Utah State University

Supporting Competency-Based Education With Canvas

📍 **Logan, UT**   👥 **28,000+ Students**   📅 **Adopted Canvas: 2011**

SUMMARY

Some 36 million Americans hold college credit but no degree. For these post-traditional students, many already in the workforce, a credit-hour-based degree is a hurdle. Competency-based education (CBE) allows students to demonstrate prior learning to progress quickly to their degree. Embracing this shift, Utah State University (USU) launched a pilot CBE program in 2019 for a group of Northrup Grumman employees to turn their vocation into a degree. USU relied on Canvas' robust course-building and assessment tools to transition credit-based courses to competency-based ones. Read on to find out how Canvas helped faculty buy-in to a CBE model and provided unexpected benefits during the pandemic.

THE CHALLENGE

Progress in higher education hinges on time — a four-year degree, a 16-credit semester, a one-hour lecture. But today's employers don't need to understand a student's time in a classroom; they need proof of adequate knowledge and skills. In a competency-based education (CBE) model, time is variable. Students progress by demonstrating mastery of skills, not by credit hour.

Recognizing this shift in learning measurement, Utah State University (USU) launched a competency-based education initiative in 2018. The program offered students an Associate's Degree of Science in a competency-based, flexible format., Students leveraged online assessments to demonstrate mastery and follow a personalized learning plan based on their needs.

Such a monumental change did not happen overnight. USU's competency-based education leaders spent months seeking buy-in from administrators and faculty. Another year was spent mapping competencies and designing courses. USU's pilot CBE

🔍 Key Insights

01 An early adopter of Canvas, Utah State University, uses the learning management system to shift to a competency-based education (CBE) model to attract and retain post-traditional learners.

02 Canvas' open ecosystem and robust assessment tools like Outcomes and SpeedGrader proved essential in mapping complex course competencies for USU's pilot CBE program.

03 USU is now accredited by NWCCU for competency-based education and plans to expand the program, using Canvas as its central course-building tool.

program officially launched in Fall 2019, promising students an affordable and flexible option towards graduation.

Just as USU transitioned from a semester-based learning model to a mastery-based approach, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruptions to its plan. Mainly, the urgent need for professors to move all courses online.

USU is committed to growing its competency-based education offerings. But administrators recognize the significant effort it took to launch their first pilot of 30 students. Scaling the program efficiently would take a robust centralized tool rich with assessment capabilities.

> "We have been using Outcomes since the beginning. It gave faculty an alternate view of student assessment and possibilities of competency-based education. Outcomes is the central tool that we need to do CBE here."
>
> *—John Louviere*
> *Executive Director of Academic and Instructional Services, Utah State University*

THE SOLUTION

A successful CBE program largely depends on assessment tools. If a school can't accurately measure mastery, how can students prove competencies? When developing their CBE program, USU leaders put significant energy toward finding the right experts and tools to measure learning.

One thing was clear — they wanted Canvas to be the hub of learning. An early adopter of Canvas in 2011, USU uses Canvas Outcomes feature to track mastery in a course.Louviere said the adoption of SpeedGrader specifically helped faculty buy into a competency-based model.

"SpeedGrader is the best assessment experience out there. It's the standard. If we are going to explain how Outcomes or competency assessment works, you show the SpeedGrader, and it's done."
–John Louviere, Executive Director of Academic and Instructional Services, Utah State University

Amy Carpenter, a senior instructional designer, worked with faculty to map course competencies before shifting to CBE. She said aligning Canvas Outcomes to rubrics opened teachers' eyes to the benefits of CBE.

Faculty who spent time building competency-based courses saw their teaching improve: "Using Outcomes in Canvas forces teachers to think through, 'What does real mastery look like? Where do you set that, and how do you assess that?" Carpenter said.

When faculty created these tree-like competency maps for their courses, they realized they needed an additional assessment tool for such nuanced skill measurement. Administrators chose ShiftiQ for its "backend logic" and because of its deep integration with Canvas Outcomes.

The combination of Canvas' unmatched front-end experience, SpeedGrader's assessment capability, and their LTI tool ShiftiQ gave USU a strong foundation to launch their CBE initiative seamlessly.

THE RESULTS

For its pilot CBE program, USU focused on optimizing courses for post-traditional learners — adults with little to no college experience. Competency-based education is particularly beneficial for these students because it allows them to apply prior learning from workplace experience to test out of courses and complete their degree quicker. For USU's fully online CBE program, students could test out of and complete courses at any time within a 14-week semester.

In Fall 2019, USU partnered with the global aerospace company and local employer Northrup Grumman to enroll 30 students — 24 of them first-generation college students — in an associate's of science degree. Northrup Grumman covered tuition and supported their employees with mentorship. The pilot was successful, with students showing comparable competencies in general education courses compared to traditional non-CBE students (3.16 for English 1010 vs. 3.19 for traditional students).

> "We want to give students an Outcomes transcript at the end of this experience. They can say, 'I didn't just take English 1010, I can do this and this and this.' Specific marketable outcomes are valuable information for them to have as job seekers."
>
> *—Amy Carpenter,*
> *Senior Instructional Designer, Utah State University*

IDEA scores were similar or higher than courses taught in a traditional format (IDEA score of 61 for English 1010).

USU planned to expand the program after the successful pilot, but the COVID-19 pandemic forced administrators to pause expansion and instead triage with faculty adapting to remote learning.

Even still, the legwork for launching a CBE program on Canvas proved useful for instructional designers during COVID shutdowns. Detailed course mapping and course design in Canvas gave faculty an easy template to work with. For instance, a Biology 1010 professor without online teaching experience could easily import the CBE "master course" of Bio 1010 into their Canvas dashboard.

Marketing and communications efforts were critical to USU's COVID-19 adjustment. The campus rolled out a USU Ready campaign, a resource for faculty and students. The USU Ready button was embedded straight into Canvas for quick access to FAQs and tutorials on adjusting to online learning.

Did the pandemic pause USU's CBE efforts? Not necessarily, it paused growth, but we could leverage what we learned to scale in other areas as the need for online increased, said Rene Eborn, assistant vice president of academic and instructional services. Canvas was critical in USU reaching its goal of advancing

post-traditional students. The university hopes it can do the same for traditional students on the cusp of entering the workforce.

Now that general education CBE courses are built out in Canvas, Carpenter said the process would only become easier in higher level, applied courses.

Alongside CBE-champion Western Governor's University, Utah State University is now the only campus in the Utah System of Higher Education accredited by the NWCCU for online competency-based education.

The university's next steps for scaling its competency-based education offerings are largely operational — building a sustainable business model, determining faculty compensation, and enhancing the student experience. With Canvas, the digital infrastructure is already in place.