

# Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN)

A National Network for Developing Higher Education Models

**Embargoed Until:**  
**12:01 AM ET**  
**Wednesday March 5, 2014**

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## **Competency-Based Education Network announces initial cohort**

*New group seeks to provide national leadership to create robust learning-based models*

The Competency-Based Education Network has selected an initial cohort of colleges and universities to address shared challenges to designing and developing competency-based degree programs and related business models. The research-and-development strategy the institutions will undertake as part of this network, coordinated by Public Agenda and funded by Lumina Foundation, will provide an evidence-based approach to advancing high-quality competency-based education capable of serving many more students of all backgrounds.

A Steering Committee, led by Laurie Dodge of Brandman University and David Schejbal of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, formed in spring 2013 and the network issued a formal call for membership applications in the fall. Participating institutions either offer degree programs with well-defined learning outcomes and rigorous assessment or are on their way to creating them. The network was established to support institutions that have an interest in accelerating progress on their models and contributing lessons to the field through structured collaboration involving rapid-cycle testing of practices, processes, and concepts.

The cohort includes 18 institutions: **Antioch University, Argosy University, Brandman University, Broward College, Capella University, Charter Oak State College, City University of Seattle, DePaul University, Excelsior College, Lipscomb University, Northern Arizona University, Salt Lake Community College, Southern New Hampshire University**, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (**Texas A&M University-Commerce** and **South Texas College**), the **University of Maine at Presque Isle**, the **University of Maryland University College**, and **Westminster College**. In addition, two systems serving 42 campuses also are participating: **Kentucky Community & Technical College System** and the **University of Wisconsin-Extension**.

The C-BEN Steering Committee, comprising higher education innovators from several of these institutions, will guide the work and periodically will issue additional calls for applications.

"We were impressed by applications we reviewed and the overall level of work going on in the field," said Co-Chairman Schejbal, dean of continuing education, outreach and e-learning at UW-Extension. "This group believes we can accelerate progress on developing our models and help inform the field of higher education by collectively testing approaches that speed the transition to programs that advance students based on learning instead of 'seat time.'"

The movement toward competency-based academic delivery comes as the United States, to meet social and economic demands for more college graduates, must provide more education options for more students. Advocates believe academic programs that clearly define what students must know and be able to do to earn degrees in specific disciplines create significant potential to affordably help students from all backgrounds prepare for further education and employment.

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## A National Network for Developing Higher Education Models

"This national network will consist of representatives from colleges and universities willing to commit time and effort to solving common challenges around developing quality competency-based models," said Co-Chairman Dodge, vice provost and vice chancellor of institutional assessment and planning at Brandman, a Hispanic-Serving Institution with campuses in California and Washington State. "Priority will be given to addressing significant obstacles that cannot be adequately resolved in isolation."

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and public engagement organization, received a three-year grant from Lumina Foundation to coordinate and manage the network. Southern New Hampshire University received an additional grant to host the network's regular meetings, which will begin in April in Phoenix. Additional working sessions have been scheduled for July in Washington, D.C., and October in Nashville, Tenn.

"This network is an unprecedented and exciting opportunity for higher education institutions to collaborate in ways they never have before on challenges they all share," said Alison Kadlec, Public Agenda's senior vice president. "These challenges often stand in the way of making high-quality competency-education more widely available. There's especially a need for shared learning around issues related to communication, program design, quality and rigor, stakeholder engagement, back office systems, and sustainable business models."

There is a high level of interest nationally in competency-based education. A Gallup Poll last year found 87 percent of Americans believe that students should be able to receive credit for knowledge and skills gained outside of the classroom. In addition, 70 percent of those polled said mastery, not time spent in the classroom, should matter most in awarding college credit. However, this interest has been tempered by uncertainty among colleges and universities about what can be done within federal law and the implications of using federal student aid to pay for degree programs that do not rely on the credit hour. By working together, institutions in the network hope to address these challenges.

### **About Public Agenda**

Public Agenda is a nonprofit organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive and complex issues. Through nonpartisan research and engagement, it provides people with the insights and support they need to arrive at workable solutions on critical issues, regardless of their differences. Since 1975, Public Agenda has helped foster progress on K-12 and higher education reform, health care, federal and local budgets, energy and immigration.

### **About Lumina Foundation**

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

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