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Education Department Opens the Door to Innovation in Higher Education

Ted Mitchell Addresses the Competency-Based Education Network and Announces Experimental Sites

WASHINGTON, DC—The U.S. Department of Education today announced a new round of experimental sites that will open the door to higher education innovation aimed at increasing college access and providing more affordable and flexible paths for students seeking quality credentials. Under Secretary of Education Ted Mitchell announced the use of experimental sites to test these emerging models of student-focused, outcomes-based academic delivery and provided details at the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) quarterly meeting.

“Today, we are happy to announce a new round of new ex-site initiatives that can further increase innovation in higher education and to help more Americans get succeed,” Under Secretary Mitchell said. “Through the ex sites initiative we look forward to delivering some of the innovative ideas to give more students flexible paths to academic and career success.”

These federally authorized experimental sites will include four strands: competency-based education models; models that include a mix of both competency-based education and traditional academic instruction, or so-called “hybrid” models, which also have approval to offer direct assessment of learning; the assessment of prior learning for academic credit; and the use of work study for near-peer counseling.

In his half-hour talk, Mitchell highlighted C-BEN’s efforts to address shared challenges that institutions face in building programs capable of serving large numbers of students, including the need for new business processes and systems, the need for better-informed program design principles, and the need for better, evidence-based storytelling and communications. He encouraged the Network’s participants to keep leading.

“We do our best work when we follow you,” Mitchell told the group of about 60 education innovators. “We want these experiments to clear the brush and help you lead.”

C-BEN is a group of 18 colleges and universities and two state higher education systems serving 42 campuses working together to design and develop competency-based degree programs and related business models. The Network’s participants, representing teams of academic and business leaders from each institution, are taking part in a rapid-cycle research-and-development process to develop their own models and to advance and inform the field by collaborating across institutions.
“These experiments will allow flexibility with some of the time-based statutes and regulations to test new approaches for using federal student aid to pay for competency-based degree programs,” said Laurie Dodge, vice chancellor of institutional assessment and planning for Brandman University, a private school based in California, and co-chairman of C-BEN. This will allow institutions and the federal government to engage in responsible innovation and learn which types of programs work best and whether there are effects on other policy goals such as increased student retention, program completion, and college affordability.”

In December, the Education Department issued a request for information soliciting ideas for experiments with potential to increase quality and reduce costs in higher education while maintaining or increasing the programmatic and fiscal integrity of Title IV student aid programs. The Department was interested in testing ideas that could improve student persistence and academic success, result in shorter time to completion, and reduce students’ reliance on loans, especially among lower-income students and students who struggle academically. Several institutions and members of C-BEN responded to the request and have participated in follow-up conversations with the Department.

“Our institutions fully support the Department’s interest in fostering responsible innovation and experimentation with these learning models. We believe competency-based models have the potential to meet the needs of students from all backgrounds,” said David Schejbal, dean of continuing education, outreach, and e-learning at University of Wisconsin-Extension and co-chairman of C-BEN. “We hope these experiments will allow the Department, institutions and policymakers to see the benefits of better, more-personalized pathways for students while at the same time working to mitigate the potential pitfalls.”

Colleges and universities will have 60 days to complete their applications; this will be followed by a rolling admissions process. For more information on the Competency-Based Education Network please visit: www.cbenetwork.org

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