

Written Testimony of

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before the

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**Innovation to Improve Equity: Exploring High-Quality Pathways to a College Degree**

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## Biography

Long is the founding Executive Director of the Competency-Based Education Network, a national consortium of more than 120 higher education institutions and statewide systems seeking to design, develop, and scale new models of student learning. Additionally, she leads C-BEN's Consulting Services, which is dedicated to helping institutions create competency-based offerings, based on *C-BEN's Quality Framework for CBE Programs*. Long frequently facilitates workshops nationally and internationally on CBE and co-authored the book titled "*A Leader's Guide to Competency-Based Education: From Inception to Implementation*" (Bushway, Dodge, & Long, 2018). In 2016, Long was recognized by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of the Top 10 Most Influential People in Higher Education for her work in competency-based education. Each year, Long plans CBExchange, the foremost conference on CBE, where leaders from hundreds of institutions gather to learn how to build and bring to scale high-quality programs. Prior to her work with C-BEN, Long served as the founding dean of and tenured faculty in the College of Professional Studies, an innovation incubator, at Lipscomb University, where she created their nationally acclaimed competency-based education (CBE) model and badging ecosystem. Long has 20+ years of higher education experience at both public and private institutions in the United States. Long has an undergraduate degree from Northeastern State University in Oklahoma and her *Juris Doctor* from Oklahoma City University. Long is married to Allen, a business executive turned elementary school teacher, and they have four children, two of whom are in college.

## **Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Foxx, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify about the role competency-based education (CBE) is playing in creating high-quality pathways to college degrees and post-secondary credentials. As the Executive Director of the Competency-Based Education Network, I represent a community of educators who believe CBE is an essential component in increasing access to high-quality, post-secondary educational opportunities for our Nation's diverse learner population. Our Network is comprised of regionally accredited colleges, universities, higher education systems, and service providers who work together to address shared challenges to designing, developing, and scaling high-quality CBE programs. Today, CBE is one of the fastest-growing approaches for individuals to access a college education with more than 500 programs across the country being designed or launched. In the last two years, our Network has grown from 30 institutions to over 120 member entities with more institutions joining the competency-based movement each month.

In order for our country to compete in the global economy, we must have the right employees in the right positions at the right time with the right credentials. This requires a better understanding of and appreciation for today's learners and our Nation's workforce needs, as well as an enhanced learning ecosystem to support this objective. We all have a role to play in increasing the availability of efficient, effective, high-quality pathways to post-secondary education that leads to meaningful employment and enhances our nation's standing in the world. In today's testimony, I will share with you how CBE pathways can help increase credential attainment rates and reduce present inequities in the higher education system.

## **Understanding Today's Learners and Workforce**

Today's learners are older, more diverse, working, raising families and often struggling to balance all of life's demands. In a recent study released by Lumina Foundation, a summary of today's learners reveals statistics, which may surprise some. When describing learners overall, 37% of college students are 25 or older. 46% are first-generation college students. 42% of college students are students of color, and 9% are first-generation immigrants. Today's learners must balance many work-life-college demands. 64% of college students work, with 40% of them working full-time. 57% live independently – away from parents or campus housing, with another 24% having children or other dependents. Today's learners face significant financial and social challenges. 36% reported not knowing where their next meal was coming from with 9% reporting homelessness within the past year. 31% come from families at or below the Federal Poverty guideline and 53% of college students come from families at or below twice the poverty level.

A study from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce tells us that low-income working learners are disproportionately Black (18%) and Latino (25%), women (58%), and first-generation college-goers (47%), while higher-income working learners tend to be White (73%). Knowing that students from low-income households are 5x more likely to move out of poverty if they earn a college degree, Lumina's work further reveals only 11% of young adults from low-income families earn a bachelor's degree by age 24, compared to 58%

from high-income families. Given that tuition has increased 503% (5x) more than inflation over the past 35 years and 68% of bachelor's earners graduate with student loan debt, owing an average of \$30,100, today's higher education system is clearly failing to meet the needs of all Americans.

