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# How NHA Helps to Bridge the Classroom- to-Practice Gap

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New allied healthcare graduates are brimming with essential, up-to-date knowledge that can help healthcare facilities deliver exceptional patient care. However, 40% of employers say new graduates may not fully be ready to perform in the role.<sup>1</sup>

This concern is primarily rooted in the challenge of translating academic knowledge into practical, real-world experiences. For instance, students pursuing online education may need access to laboratory facilities to gain hands-on experience. Additionally, the availability of internship and externship programs can vary, making it challenging for some students to secure these valuable opportunities. While Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies show promise in providing practical training to medical students, their widespread adoption remains limited, partly due to cost considerations.

These factors collectively contribute to a gap between classroom learning and practical application, ultimately impacting patients' access to and the quality of allied healthcare services. Competency-based education (CBE) has emerged as a practical solution to address this growing issue, aiming to bridge this gap effectively.

CBE ensures that students thoroughly grasp new concepts before progressing to other topics and provides a platform to teach practical medical skills outside traditional laboratory or clinical settings. As a leading provider of CBE resources, NHA plays a crucial role in supporting health science educators and students. By aligning education with real-world demands, CBE offers a pragmatic approach to addressing the challenges students and educators face, ultimately benefiting healthcare employers and, most importantly, patients.

In this article, we will explore the benefits of NHA's CBE resources and how their integration into the curriculum can enhance the readiness of graduates as they step into their respective healthcare roles.

<sup>[1]</sup> National Healthcareer Association, 2024 Industry Outlook



# What is CBE & Why is It a Critical Aspect for Medical Professionals

Competency-based learning is an instructional method that centers on the results and abilities acquired by students, emphasizing their active involvement in learning activities.<sup>2</sup>

It is defined as: *“the capability to apply or use a set of related knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors, such as communication and problem-solving, to thrive in a defined career setting.”*<sup>3</sup>

This approach places the learner at the forefront of the educational process, encouraging active engagement in the learning experience. Its ultimate goal is to prepare aspiring medical professionals to work in real-world environments like clinics, hospitals, and long-term care facilities.

CBE is tailored to individual learning styles, maximizing every students' chance of success and making it easier for educators to cater to the diverse needs of their students. It allows learners to progress by working on the specific competencies they find difficult until they're fully understood and internalized. This method leads to a personalized, adaptive learning experience suited to any student.



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**[2] American Association of Colleges of Nursing. What is Competency-Based Education?**

<https://www.aacnnursing.org/essentials/tool-kit/competency-based-education>

**[3] Competency-Based Education Network. (2022). Reinventing health care credentials in a pandemic: A competency-based education case study. Available online at [www.cbenetwork.org](http://www.cbenetwork.org). Retrieved from <https://www.c-ben.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBEN-22-014-Case-Study-Reinventing-Health-CareCredentials-in-a-Pandemic-1.pdf>**



For healthcare educators, CBE teaching methods:

Allow you to prepare learners for the realities of healthcare and ease them into the differences between academia and the real world.

Instill more confidence in your learners as they can develop complex skills and practice delivering high-quality care before entering the workforce.

Offer increased flexibility and adaptability in teaching and assessment methods—meaning a more skill-focused learning experience that aligns closely with the evolving demands of the medical sector.

By preparing students for the dynamic nature of clinical environments, educators can teach them to be more adaptable to shifting demands in their future careers.

## How Does CBE Differ from Traditional Education?

The image of traditional education is oft-repeated – teachers lecture, students take notes, pore over textbooks, and then work to pass a lengthy exam.

CBE reimagines this model to establish teaching and assessment practices more in tune with modern life. Contemporary CBE assessment practices revolve around:

Ongoing skill observations ensure students' practical abilities are developing alongside their theoretical knowledge.

Regular performance assessments empower students to continually monitor their genuine progress in understanding a skill or topic, eliminating the need to await incremental report cards for feedback.

Numerous practice assessments aim to foster a deep understanding of essential skills in students, ensuring that these concepts remain ingrained beyond the examination.



CBE's emphasis on monitoring progress and reassessments helps students identify focus areas to improve their skills. As a result, students can bridge the theory-to-practice gap with less dependence on educators. This guided self-learning approach fosters skills to become lifelong learners, which is an essential healthcare worker competency.

## Assessment Framework in CBE

As mentioned, CBE utilizes an array of professional observations, performance evaluations, and practical exams to support learners in their skill development journey.

The automation capabilities within the MA SkillsBuilder Clinical platform play a pivotal role in promoting competency-based training by empowering facilitators to efficiently oversee clinical skills performance gaps. This provides a standardized and impartial method for evaluating students' clinical proficiency, ensuring compliance with the required competencies. Additionally, this automation facilitates instructors in monitoring and tracking students' progress comprehensively, pinpointing areas for enhancement, and delivering targeted feedback and remediation.

These automated tools seamlessly integrate with customized teaching and assessment approaches that cater to individual learners:

Instructors tailor learning experiences to match specific competencies.

Learners take an active role in steering their own learning journey.

