

## **New Checklist Will Help Ensure Competency-Based Programs Comply with Federal Financial Aid Policies**

*Document is a result of field leaders' efforts to test and share emerging practices nationally that support a move away from "seat time" as the primary measure of student progress*

**April 13, 2016**— The Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) has released an urgently needed planning resource to help financial aid officers ensure that competency-based education programs are designed and offered in ways that allow students to pay tuition, fees, and living expenses using federal grants and loans. C-BEN released the financial aid checklist and a related academic calendar tool in advance of its meeting April 20-22 in Santa Fe, N.M.

The new checklist, "Questions Financial Aid Professionals Should Ask About Competency-Based Education Programs," is a guide for student aid officers looking to support competency-based programs offered on campus and online. The checklist aligns with primary topics found in the U.S. Department of Education's *Federal Student Aid Handbook*, such as institutional and student eligibility, record-keeping, and program reviews.

"Financial aid officers must make a lot of decisions when it comes to implementing competency-based programs, but many of them have been made in the dark. This checklist, designed by practitioners, will be a welcome resource," said Laurie Dodge, who is chairman of C-BEN's Board of Directors and is vice chancellor of institutional assessment and planning and vice provost of Brandman University, based in Irvine, Calif. "Ensuring compliance with federal financial aid policies is critical to making competency-based education available to more students from all backgrounds."

C-BEN comprises 30 colleges and universities, including public, private and for-profit members, as well as four public higher education systems in Georgia, Kentucky, Texas, and Wisconsin, which are working collaboratively to address shared challenges to designing and implementing competency-based programs. Lumina Foundation supports the network, which is managed by Public Agenda, a New York-based nonpartisan research and public engagement firm. Nearly 600 institutions across the country, including public and private colleges and universities, community colleges, for-profit universities and nonprofits offer—or have expressed interest in developing—competency-based programs, according to a 2015 survey by Public Agenda.

“This checklist makes very public the awesome work that members of the C-BEN community have been doing,” said Amy Laitinen, deputy director for higher education at New America, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank which in September 2012 released *Cracking the Credit Hour*, a set of policy recommendations for measuring student academic progress based on learning mastery. “The number of hours to produce a document of this depth and breadth is a testament to the field of higher education’s commitment to competency-based education.”

As a result of rapidly growing interest, policymakers are paying greater attention to competency-based education, which combines an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and expectations about learning are held constant. Learners acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities, and experiences that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. Learners receive proactive guidance and support from faculty and staff members, and they earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace.

Competency-based programs offer potential to address rising costs of higher education while offering alternatives for learners who find that traditional instruction doesn’t meet their needs. For many learners, it can be a better way to plan, organize, deliver, and support education. By requiring students to meet measurable learning outcomes to earn credentials, competency-based programs also can provide employers with a clearer picture of what demonstrated knowledge and skills graduates are able to take into the workforce.

C-BEN’s checklist for financial aid officers is among resources the network will release in the months ahead to accelerate progress toward addressing common challenges across institutions to building affordable, scalable, and high-quality academic models. The financial aid checklist identifies questions that financial aid officers should be prepared to ask and answer, whether their institutions are launching competency-based programs or are further along.

“The checklist build a bridge between the *new* and the *known*,” said Joellen Shendy, associate vice provost and registrar at University of Maryland University College. “Financial aid officers do not have to wait for the feds to rewrite the federal handbook to account for competency-based education. They can now see and understand how competency-based programs have to operate within existing law and regulation.”

“The federal rules allow for competency-based programs,” agreed Will Pena, associate vice president of CBE financial aid at Southern New Hampshire University, which offers College for America, a competency-based program that forms corporate partnerships to recruit students. “The C-BEN checklist will eliminate a lot of anxiety and allow financial aid officers to feel that these programs are doable.”

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**About the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN)** The Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) is a group of regionally accredited two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities working together to address shared challenges to designing, developing and scaling high-quality CBE programs. C-BEN institutions have developed or are developing affordable, high-quality CBE programs capable of serving many more students of all backgrounds. Additionally, member institutions are offering or will offer programs with well-defined learning outcomes and rigorous assessments. The C-BEN Board of Directors, comprising innovators from several participating institutions, guides the work to provide an evidence-based approach to advancing CBE across the country. *C-BEN can be found online at [CBENetwork.org](http://CBENetwork.org) and on Twitter at [@CBENetwork](https://twitter.com/CBENetwork).*