type of student at a lower price point. This new model embodies the University's commitment toward continuous innovation, while adding value to our students, industries, and the communities in which we serve.

Program Outcomes and Growth

Since the first cohort of students began classes in February of 2020, the MBA-CB program has demonstrated strong outcomes. The success of the initial MBA-CB cohort was validated in February 2021, when the first group of students graduated on time and within the anticipated cost structure (in less than one year for under \$10,000). Subsequent cohorts have continued to achieve similar results, demonstrating the scalability and sustainability of the model.

Building on this success, University of Phoenix expanded its Competency-Based offerings to include additional programs, including a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN to BSN), a Master of Health Administration, and a Master of Information Systems. These programs require a student to complete 36 credits for degree completion, which is three credits greater than the MBA-CB program, so the price point is slightly higher than that of the MBA-CB program. Despite the difference in credit requirements, all CBE programs at the University can be completed in less than one year for less than \$11,000.

In just under 6.5 years since the first CBE student program started, the University has had strong enrollment in these programs and has conferred over 5,000 graduates from students completing degrees using the CBE delivery model.

Continuous Improvement and Evolution

While the initial design of the MBA-CB model established a strong foundation, University of Phoenix approached its implementation with a commitment to continuous quality improvement (CQI). Recognizing that innovation in educational delivery requires ongoing refinement, the University implemented a structured feedback and evaluation process to guide the evolution of the model, which has been critical to reaching its 5,000 graduates.

Opportunities for improvement were identified through multiple channels, including targeted CBE student and faculty interviews, classroom observations, staff feedback, and institutional reporting and analytics. These insights provided a comprehensive

understanding of the student and faculty experience, highlighting both strengths and areas for enhancement.

Based on these findings, the University focused its improvement efforts across four key domains:

- **Learning:** Enhancements to curriculum design, course structure, and assessment strategies
- **Framework:** Refinement of policies, processes, and technology infrastructure
- **Faculty Experience:** Development of faculty roles, support systems, and collaborative practices
- **Student Experience:** Improvements to onboarding, support services, and engagement strategies

This iterative approach allowed the University to rapidly respond to feedback, implement targeted improvements, and continuously enhance the overall effectiveness of its CBE programs.

Learning: Structural Curricular Improvements Made

As part of the University's commitment to CQI, actions were taken to iterate on the student CBE experience through curricular enhancement. The ability to quickly evolve the CBE program student experience is a result of the centralized curriculum development model used by University of Phoenix. The University's centralized curriculum unit is located within its Center for Teaching and Learning. This centralized approach ensures consistency, quality, and alignment creating an environment where learners engage in courses that provide a high level of quality and rigor, optimized for a learning experience that supports adult learners.

The cornerstone of the CBE program's course design was rooted in skills-aligned curriculum maps, which served as the blueprint for every course in the program. These maps were meticulously crafted, drawing insights from a diverse range of sources to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant skills and knowledge applicable to the degree program. Course development was a collaborative effort involving College-aligned Instructional Designers who worked closely with Practitioner Subject Matter Experts. The focus was not just on content delivery but on ensuring that each course effectively measures the competencies outlined in the curriculum map through authentic assessments.

By using these processes as a baseline for the initial CBE course creation, the University was able to integrate authentic assessments and leverage the expertise of a diverse team

of collaborators to ensure learners not only acquire knowledge, but also develop the practical skills they need to excel in their chosen fields. After the launch of the CBE programs, student feedback was used to further evolve the courses to improve the learner experience and revise courses.

Revisions made to the CBE courses were a result of adopting the CQI mindset. The CQI mindset honors the voice of the user (our learners), which helps to enhance learning outcomes, improve course design, and foster personalized learning experiences. To evaluate the success of these changes, metrics were established related to these improvements with the goal of increasing student satisfaction and retention.

Improvements to the course curricular design were identified using data from student surveys and student interviews. The initial feedback received from students in the CBE programs was more concerned with course navigation and cognitive loads, rather than assessment and learning outcomes. Thus, as themes emerged, changes were made that were geared toward creating a more structured, intuitive, and learner-centered experience, essential for supporting self-directed engagement in a CBE framework.

This first tranche of revisions focused on enhancing the learning experience and was achieved primarily through structural changes. These updates included simplifying the course interface by reducing the number of clicks (or flattening the course structure), reorganizing content to align with CBE principles, and improving the understanding of the content through better labeling and organizational schemas.

A summary of these changes and the anticipated benefits for each are provided in the table below.

