

# The CBE Story A Strategic Storytelling Toolkit

Share Your Vision, Communicate Your Results,  
Change the Conversation

COMPETENCY-BASED  
EDUCATION NETWORK 

## KEY CONTRIBUTORS:

Alison Kadlec, Consultant to Public Agenda

Deborah Bushway, CBE Consultant

Andy Goodman, The Goodman Center

Madison Gordon, Public Agenda

Roger Harvey, Bose Public Affairs Group

Charla Long, C-BEN Executive Director

Kelle Parsons, American Institutes for Research

## C-BEN COLLABORATORY CO-AUTHORS & SPECIAL CONTRIBUTORS:

Christina Amato, Sinclair College

Kelvin Bentley, eLearning Consultant

Kimberly Chaudoin, Lipscomb University

Fang Chen, Central New Mexico Community College

Bob Collins, Western Governors University

Laura Dorman, University of Louisville

Jeffrey Evans, Purdue University

Bridget Gaer, Capella University

Odeese Ghassa-Khalil, Carlow University

Cori Gordon, Northern Arizona University

James Hedges, Westminster College

Chuck Komp, Nicolet College

Chrisann Merriman, University of Mary Hardin Baylor

Billie McConnell, Ohio Valley University

Tracy Money, College Unbound

Cali Morrison, American Public University System

Sean Nemeth, Brandman University

Laura Pedrick, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

William Pena, Southern New Hampshire University

Carlos Rivers, Texas A&M University-Commerce

Craig Schieber, City University of Seattle

Ward Wesolowski, University of Phoenix

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# 01

## Share Your Vision, Communicate Your Results, Change the Conversation: How to Use this Toolkit

The CBE Story is designed to help you communicate more effectively about the purpose, value and results of competency-based education. Inside, you'll find a framework for bringing your CBE story to life. You'll also find activities, prompts, tips and templates to help you tell your best stories to different audiences, including students and families; faculty, staff and administrators; governing boards; regulators and policymakers; and employers. You will also find tools and resources that can help you help others, such as students and faculty, to tell their stories.

You may want to jump in and read this toolkit cover to cover, using each section as a stepping stone on the path to becoming a powerful storyteller for the CBE movement. Or you may want to focus on a specific section to learn more about a certain facet of storytelling, such as how to craft stories for a particular audience or bring the best stories out of others. Regardless of the approach you take, we suggest you use the embedded  **tips**,  **templates** and  **tools** both for individual reflection and team deliberation, and we encourage you to think about storytelling as a key competency required of all CBE advocates.

### 7 Ways to Use this Toolkit

1. Position yourself as a guide in a complicated and unclear landscape.
2. Develop and leverage key stories for different groups.
3. Describe your CBE program in a more compelling way.
4. Reinforce your credibility and relationships with regulators and policymakers.
5. Communicate with your board about how CBE is helping your institution fulfill its mission, and what you need to do it right.
6. Build energy and cohesion within your CBE design team, and sustain appropriate collaborative partnerships with faculty, staff and administrators.
7. Attract and respond to new opportunities with external partners such as employers.

#### NOTE:

The C-BEN Collaboratory is working on a digital story bank to assist institutions. The story bank will be ready for use in September 2018.

*The CBE Story was created to help CBE institutions and champions communicate effectively with the audiences whose attitudes most directly shape the CBE movement and field.*

# 02

## Why Storytelling Matters in CBE

Those who believe deeply that our traditional higher education structures are failing to meet the needs of far too many of today's learners are people who tend to understand and value CBE. They are people who share CBE's commitment to creating educational journeys tailored to individual learners' needs, and who recognize and appreciate that well-justified pressure is mounting to make evidence of learning transparent to students and employers alike. These people are more likely to have been exposed to the curricular and pedagogical innovation that comes with the conviction that demonstrations of learning—not time spent in class—should determine a student's pace toward her or his credential. And they are comfortable with the notion of "beginning with the end in mind," and thus believe that programs of study should be backward-designed from clear statements of the knowledge, skills, abilities and intellectual behaviors required of their graduates.

