

# Quality Framework for Competency-Based Education Programs: Crosswalk to Other Standards

# Introduction

**The Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) identified the lack of a quality definition of competency-based education (CBE) hinders efforts to grow demand, build capacity and remove barriers for competency-based programs. In response to this need, C-BEN created the C-BEN Quality Standards Task Force to develop a framework for developing and evaluating quality competency-based educational programs. The Task Force drew from the *Shared Design Elements and Emerging Practices of Competency-Based Education*, and brought together leading program designers and system administrators from C-BEN member institutions representing an array of models.**

This task force worked together during 2016 to create the first edition of Quality Principles & Standards for Competency-Based Education Programs through an iterative and inclusive process, developing principles and standards universal enough to apply to all CBE programs, regardless of model variations. These universal principles and standards are planned to be augmented by additional stackable principles and standards based on research and program outcomes, as well as model-specific, programmatic features.

To further the work of the original taskforce, the C-BEN Quality Framework User's Guide Collaboratory convened in November 2017 to create a companion "workbook" for institutions and individuals interested in applying the C-BEN Quality Principles & Standards for Competency-Based Education (CBE) Programs. In addition, the team divided into smaller groups to create additional tools and resources to support users, including a focus on creating a Crosswalk to Other Standards.

The Crosswalk to Other Standards report serves as a reference guide comparing the C-BEN Quality Framework to a variety of other frameworks and standards that may be of interest to institutions and individuals at varying stages of investigating, planning, developing and implementing competency-based programs. This comparison provides institutions with information as to how the C-BEN Quality Framework fits within the landscape of current frameworks in higher education and the field and ways in which the C-BEN Quality Framework brings added value to inform planning, decision-making and evaluation of quality CBE programming.

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## RELEVANT STANDARDS

The Crosswalk to Other Standards team members researched various frameworks currently used within higher education and identified eight frameworks to use in the crosswalk comparison. These eight frameworks have specific purposes and scopes that are separate from competency-based education, but contain standards or elements that align with the C-BEN Quality Framework. The team recognizes there are other frameworks that could also be included, but determined that these eight provided diversity of approaches and are representative of frameworks currently in use nationally and internationally.

The eight frameworks identified as a best match with the C-BEN Quality Framework are:

- Connecting Credentials Framework (<http://connectingcredentials.org/framework/>). The Connecting Credentials Framework uses competencies - what the learner knows and is able to do - as common reference points to help understand and compare levels of knowledge, skills and abilities that underlie degrees, certificates, industry certifications, licenses, apprenticeships, badges and other credentials. The Connecting Credentials Framework is a tool to understand, compare, and connect the thousands of diverse credentials used in the US in order to increase the career and economic mobility of workers. It functions as a translation device across different credentials.

- Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) (<http://degreeprofile.org/read-the-dqp/dqp-cover/>). The DQP outlines a set of reference points for what students should know and be able to do upon completion of associate, bachelor's and master's degrees - in any field of study. There are five broad categories of proficiencies, which provide a profile of what degrees mean in terms of specific learning outcomes or competencies. Through a focus on broad areas of learning and the application of that learning, the DQP illustrates progressively challenging performance expectations for all students. The DQP acts as a translation tool across the three levels of degrees.
- Global Learning Qualifications Framework (<https://www.esc.edu/glaf/>). The Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF) is competency-based framework developed through research on the evaluation of undergraduate education and policies, procedures, and qualification frameworks from over 90 countries. The GLQF is used to evaluate college-level learning, regardless of when, how or from where the learning was acquired.
- Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes (<https://www.aacu.org/leap/principles-of-excellence>). Based on research involving over 100 higher education institutions, the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes provide a framework to guide students' cumulative progress through college. Paired with the Essential Learning Outcomes are a set of Principles of Excellence and rubrics for each of the outcomes.
- National Association of College and Employers (NACE) Career Readiness Competencies (<http://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined/>). In consultation with employers and educators, NACE researched and identified seven competencies associated with career readiness. Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace
- Online Learning Consortium (OLC) Quality Scorecard (<https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-suite/>). The Online Learning Consortium Scorecard provides benchmarks and standards to measure and quantify elements of quality within online programs in higher education. Through the scorecard process, institutions can determine strengths and weaknesses of their

online program and initiate planning efforts towards areas of improvement.

