



WHAT  
**HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
LEADERS**

NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE AACN ESSENTIALS



American Association  
of Colleges of Nursing

*The Voice of Academic Nursing*



Preparing practice-ready nurses able to successfully transition from student to clinician and thrive across healthcare settings is a top priority for leaders in nursing education and practice. In April 2021, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) announced a new model and framework for preparing nurses, which are outlined in *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education*. This landmark document delineates the expected competencies of graduates from baccalaureate, master's, and Doctor of Nursing Practice programs using a competency-based approach to nursing education.

This transformational approach to educating nurses to meet complex patient needs and contemporary practice expectations can only be achieved through close collaboration among college/university leaders, nurse educators, and practice partners.

## WHAT IS COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION (CBE)?

Moving to the *Essentials* and competency-based education will bridge the gap between what nursing students learn in school and the knowledge they need to be successful in real world practice settings. AACN defines competency-based education (CBE) as “a system of instruction, assessment, feedback, self-reflection, and academic reporting that is based on students demonstrating that they have learned the knowledge, attitudes, motivations, self-perceptions, and skills expected of them as they progress through their education.”

It is important to note that:

- Other organizations define CBE differently, including the U.S. Department of Education, which more narrowly defines this term as education that “organizes academic content according to competencies—what a student knows and can do—rather than following a more traditional scheme, such as by course.”
- AACN does not require schools to move to time-variable education or organize academic content according to competencies instead of by course.
- Institutional and discipline specific accrediting agencies may require notification or approval of substantive changes proposed to implement the *Essentials*, depending on the extent and nature of the proposed changes.
- Most schools of nursing across the country are moving forward with the transition to a competency-based pedagogy with guidance, resources, and training provided by AACN.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MOVING TO CBE?

- **Student-centered learning:** CBE puts students at the center of the learning process.
- **Inclusive education:** CBE promotes equity by catering to the diverse needs of learners from different backgrounds.
- **Clear expectations:** CBE clarifies faculty expectations regarding student development and performance, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning.
- **Real-world relevance:** CBE ties curriculum and coursework to life and professional expectations, preparing students for success in the nursing profession.
- **Practice-readiness:** CBE will help to ensure that students are practice-ready and able to transition smoothly into the workforce.
- **Personal growth:** CBE encourages internal motivation, collaboration, and continuous learning as students develop into a highly competent nursing professional.

## HOW CAN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS FACILITATE THE MOVE TO CBE?

Implementation of the *Essentials* and moving to CBE requires participation at all institutional levels—from the president and provost to campus partners, faculty, practice partners, alumni, and students. Higher education leadership can assist their nursing schools with curricular transition by providing support in a variety of ways:

- **Faculty development:** Provide your school of nursing with adequate funding to attend faculty development workshops, conferences, and other continuing education opportunities to ensure faculty are prepared for CBE pedagogy.
- **Meaningful partnerships:** Assist your school of nursing in making connections with practice partners, donors, state legislators, and state boards of nursing.
- **Experiential learning:** Assist your school of nursing with financial support for developing practice and clinical experiential learning opportunities.
- **Facilitating student success:** Encourage collaboration with your institution’s student services office to identify diverse student needs and the resources available to them to facilitate student success.
- **Engagement:** Advocate with alumni and donors for nursing education to prepare a practice-ready nursing workforce.
- **Support:** Provide the dean and nursing faculty with support and resources needed during the curricular transition.



Visit [aacnnursing.org/essentials](https://aacnnursing.org/essentials) to find out more about how nursing schools and practice partners are working together to implement the 2021 *Essentials*.



# THE ESSENTIALS

For more tools related to the  
*AACN Essentials* and moving  
to competency-based  
education, visit:

[www.aacnnursing.org/Essentials](http://www.aacnnursing.org/Essentials)



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