But this population of innovators remains the extreme minority in American higher education, and the work they do on behalf of better and more equitable outcomes for all learners is facing many challenges. Given the profound departure CBE represents from traditional approaches

to higher education, and given the diversity of educational models currently in play, many people have difficulty picturing what CBE is and how it works. In candid conversations with those who are unfamiliar with CBE, one frequently hears comments and questions like, "I don't get it. This doesn't sound like college..." and "Is this about just testing your way to a degree? That doesn't sound like learning..." and "So, students are just left on their own to learn? That doesn't sound like quality..." and "So this is just job training? That doesn't sound like real education..."

Beset by myths and misconceptions, and endangered both by entrenched defenders of the status quo and by the real threat of bad actors posing as innovators, CBE is in dire need of champions who are able to tell compelling stories that paint a picture of the richness of high-quality CBE programs.

As institutions, researchers and regulators begin using the CBE Quality Framework as a common vehicle for discerning program quality and building a knowledge base around student outcomes, it will become easier for prospective students, faculty, staff, policymakers and employers to understand and have confidence in

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*In order for the CBE movement to meet its potential, its champions must learn how to share their best stories in ways that critical audiences can hear and understand.*

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## *Stories constitute the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal.*

*—Howard Gardner*

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the purpose and value of CBE. Alongside working to support widespread adoption of common standards and building this evidence base, the CBE movement needs an awareness-raising and myth-busting campaign. This is where storytelling enters the picture.

### The Power of Narrative

Since the beginning of recorded history, stories have been humans' primary vehicle for making meaning in life and connecting with one another. It is through stories that we make and justify our decisions, persuade others, create our identities and explain how things work. Stories connect us to a larger self and to universal truths, and they intrinsically encourage collaboration. Because they engage us through emotions and work to connect us to each other, stories inspire empathy and help us to share a sense of purpose. In her book *Wired for Story*, author Lisa Cron explains why humans are natural storytellers. [Learn more](#) in this interview with her.

A growing body of evidence from neuroscience and molecular biology research is offering new insights about the impact of storytelling on the human brain and decision-making:

- ▶ **Stories are the most powerful way to activate the human brain:** More areas of the brain “light up” when people process stories than when they are engaged in other forms language processing, suggesting stories are how people truly connect with ideas and make broader sense of them.
- ▶ **Stories motivate voluntary cooperation:** Hearing compelling stories releases chemicals in the human brain, like oxytocin, that are associated with a feeling of safety—a basic condition for cooperation to occur.
- ▶ **Stories change minds:** The more “transportive” or absorbing a listener finds a story, the more likely he or she is to develop favorable attitudes about its main character.
- ▶ **Storytelling boosts memory and recall:** When the brain detects emotionally charged events, it releases the chemical dopamine, which boosts memory and information processing ability.

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Lisa Cron interview [http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free\\_range\\_2012\\_05.pdf](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2012_05.pdf)

Stories are the most powerful way to activate the human brain: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1354716276-vBCJNxgtlulFGnU+PmkBpA&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1354716276-vBCJNxgtlulFGnU+PmkBpA&_r=0)

Stories motivate voluntary cooperation: <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling>

Stories change minds: <http://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>

Storytelling boosts memory and recall: <https://www.td.org/Publications/Blogs/Science-of-Learning-Blog/2016/07/Storytelling-and-Brain-Science-This-Is-Your-Brain-on-Story>

# 03

## The Elements of Effective Storytelling

Every good story has key elements in common. Learning how to tell your best CBE stories requires applying these elements to your circumstances.<sup>1</sup> For more on the basic rules of storytelling, we suggest you read the [Goodman Center's "The Ten Immutable Laws of Storytelling."](#)

Before jumping into the work of crafting stories, we recommend that you stop to ask yourself and your project team the following questions. Being clear about your strategic goals will help you identify which of your stories most need telling.

- ▶ Why do you need to share your CBE story at this moment in time?
- ▶ What are you trying to achieve?
- ▶ What problems do you think CBE can help your institution or community solve?

- ▶ How might effective storytelling increase confidence in CBE within your organization and strengthen your organizational culture?
- ▶ Given your goals and the needs of your institution, what is the most important story you need to share, and why?