Change	Benefit
Branding	Content was rebranded to improve recognition and association with the university, enhancing the sense of community and belonging.
Grouping & Flattening	Related content was assembled for easier comprehension. This change also resulted in flattening the course structure, which reduced the amount of clicks it took to locate information or a course component.
Labeling and Language Simplification	The ability to apply descriptors to course components was leveraged in a manner that provided cues for learners, and simplified some of the overly academic language. This also addressed the power differentials that are often inherent in specific language usage.

Change	Benefit
Syllabi and Rubric Refresh	A cleaner syllabus format was adopted to increase clarity about course expectations; greater alignment in course objectives was achieved through a modification to the analytical rubrics.
Video-Based Guidance	Video assets were developed to address previously identified student pain points in understanding and adapting to the format of a more flexibly-paced learning model.

These structural curricular enhancements simplified course navigation complexity and provided clearer student instructions and cues, which contributed to a more supportive and engaging learning experience. Additionally, these changes supported the reduction of cognitive load through simplified language and structured content as posited by Cognitive Load Theory, which allows the learner to focus on content synthesis more directly. Given the agile approach used to scale and improve the University's CBE programs, these changes were quickly identified and implemented. This agile approach helped to create and maintain a more engaging experience for learners while the assessment of more longitudinal changes to course content could occur in parallel, feeding the CQI cycle.

Framework: Improvements Made to Institutional Policy

The University has long recognized the capacity for critical academic policy evaluation to be a driver of student success (Blaney, B.R., 2009; Coffman, L.D., 2016). This idea is integral to the University's "plan, do, check, act" (PDCA) approach to CQI in the realm of academic policies generally and has therefore been a guiding principle in the development and ongoing refinement of its CBE policy framework as the CBE programs evolved.

At program launch, the CBE policy framework was planned with a focus on creating optimal conditions for adapting the University's existing credit-based, non-term program and course offerings to support a CBE model. That policy framework was then vetted through the University's existing systematic process for evaluating proposed policies' academic merit and operational feasibility. This process yielded recognition that an initial policy framework should account for the likelihood of future adaptation and refinement, informed by actual student experiences and outcomes after the first CBE programs launched. Too much specificity and rigidity in the initial academic policy framework might commit the University to an insufficiently flexible design in supporting systems and processes. Additionally, policies of comparable CBE offering institutions, and best practices in CBE implementation endorsed through reputable industry forums, were considered in the context of the University's unique mission, vision, resources, competencies, and student population, to establish the policy framework in important

areas such as admission requirements, course structure, academic engagement, grades, and academic standing.

Some of the key features of this initial CBE policy framework included the following key departures from the University's standard academic policy framework.

- Admission requirements that set the CBE program offerings apart from their traditional counterparts to ensure that only students appropriately prepared for the CBE model would be admitted.
- A course structure with extended course lengths to accommodate concurrent enrollment in four courses at a time
- A grading scale suited to the CBE assessment structure and curriculum design was implemented. In this structure students are required to receive at least a grade of 'Met' (ME) or 'Mastered' (MA) on each competency assessment in order to pass the class and earn credit for the course. Grades of ME or MA are the equivalent of a grade of 'B' or 'A' respectively, in the traditional University of Phoenix grading scale. Students failing to achieve a ME or MA grade on all competency assessments in the course receive an overall course grade of Not Met (NM) and must repeat the course. Additionally, in order for a student to achieve a grade of Mastered (MA) for the entire course, the student must achieve an MA on all summative assessments for that particular course.
- Replacing the weekly attendance policy (which is more conducive to the traditional program model's focus on routine classroom instruction) with an academic engagement policy that ensures regular engagement with course activities and assessments while allowing for increased student agency in pacing and assignment prioritization—with that increased agency being checked by a consequence of withdrawal from all concurrently enrolled courses for failing to meet the engagement requirement.

After launching the first CBE offering in January 2020 (the MBA-CB), the University continued to apply its PDCA approach to CBE policy management and continuous improvement. As cohorts of students began to progress through the newly launched CBE offerings, the University's academic and operational leadership engaged in active monitoring, supplemented by a committee formed specifically for evaluating the impact of academic policies on CBE student success measures. This active monitoring began to highlight areas for improvement. Early adjustments included refinements and clarifications to the work experience admission requirements of the CBE programs, which were intended to ensure admission of students with a professional background that would set them up for success in the CBE program model. Later adjustments included a focus on analyses of

student outcomes to identify where policy adjustments could help these admitted students to better progress through to course, and ultimately degree, completion.