Employers spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year on work-based and higher education, including through tuition assistance programs. Yet, in recent surveys by both the National Association of Colleges and Employers and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, employers do not believe college graduates are well-prepared in competencies employers believe are most important for workplace success. Today, 3.3 million Americans hold an industry-recognized certification as their terminal credential. These credentials enable workers to find jobs in-field, with earnings significantly more than the average high school diploma attainer, but often provide no pathway to a post-secondary degree or credential.

Now is the time to review the higher education system and make the needed modifications to serve a broader, more diverse learner population, including those who have historically been underserved, and to address our workforce preparedness disparities. Failure to make these changes will lead to the continuation of equity gaps like those I have just shared. It is imperative for policymakers and institutional leaders to commit to expanding the design and delivery of high-quality pathways to post-secondary credentials that better meet the needs of today's learners. These pathways must be accessible, affordable, and efficient. I sit before you representing a growing number of forward-thinking institutional leaders who are diligently building and scaling competency-based pathways to high-quality degrees and credentials that serve a more diverse student population. Their work is essential to our Nation's success and our Network stands fully committed to working with Congress on a solution to our equity challenge.

## **Building a New Learning Ecosystem Based on Competencies as Currency**

Today's higher education system recognizes and validates primarily learning that occurs within the confines of a college or university. Yet, we know learning occurs in multiple contexts, such as at work, in the military, and through community service. Higher education has been slow to recognize learning that occurs outside of a classroom environment, which creates an inequitable system that disadvantages those who have been unable to access or afford formal, structured learning opportunities. Part of the reason for this challenge is our inability to compare learning across multiple contexts. Higher education institutions speak in the course and credit hour language, while the vast majority of other contexts speak in terms of competencies. When higher education institutions use competencies as the currency of learning, we are able to connect, compare and validate learning across multiple contexts through the use of a shared competency language.

The transition to competencies as the currency for learning, instead of today's currency of the credit hour, is a major undertaking. Such a transition requires a new learning infrastructure to be built, where competencies can be exchanged freely across contexts and not limited to only those in the higher education system. Building a new learning infrastructure is not an impossible task; just a challenging one that requires careful planning and execution. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Credential Engine, Lumina Foundation, and many other leading

organizations have made significant progress on the creation of a public-private data and technology infrastructure based on open, linked competency data. As envisioned, this technology-enabled talent market system will be interoperable across higher education, K-12, human resources, military, and many other contexts, and will allow for information to be freely used and shared to connect competencies and credentials for learners, credential providers, and employers. Through the T3 Innovation Network™, data will be shared seamlessly across all vendor tools because of interoperable data standards. The Job Data Exchange™ will help employers better signal their needs regarding job requirements, skills, and credentials via their HR information systems which allows higher education institutions to more quickly recognize and respond to workforce needs. Using comprehensive digital learner records, individuals will have a secure way to share their education and employment portfolios digitally. Finally, the Credential Engine™ will help education providers better signal the competencies learned via credentials.

Truly, significant progress is being made toward *Cracking the Credit Hour*, as Amy Laitinen from New America so masterfully described in her 2012 article, but this comprehensive learning ecosystem that transcends contextual settings is still under development or early in the implementation phase. As much as it disappoints me to say so, I believe the current risk of a wholesale repeal of the credit hour outweighs the benefits of creating a conducive environment for innovation. Without having a fully developed and tested alternative ecosystem based on competencies as the currency of learning, students may experience transferability issues, inconsistencies in competencies across institutions, and a myriad of other complex issues. At this point, more time is needed to lay this essential foundation and gather necessary evidence of CBE's effectiveness. Although I know my beliefs may frustrate a number of our more established members, I cannot in good faith recommend more aggressive Congressional action for fear it may harm learners and jeopardize the overall CBE movement.

## **Competency-Based Education as a Solution**

Despite many challenges, Network members and other institutions are designing, building, implementing, and scaling CBE programs that offer high-quality pathways to a college credential, often within the confines of the course and credit-hour structures. Although there is no standardized definition of competency-based education in federal statute, the field has created many definitions of what CBE is and is not. In fact, most institutions have their own definitions of what competency-based education looks like, too.