These questions are designed to give you a starting point for telling your best stories. Your answers, particularly to the last question, may change over time or by audience. We suggest returning to the questions periodically to help keep your storytelling strategy clear and strong.

Once you're clear about the broader strategic purposes of telling a CBE story, it's time to work on the story itself. The following elements and prompts are designed to help you tell the most effective story possible. We suggest you return frequently to this section as well, to workshop and improve your stories as you construct them.

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*Inside each of us is a natural-born storyteller,  
waiting to be released.*

*—Robin Moore*

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Goodman Center's "The Ten Immutable Laws of Storytelling" [http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free\\_range\\_2007\\_06.pdf](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2007_06.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> C-BEN would like to thank The Goodman Center for providing storytelling training to C-BEN members. While several sources were consulted in the creation of this toolkit, we draw here and throughout on lessons learned from our work with [Goodman Center](#).

## CHARACTER

- Who is the focal point of your story? Choose one character to focus the story on. This person will be your protagonist.
- What exactly does this character want? How do they see/understand their world?

## CIRCUMSTANCE

- Where is the character and what's going on? What's the larger context? The setting must be clear.
- What about your character's circumstances make the listener feel something and empathize? There must be vulnerability.

## CONFLICT

- What is the core challenge or dilemma the character faces?
- What makes this story's arc interesting, creative or unexpected?

## RESOLUTION

- How does the conflict resolve?
- What's the 'moral of the story'?

## Additional Considerations

- **Delivery:** Does your story flow? Does it bog down in unnecessary details? We suggest you read: ["You Have the Story, Now Let's Work on the Telling"](#)
- **Medium:** What is the best platform for delivering this message (video, audio, written word)?
- **Imagery:** Since imagery is key to feeling, what imagery will you include and why?
- **Empathy:** Is your main character authentic, likeable, relatable? How do you know?
- **Satisfaction:** Is the resolution of your story satisfying to listeners? Is the meaning absolutely clear?



## TIPS

### Common Mistakes:

1. Overloading the listener with too much information all at once. We suggest you read: ["The Too-Much-Too-Soon Problem in Storytelling."](#)
2. Not reaching the full potential of your story by hiding the action behind blasé adjectives. We suggest you read: ["The Black Box: Is Your Story Trapped Inside?"](#)
3. Not having a relatable protagonist in your story, or hiding behind "we."
4. Using jargon or words that don't create an image in people's minds (non-visual language).
5. Not including or describing real barriers or obstacles.

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You Have the Story, Now Let's Work on the Telling [http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/freerange\\_2017\\_10.pdf](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/freerange_2017_10.pdf)

The Too-Much-Too-Soon Problem in Storytelling [http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free\\_range\\_2010\\_11.pdf](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/free_range_2010_11.pdf)

The Black Box: Is Your Story Trapped Inside? [http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/freerange\\_15\\_04.pdf](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/freerange_15_04.pdf)

# Activity: Recognizing a Good Story

Read Story A and Story B below.

**Story A:** 87 percent of our students value the flexibility our program affords, according to our surveys. Adult students express particularly high levels of satisfaction when it comes to faculty interaction and support. In fact, students in our CBE program express higher levels of satisfaction than do students in our traditional face-to-face courses or our online courses. There's something about personalized support that seems to work especially well for adult students with family responsibilities. Job prospects for our CBE students are also great, with 45 percent of graduates receiving promotions or increased pay within 12 months of graduation.

**Story B:** Jim, a single father of three young girls ages 10, 8 and 7, knew he needed a degree to advance in his IT career, but he felt he was too old to be in a classroom and couldn't see how college could work with his hectic life. In his competency-based IT program, he was provided with a flexible alternative that gave him more contact with expert faculty members, coaches and other adult students than he'd ever experienced in the online classes he'd previously tried. He was able to complete assignments at his own pace, when his children were asleep or busy with activities, and he was directed to the right learning material and subject matter experts as he needed them. Some classes he finished quickly because he'd already mastered the necessary skills on the job, while other classes he took more slowly in order to master new skills. This spring, Jim's daughters waved a colorful sign saying, "Our Daddy Rocks!" as he crossed the stage during his graduation ceremony. Jim is now qualified to apply for jobs that pay 35 percent more than his current one, and he feels ready to take the next step in his career. The best part is that Jim is not alone—we had over 100 adult students like him start that same year, and 80 percent of them graduated!