The focus on improving student progression led to cross-functional discussions regarding multiple other CBE policies, including the CBE academic engagement policy. Policy owners and stakeholders considered the potential merit of a one-time exception for students who are withdrawn from all their concurrently enrolled courses for failing to meet the academic engagement requirement. They hypothesized, based on available data and insights, that the typical student who is adversely impacted by the policy was a one-time offender who could reasonably be offered an opportunity to return to class, with the expectation that they would be better informed of, and strictly adhere to, the policy requirement going forward. Academic, operational, and technology considerations were assessed, and the policy exception was approved and implemented. Subsequent analysis showed a significant number of CBE courses in which students who applied the one-time exception were able to return and successfully complete their courses, who otherwise would have been required to bear the additional time and cost to repeat them. That analysis led to consideration of other policy requirements that could potentially benefit from similar adjustments.

This cyclical PDCA approach to monitoring and continuously improving CBE student outcomes through academic policy remains an ongoing process, in some instances driving changes like those noted above to actual policies, and in other instances prompting enhancements to student support processes, systems, and applications to close operational gaps and to better equip and prepare students to be successful. Utilizing continuous improvement strategies for academic policies with the University's CBE programs allowed it to evolve, scale, and improve these programs to enhance the student experience and deliver on its promise to provide a new lower cost delivery model that met the needs of a specific kind of working adult student.

Faculty: Improvements Made to the Faculty Role and Experience

As previously indicated, the CBE learning model University of Phoenix implemented allows the student and faculty member to work together on a personalized learning plan that provides the student with more agency and flexibility regarding how they consume learning content. To maximize student support using faculty resources in an environment where students have more control around their learning plan, a dual faculty model was created in which one faculty member is assigned in each individual course as the practitioner faculty (PF), to teach and assess that course's content, while a separate faculty member is assigned as a faculty mentor (FM) who supports the student across all of the courses they are scheduled for during each 16-week block of courses.

Focused Faculty Engagement and Continuous Feedback Mechanisms

Faculty engagement remains a critical component in the successful implementation and ongoing evolution of the University of Phoenix CBE model. To support alignment across courses, consistency in student experience, and continuous program refinement, structured faculty meetings and collaboration forums were established early in the program lifecycle.

These meetings provide a dedicated space for practitioner faculty and faculty mentors to discuss curriculum design, share instructional strategies, and identify emerging challenges within the learning environment. Through these collaborative touchpoints, faculty are able to exchange best practices, calibrate expectations related to competency assessments, and ensure consistency in feedback provided to students. This ongoing dialogue helps maintain alignment among course design, learning outcomes, and the evolving needs of the adult student population.

Equally important has been the creation of continuous feedback loops across faculty roles. By incorporating regular feedback from faculty into program evaluation processes, the University has been able to make timely adjustments to both instructional practices and program structures. This iterative approach supports a culture of continuous improvement, promotes transparency in decision-making, and encourages faculty to take an active role in shaping the evolution of the CBE model.

Evolution of the Faculty Mentor Role

The FM role has been a foundational element of the CBE model since its initial implementation. FMs are responsible for supporting students across their full course load within a 16-week learning block, providing guidance, coaching, and feedback to help students successfully progress through competencies. In this role, FMs serve as both academic guides and engagement catalysts. FMs assist students in developing individualized learning plans, setting goals, and navigating challenges associated with a more flexible, self-directed learning environment. Additionally, FMs play an important role in reinforcing connections across courses, helping students synthesize learning and apply concepts across multiple competencies.

Over time, the role of the FM has evolved in response to student needs and program insights. While initially designed with a focus on general support and communication, the role has expanded to include more proactive and structured engagement strategies. This evolution reflects the University's broader commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness to the student experience.

Faculty Mentor and Practitioner Faculty Collaboration

A key innovation within the CBE model has been the collaborative relationship between FMs and practitioner faculty PF. While PF are responsible for course-specific instruction and assessment, FMs provide continuity and holistic support across a student's entire set of concurrent courses during the student's 16-week block.

