

CASE STUDY #4

WELLSPRING INITIATIVE PHASE II

# BRIDGING THE GAP

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION  
AS A CATALYST FOR CLOSING  
EQUITY AND SKILLS GAPS

# PROJECT REPORT

Wellspring is a multi-year initiative of the [1EdTech Foundation](#) and [IMS Global Learning Consortium](#) aiming to accelerate the adoption of an education-to-work ecosystem based on open technology standards. Wellspring envisions an environment where educators and employers can collaborate on education curricula focused on skills, learners control their skills-based achievements through secure and verifiable [digital credentials](#), and employers can find highly qualified talent based on their verifiable credentials. The initiative establishes proof points through research, practice, and demonstration as a roadmap for talent ecosystem stakeholders to achieve digital transformation based upon proven open standards. See the [Wellspring Initiative](#) for more information.

This case study shares the practical experiences of the participating Wellspring Project teams from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB), a HBCU\*, and Con-Real, LLC, a large construction company. The teams demonstrated the power of partnership in the design and development of competency frameworks as a foundation and initial step toward an institutional competency-based education strategy. The competency frameworks that emerged from the work will serve as a springboard to the implementation of a skill-validated certificate program, with industry certification, that will immediately serve the talent needs of business partners.

## THE ROLE OF COMPETENCIES AND COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS IN LINKING ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS DIRECTLY TO WORKFORCE NEEDS

CBE combines an international and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and the expectations about learning are held constant.

Recent social, cultural, and economic conditions, exacerbated by catalysts such as the pandemic, racial justice issues, and workforce disruptions, have elevated the need to provide tangible connections between academic credentials, jobs, and the skills required for success in the marketplace.

While a benchmark of some level of achievement, the degree is a proxy for skills that have been covered but not necessarily mastered. Understanding what an individual knows and can do, rather than how much time has been spent in a course on a particular topic, becomes critical to filling industry talent gaps with a diverse pool of quality candidates.

In addition, education and workforce systems have been described as disjointed, threatening economic vitality and individual quality of life.

Competency-based education (CBE) provides an innovative, instructional means of designing curriculum, credentials, content delivery, academic process, and skill documentation that can be responsive to local needs by designing in conjunction with employers. CBE credentials and instructional models rest upon the foundation of competency frameworks to inform the delivery, messaging, and documentation of skills accomplished in the academic experience.

\*Historically Black College & University (HBCU)

## Leveraging the Development of Shared Competency Frameworks at University of Arkansas Pine

In partnership with business partner Con-Real L.P., the University of Arkansas in Pine Bluff (UAPB) sought to initiate change within their academic structures by introducing CBE as a mechanism to align existing quality content directly with job roles.

There are disproportionate national unemployment and underemployment rates for African Americans with degrees (12.4%) than their white counterparts (5.6%). UAPB, a historically black college & university (HBCU), leveraged the Wellspring project as a means of taking action to respond to their local stakeholder needs and begin a process of institutional change.



**Troy Alley**  
 President  
 Con-Real Real Estate Division



Encouraged and facilitated by leadership and content experts at UAPB, the team focused on building a construction engineering technician academic credential, while Con-Real’s organizational leadership targeted the job role of construction project engineer.

Each organization crafted individual competency frameworks that were then aligned with each other to demonstrate the relationships between the two and represented digitally using the IMS Competencies and Academic Standards Exchange® (CASE®) standard and made openly available in [CASE Network Labs](#).

Validated via faculty and internal academic quality review, the UAPB team intends to begin the institutional implementation process of their CBE program. The team concluded the project with a clear sense of accomplishment and recognition that the work has led beyond “conversation to a plan” that results in the opportunity for bi-directional feedback between the “classroom and workplace” with neither party operating on an “island”, per Troy Alley, President, Con-Real Real Estate Division.

The resulting relationships between UAPB and Con-Real were described by all participants as more substantial, with a clear plan that could be tweaked over time as changes become evident.

UAPB has described participation in the Wellspring project as the initiation of a long-term strategy with outcomes that can be expanded and replicated with other technical programs such as those in the energy or criminal justice field. According to Dr. Bruce W. McGowan, Interim Dean and Director of the School of Agriculture, Fisheries and Human Sciences at UAPB, “the future use of competency frameworks are a requirement. The right business partnerships make it possible to develop a large network of competencies that can serve as a model for the HBCU community to rethink how we ‘do’ education and help HBCU graduates rise to the top of the list for employment opportunities.” The designed competency frameworks will leverage the alteration of delivery models, the inclusion of digital credentials and industry credentials, and signal for employers the technical and 21st-century skills gained by completers.

## Considerations for the Use Competencies to Stimulate Institutional Change

The project participants identified the following considerations as part of their work:

- Identification of the “right” partnerships with active, engaged, invested organizations is critical to the process. While many academic institutions have partnerships, the framework co-design process leads to deep and meaningful shared understandings and engaged relationships that extend beyond the typical “advisory” function.

The integration of learning and work requires new approaches  
to empower “students of any age to future-proof  
their careers and adapt with the changing needs of an employer.”

- A full degree program can range from 2-4 years to complete. The introduction of CBE into the academic structure of more traditional programs can allow for the completion of embedded credentials that empower the learner with highly coveted credentials for employment along the learning journey.

The UAPB construction engineering technician certificate, delivered in a CBE format, supports the opportunity to begin earning while completing the degree. By utilizing CBE, mastery of skills becomes the unit of completion rather than course and program time, which can be a clear signal to employers.

- in-demand 21st-century skills appear less tangible for CBE measurement and validation. Through the identification and alignment to demonstrable, transferable, and durable 21st-century skills that were provided as part of the [Education Design Lab nationally recognized framework](#), it was possible to clearly identify the aligned “soft skills.” Quality CBE programs are intentional and transparent about what they cover and assess (Element 2). Employer buy-in and contribution to these assessments is critical.
- Aligning curriculum with workforce requirements is essential to greater workforce equity and opportunity for those of color. Using competencies in the delivery of certificates clearly communicates to employers the skills that an individual has. The value of CBE is further expanded through the verifiable digital representation of the skills accessible to employers, which was noted as the “great innovation of the Wellspring project” (O.C. Duffy).

## About 1EdTech Foundation

[1EdTech Foundation](#) facilitates cooperative investment catalyzing a connected ecosystem of innovative educational products and digital credentials that together accelerate teaching and learning innovation enabling every individual to achieve without limits.

For more information visit <https://www.1edtech.org>.

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## About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global Learning Consortium is a non-profit organization that advances technology to scale and improve educational participation and attainment affordably. IMS members are leading suppliers, higher education institutions, K-12 districts and schools, and government organizations that enable better teaching and learning by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors the annual [Learning Impact](#) program to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality while developing the leadership and ideas to help shape the future of educational technology.

Learn more at <https://www.imsglobal.org>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kumar, R.S. & George, S. (2020). [Why skills - not degrees - will shape the future of work](#). World Economic Forum.

<sup>2</sup> Dulin Salisbury, A. (2019). [Education and Career are Disconnected By Design--Here is a Roadmap to Fix It](#). Forbes.

<sup>3</sup> UNC Career Pathways Initiative. (2017). [Developing Guided Pathways for Students Through College and Into Careers](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Linking Skills-Based Learning to Career Opportunities](#). (2020). Harvard Business Review.

<sup>5</sup> Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). (2017). [Quality Framework for CompetencyBased Education Programs. Element 2](#).