Compare these two stories based on the elements of effective storytelling. How are the stories different?

Which one is better and why?

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 **Additional thoughts**

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# Activity: Workshop Your Story

- Step 1** – At tables of no more than eight, everyone spends a few minutes thinking of a two-minute story that illustrates something important about her or his CBE program. The story can be about any aspect of the program—a student, a faculty or staff member, a personal experience, anything—but it should help the listener understand something about the value and purpose of CBE.
- Step 2** – Each person at the table takes a turn telling her or his story. A two-minute timer is kept by the person to the left of the storyteller.
- Step 3** – After everyone at the table has told a story, each person pulls two chips from the “I like your story” chip bucket and gives them to the two people whose story they liked the most.
- Step 4** – If any one person gets many more chips than the others, the group should discuss their story. Why did people like that story? What elements of storytelling did it use? What could make it stronger?
- Step 5** – The group discusses lessons learned, with each person reflecting on ways to make their own story stronger. Consider using the “Telling Your Best Story” template on [page 18](#) to accompany this exercise.



## Additional thoughts

# 04

## Audience, Audience, Audience

Adapting to different audiences is an essential practice for effective storytelling. It also benefits the storyteller because it promotes empathy and “perspective taking”—the ability to put one’s self in another’s shoes. Perspective taking is a good tool for learning as well as persuasion. As it pertains to CBE, there is a wide range of audiences who need a better understanding of high-quality CBE and who bring to the topic distinct sets of biases and preconceived notions. Meeting audiences where they are, and taking their needs into account, will help you tell your best story. If you need to better understand your audience, start by listening to them. Focus groups, surveys and interviews are all good tools in this pursuit. Making false assumptions can make your story ineffective, or even harmful.

Prospective students, faculty and staff, policymakers and regulators, and employers are all critical stakeholders in the CBE landscape. In the sections below, we offer considerations, tips and tools for helping you think carefully about your audience when telling your CBE stories.



### Checklist for Telling Your Best Story

- ✓ How clear are you about why you’re telling your story, and what do you hope it will achieve?
- ✓ Practice the key elements of effective storytelling.
- ✓ Conduct an audience analysis.
- ✓ What evidence do you have, and how are you including it in your story?
- ✓ Practice your story with people who have varying levels of familiarity with CBE.

### Additional thoughts

- Don’t assume that all audiences have the same understanding of CBE or higher education.
- Analyze all key audiences (**see tool on page 10**) and map out 3-5 key messages for each. Think about the barriers or concerns that each audience may have, and how to address them in your story.
- If you get off topic, practice strategies that bridge the conversation back to your 3-5 key messages.
- Remember to avoid jargon! Keep your language simple.
- Tell a story that helps the listener connect to the protagonist.
- Use numbers to support the story—not take center stage. This will give your story “proof of performance” that your CBE program is successful.



# Audience Message Alignment Tool

This tool is designed to help you craft your CBE message for different audiences by using a series of questions. Start by choosing an audience (e.g., policymaker, prospective students, adjunct faculty), then answer the questions in the left column with this group in mind. As you move through this tool, consider subdividing your audience into smaller groups to ensure you're telling the right story for each.

## Audience

e.g., policymaker, prospective student, employer, faculty member

Analysis	Alignment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the individual or group traits of your audience?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are their goals and aspirations?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What problems do they have or need to solve?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do they know and believe about higher education?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do they think about CBE? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ What do they know?</li> <li>◦ What do they want to know?</li> <li>◦ What do they need to know?</li> <li>◦ What aspects of CBE are they familiar with?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your assumptions about this group? How can you validate them?</li> </ul>	

## A. Considerations for Students & Families (Prospective and Current)

Telling stories that help students and their families understand more about how CBE can help them achieve their goals is job one for institutions trying to build their CBE programs. Knowing who your students and prospective students are is the first step on the journey to telling them your best stories. Because CBE is especially promising for those who have not been well-served by traditional higher education, it is important to take the time to understand what about traditional programs does not work well for some students. The guiding question here should be: what population of students are we targeting with our CBE offerings, and what do those prospective students value most when it comes to postsecondary attainment?