Your Faculty Mentor...	Your Practitioner Faculty...
Is an expert on the degree program. Faculty Mentors coach you through establishing and maintaining your Pacing Guide. They will help you identify barriers and strategies for overcoming them. They will also help you see where you've succeeded and why.	Are subject experts for each course and will bring their knowledge of the field as well as enthusiasm for the skills being mastered to the course. If you have questions about the course content, the Practitioner Faculty in your courses are the people to ask. Look for their office hours and contact information.
Will keep in regular contact to see how you are doing in reaching the milestones set out in your program.	Will check the Course Questions and Advice forum where you and your classmates are asking one another for tips and advice, and they will offer additional advice based on trends in your learning activities and assessments and those of your classmates.
Will collaborate with your Practitioner Faculty if learning activities, assignments, and Competency Assessments are especially challenging.	Will read and score assessments such as the Practice and Reflection assignments and Competency Assessments, and will monitor your engagement in the assigned textbook and make sure learning activities are completed.
Will help you work with feedback from your Practitioner Faculty and give you additional study advice and time management advice as needed.	Will provide timely feedback to you on the assignments they score and on your Competency Assessments. They will also collaborate with your Faculty Mentor if they see your engagement falling off or if they see you're having struggles with activities and assessments.

Figure 2: Faculty Mentor and Practitioner Faculty Responsibilities

When the CBE programs were first launched, FMs were encouraged to approach their role with flexibility, allowing for organic development of engagement strategies based on student needs. This led to the emergence of a more proactive, collaborative engagement model, particularly within early cohorts.

One notable example included the introduction of live, synchronous engagement sessions facilitated jointly by FMs and PF. These optional sessions, initially offered multiple times per week and later refined to a more sustainable cadence, provided students with opportunities to ask questions, receive real-time feedback, and engage more deeply with course material. Given the diverse geographic distribution of students, scheduling required careful consideration to accommodate multiple time zones, reinforcing the program's global accessibility.

These collaborative sessions also supported a consultative teaching approach, where faculty worked together to guide students through competency expectations, assessment criteria, and progression from meeting expectations to achieving mastery. FMs additionally

played a key role in onboarding PF into the CBE model, helping to establish consistency in instructional approach and student engagement practices. Through these efforts, strong faculty-student relationships were developed, creating a foundation of trust and communication that supported student success. The time invested early in building these connections proved critical in fostering collaboration, improving student confidence, and enhancing overall program engagement.

Faculty Mentor Selection and Qualifications

FMs are selected from among the University's PF ranks, ensuring both subject matter expertise and a demonstrated ability to support adult students in flexible learning environments. A key attribute in FM selection is the ability to operate effectively in less structured environments and to support students navigating ambiguity within a self-directed learning model. FMs are expected to demonstrate strong communication skills, adaptability, and a commitment to student engagement.

Adapting Faculty Engagement to Meet Student Needs

Insights gathered from early MBA-CB cohorts indicated that specific types of faculty engagement—particularly in the form of proactive communication and personalized support—was critical to student success as the students acclimated to the flexible pace of the program.

In response, the faculty engagement model evolved into a targeted “high-touch” approach, characterized by increased visibility and by leveraging multiple communication channels, including phone, text, and virtual meeting platforms. This shift allowed faculty to better understand individual student needs and tailor their support accordingly when needed. Currently, a consultative approach to student engagement, where FMs and PF collaborate to provide guidance that is both personalized and actionable is best practice. By meeting students where they are—both academically and professionally—faculty are able not only to support competency attainment, but to also facilitate broader skill development and career alignment.

This adaptive approach reflects the University's commitment to continuous improvement and reinforces the importance of balancing flexibility with structured support. As the CBE programs continue to evolve, faculty engagement strategies will remain a central focus in ensuring positive student outcomes and sustaining program success.

Student Experience: Improvements Made to Student Onboarding and Support Services

Student onboarding and support falls primarily within two functional University roles: the Enrollment Representatives (ERs) and Academic Counselors (ACs). The ER supports students by first understanding their goals, why they are interested in a program, how that program aligns with their stated goals, and verifies student's admissibility. Once a program is selected, ERs then begin the onboarding process to prepare students to start. The AC supports students once they begin the first course in their program, through degree completion, with continuous coaching and academic advisement along the way. As the CBE programs continued to grow, services and support offered by ERs and ACs evolved as well.

Onboarding and Enrollment Support Changes

When first launching the CBE programs, Enrollment teams faced new challenges. The University began with only one CBE degree program (MBA-CB), therefore only a limited number of ERs were trained to support enrollment into the program, with its unique learning model and admission requirements. Additionally, there were no external informational resources supporting the new program offering type, so the only way potential students could learn about it was through conversations with ERs. As a result, any eligible students discussing programs with an ER who was not trained for this new program may not have been given the opportunity to enroll into the CBE program. For those who did find their way into the program, ERs were uncertain as to the potential challenges they might face (and need ER support for) in finding the best way to stay organized and meet course commitments in a program that gives students much more agency.