- Quality Dimensions of Connected Credentials (<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Quality-Dimensions-for-Connected-Credentials.aspx>). The Quality Dimensions of Connected Credentials is a tool that aims to create a shared understanding about what makes credentials valuable, how that value varies across different types of credentials for different stakeholders, what constitutes quality, and how credentials are connected to each other and to opportunities for the people who have earned them.
- Quality Matters Framework (<http://qualitymatters.org/>). The Quality Matters (QM) framework provides a set of standards and rubrics for designing, assessing, and improving online and blended learning opportunities for both higher education and K-12 settings. The QM framework is based on research and best practices from the field in online learning.

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## METHODOLOGY

The Crosswalk to Other Standards team members compared the C-BEN Quality Framework with the eight identified frameworks using two analysis approaches: 1) overall analysis based on Travers (2018) Framework for Frameworks, which examines the morphology of frameworks; and 2) a content analysis of the actual standards provided in each framework. Team members divided and analyzed the eight comparison frameworks using the C-BEN Quality Framework quality elements and standards as the basis of analysis. Through ongoing discussions and review, the team members provided feedback to each other and normed the process.

### Results of the Overall Framework Analysis

The overall framework analysis used Travers' (2018) Framework for Frameworks, which examines 22 elements of a framework within six areas: Philosophy, Quality, Targeted Groups, Learning Focus, Prior Learning, and Structure. The team identified key differences across the frameworks in each of the areas:

- Philosophy examines the Purpose, Scope and Range of the framework. The C-BEN Quality Framework focused on competency-based educational programs and its purpose is to provide standards from which to develop, assess, and improve programs. This is very different from the other frameworks (see descriptions above), which spanned from online programs, career readiness, comparing credentials to college-level learning and comparing credentials

to each other. The differences in philosophy makes it problematic to compare the C-BEN Quality Framework to other frameworks, in that its specific purpose shapes the content within the framework and how it is to be used. The result of this analysis indicates that these different frameworks can be used in conjunction with each other, rather than replace one for another.

- Quality dimensions of a framework include a definition of the framework, transparency, mechanisms of assurance, tuning efforts, and a definition of quality. All of the frameworks met all of the criteria, except a definition of quality for which only C-BEN Quality Framework and the Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials had a definition for quality. The DQP implies quality, but it is not an explicit definition.
- Targeted Groups provides information on the contributors and targeted audience. All frameworks reviewed provided this information.
- Learning Focus includes areas for participant focus, learning continuum, progression, depth & breadth of learning, transferability/portability/bridging of learning, learning units, and output (targeted outcomes). Each of the frameworks provided information on who would be using the framework (rather than who the learning was targeting). The OLC Scorecard, Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials, NACE Career Readiness Competencies, LEAP Essential Outcomes, and Quality Matters did not have a learning continuum, progression or depth & breadth of learning identified; the other frameworks did. All the frameworks did address transferability/portability/bridging of learning and output. Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials was the only one not to address output.
- Prior learning addresses the ways in which competencies developed prior to engaging the learning experiences are recognized and credentialed. The GLQF is designed directly to assess prior learning. The remaining frameworks do not address prior learning directly, but some imply recognizing prior learning with many of their standards.
- Structure looks at the ways in which the framework is structured and explores the areas of key terms, levels, overarching constructs, domains, and descriptors. For those frameworks that address specific learning competencies, each addressed these areas. The frameworks (such as the C-BEN Quality Framework) that are intended for developing and evaluating programs also address these areas, but used focused language of standards rather than learning.

The key finding for the first level of analysis is that the act of comparing frameworks relies on understanding the purpose and philosophy of each framework. Most of the frameworks were more complementary than overlapping. For example, the GLQF is designed to assess prior college level learning, and although it is a competency-based framework it gives no guidance for developing and evaluating CBE programs. It is useful to use within the Quality Element of the C-BEN Quality Framework that addresses designing appropriate and transparent competencies. Another example is Quality Matters, which has been a long-standing quality framework for general online learning and blended instruction focused on best practices for curriculum, rubrics, instructional delivery, and assessments. It has recently added standards and practices on competency-based education specific to integrating competencies and learning skills in online curriculum and could be used in conjunction with the C-BEN Quality Framework.

### **Results of the Quality Elements and Standards Content Analysis**

The content analysis explored the specific standards within the eight quality dimensions of the C-BEN Quality Framework. The team aligned each of the comparative frameworks standards to the C-BEN Quality Framework standards and developed an analysis from this comparison. In some cases, the C-BEN Quality Framework standards were unique or only one or two of the other framework standards related; in other cases, there were more commonality across the different framework standards.