C-BEN defines CBE as follows:

*Competency-based education combines an intentional 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. Students acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities and experiences that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. Students receive proactive guidance and support from faculty and staff. Learners earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace.*

Many other organizations, including regional accreditors through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, have issued CBE definitions. The vast majority of the existing definitions include several distinguishing features, which Dr. Deborah Bushway shared with the U.S. Senate HELP Committee during her testimony on January 18, 2018. I repeat them here with her permission:

- ***Intentional backward design.*** In CBE programs, the educational journey is designed with the end in mind and the student at the center. Faculty begin by answering the question: “What ought a graduate of this program know and be able to do?” From this starting point, teams of faculty members, employers and instructional designers develop a set of clearly specified competencies that illustrate what the learner must know and be able to do in order to progress in and complete a credential. These competencies are integrated and scaffolded so that the integrity of the academic credential is maintained.
- ***Outcomes emphasis.*** Competency-based education is an approach to teaching and learning that focuses on the competencies that students must master rather than the amount of time they have spent in class, as measured by credit hours. This allows students with some existing knowledge or skill to spend their time on new content rather than reviewing already mastered material.
- ***Agnostic regarding learning source.*** Because well-defined competencies mandate the integration of knowledge (theory) and practice (application), CBE programs can be agnostic as to the source of students’ learning. A student may have learned the practice or application component of a competency in a work setting and the theoretical component in a traditional classroom, but what matters is the student’s ability to knit this together and demonstrate the competency as required by the credential being earned. The institution enrolling the student and offering the credential must provide the student with proactive, relevant, and substantive educational support that leads to this demonstrated learning.
- ***Rigorous requirements.*** Many people wrongly assume that CBE programs are easier or shorter, but, in reality, a high-quality CBE program offers a very rigorous instructional model in which students must demonstrate the acquisition of all the competency sets required to master a program of study. In fact, for some students, CBE programs will take *longer* to complete than traditionally structured programs. Yet, a high-quality CBE program will guarantee the learning outcomes or competencies of the students, unlike most traditional programs.
- ***Students at the center.*** In CBE programs, the student educational journey becomes a primary organizing principle. Rather than enrolling in a series of courses taught by individual faculty members, the CBE student is engaged in a carefully designed set of learning experiences and assessments built to allow the student to demonstrate the required competencies when she or he is ready to do so.

- **Modularization.** Rather than on the traditional method of clustering chunks of learning into a “course,” CBE disaggregates courses based on competencies demonstrated as a result of learning. Each competency is clearly articulated, and demonstration of each competency is assessed and transcribed. Modularization not only allows for more transparency; it also supports stacking of competencies into diverse credentials.
- **Personalization.** Such modularization allows for more precision and personalization in developing the student learning journey. For each student, the path to a credential can be customized by acknowledging where competencies already exist and “prescribing” additional learning where competency is absent or incomplete.
- **Transparency.** Student learning outcomes, or competencies, are clearly articulated and transparently transcribed so that students, employers, and the public can all know what any given credential means. This is much more meaningful than the traditional “grade” offered for a course.

In high quality CBE programs, these features are interwoven to produce value for the students in unique ways, including increased transparency of learning outcomes, potential lower costs of both tuition and time for some students, and the ability to personalize each student’s learning pathway with increased precision and intentionality.

Although the field is working on a common typology for CBE programs, there is a vast range of CBE models in the U.S. today. Each institution uses these features as a guiding framework and decides, based on the specific needs of its learners and institution, how to design its CBE program model. More data needs to be collected to see if one model or some combination of distinguishing features leads to better learner outcomes, but such research does not exist today. As Congress considers policy in this area, it is important to remember the wide variety in CBE models. Additionally, the lack of a common definition complicates policy making efforts, and we believe Congress should define CBE within the Higher Education Act (HEA) in a way that correctly emphasizes its focus on learning outcomes and differentiates it from prior learning assessment, distance education and correspondence courses, while creating flexibility for model variation.

High quality CBE programs meet the needs of a diverse group of learners, as captured by these actual learner stories from perhaps some lesser known institutions working in the field.

**Nicolet College:** Elena lives in a community of a few hundred people in northern Wisconsin. She has a High School diploma and worked in nearby Rhinelander at a warehouse and distribution center for a national pet supply retailer. The pay was not great, but she had health insurance and could make ends meet. Then, on January 9, 2019, her employer, one of the largest in the area, announced the facility would close. Elena would be out of work by mid-March. What would she do? How would she pay her bills? She is not afraid of hard work, but good jobs in this rural community of about 8,000 are rare, especially for people without a college education or in-demand skills.

