Foreword

Interest in competency-based education has grown dramatically within the past few years. Today in the United States nearly 600 colleges and universities—public, private nonprofit, and for-profit two- and four-year institutions—are exploring, planning, creating, or offering competency-based programs. This form of education has been around for decades, primarily as an alternative form of adult learning pioneered by institutions such as Alverno College and DePaul University. It was introduced to state and federal policymakers with the rise of Western Governors University, which now operates online branch “campuses” in Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington State. In recent years, other institutions have further innovated. These include Southern New Hampshire University and its College for America, an online business-to-business model using federally approved Direct Assessment of learning and an “all-you-can-learn” pricing strategy to move away from the longstanding practice among such programs of mapping competencies to the credit hour. Federally approved Direct Assessment programs such as College for America are meant to operate “in lieu of clock or credit hours” and offer the potential for transformative approaches to program conceptualization, design, organization, and delivery. Also among the innovators is the University of Texas System, which through its Institute for Transformational Learning has introduced competency-based education to first-time, full-time students in STEM and medical sciences through personalized coursework delivered online and in formats that blend classroom and online learning. Many emerging programs represent significant shifts in how this form of education is structured and even the students it is meant to serve.

The Competency-Based Education Network (CBEN), comprising field leaders from 30 colleges and universities and public systems in Georgia, Kentucky, Texas, and Wisconsin, has defined competency-based education. These field-leading institutions say it is a pedagogy which combines an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies—students may speed up or slow down—and learning expectations are held constant. Students acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities, and experiences which align to clearly defined program-level outcomes, and they do so with proactive guidance and support from faculty members and staff. Learners earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace. In this emerging area of practice, no widely agreed-upon standards, guidelines, and best practices yet exist for what constitutes high-quality program design or elements of valid, reliable, authentic student learning assessment.

For many students who have not been well served by traditional forms of academic instruction, thoughtfully designed and delivered competency-based education holds great promise as a better way to plan, organize, deliver, and support education. In their chapter, Cleary, Marienau, Meyer, Atta, and
Woźniak “make the case for learning” in such programs, which place a lot of responsibility on students for learning how to learn and understanding how to talk about this learning.

Many issues still must be resolved for acceptance of competency-based education to grow and for its availability to become widespread. For example, the emerging field must build business processes and systems to support delivery of competency-based education, as Irvine and Kevan and Arbuckle, Uranis, and Bibbs discuss in their chapters. In addition, a great deal of confusion exists around terminology—and no agreed-upon system for classifying programs yet exists. All of this makes competency-based education complex and challenging to explain, measure, and compare to other academic programs. For instance, there is a lack of agreement when it comes to use of the term “competency,” with some people viewing the concept as a relatively low standard for learning. For more than a decade, there has been a working definition developed by a group under the auspices of the National Center for Educational Statistics. That definition is: “Competency: Combinations of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a task in a specific context” (Jones, & Voorhees, NCES, 2002). As Seymour and Everhart noted, a narrow or restrictive definition of competency-based education as newer models emerge would impede innovation—a conclusion the Competency-Based Education Network of field-leading institutions also has reached.

When Lumina talks about learning outcomes and competencies, the foundation is clear these ultimately are developed at the program level and that competency-based programs can benefit both the liberal arts and technical fields such as nursing and engineering. Regardless, myths and misconceptions abound, including competency-based education being about vocational education or job training. In addition, there is a widely held view—albeit incorrect in light of longstanding programs at Alverno and DePaul and newer ones at Purdue University and Westminster College—that competency-based education is offered exclusively online and cannot be part of an on-campus experience.

Several issues give rise to confusion in the national dialogue about competency-based education. For example, Direct Assessment, which refers to federally approved programs that directly measure student knowledge and learning rather than linking it to seat time or grades, is one form of competency-based education. Because of the difficulty and lack of clarity around deviating from use of the credit hour, many competency-based programs do not rely on Direct Assessment and instead “map” competencies to the credit hour. This is a more-straightforward approach that sacrifices the full potential of competency-based education to truly break the seat-time barrier.

Another source of confusion, which the DePaul team addresses indirectly in this volume, is Prior-Learning Assessment (PLA), which assesses previously acquired knowledge and skills. PLA is a tool that can be used across various pedagogies, including as a complement to the broader, program-level design of competency-based programs, which helps students acquire new knowledge and skills through regular and substantive interaction with faculty members. However, PLA is not, itself, a form of competency-based education. It does not offer an educational journey leading to a credential, as competency-based education does. Nor does it take responsibility for teaching and learning. This is why federal financial aid is not available for PLA and the line separating PLA and competency-based education should not be blurred.