**The following considerations are among those that matter most to students and their families:**

- ✓ How does your CBE program provide the combination of flexibility and support that is vital for accommodating the circumstances most “new traditional” students find themselves in (working more than 25 hours per week while attending school, taking care of children or other family members, living on the economic margins)?
- ✓ How does your CBE program provide an affordable path to a high-quality credential that has real labor market value? In other words, why is your CBE program worth a student’s time?
- ✓ How does your CBE program offer a sense of belonging to students? How do they know that they and their aspirations really matter to your institution?
- ✓ How does your CBE program help students succeed where other models have fallen short?



### TIPS

- Be honest about how your approach to CBE might not right be for everyone.
- Check your assumptions. Students might not be interested in your program for the reasons you think. Ask them about their motivations and interests, and listen carefully.
- Connect students’ educational and career goals to their family and larger community contexts.
- Don’t use jargon or terms that only you are likely to understand. Most students won’t know acronyms like “CBE,” so break it down and keep it straightforward.
- Tell the stories of successful CBE students so that prospective students and their families can envision success for themselves as well.

## B. Considerations for Faculty, Staff & Administrators

Internal audiences can make or break your efforts to build, scale and sustain high-quality CBE programs. Because instituting CBE can entail significant changes to organizational structure, work roles and professional boundaries, internal audiences are among the most likely to view new CBE efforts as a threat. Therefore, your challenge here is two-fold: not only do you need to tell stories that help faculty, staff and administrators see the value of CBE for your students, you also need to tell stories that help these people and groups see themselves as valued experts and co-creators in the work.

### **Special considerations for faculty, staff, and administrators:**

- ✓ Tell stories that help faculty, staff and administrators see how CBE can help them do more of the things that matter most to them—or less of the things they least enjoy—among their many responsibilities.
- ✓ Do not use data to shame or punish when engaging internal audiences. Consider inviting others to tell stories that might help make sense of the data you choose to include.
- ✓ Because a wide array of employees will be involved in implementing CBE, create the conditions for people to tell their stories as a way to build shared understanding about what CBE means for different people in different work roles. Carefully consider where you can employ storytelling exercises to build common ground.

### **Additional special considerations for faculty:**

Among the leading narratives of CBE detractors is that the faculty role is diminished in competency-based programs, and that the shifts in faculty roles in CBE programs represent an erosion of quality. Those who seek to tell their best stories about CBE must contend with opposing narratives in the minds of faculty members and others who identify strongly with the traditional model of higher education. The best CBE stories for these audiences are those that help them understand: 1) how the faculty role remains central in high-quality CBE programs, and 2) the ways in which CBE programs can help faculty focus more of their time on what matters most to them: fostering student learning in the context of sharing subject matter expertise.

- ✓ Keep in mind how disciplinary norms, and the accompanying conflation of subject matter expertise with claims to autonomy in curriculum/pedagogy/assessment, conspire to make CBE feel potentially threatening. Tell stories that help faculty members unpack these issues for themselves, and create space for them to tell their own stories about their own most meaningful professional experiences. In other words, use storytelling not to persuade faculty about the value of CBE, but rather to listen carefully and, by doing so, build greater trust and common ground.
- ✓ Keep your stories focused on students and academic excellence, not business considerations, and do not be afraid of showing vulnerability when telling your story.
- ✓ Be mindful of the pressures faculty are facing and how those may affect their views of CBE. Articulate how your CBE programs are student-centric, concerned with academic quality and excellence, and promote academic freedom.