Elena and other soon-to-be dislocated workers attended informational meetings where they learned about the State-supported services available to them, including a re-tooling education benefit. Elena was fearful. It had been a long time since she had been in school. How could she manage a class schedule and all of her other obligations? Besides, going back into a classroom full of students twenty years younger was not at all appealing. Then she heard about Competency-Based Education (CBE) at Nicolet College. There, she learned that CBE programs were made for people like her. She could start right away. She would not spend time and money being forced to repeat what she already knew. She could move through her program as quickly as she was able, and she could slow down when she needed a little more time.

Nicolet College, one of Wisconsin's public technical colleges, is already highly affordable, but it is the only one accredited to offer Competency-Based Education programs. For Elena, that made all the difference. Called "Nicolet My Way", CBE offered her scheduling flexibility she had to have, the variable pacing she needed to save money and feel confident, and the learning she knew was in demand by employers.

Elena took the plunge and enrolled in one of Nicolet's CBE programs, IT-Computer Support Specialist. She immediately connected to an IT Faculty member, who helped her understand the structure of the program and gave her advice on how to be successful in the program. Though not required, she came to campus regularly at first. She actively engaged her instructors as she worked on her courses, and she discovered that going back to school as a non-traditional student was not so frightening after all, at least not with the adult-friendly design of CBE.

Through hard work and determination, Elena mastered her spring competencies faster than would have been possible in a semester-based calendar. She is currently enrolled for summer and well on her way to reinventing herself in a new career. She has her sights set on starting out in a Help Desk role, then moving up on the hardware side of IT. Because of Nicolet's My Way and CBE pathways, Elena has a roadmap to a better life. A roadmap that leads to the job she wants, gives her the flexibility working adults need, and will not leave her under a mountain of debt.

**University of Maine Presque Isle:** Bradford is part of the University of Maine Presque Isle's (UMPI) YourPace CBE program. As an active military member, Bradford believes the best part of the YourPace program is his ability to jump in and out of the program based on his deployment schedules. Because of the modularized nature of the 8-week sessions, with multiple start dates spread out over the academic year, he can step out when being deployed and seamlessly return when he is back home. This flexible pacing has allowed him to be able to take time off without fear of falling behind or missing deadlines, especially because his assigned success coach helped him develop a personalized completion plan. The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) just completed an on-site visit and the review team shared this learner feedback:



*UMPI CBE faculty work closely with students as they progress through the competency milestones and the summative assessments. In addition to faculty, CBE students have dedicated success "coaches" who work with them to maintain a high level of engagement and to make progress toward their goals. Students described high levels of satisfaction with the responsiveness and effectiveness of their coaches, and credited the faculty and coaches with their success, especially during challenging times. One student, who had attended three different institutions of higher education and had not been able to finish a program at any of them because of juggling a career and children, reported that he was seeing the benefits of CBE in his career already, before finishing the program. He noted that "everything is applicable" and expressed appreciation for a program that did not weigh him down with "busy work" and spending times "learning things he already knew". Another student shared that she was so grateful for the professors and coaches who "are there for me when doubts creep in and convince me that I can do it". She mentioned being out of school for 30 years and remarked, "I don't know why all schools are not doing this". Another CBE student described "immediate faculty response when needed", and a single working mother shared, "I don't have to have things done at a specific time and it's the only reason I can do this".*

**Lipscomb University:** Lipscomb University is leveraging CBE to educate those who are incarcerated. Established in 2007, Lipscomb's LIFE (Lipscomb Initiative for Education) Program introduced an innovative education format that brought up to 30 Lipscomb's traditional students ("outside students") to the Tennessee Prison for Women (TPW) each week to study alongside residents of the prison ("inside students"). Both the "inside" students and the "outside" students earn college credit for the course. Each Wednesday night, the LIFE Program provides Lipscomb University students an academic and service-learning experience like few others. On these nights, professors and enrolled outside students travel to TPW where they are scanned in through security and learn side-by-side with inside students. The first cohort of inside students graduated with their bachelor's degree in organizational leadership, a CBE program, in December 2017. Erika, one of the recent graduates, wrote: "We are wiser because [Lipscomb has] taught us that we aren't broken or thrown away. We have learned that our identity has risen above the prison culture." Several of these 2017 graduates have since been released and have been able to secure meaningful employment post-incarceration, with their CBE credential in hand.