Faculty ensures that all learners actively participate in assessments, including both formative and summative evaluations.

Expectations for learners are clearly defined, outlining the competencies and expected behaviors.

Uniform expectations are established across various facilitators and preceptors, ensuring a consistent learning journey for all students.

Learners proactively gather and review performance evidence, including self-assessment, and collaborate with faculty to co-create personalized competency-focused learning plans.

Overall, the MA SkillsBuilder Clinical platform's automation, combined with competency-based education approaches, fosters a robust environment for learner engagement and skill development.

## Emphasis on Competence in CBE

Elevating students' competencies is at the heart of CBE. While many traditional programs emphasize classroom instruction as their core curriculum, this approach can sometimes result in practical skills not flourishing to the same extent as theoretical knowledge.

Conversely, CBE requires learners to demonstrate their aptitude in practical skills before moving on to other competencies. By shifting the focus from theoretical to practical, educators who utilize CBE boost the chances that graduating students are proficient in the skills they'll use to deliver healthcare in clinical settings immediately.

## Tailoring Education in CBE

From the early days of our education, we're aware that we all have different learning styles. Some of us are visual learners, others learn by listening and reading information.

CBE's flexibility allows educators to cater to the learning styles of their individual students. If some learners lag in specific competencies, they'll get more time to refine their study approach and grasp the skill before moving on.



Providing learners the freedom to focus on specific competencies—rather than rushing them along a timeline where they're supposed to reach specific benchmarks at a predetermined pace—means their skills will be more robust and refined once they enter the workforce.

## Outcome Prioritization in CBE

Conventional healthcare worker training uses time-bound programs to teach students new skills. These traditional time-based methods have schedules to keep and continue moving forward regardless of students' practical progress, leaving very little time for remediation.

Alternatively, CBE uses competency-focused techniques to ensure students understand critical skills before moving on to new material. This outcome-centric approach means every student has the tools to develop a firm grasp on the material—regardless of their study pace or learning style.



# How the CBE Model Enables Patient-Centric Care

By championing students' skills as a top priority, CBE emphasizes the importance of preparing allied healthcare workers to deliver patient-centric care. From critical competencies to a broad range of patient-focused abilities.

## Teaches Students Both Technical and Essential Skills

From clinical assessments to trauma responses, refining these skills is essential to caring for the diverse needs of patients in clinical settings.

Likewise, CBE also allows learners to develop the critical essential skills they'll need in real-world scenarios, such as:



**Communication skills** (verbal, nonverbal, and written)

**Continuous & immediate feedback**

**Teamwork**

**Active listening**

**Emotional intelligence**

**Professionalism and personal brand**

**Compassion**

**Taking initiative**

**Adaptability/flexibility**

NHA's PersonAbility tool is a CBE-focused interactive resource designed to teach students essential soft skills, including emotional intelligence, empathy, active listening, and adaptability, which are deemed crucial for delivering optimal care to patients.<sup>5</sup>

[5] National Healthcareer Association, 2024 Industry Outlook.



Empathy is among the most essential professional skills to exhibit in clinical settings. Knowledge and skill in medical theory and practice are key to proper care. Ultimately, patients are people—often in difficult and stressful situations—and, thus, must be treated with dignity and respect.

CBE recognizes the need to foster real understanding between patients and allied medical professionals. PersonAbility is a key tool to help students understand the essential humanity of their patients. It emphasizes cultivating close communication and understanding to foster the empathy necessary to navigate the difficult, delicate nature of healthcare delivery.

## Competence Can Instill Hope in Patients

Patients want to know their allied healthcare professionals are highly skilled and qualified for their jobs when receiving medical attention. Competency-based learning offers a reliable and verifiable way to ensure healthcare professionals maintain current knowledge and skills in their field.

A healthcare professional's competencies, or skills, are a visible, tangible measure of their commitment to the well-being and satisfaction of their patients. Obtaining a [NHA certification](#) validates that learners have the skills required for confident and calm patient care.

Additionally, this underscores the value of nationally recognized and accredited certifications that demonstrate an individual's competency and skill. This is particularly significant in light of the growing trend among healthcare employers, with **77%** now requiring certifications upon hiring. Moreover, a striking **83%** of employers express a preference for candidates with nationally recognized certifications, further emphasizing the importance of these credentials in the healthcare industry.<sup>6</sup>



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[6] National Healthcareer Association, 2024 Industry Outlook.



## Alignment with Patient-Centric Values

CBE champions patient-centric care as a key component of modern practice and implores students to prioritize patient interactions. Some of the key patient-centric principles CBE emphasizes include:

Compassionate,  
timely care

Individualized assessment  
and treatment

Respect for patients  
and their families

NHA's MA SkillsBuilder allows students to develop these critical values by emulating scenarios from actual Electronic Health Records (EHRs). Further case studies and simulations help learners understand how to react when faced with real-life medical scenarios. Its unique reflective activities also give students a glimpse into the patient experience to provide a clear sense of their perspective during healthcare interactions.