The following questions can be used to create conversations with faculty, staff and administrators about the value and purpose of CBE. These are not necessarily the same questions as those you would ask to draw the best stories out from these groups (see Section 5), but there may be some overlap. The questions here are designed to help faculty, staff and administrators use story to communicate their values, and to build a shared sense of purpose across real or perceived boundaries:

- What are you most proud of in your work? What energizes you?
- What takes the wind out of your sails? What concerns you about the state of education, your discipline, your students?
- Tell a story about a time when you overcame a barrier to help our students.
- Tell a story about one of our students. What's the moral of this story? What's important to others about it?
- What worries you most about CBE? What excites you?
- What's your current understanding of CBE? How do you see its position in our institution?

## C. Considerations for Governing Boards

Many governing boards are composed of individuals for whom the traditional higher education system worked well. For people who feel well-served by the traditional model, and who have only their own and their children's traditional experiences to go by, CBE can seem both confusing and threatening. Realizing that knee-jerk reactions may come from any audience that feels well-served by traditional higher education is important for telling them your best CBE stories.

### Keep the following in mind when adapting your story for a governing board:

- ✓ Most trustees have a background in business, and therefore stories about the economic development functions of CBE are very likely to resonate with this audience.
- ✓ Trustees are already concerned about employer engagement, so showing how CBE programs require students to be actively engaged in learning that is relevant to the workplace will resonate with them.
- ✓ Keep in mind that CBE can play a positive role in conversations about workforce development, but some boards will want to know how it is different from more narrow job skills training.
- ✓ The concept of adult learners whose needs are not being met by traditional higher education programs resonates with most boards. Help them understand who these prospective students are and what they need that CBE provides.
- ✓ Boards will always be interested in any innovation that reduces cost and student debt while enhancing student success. The notion that the significant investments required for high-quality CBE pay off in terms of student outcomes is an important part of the CBE story for boards.



### TIPS

- Answer this question from the board's perspective: "Why does this matter to me?" Link your CBE program to current institutional or statewide strategic initiatives.
- Go in prepared: know who you will be meeting with and what matters to them.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I will find out and get back to you." Then do your homework, and use it as an opportunity to follow up later.
- Consider inviting prosperous CBE students in to your meeting to tell their own success stories.
- Avoid using jargon.

## D. Considerations for Regulators & Policymakers

Regulators and policymakers are, understandably, most interested in preventing waste, fraud and abuse of federal financial aid dollars. They are also driven by concerns about student protections, including those surrounding student debt and quality of educational experience. When communicating with policymakers and regulators, it is important to keep your messages crisp and clear. It's also important to remember that, like governing boards, most policymakers and regulators are products of traditional higher education structures and experiences. Therefore, they are more likely to view CBE with suspicion or as a threat to deeply held assumptions about what education is and how one knows what constitutes quality.

Your CBE story for this audience should attend to the following questions, as these are usually “top of mind” for policymakers and regulators:

- ✓ How does your program ensure that students aren't “left on their own” to learn?
- ✓ How do you verify learning in your program?
- ✓ How is your program different from a correspondence program?
- ✓ What kind of data do you have about student outcomes in your program?
- ✓ How do you ensure that your program is affordable for students? How do you otherwise signal attention to cost considerations and anticipated labor market outcomes for graduates?
- ✓ How is CBE going to benefit my constituents?



- Before your meeting, know who you'll be speaking with, what's on their agenda and who their constituents are. Craft your key messages accordingly.
- Tell stories that paint a picture and help listeners put themselves in your protagonists' shoes. It's not just about the numbers.
- Create a simple one-page “leave-behind” and provide it at the end—not the beginning—of the meeting. This is where you can include data and further information.
- Avoid using jargon.
- Prepare for difficult questions and practice bridging strategies to bring the conversation back to your key messages when necessary. Always take the high road.
- Be proactive: don't wait for the policymaker to address the “elephant in the room.” Bringing it up yourself will help you build credibility.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say, “I don't know, but I will find out and get back to you.” Then do your homework, and use it as an opportunity to follow up later.
- Be respectful of any and all staffers. They will be your greatest advocate with their bosses.
- Come ready to talk cost (e.g., return on investment, efficiency, etc.).