One of those challenges came to light after the initial CBE cohorts began. Analysis identified that some of the CBE students who were alumni of the University's traditional bachelor's programs struggled to adjust to the CBE learning model's differences from the learning model they were familiar with in their undergraduate studies. These challenges led to friction points in the student enrollment and onboarding process that the University needed to resolve, in order for the CBE program model to be successful and expand.

The University's CQI focus led to several adjustments aimed at addressing these challenges with the CBE student onboarding experience. For example, all ERs were trained to support enrollment for CBE programs, which allowed them to have in-depth conversations with their students about both traditional and CBE options, and to determine best fit for the student. Resources were allocated to providing more robust information about CBE program offerings on the University website. The University also

introduced a simple assessment for students, available on the website. The assessment allowed prospective students to self-reflect and review factors intended to help determine the learning model that best matches their educational goals. The admissions application was also enhanced to accommodate the different requirements for CBE programs, which created a more streamlined enrollment process.

Data-driven insights were used to further improve the student experience beyond the admissions application process, with a particular focus on the crucial timeframe during which a student is preparing to go to class. One of those insights was that the most successful CBE students demonstrated high engagement early on in their classes, which inspired the use of a pacing guide for all students to plan their studies before they started class. By encouraging students to make a plan early, rooted in the insight that starting class with a high level of engagement was a successful behavior demonstrated by other students, the University was able to see improved early course progression rates. Additionally, student touchpoints leading up to their start date, as well as messaging within the crucial first week of their courses, were updated to ensure understanding of the modality and course requirements.

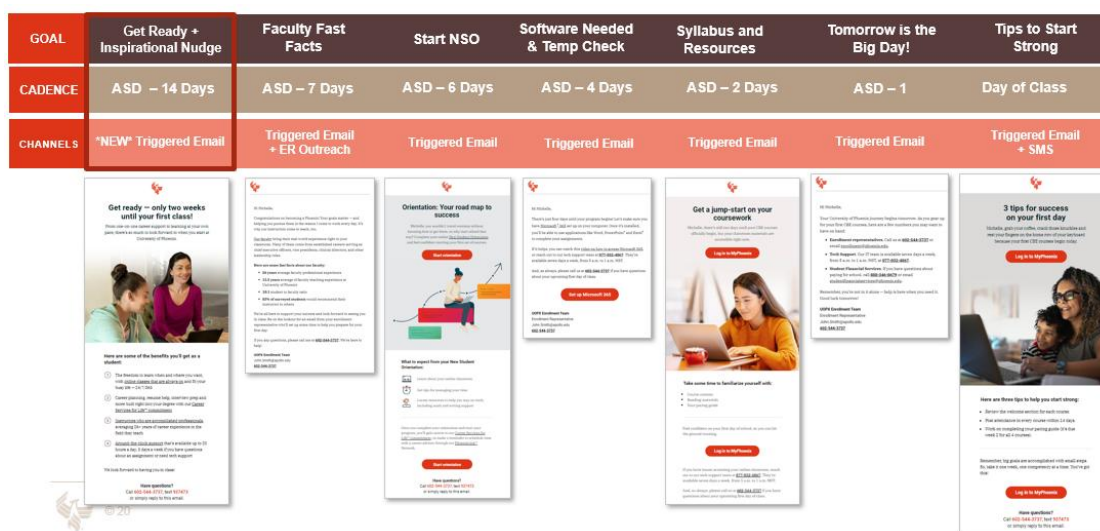


Figure 3: ER Onboarding Strategy for CBE programs

Enhancements to New Student Orientation and Early Engagement

The CBE New Student Orientation (NSO) experience has undergone several iterations since the launch of the CBE programs, reflecting the University's commitment to improving early student engagement and program readiness. Initially designed as a foundational introduction to the CBE learning model, NSO has evolved into a more comprehensive and interactive onboarding experience. The current self-paced orientation serves as a launch

point for students, providing clarity on program expectations, competency progression, and strategies for success within a flexible learning environment.

Given the multiple touchpoints within the student support ecosystem—including ERs, ACs, and faculty—efforts have been made to ensure consistency in messaging and reinforcement of key behaviors needed for students to be successful. Students are guided to develop pacing strategies early in their program, with an emphasis on maintaining steady progress through competencies and adhering to engagement expectations.