## **Quality Framework for CBE Programs**

C-BEN shares Congress' desire to protect consumers, ensure quality, and hold institutions accountable for results. In 2015, it became clear to the leaders of C-BEN that efforts to grow demand, build capacity, and remove barriers for CBE were hindered by the lack of a quality definition. In response to this need, C-BEN created a Quality Standards Task Force, and this group began an iterative and inclusive process, developing principles and standards universal enough to apply to all CBE programs regardless of model variations. The resulting Quality Framework is both attainable and aspirational. For each of the eight elements of quality, the framework provides an overarching principle, detailed standards, and a development guide that institutions can follow when building new or scaling existing programs.

The 8 elements of quality which should be present in every CBE program are:

1. Demonstrated Institutional Commitment to and Capacity for CBE Innovation
2. Clear, Measurable, Meaningful and Integrated Competencies
3. Coherent Program and Curriculum Design
4. Credential-level Assessment Strategy with Robust Implementation
5. Intentionally Designed and Engaged Learner Experiences
6. Collaborative Engagement with External Partners
7. Transparency of Student Learning
8. Evidence-driven Continuous Improvement

Since the Quality Framework's release in September 2017, C-BEN institutions collaborated to create a User's Guide, an additional resource to help institutions make the most of the Quality Framework. Today, C-BEN conducts program reviews and provides institutions with guidance on how to enhance the quality of program offerings. C-BEN encourages Congress and our accrediting bodies to embrace and leverage the Quality Framework if you seek to define CBE, determine quality, or consider guardrails for innovations in this space.

## **Data on Effectiveness of CBE Programs Today**

Institutions develop their CBE programs with many goals in mind, such as lower student costs, higher quality, faster completion, better workforce preparedness, allowing students to leverage all learning, and increased access for underserved or not well-served learners. It is important to assess how CBE is able to deliver against these important goals, and institutions want and need to have evidence of the impact these programs are having in meeting these goals.

A study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) in 2015 looked at six institutions offering CBE programs to understand the characteristics of students enrolled in CBE and their outcomes, as compared to traditional programs. AIR found that the CBE programs were beginning to fulfill their value propositions of broadening access, offering paths to credentials, and improving cost and quality for students. A further study released by AIR this year evaluated the student outcomes at a larger number of institutions and found that, although some were still in the early stages of CBE program implementation, CBE is performing at least on par with traditional programs and can, in some cases, result in lower total costs of credentials for students.

Beyond a handful of studies such as these, data on the effectiveness of CBE programs is not yet plentiful. There is a need to establish a relationship between distinguishing features of CBE programs and the student outcomes achieved. Although much of the research is limited to small samples or single institution cases, the results achieved by individual institutions with CBE programs are promising. A sampling of data from a range of institutions not as often in the spotlight is included to illustrate the data that institutions are currently collecting and to share institutionally reported results:

**Sinclair College:** Sinclair is an open access, urban community college of around 20,000 students in Dayton, OH with institutional core mission focus areas of access, equity, and alignment. Sinclair’s equity initiatives are designed to bring college to all learners and focus on breaking down barriers to access and success. Sinclair has over 5,000 high school students across the county studying at Sinclair while in high school. Additionally, they have more than 1,500 incarcerated students who are pursuing certificates as they near release, in fields where they can be employed post-incarceration. Sinclair has an African American male mentorship program designed to pair African American male students with mentors and focuses on graduation within 2-3 years. Also, the institution has low or no-cost childcare for students with economic challenges.

Sinclair’s online and CBE programs broadly support the equity goal as well, by ensuring that students have solutions to both the “time” and “place” barriers that lock so many students out of traditional education. Particularly with CBE, being able to start and finish classes on their own timeline, and study and make progress in a way that is completely customized to the individual student is extremely important for our post-traditional learners. Sinclair has 12 CBE programs (associates and certificates) in IT, Business, Criminal Justice, Advanced Manufacturing, and UAS. CBE programs are branded to students as the FlexPace program. Sinclair also has general education courses and is piloting work this year in Developmental Education acceleration to college-level coursework within a single term through CBE.