# Activity: Policymaker Engagement: Telling Your Best Story

- Step 1** – Keeping in mind the questions of greatest interest to policymakers, and their notoriously short attention spans, work individually or with your team to craft the 3-5 core messages you would want a policymaker to understand about your program.
- Step 2** – Identify 2-3 data points that can be folded in to those messages.
- Step 3** – Develop a maximum three-minute presentation.
- Step 4** – Practice your story, and get feedback from people both inside and outside your institution who have varying degrees of familiarity with CBE and your work. If you're working in a team, have each member craft a three-minute presentation and workshop one another's so you can land on your single best story.
- Step 5** – Submit your best story to the C-BEN Story Bank either as a video or in writing, and let C-BEN know if you would be willing to participate in trips to Washington, D.C. to engage and educate policymakers about CBE.



## TIPS

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*Stories are memory aids, instruction manuals  
and moral compasses.*

*–Aleks Krotoski*

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## E. Considerations for Employers

The language of education and the language of business are very different, yet the language of “competencies” makes intuitive sense to many business-minded people. In order to engage employers, you must understand their language and know how to use it to make your points. Unsurprisingly, most employers are most interested in whatever impacts their “bottom line.” They want to know that the people they hire will be able to deliver on their company’s promise to the market, and they want to know how to efficiently find, retain and develop their talent. Unfortunately, most industry/education partnerships are thin and anemic because the time it takes to nurture and sustain robust partnerships is significant: the silo-spanning work entailed in true partnerships is as challenging as the work of internal institutional change. Stories that help employers see how CBE can help solve some of their pressing problems are the ones most likely to hold their attention and lead to greater understanding.

The following questions are top of mind for employers:

- How do I know your graduates actually have the skills I’m looking for?
  - Why is your approach to preparing students for work in our industry (or at my company) better than the traditional paths our employees take?
  - If we were to partner with you, what would be entailed? How would partnership affect our bottom line?
- 
- ✓ When seeking to build partnerships with employers, do your homework on their industry and hiring patterns. Don’t aim your initial conversations at senior leadership; instead, engage HR managers first and begin a dialogue that includes plenty of up-front listening.
  - ✓ When crafting or modifying a story for an employer, focus on themes like employability skills, applied learning, worker retention, leadership development, and assessment of learning that models workplace conditions (avoid jargon like “authentic assessment” and instead unpack this idea in “employer language”).
  - ✓ Always adopt a “we’re here to solve a problem for you” attitude and a customer service perspective and tone when engaging employers.



- Share success stories of CBE/employer partnerships with prospective employer-partners to illustrate how CBE can be an important professional development tool that leads to a highly skilled workforce.
- Avoid using jargon. Keep your message simple and straightforward.
- Make sure your institutional plans and goals around workforce development efforts are aligned. You want to avoid a situation in which different groups within your institution are competing for the same employer.
- Work step by step to engage employers across the organizational hierarchy, from hiring managers to CEOs.



# Telling Your Best Story

- Fill out the following template to ensure your story has all the characteristics it needs to be great. Consider using the “Workshop Your Story” activity on **page 8** as an accompaniment to this exercise.

What do you want listeners to take away upon hearing your story?		Elements of Effective Story	
Core Messages	Data Points	Character	Circumstance/ Inciting Incident
1.	1.		
2.	2.		
3.	3.		
4.			
5.			
		Resolution/Goal	Conflict/Barriers
		Additional Considerations	

# 05

## Helping Others Tell Their Stories

Part of becoming competent in the art of storytelling is learning how to bring the best stories out of others. Helping others tell their stories is important not only for communicating the value of CBE, it's also crucial for improving your own understanding of your critical stakeholders' experiences. There is no more important stakeholder group than your students. CBE is a student-centered innovation, so student experience and perspective must be part of your institution's CBE story. After students, helping faculty and staff tell their stories is most essential for building internal will and for driving improvements in your program. Below we include a sample set of questions to help you draw the best stories out of others.