In addition to self-paced materials, supplemental webinars and live sessions have been introduced, especially for students newer to the program, to provide opportunities for real-time interaction and clarification. The webinar, specific to CBE students, is broadcast one week prior to the start date of classes. New cohorts of students are invited to attend these webinars, wherein hosts answer questions in real-time, while the most common questions about the program from prior students are addressed. Personalized onboarding appointments are also now offered for CBE students, which are one-on-one conversations with staff members, in which students are oriented to their classroom environment, while being able to ask any questions. These improvements helped to ensure students start their CBE program on a solid foundation and increase their likelihood of success throughout their program.

Student Services Support Changes

Upon launch of the MBA-CB program, ongoing student support offered by ACs posed some of the same challenges faced by ERs in their onboarding support of new students. CBE students were initially supported by a small, specialized team using limited technology resources. Students were selected for contact periodically based on analysis of reports that were manually generated, and ACs had limited visibility into student progress in CBE courses, which was inhibited gaining optimal insight into the effectiveness of student coaching.

In spite of these limitations, ACs were able to identify trends in CBE student behavior as the new program offerings grew. Using these insights, technology was improved to support ACs in student coaching. These changes began with creating visibility into student progress in courses through a system-generated CBE-specific progress report and a CBE-specific contact strategy based on student needs (as informed by previous student cohorts). This new contact strategy began with outreach exclusively by phone, but was eventually supplemented with automated SMS messages and targeted emails. These changes included proactive outreach strategies that added a touchpoint call near the third week of the student's first course, which was identified to be a crucial timeframe for ensuring students are engaged and on-track with their program. These calls help ACs to understand

how well the student's initial weeks of class have been going, and how individualized support can be tailored to the student through coaching and advisement over the next 13 weeks. Additionally, these updated support strategies added proactive SMS nudges during the first four weeks of each block of courses. This SMS outreach enables ACs to support students in understanding what to focus on and to tailor their advisement to ensure students progress through their courses at the right pace.

These augmented sources of insight into student performance enabled ACs to identify the most impactful student risk factors. One of the earliest and most significant of those identified was the administrative withdrawal of students who failed to meet the CBE academic engagement policy, which was related to students failing to keep pace with course assessment requirements during their 16-week block of courses. To support students' knowledge of the academic engagement policy and avoid being withdrawn from courses, automated contacts via SMS and emails prior to policy deadlines were implemented. Because students have flexibility in addressing their course assessments in this model, these timely notifications are essential to ensure they do not fall too far behind when inevitable unexpected life challenges occur. Additionally, a visual tracker (Figure 3) was created, located on the student portal, to indicate when students last engaged in their courses, and any upcoming requirements they need to meet to remain active in their program. Additional notifications were introduced to generate support cases, which alert ACs when students have fallen behind in their progress (based on their individual patterns of behavior). ACs can then provide customized coaching to ensure students have a continuing plan to be successful.

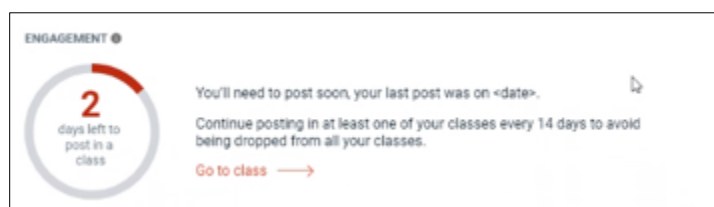


Figure 4: Engagement Tracker on Student Portal

These changes in resources and tools to support the AC and ER responsibilities tied to onboarding and student support have assisted the CBE programs to grow and capably support more students as the University scaled this learning modality.

Conclusion

Society is calling on higher education to innovate in meeting the diverse needs of a wide range of different student populations. University of Phoenix, founded on the belief that higher education cannot be administered through a “one size fits all” approach, is continuously responding to that call in supporting working adult students in their educational endeavors. The University recognized that within this student population exist many students who are professionally prepared and organizationally oriented to thrive in an alternative CBE delivery model that allows for increased student agency, accelerated pacing, and lower tuition costs while simultaneously preserving academic rigor and outcomes that align with the needs of prospective employers. Determined to meet their need for a customized learning experience, the University has successfully leveraged its deep subject matter expertise in serving working adult students, centralized skills-based curriculum development, industry advisory councils, personalization-oriented and data-driven student support infrastructure, and culture of continuous quality improvement to launch a CBE program model that has proven adaptable and scalable, and that is meeting—and, in many respects, exceeding—both student and institutional expectations.

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