## Why Innovative Educational Approaches Are the Future

One of the key opportunities for enhancing teaching methods lies in adapting to the evolving needs of contemporary learners. Traditional educational approaches have often relied heavily on lectures and conventional classwork formats.

However, today's students could thrive even more when they receive increased personalized attention. The rapid advancements in technology, the growing diversity of students, and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a shift to distance education and hybrid learning, have underscored the importance of tailored instruction.<sup>7</sup>

Competency-based training offers instructors a valuable framework to revitalize traditional methods, boosting learning efficiency and ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for all students. With the aid of NHA's tools, educators gain access to an interactive and adaptable learning environment that aligns with the preferences of today's learners. This equips them with a rich repertoire of teaching resources, simplifying the customization of their curriculum to cater to the unique needs of their student groups.

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**[6] Competency-Based Education Network. (2022). Reinventing health care credentials in a pandemic: A competency-based education case study. Available online at [www.cbenetwork.org](https://www.cbenetwork.org). Retrieved from <https://www.c-ben.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CBEN-22-014-Case-Study-Reinventing-Health-CareCredentials-in-a-Pandemic-1.pdf>**

# Actionable Ways to Close the Gap and How NHA Can Help

Newly graduated allied healthcare professionals often struggle to apply classroom knowledge in clinical settings. Ongoing initiatives aim to bridge this gap and ensure that theoretical understanding from academics is applied effectively in daily clinical practice.

## Deliver the Right Amount of Content

Educators should align their curricula with national certification test plans suited to the subjects and content of their course. Partnering with NHA allows educators to provide plentiful resources to support the learning styles of individuals working toward certification.

NHA's test plans are based on job task analyses, thereby ensuring knowledge and skills are situated to the practice environment. This is especially significant when considering the pathway between academic theory and practical application, bridging the gap and ensuring that certified professionals are well-prepared to excel in their chosen fields.

NHA is the U.S.'s largest allied health certification agency, awarded over 1,250,000 nationally-recognized certificates. We offer eight NHA certifications, such as:

Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (CCMA)

Certified Patient Care Technician/Assistant (CPCT/A)

Certified Pharmacy Technician (CPhT)

Our certifications focus on the essential components of various allied healthcare professions to provide students with the necessary skills to succeed in their future careers.



## Determine What Content is Most Important

NHA continuously updates its certification materials to ensure relevance to current healthcare practices. We achieve this by regularly performing Job Task Analyses (JTA), which analyze the essential tasks and skills needed in allied healthcare roles, directly informing our exam content to prepare students effectively for their careers.

NHA's exam prep materials begin with initial practice tests to get a feel for students' understanding of the course's key concepts. This process allows learners to utilize our Focused Review<sup>®</sup> feature to formulate a study plan that addresses their weaknesses.

Focused Review<sup>®</sup> is a patented NHA resource that assesses students' performance across practice tests, tracks their improvement, and helps them develop effective study plans. It also measures their performance against students who have previously passed the same certifications they're pursuing to gauge their progress versus successful graduates. By using Focused Review<sup>®</sup> to identify what areas of study need work, students can easily find the most critical points to prepare for before certification exams, boosting their scores and chances for success.

## Expand on General Teaching Tactics and Learning Techniques

Traditional training programs often center around lectures and extensive reading. However, these methods do not always deliver optimal results when it comes to preparing students for certification exams and real-life practice.

Instead of reverting to these approaches, educators can consider:

Scenario-based learning

Active learning templates

Skills competency checklists

Critical-thinking activities



To appeal to each student's learning style and optimize their chances for success, educators can use [NHA's Performance Analytics](#). This handy tool allows students to assess growth across their program and gain access to a wide range of resources, including:

### **Monitor engagement and performance**

Easily track your learners' overall progress, performance, and utilization of study materials. You can also delve into individual learner data for a more detailed assessment.

### **Identify learning gaps**

Utilize the Suggested Review feature to identify the topics where learners face the most challenges across their practice test attempts, enabling targeted study recommendations.

### **Target remediation using actionable insights**

Categorize each learner based on NHA's recommended remediation level before each exam, facilitating personalized guidance for students on their path to passing.

This tool empowers educators to filter individual, module, or specific assessment performance results. It provides comprehensive insights into students' performance, including time spent on each question and their performance on quizzes compared to other course content. As a result, educators can tailor lessons and remediation to meet their learners' specific needs effectively.





## NHA's Learning Resources Help Students Excel on Exams and in Their Careers

NHA keeps the CBE model central to our learning resources and exam prep. We're committed to making it easier than ever for educators to teach their students the necessary skills and competencies to deliver exceptional patient care.

Our solutions reimagine how education should work. At NHA, we aim not only to prepare healthcare workers to meet certification standards but also to be skilled, highly adaptable, and committed to quality patient care. And patients will be all the better for it.



With NHA learning resources, exam prep, and accredited certifications, your students can develop the skills and core competencies needed to thrive in a modern, dynamic healthcare landscape. Reach out to NHA today to discover how our array of learning resources can maximize learning success and help educators offer effective, personalized training to their students.



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