Sinclair has enrolled more than 2,300 students since 2013 in its CBE programs, with adult learners comprising nearly 75% of enrollment. 70% of the CBE learners are new students or students who stopped out two or more years from Sinclair. To date, Sinclair CBE students have earned over 1,200 credentials. CBE student credential rates are 15% higher than traditional students across all CBE programs (and higher in the technical programs), and students average a first credential within 4 terms of entry (as opposed to a traditional student pace of 6 terms). CBE students still finish CBE courses at Sinclair an average of 35% faster than their traditional semester counterparts. Enrollment in CBE programs has more than doubled in the last academic year. Upon entry, the average annual income of a Sinclair student is below \$17,000. Within one year of graduating from Sinclair with an associate degree, that average annual income jumps to over \$37,000 annually.

**Texas A&M University Commerce (TAMUC):** TAMUC offers a CBE program for working adults that is a flexible and afford pathway to a degree. The program started with only seven students and is now the third largest program on the TAMUC campus with over 400 students as of Spring 2019. Although the program is not yet minority-majority, those identifying as Hispanics/Latinx students comprise 23% of the learner population with those identifying as Black students at 14%. This accelerated program is offered year-round in six, seven-week terms for a flat rate of \$750 per term. The average CBE cost to a degree is \$6,000, as compared to \$14,000 in a traditional program. This model allows only 37% of its learners to graduate with student loan debt, in comparison to 65% in their traditional program. Nearly 62% of all learners complete within two years, up from 42% in traditional programs.

**Salt Lake Community College (SLCC):** The SLCC School of Applied Technology and Technical Specialties administered a TAACCCT Round 4 institutional grant, called the Adult Competency-Based Education Design (ACED). ACED had a primary goal of applying CBE to a wide range of career and technical education and applied technology programs. By the end of this grant, SLCC converted 24 of its programs of study to a CBE format. Enrollment in these programs exceeded projections and attracted a more diverse student population than SLCC's previous student population, with nearly 24% of students identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. In an impact analysis completed for the TAACCCT grant by a third-party evaluator, learners in SLCC's CBE programs showed increased odds of program completion at 44.7% over the baseline. Controlling for multiple variables, program participation was associated with an average post-program quarterly wage increase of \$675. Incumbent workers' quarterly wages were, on average, higher compared to non-incumbent workers to the magnitude of approximately \$550.

**Capella University:** Offering the Nation's first CBE direct assessment bachelor's and master's programs approved by the Department of Education for federal financial aid, Capella's FlexPath program allows learners to progress at their own pace, with no set semester or quarter system. This allows learners to move on to new courses as soon as competencies are mastered. Over the past five years, over 7,000 students have enrolled in FlexPath with a combined graduate total in excess of 5,000 learners. The median time for learners to complete Capella's direct assessment bachelor's programs was 59% faster than similar learners in equivalent credit-hour bachelor's programs. The median time for learners to complete Capella's direct assessment master's programs was 42% faster than similar learners in equivalent credit-hour master's programs. Capella's use of a flat rate subscription model allows learners to save money, the faster they master content. The median tuition billed to a FlexPath student was \$10,548, which is 59% less than a similar learner in an equivalent credit-hour program. The median federal financial aid borrowed by a FlexPath student was \$11,739. This is 45% less than a student in Capella's equivalent credit-hour programs. In the last quarter of 2018, the two-year persistence rate for FlexPath learners was 23 percent higher than in equivalent credit-hour programs.

As you can see, the results achieved by individual institutions with CBE programs are promising.

## **Responding to Workforce Needs through Innovative Work-Based Partnerships and Industry Credential Recognition**

The C-BEN Collaboratory, the Network's research and development arm, deepens and extends the organization's founding commitment to collaborative work, creating time-bound and field-advancing projects aimed at accelerating progress and furthering at least one of the organization's priorities: grow demand, build capacity and remove barriers. The 2019 project is focused on allowing C-BEN members to advance specific strategies designed to ensure that those with industry-recognized certifications and work-based postsecondary-level learning have guaranteed pathways into further education.