Perhaps more importantly, additional work is needed to identify and support a strong, evidence-based framework for gauging the quality and effectiveness of emerging programs as terminology and taxonomies evolve. Competency-based education is neither solely nor exclusively delivered online, but the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements (DETA, 2016), a partnership of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin System, the University of
Wisconsin-Extension, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, has noted that significantly more must be done to advance rigorous research into the design and delivery of competency-based education, with DETA describing the field in a recent request for research proposals as relatively unexplored. In an attempt to provide a framework for addressing this paucity of research, the DePaul researchers will offer guidelines in this book for institutions that want to create programs supporting today’s students, many of whom are racial and ethnic minorities and are from families without much in the way of financial resources or experience with higher education.

Competency-based education has remained on the margins, in part, because until recently many students have not been eligible to apply financial aid toward it. Financial aid has been determined by students’ enrollment statuses as either part-time (six credits per term) or full-time (12 credits per term), which in turn is based on class attendance and interaction with faculty. A limitation of this approach is that enrollment is not an outcome. The promise of competency-based education is that it could focus on outcomes—demonstration of learning mastery or proficiency—rather than inputs or activities. As noted earlier, there are now two ways in which students may receive federal student aid for competency-based education:

1. Programs Translate to the Credit Hour. Once the student has demonstrated a competency or set of competencies, the college or university tracks his/her progress in terms of credit-hour equivalencies.
2. Federally approved Direct Assessment. In accordance with the Higher Education Act (2005), the Education Department allows institutions to use direct assessments of student learning “in lieu of credit or clock hours.” This can be expressed as a percentage of program completion in terms of competencies demonstrated.

To ensure the effectiveness of competency-based programs delivered in either fashion will be rigorously evaluated, a national research agenda is gradually being constructed. Practitioners, policymakers, and other stakeholders need a better understanding of what works for different types of students and under which circumstances. Among these efforts is a multi-year study by the American Institutes for Research, funded by Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by Lumina colleague Amber Garrison Duncan, which will examine programs at up to eight colleges and universities. Preliminary questions for this quasi-experimental design research project include:

1. Do learners who in enroll in competency-based programs differ from their peers in similar, traditionally delivered programs on measures of time to—and rate of—degree completion, academic performance on end-of-course assessments, rates of industry certification or professional licensure, post-graduation employment or wage rates, and other leading indicators of student success or program quality?
2. Do any of the differences observed vary systematically along important dimensions, including characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and income status, and program features such a bundled or unbundled faculty roles?

As several contributors to this book suggest, interest in competency-based education is taking off, in part, because there is clear evidence in first-time, full-time graduation rates that traditional higher education options do not work for many students. In a 2013 Lumina/Gallup Poll, Americans cited barriers
to returning to school that included family responsibilities (36 percent), cost of attendance (28 percent),
job responsibilities (15 percent) and the time it takes to complete a program (11 percent). Creating more
transparent learning expectations, offering more applied learning options, and using more authentic
forms of assessment can create opportunities for colleges, universities, and other providers to engage
students they might not otherwise reach. Arbuckle, Uranis, and Bibbs describe many of the challenges
students face with prevailing instructional models. To date, competency-based education has helped
many students who face barriers to accessing traditional higher education, including family responsi-
bilities, affordability, and the length of time to completion. But what has captured the imaginations of
educators and higher education leaders is the possibility of taking competency-based education even
further. This form of education can open doors to new ways of teaching and learning which offer clear
potential to benefit traditional, college-age students from all walks of life, including students of color,
first-generation college students, and students from low-income families—all of whom are critical to
increasing the numbers of Americans with postsecondary education.

Although there is cause for optimism, existing gaps in theory, research, and evidence-based practice
related to competency-based education present a challenge for future development of this form of edu-
cation and efforts to make it more widely available. Competency-based education offers a response to
problems facing higher education, including a lack of transparency around learning expectations. How-
ever, without a more-robust evidence base and an agreed-upon set of good practices, it will be difficult
for advocates to make the strongest case for competency-based education. The purpose of this research
compendium is to explore the history and current state of the competency-based movement in higher
education as a foundation for outlining a strategic approach for its long-term growth and sustainability.
In her chapter, Jones sets forth a historical and theoretical groundwork, with a focus on the distinguishing
characteristic of competency-based education as a student-centered approach to learning which relies
on new faculty roles. To advance competency-based education as an option for all types of students, the
field ultimately will need to develop a shared vision and outline a coherent research agenda. Our hope
is this book will be the start of such an effort.

