

# Transitioning to CBE: Start with the Student

The following is an excerpt from our ebook, *Transforming Learning: A Personalized Approach to Competency-Based Education*. We invite you to download the entire book by [clicking here](#).

## How to Begin and End With the Student

It seems a bit self-evident to say that the heart of student-centered learning is, in fact, the student.

Because, obviously, the most valuable asset in any place of learning is—undoubtedly—the students. But, traditional models of education historically have little to do with the student, instead they focus heavily on the needs of the instructor or the course. In turn, when it's time to make important decisions at an institution, students are the last thing considered.

Which is exactly what makes CBE such an attractive model: it begins and ends with the student. Every decision relies on their voice, their learning, and their motivation. Truly listening to their needs and incorporating their feedback takes time, but it is invaluable.

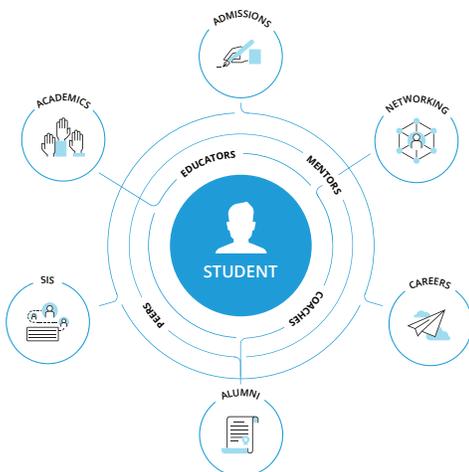
So before you change the length of classes, alter the role of the educator, or decide to add or drop a course from the curriculum, consult with them!

Because every school is dedicated to educating and inspiring students, they often think of themselves as “student-centered.” And while student agency is cultivated in a number of ways in every school, many are merely paying lip-service to an admittedly important feature of student success—without taking any significant action towards achieving this goal. On the other hand, some schools have created student voice committees that work with faculty and staff to create a more engaging learning environment—with students at the center.

“ Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies. ”

**Kofi Annan**

Secretary-General of the United Nations '97-'06



## Abbey McIntosh, Nashua High School South

When Abbey McIntosh was a freshman at her high school in New Hampshire, her science teacher asked her to join the school's Student Voice Committee. She was already a strong student, academically and socially, so she was honored to lend her voice to the formation of high level decisions that would help shape the future of her school.

When asked for her honest evaluation of the level of student voice in her school, Abbey labeled the commitment as “tokenism.” In other words, while the school thought that they were giving students a chance to be heard, the reality was quite the opposite.

Over the next several years, Abbey and the Student Voice Committee worked with school administrators and teachers to ensure that student voice was incorporated.

“This incorporation of student voice became a high point for me in my education—to realize how much my teachers care, how much my principal cares about the students, and what the students have to say.”

## Consult With Students to Give them Agency

Thanks to amazing work through the Center for Secondary School Redesign (part of the US Department Of Education’s i3 Grant), schools around the country are incorporating student voice as they develop performance assessments that incorporate personalized learning strategies.

Their first step is to figure out what students need to be more engaged in their learning. Who better to ask than the students themselves?

But where to begin? There are already systems in place to support student engagement—for example, student governance groups—so they are a great place to establish the inclusion of student voice in every decision, including school policy and school improvements.

Likewise, it’s invaluable to cultivate educational leaders alongside student leaders. Teachers can ensure that decisions represent the most important client in the industry (the students!), and can evangelize this work to peers and parents, so there’s widespread understanding of the needs and dynamics behind the changes.

When you consult with your students, you give them the agency to make decisions as you design and implement changes in the transition to CBE.

## Areas you might ask for student input/feedback



### Grading policy changes

When CBE is implemented well, grading practices will naturally evolve. Be sure to ask how students perceive the ways grades might change their academic experience.



### Indices of success

Are your competencies clear and accurate? Students will be the most significantly impacted by them if they are unclear or confusing, so they should be a significant part of this process.



### Transition roadmap

When will different components be implemented? Students should be aware of the timeline so they can ask questions or raise concerns around dates and critical times of the academic year.



### Technology evaluation

Most traditional gradebooks and learning management systems do not accommodate CBE. Many schools try to make their technology work, but it’s usually not a great fit. As your team chooses technologies and tools to enable CBE, ask some students to test them out and offer their feedback.