By helping institutions better understand and recognize work-based learning and industry-recognized certifications, this project will allow more individuals to pursue competency-based postsecondary credentials and encourage employers to more closely align workforce

development initiatives with institutions engaged in the CBE movement. In order to help millions of adults have pathways to high-quality, competency-based credentials, the project seeks to create transparent pathways that recognize competencies as currency and allows adults to leverage work-based learning and industry recognized credentials during the acquisition of credentials.

At C-BEN's CBExchange conference, held October 21-25, 2019, Collaboratory members will release the following new field-facing resources:

- An employer partnerships toolkit designed to help institutions effectively collaborate with organizations on workforce needs;
- A return-on-investment tool which allows institutions to measure the financial impacts of the recognition of non-institutional learning; and
- A comprehensive pathways report that will explain the various methods institutions can use to create high-quality degree pathways for industry-recognized credentials. This report will highlight work completed by Collaboratory participants from 28 different U.S.-based institutions, when they examined industry-recognized credentials in four different industry sectors (technology, advanced manufacturing, service sector, and healthcare).

The following examples highlight a range of work-based learning and higher education partnership models being utilized by institutions and state systems of higher education.

**Walmart & Brandman University:** In addition to the Collaboratory project, many C-BEN institutions are proactively seeking and securing business-to-business partnership agreements with some of the Nation's largest employers. As you have probably heard, Walmart unveiled a new associate education benefit aimed at removing barriers to college and graduation. Brandman University, a C-BEN founding member, is one of three higher education institutions chosen to provide this benefit. Walmart's Live Better U education program enables the company's associates to earn a college credential in a number of high-demand fields for just a dollar a day. Walmart operates its Academies at exemplar stores throughout the country, and provides education for frontline supervisors, department managers and assistant managers. Hundreds of thousands of Walmart associates have gained education through the Academies. Working in partnership with colleges and universities, like Brandman University, Walmart has intentionally connected Academy education to further postsecondary learning. Associates participating in Live Better U can receive significant college credit, up to a semester's worth, for their Academy learning that meets quality academic standards. This not only benefits Walmart, which leverages its investments in employee education while, more importantly, helping the company's associates get on a solid path to a postsecondary credential.

**Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) & Illinois Board of Higher Education:** Illinois is engaged in a statewide effort, involving the Governor's Office, multiple state agencies, and more than 45 public and private, two- and four-year institutions of higher education, to create a competency-based system of early childhood educator preparation, credentialing, and professional development. This is part of a strategic effort to equitably advance knowledge and skills of the state's large and diverse workforce of early childhood professionals, creating a competency-based pathway beginning with basic health

and safety courses to college coursework that leads to the state's industry-recognized Gateways to Opportunity credentials for the field, as well as associate-, baccalaureate-, and master's level degrees. In Illinois, hundreds of success stories exist where people have been able to leverage professional development when starting on a competency-based pathway to a college-level credential. Tracey, a child care provider, had completed more than 170 hours of community-based professional development offerings, yet those hours never applied to a degree or credential. At the age of forty-three, she enrolled in a newly designed competency-based credential for Family Child Care providers at Heartland Community College. By leveraging the competencies she had developed through prior community-based professional development offerings, Heartland was able to offer her a streamlined and personalized competency-based pathway. After engaging with new college-level, competency-based content, Tracey was able to earn 16 hours of college credits and complete two Gateways to Opportunity credentials in an affordable, accessible online program at 25% the price of traditional tuition.

**The Bureau of TennCare and the Tennessee Board of Regents:** In order to build a more competent workforce which will lead to an increase in the quality of care and quality of life for those receiving long-term healthcare services and supports, Tennessee's state Medicaid agency, the Bureau of TennCare, commissioned the creation of a statewide competency-based credentialing program and workforce registry. This comprehensive program and its resulting credentials were designed to be worthy of college credit and eligible for the State's last-dollar scholarships, made available through the Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect initiatives, which allow Tennesseans to return to higher education to gain new skills, advance in the workplace, and fulfill lifelong dreams of completing a college degree or credential, at no cost to the learner. By connecting the work-based credentialing program to the higher education system and the Tennessee Promise & Reconnect initiatives, 60,000 to 100,000 frontline direct care service workers, many living at or below the poverty level and with no prior higher education experience, will be eligible to complete the work-based designed program through participating community colleges and colleges of applied technology at no cost and for college credit. Upon completion of the credentialing program, learners will have earned an 18-credit hour post-secondary credential, which could be applied to a wide range of possible associate-level degree programs, and will be more competent to handle daily work-based assignments. Additionally, TennCare will connect credential completion to its value-based purchasing model, which will result in higher reimbursement rates for providers with competent employees. Providers will then be required to pass on these additional funds to their low-income workers in hourly pay increases. Simultaneously, this program will allow individuals to earn a post-secondary credential while boosting personal earnings. It is anticipated that this program will begin statewide rollout in early 2020.