For the past few years, Lumina has been leading work to support the emergence of new, student-
focused higher education alternatives. Lumina is a private foundation committed to increasing the share
of working-age Americans with high-quality college degrees, certificates, and other postsecondary
credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Foundation support for competency-based education emerged from
efforts to define what we meant by high-quality credentials and a desire to serve more students. Quality
in higher education primarily has been defined using proxies such as reputation, selectivity, student/
faculty ratios, research spending, and campus amenities. These factors are captured by U.S. News &
World Report and others, and are used to rank institutions. However, such rankings tell us nothing about
what students are learning or about ways in which students are able to apply their knowledge, skills, and
abilities. Rather, these measures encourage restricting college access and spending in ways that often
have little to do with educating students. For these reasons, a major focus at Lumina has been on efforts
to scale and spread competency-based degree programs, because of their potential for helping more
students affordably complete high-quality, lower-cost degrees that meet them where they are. The role of
philanthropy has been to encourage forms of communication and collaboration at state and federal levels.
Among the questions we are working with policymakers and practitioners to resolve are: How do you pay
for learning vs. seat time? How do you ensure academic quality—and that public funds are well spent?

Isolated pockets of experimentation with competency-based education have been around for some
time. What is new is a confluence of interest at the highest levels of the federal government, among
education innovators and business leaders, and at private foundations and elsewhere in what needs to be done to make this form of education more widely available. Many of these stakeholders believe the potential benefits could be significant:

- Clarity about what is expected of students and institutions, including stronger student academic and psychosocial supports.
- Lower net prices for students and families and reduced spending per completion by institutions among newer programs built from scratch.
- Reduced time to degree or time to program completion for confident learners.
- Improved learning assessment, processes for continuous improvement, and rigorous measures of program quality.

The most innovative competency-based programs are shifting away from time-based measures of academic progress. As Amy Laitinen (2012) of New America noted in her ground-breaking 2012 report, *Cracking the Credit Hour*, “credit hours were never intended to measure learning, but because they are easy to measure and understand, they have become the basic building blocks of higher education for scheduling classes, determining faculty loads and meeting graduation requirements.” Many colleges and universities that offer competency-based programs instead use terms such as assessment-, concept-, project-based or personalized learning to describe their offerings. Programs are organized around making explicit the many implicit assumptions about learning in program design in an effort to better meet the needs of students, shifting the focus from what is taught to what must be learned. Many programs fully incorporate the liberal arts and offer degrees at the associate, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. In addition to the liberal arts, degree offerings include concentrations in fields such as business, education, nursing, and information technology. There are even some traditional institutions such as the University of Maine at Presque Isle that are converting all or most their programs to better meet the needs of students and capitalize on the prevalence competency-based programs in K-12. As it exists today, competency-based education may not be for every student, but evidence supports the assertion such education can be of high quality and can put students on paths to success in their lives and careers.

When Lumina surveyed the competency-based landscape in 2012, its consultant, Michael Offerman, former chancellor of Capella University and a higher education leader with prior experience at the University of Arizona and University of Wisconsin-Extension, identified between 20 and 25 colleges and universities that were developing or delivering thoughtfully designed programs. The study was limited to public and private, nonprofit colleges, with the intent of expanding later to include for-profit institutions. At the time, he was told the level of innovation would increase if greater clarity existed within the regulatory environment about what constitutes acceptable practice in defining and measuring student progress in terms of competencies. At the time, no institution had yet been approved by the U.S. Department of Education to use Direct Assessment, and although there had been some movement, it was unclear how safe it was for institutions to experiment or innovate without jeopardizing access to federal student aid. As a result, many institutions were creatively pushing the limits while staying within the letter of the credit-hour rule.