Before turning to audience-specific questions, keep in mind the following general tips from the [Goodman Center for finding great stories](#):

- **Ask people to tell you their story using "I" instead of "we."** People are often tempted to use "we" language when telling stories, but this can prevent the listener from truly grasping the meaning of the story, as it can make it harder to understand who exactly is doing what. Because *people identify with individuals, not groups*, helping others tell their best stories means helping people put themselves—and only themselves—at the center.
- **Look for moments of vulnerability.** The best stories are not about a straight line to success for the protagonist. Challenges, setbacks, flops and fails are humanizing, and stories that include them are more relatable and authentic for listeners. Everyone can identify with humbling setbacks, since the human condition is rife with them, so helping others share these aspects of their story will make it stronger.
- **Don't settle for the gist—insist on details.** People are often tempted to get to the point of their story, skipping over details. But a powerful story is anchored in time and place, and carries with it a feeling that can only be produced by including minutiae. By asking for details, you can help others give their story the texture that will bring it to life.
- **Don't accept jargon.** If someone uses a phrase or acronym you don't know, ask them to explain.
- **Map out a timeline of the story in your head.** As the storyteller progresses, if they skip over something, ask them to go back. Or if they hesitate to proceed, ask, "And then what happened?"
- **Press for quotes.** A good quotation can go a long way when telling a story, and can help to expose missing details.

# 06

## Using Data & Evidence to Bring Your Story to Life

**“Maybe stories are just data with a soul.”**

—Brené Brown

Stories are essential for triggering memory and emotion, and for anchoring in your audiences’ minds key ideas that you want them to remember and feel something about. But moving people from idea to active support of the kind required for advancing CBE also requires that advocates skill up in their use of data and evidence, for it is evidence that provides the pretext for action and direct support.

No matter what your story is about, it must align with your audience’s value propositions if it is to garner support, sustain momentum, and be impactful. This requires getting clear on the specific benefits your program creates for students or your institution, and then developing an evidence base that shows these benefits. The diagram on this page highlights three common categories of CBE benefits, but your program may have others. A guide by the American Institutes for Research<sup>2</sup> suggests asking your team these questions to help create more unique value statements:

- ✓ What were we trying to improve or address when we designed this program?
- ✓ How does addressing those issues help our institution achieve its mission with integrity?

Getting clear on the value proposition of your particular program will allow you to collect and/or analyze relevant data. Such data is a critical component of assessing whether your program is actually having its intended effect.



If your CBE program was designed primarily to increase access by allowing students the flexibility to adjust their pace each week—something your institution’s traditional programs don’t offer—it’s important to collect data about whether your CBE program is indeed enrolling different types of students than your traditional programs. Similarly, if your program is focused on allowing students to accelerate more quickly through it, collect data about the pace at which students are actually moving and their time to degree.

Ultimately, citing data relevant to your value proposition should fit into the narrative arc of your story; ideally, the data or evidence you cite will align directly with the benefits you’re highlighting in the story itself. This could be as simple as adding a statement about how the experience of your protagonist is common among your students. For instance, if your story is about a single working mother who felt she was only able to come back to school because of the flexible timeline of your CBE program, you could reinforce that narrative by closing with a key statistic about the share of students in your program who also have some college credits but no credential and are now graduating at the same rate as other students.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Soldner, M. & Parsons, K. (2016). Making the Case for Competency-Based Education: Early Lessons from the Field. American Institutes for Research. <http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Making-the-Case-for-Competency-Based-Education-May-2016.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> For inspiration about metrics related to certain value propositions, see: Parsons, K. & Rivers, C. (2017). Measuring Student Success in Postsecondary Competency-Based Education Programs: Toward a Student Outcomes Metrics Framework. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Toward-CBE-Student-Outcomes-Metrics-Framework-August-2017.pdf>



07

## Conclusion – Share Your Story With C-BEN!

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*When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in context and to deliver them with emotional impact.*

*–Daniel Pink*

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# NOTES

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# Consulting Services & Technical Assistance

C-BEN offers consulting services and technical assistance to help institutions, state systems, and other organizations build new and enhance existing CBE programs. If you would like to learn more about how you can best leverage this resource and C-BEN's services, please contact:

**Charla Long**, Executive Director  
Competency-Based Education Network  
charla@c-ben.org  
615-517-1256

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**[www.cbenetwork.org](http://www.cbenetwork.org)**

**1417 Hanson Drive Franklin, TN 37067**  
**615-517-1256**