### **Establish a Demonstration Project to Support Innovation in CBE**

These stories illustrate the promise and potential of competency-based education to change students' lives and increase their educational opportunities, particularly for adult students. However, retrofitting these programs to the existing federal financial aid system carries its own set of challenges, for colleges and students alike. We appreciate the enthusiasm of so many

Members of Congress interested in helping competency-based education to thrive and succeed on behalf of students.

The emerging world of competency-based programs has taught us, though, that CBE brings a wide range of diverse experiences and opportunities to the higher education landscape. Programs use different models for financing, instruction, assessment, delivery modality, faculty, and more -- and they work with a patchwork of states, accreditors, governing boards, and others to ensure the quality of those programs every day. Some CBE providers bring decades of experience; others are still launching their first programs. They serve all types of students, all with different backgrounds, experiences and incomes. In short, there's still much to learn about how to responsibly expand students' access to high-quality competency-based education.

To support further innovation in this space, we need Congress to approach competency-based education with the same level of rigor and attention CBE providers give their students. While it is tempting to fully open up requirements to allow CBE to grow, we believe that it is still too soon to take that step. There is still much to learn on how to do this so that we protect students, assure quality learning, and safeguard the taxpayers' investment. We have therefore been vocal in calling on Congress to **authorize a demonstration project for competency-based education programs**.

Careful, cautious legislation that takes a responsible approach to innovation will enable us to learn how best to incorporate new educational models into the higher education system without up-ending the entire federal aid model. In particular, lawmakers should **create a definition of a competency-based education program that applies to CBE programs participating in the project**, rooted in the valid assessment of students' outcomes. C-BEN's Quality Framework provides what we believe is a rigorous framework for such a definition. Congress should also ensure a demonstration project provides straightforward, clear expectations for participating institutions, to ensure those institutions are able to serve as a reliable test case for future policymaking.

Under a demonstration project, **colleges should be allowed flexibility with federal financial aid rules** to assess how new things work in a controlled manner that protects students and taxpayers. While time-based learning leaves much to be desired, there is not yet a widely accepted replacement for the credit hour. A well-controlled experiment can help to identify the possibilities--and pitfalls--of awarding federal aid on the basis of other measures, and to determine the definitions and guardrails that will be needed to protect students and taxpayers under such a system. We must do this thoughtfully to protect the students and the field from a race to the bottom, fueled by federal financial aid.

Finally, Congress should **require the collection and publication of accurate, comprehensive, and robust data** to support a rigorous assessment of the demonstration project's success in serving students and spending taxpayer dollars well. A demonstration project will be of little use if we don't learn how to responsibly expand access to competency-based education moving forward. CBE providers themselves are clamoring for better information to help them prove their value to students and other stakeholders--and to ensure that CBE programs help close, rather than exacerbate, equity gaps. The data on students' outcomes are woefully inadequate across

higher education; but in educational programs premised on career-relevant coursework and the assessment of student learning, it could not be more important, to providers, to policymakers, and to students and families themselves. Congress can help us fill in critical data gaps about student outcomes.

The landscape has also seen tremendous growth in recent years, and C-BEN recognizes new institutions entering the CBE sector each month. With so many new entrants, and such rapid expansion underway, we need to **test, evaluate, and iterate on the outcomes of those programs under an entirely new federal structure**. This will also enable established CBE programs to experiment with new flexibilities and for Congress to understand the outcomes of those new flexibilities. Congress should take the next step toward the responsible innovation of competency-based education programs in the form of a demonstration project, so that CBE providers can continue to develop promising pathways through higher education for the students who need it most.