With traditional instruction, as many have experienced it, a bachelor’s degree represents about 120 credit hours completed within a specific period, maintenance of a minimum grade-point-average, and completion of a series of elective and required general education and major courses. Little is known about the learning that takes place among individual students.
Foreword

To meet societal needs with more high-quality options, Lumina and others are interested in advancing new ways of defining and measuring—and credentialing—learning regardless of how, when, or where it occurs. A central question has been: What do students need to know, understand, and be able to do to find employment, gain further education, and participate meaningfully in civic life? To develop competency-based programs, many colleges and universities are using the Lumina-supported Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), which defines general competencies that should be demonstrated, by degree level, across a number of learning dimensions, including broad and integrative knowledge, specialized knowledge, intellectual skills, applied and collaborative learning, and civic and global learning. During Offerman’s initial interviews with colleges and universities, each school was asked if and how they were using this profile. Six of every 10 institutions were either using or considering the use of the DQP in program design. At least two institutions—Brandman University and Empire State College—said they had undertaken DQP-related initiatives that had prompted them to consider developing their own competency-based programs. Some institutions have gone further and, using the related Tuning process, defined specific academic disciplines in terms of core learning outcomes and general competencies that graduates should be able to demonstrate. The faculty-led Tuning process involves surveying faculty in the discipline, students, graduates, and employers to identify general competencies expected of degree-holders in specific fields and evaluating various academic reference points to agree upon discipline specific knowledge, such as what history or physics majors who earn, say, bachelor’s degrees should know and be able to do regardless of where they earn degrees.

Offerman’s review was the first independent examination of the emerging state of competency-based education. His primary research informed Lumina’s efforts to create and support broader conditions for efforts to stand up new programs, many of which were occurring in isolation. Common elements across these programs, further explained in chapters that follow, included:

Curriculum Planning and Delivery

- Diagnostic assessments for determining admissions, identifying prior learning and gaps in knowledge and skills, and—in some instances—for creating personalized pathways for students.
- Program requirements and validation of competencies by external advisors, including employers working with faculty members.
- Program maps that gave students and faculty members clear understandings of the educational journey, the flow of what would be learned, and how such knowledge and skills could be applied in the real world.
- Program maps, rubrics, and embedded assessments that helped eliminate program redundancies while allowing thoughtful, repeated exposure at various levels of intensity to opportunities for students to demonstrate what they knew and could do.
- Extensive reliance projects that allowed students to demonstrate competencies.
- Coordinated and intentional use of program maps, rubrics and embedded assessments that facilitated use of predictive modeling as well as rapid intervention when students faced challenges.

Self-Paced Learning

- Within parameters set by federal financial aid rules, students could advance through programs of study at their own pace. (For example, during a six-month academic term, each student could be
required to demonstrate mastery of a minimum number of competencies to remain eligible for aid, but students also could do more without penalty.)

Faculty Roles

- Faculty roles could look the same. Faculty roles also could look different because competency-based approaches lend themselves to faculty specialization.
- Some institutions created subject-matter-expert faculty teams which then designed programs and assessments. They also employed faculty as mentors and coaches who served as primary contacts with students. In some instances, a separate set of faculty members handled “grading,” or learning assessment.

Connection to the Credit Hour

- To facilitate transfer, maintain the coherence of transcripts, and comply with credit-hour rules, documented learning outcomes and competencies in many programs had been “crosswalked” to create credit-hour equivalencies.
- Some institutions maintained two transcripts: one in a standard credit-hour format with course grades and another without grades that detailed learning outcomes and how mastery or proficiency had been demonstrated.
- Academic program modules were sometimes created to combine the achievement of granular competencies (less than a single-credit equivalent) in ways that align with credit-based representations.

During the course of his interviews, Offerman found that educators were enthusiastic about these new programs. These innovators said competency-based programs offer another choice in higher education for students who find that traditional instruction does not meet their needs. The Competency-Based Education Network, a group of field-leading institutions and higher education systems led by Laurie Dodge as chairman and Charla Long as executive director, has found that competency-based programs often combine a state-of-the-art curriculum, creative learning opportunities, clear learning objectives, authentic “real-life” assessments, and a full array of support services so that, step by step, students can improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Among the possible advantages of competency-based education that Offerman’s research identified were:

Clear Learning Expectations and Enhanced Student Supports

- Identifying and assessing learning using competencies highlighted the relevance of academic programs for further learning and employment.
- Creating curricular maps offered greater coherence and a high level of transparency for faculty members and students, all of whom better understood program sequencing, expectations, and the paths to completion. (Among students, his research indicated, having a clearer view of learning expectations could reduce student anxiety and increase overall confidence.)
- Creating and publishing grading rubrics informed students about what was going to be measured, further increasing their confidence.
- Acting as mentors, faculty members remained in contact with students throughout their educational journeys. This fostered trust and confidence, which were essential when students and faculty members were adapting to new academic environments.
Lower Net Tuition and Lower Educational Costs

- Some newer programs had been designed with affordability and lower program costs in mind.
- Creating integrated, cross-disciplinary curricula eliminated redundancies in academic programs, leading to increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness.
- Embedding assessments at the concept and competency levels allowed students to test out of smaller chunks of knowledge and skills than permitted under the credit-hour approach.
- Eliminating repetition of already-learned knowledge and skills and counting smaller chunks of knowledge and skills than the credit hour permits eliminated the costs associated with teaching—and the expense of learning—academic content and skills more than once.
- Making greater use of open educational resources and digital content further reduced program costs.

Reduced Time to Completion

- Eliminating the need to re-take content that has been learned reduced time invested as well as net prices and program-related spending.
- Using assessments at granular competency levels saved time by allowing students to test out of learning modules.
- Implementing advancement-by-demonstrated-mastery approaches could lead to more rapid completion for some better-prepared students.

Improved Program Quality

- Moving to a competency-based approach had improved the coherence of academic programs through the considerable work spent identifying relevant competencies, identifying the best sequences for presenting learning opportunities, and using real-time assessment that was believed to be valid, reliable, and authentic.
- Improving transparency about learning expectations required considerable faculty-level acceptance and effort.
- Engaging external constituents, including experts and employers, resulted in programs that were likely to ensure relevance and employability.

Improved Measures of Learning

- Creating learning experiences and assessments after competencies had been identified could help ensure these competencies are taught effectively.
- Developing grading rubrics often led to explicit agreement among faculty members about what constituted the most critical learning and how to measure it.
- Using specially trained faculty or staff members to assess learning informed efforts around continuous improvement.
- Once granular learning data were collected, they could be incorporated in predictive modeling to identify students who might need extra help.
● Differentiating faculty roles—with faculty members serving as mentors—could result in an increased focus on facilitating and directing student learning.

Better Institutional Metrics

● More granular data could be used to track progress at the program and institutional levels.
● Benchmarking of general competencies at each degree level is possible when programs and institutions use the DQP to construct programs.
● The process of Tuning discipline-specific learning outcomes and general competencies could allow even-more-granular benchmarking.
● Generating data about how effectively students are performing at the concept and competency levels individually and in groups could help improve overall program efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Opportunities

● Student records could look more like a portfolio, with extensive visual and experiential information about what students did to demonstrate mastery of an array of clearly articulated and measurable competencies.
● The richness and depth of these new generation records could offer much greater insight into the skills and abilities of each student. Part of this depth will arise from the use of far-more-sophisticated and authentic learning assessments.

Using Offerman’s research and Laitinen’s New America white paper as a foundation for discussion, Lumina and the Gates Foundation hosted a convening in Indianapolis in September 2012 that brought together 21 institutions at various stages of planning and implementation of competency-based degree programs, observers from the Education Department, and grantees organizations. This was the first time the institutions, from pioneers to newcomers, had come together as a group to discuss competency-based education. Through structured information gathering and sharing, the goals of the convening were to deepen practice and problem solving among leaders and to identify ways in which the foundations could better support their work. Among takeaways that were identified by Public Agenda, a New York-based research and public engagement firm, were the following:

● The research and evidence base for competency-based education was not yet robust enough to sustain long-term growth and expansion.
● Most institutions were building programs in isolation, and little technical assistance or consultative capacity existed to help them.
● Confusion about federal law and regulation and accreditation policy were widespread, and state-level regulators appeared to vary in their willingness to address competency-based education programs.
● Faculty members were generally viewed as critical partners, although some programs stressed faculty involvement more than others.
● Learning expectations in emerging competency-based programs could prove more stringent, causing completion rates to dip, at least initially.


Practical challenges associated with back-office systems built for traditionally delivered credit-hour programs could impede development of competency-based programs.

Clearly, there was a need to frame the national conversation about competency-based education in ways that will allow policymakers and taxpayers to come to terms with the complexity of these programs and to navigate the cultural shift entailed in advancing this form of education. The September 2012 gathering led to the creation of Competency-L, a listserv for practitioners; a series of policy dialogues in Chicago and Washington, D.C., to increase communication and collaboration among innovators, accreditors, and other policymakers; a proposal by the Education Department to establish an Experimental Sites Initiative to test new approaches to using Title IV federal student aid to better support competency-based degree programs; and Lumina’s launch of the Competency-Based Education Network in 2013 as a platform supported by Public Agenda for field leaders to accelerate progress around common challenges to building and scaling this these programs.

In April 2013, Lumina and three other foundations advanced this dialogue, with the aid of Alison Kadlec, a senior vice president at Public Agenda, by hosting officials from the White House, Education Department, Office of Management and Budget, regional accrediting organizations, state higher education offices, and colleges and universities with innovative programs to explore ways of improving communication and collaboration. A week before this convening, the Department issued much-anticipated approval of a request by Southern New Hampshire University’s College for America to become the first institution to offer Direct Assessment. Prior to the Department’s approval of this associate degree program, all colleges and universities offering competency-based degrees had been mapping program-level competencies back to the credit hour. Institutions at the meeting included Brandman, Charter Oak State College, Lipscomb University, Northern Arizona University, Southern New Hampshire, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Westminster College, and WGU.

Most discussion centered on how to:

- Discern the level of innovation that can be accommodated within existing credit-hour and academic-year regulations, including how to resolve questions about the Department’s freedom and capability to act creatively under existing federal law.
- Increase transparency around the Department’s approval process for institutions interested in pursuing Direct Assessment.
- Open channels of regular communication between the Department and regional accreditation concerned about the extra layer of program review related to Direct Assessment.
- Explore the potential for a federally authorized Experimental Sites Initiative in which waiving certain Title IV regulations could inform innovative efforts by colleges and universities to make competency-based programs widely available.

Institutions and accreditors said there was a pressing need to create greater understanding of competency-based terminology, to begin to identify high-quality approaches and practices, monitor quality, and to understand how different programs really work. Because there are many possible approaches to designing competency-based programs, the participants cited a growing need for the kind of common language and a shared conceptual framework called for by various authors in this book.

By September 2013, a year after the initial meeting, Lumina and the Gates Foundation brought invited colleges and universities interested in responsible innovation around competency-based education to a
Chicago meeting. The goals of the convening were to develop: guidance for the institutions about what they should do to prepare for a request for federally authorized Experimental Sites, plans for helping institutions form a learning community if Experimental Sites are approved and implemented, and Ex-Sites feedback for the Department.

Among areas identified for experimentation were:

1. The definition of “academic year,” which has proven a bigger time-related barrier to competency-based education than the credit hour;
2. Alternative timing for releases of Title IV student aid disbursements to students;
3. Approaches to measuring Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) beyond use of “seat-time” as a proxy for learning;
4. New approaches for determining institutional Cost of Attendance; and
5. use of federal student aid to support hybrid delivery through a mix of competency-based education and traditional instruction.

A consensus emerged that institutions could work on one or multiple topics that would involve waiving Title IV laws and regulations. Again, there was substantial agreement that to untether degree programs from time-based credit as a measure of academic progress, a shared conceptual framework supported by strong evidence will be needed.

In early 2014, Lumina helped a group of institutions formally respond to the Department’s call for ideas about how federally authorized Experimental Sites could help them responsibly explore new ways of using Title IV student aid to pay for innovative competency-based learning. The institutions submitted a joint paper outlining potential experiments:

- **Testing New or Alternative Federal Definitions of Attendance and Academic Progress:** Institutions could develop alternative ways to measure educational activities, frequency of student engagement, and activities more appropriate to learning-based models.
- **Decoupling Federal Financial Aid from Time-Based Measures:** Instead of tying aid to credit hours attempted and earned, aid could be disbursed to institutions on behalf of students on the basis of competencies demonstrated during a specific period.
- **Recognizing Hybrid or Mixed-Modality Programs Using Traditional and Competency-Based Education:** Institutions could allow students in traditional programs eligible for federal aid to take competency-based modules and also allow students in competency-based programs to take traditional credit-hour courses.

There is strong public demand for the federal government to support learning-based innovation. In one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in Washington, D.C., members of the executive and legislative branches have expressed interest in competency-based education. Experimental Sites, which are in the works, will permit responsible innovation and explore effects on policy objectives such as increased student retention, program completion, and affordability.

Over time, a clearer, sharper value statement for competency-based education will be needed, because it appears, to faculty members at least, this pedagogy has the same design principles and outcomes they associate with their own credit-hour courses, which are, of course, well designed and implemented. Among differentiating factors identified during Lumina’s on-going discussions with people leading competency-
based education work nationally and thoughtful skeptics is the possibility of more personalized learning, aided by learning analytics and technology, that incorporates flexible, anywhere, anytime, self-paced study under faculty oversight. This could be accomplished, they say, by moving beyond the traditional “unit” of the course to more granular learning units – competencies and learning outcomes. When its potential is fully realized, competency-based education should open new pathways to credentials that break through higher education’s existing artificial boundaries.

Kevin Corcoran
Lumina Foundation, USA

REFERENCES