#### *C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 1: Demonstrated institutional commitment to and capacity for CBE innovation.*

There are eight standards in the first quality element that provide guidance to support competency-based education programs regarding: the role of leadership and governance; the institutional definition, approach, policies and procedures to program design and delivery; the faculty and staff model; capacity, resources and business model to support the programs; student support resources and models; and data collection and reporting procedures.

- The analysis found that the OLC Scorecard aligned to five of the standards in the areas of governance and organizational structures, definition and values, institutional support and resource allocation, strategic planning, and evaluation and assessment.
- The Quality Matters framework aligned with three of the standards at the course level in the areas of purpose of the course, learner support, and assessment.
- The Connecting Credentials Framework and the DQP each aligned with two of the standards providing justification and theoretical position and strategies for program design.

- The GLQF only aligned with providing justification and theoretical positioning.
- The Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials, NACE Career Readiness Competencies, and LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes did not align with this first Quality Element.

The C-BEN Quality Framework provides unique features in the first set of standards for guiding institutions to ensure there is institutional commitment to and capacity for CBE programs. Although some of the other frameworks address parts of this quality element, they mostly focused on understanding the justification and purpose of the intended educational activities specific to each framework. The C-BEN Quality Framework provided more in-depth standards that examined the capacity and resources to support students and provide an intended learner experience.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 2: Clear, measurable, meaningful and integrated competencies.* There are five standards in the second quality element that focus on the specifics of the competencies, how they are developed with input from diverse constituents, the currency and relevance of the competencies, how they guide the learner experience and are well aligned with instructional strategies and cognitive levels and/or industry standards.

- All of the other frameworks, except the Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials, aligned with standards in this quality element.
- Six of the frameworks provided clearly articulated competencies, of which three provided levels for these competencies.
- Six of the frameworks indicated input from a diverse constituency, including both education and industry.
- The OLC Scorecard indicated that its standards and rubrics are developed through research and input from the OLC community, which is comprised of “like-minded professionals who share similar knowledge bases” (<https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/olc-research-center-digital-learning-leadership/>).
- Quality Matters provides specific guidelines on learning objective, competencies, and captures best practices for instructional development. Input for best practices are from instructional designers, course developers, subject matter experts, and online instructors.

Examining across the frameworks, the C-BEN Quality

Framework provides extensive standards that explores deeply the structure, design and implementation of competencies identified in a program.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 3: Coherent, competency driven program and curriculum design.* The third quality element contains eight standards focused on program design, ensuring that the competencies represent a complete taxonomy of the expectation of such a program; learners know what is expected of them and can articulate what they know and can do; the learning scaffolds at appropriate sequencing; learners are well-supported and have meaningful interactions with faculty subject experts; and learning activities and assessments are varied, promote engagement, multiple develop opportunities, and are appropriate, accessible and inclusive of all learners.

- All eight of the comparison frameworks address at least two of the standards in this quality element.
- Overall, the comparison frameworks are particularly concerned with the alignment of competencies with curricular and assessment design and the competencies are well articulated and measurable, and support student success.

Once again, the C-BEN Quality Framework dives into the coherency of the program and the curricular design in more detail than the other frameworks; although, this quality element is more aligned across the frameworks overall.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 4: Credential-level assessment strategy with robust implementation.* The fourth quality element is comprised of ten standards focused on authentic and robust assessments to both inform the learning journey and validate mastery.

- All eight of the comparative frameworks have at least one standard that addresses the need for learning assessments and/or programmatic assessments that include student learning.
- Some of the frameworks (e.g., LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes) have developed companion rubrics to assist in the assessment process. These rubrics align more closely to this quality element than the other frameworks.
- Some of the frameworks (e.g., Connecting Credentials Framework) have developed implementation guides that also address assessments.
- Quality Matters provides 5 standards addressing assessment strategies in achieving learning objectives or competencies and even considers prior learning

experience and/or acquired competencies through work, research, or prior experience.

The C-BEN Quality Framework provides very specific standards for ensuring that assessments align and are appropriate for the competencies and program. One unique emphasis is the use of assessment to support students' development of the competencies. The other frameworks address assessing mastery, but not students' development of competencies.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 5: Intentionally designed and engaged student experience.* The fifth quality element delineates seven standards focused on engaged learner experiences with meaningful interactions with subject matter experts, and access to and use of learner supports. It also specifies that faculty and staff invest in understanding, improving, and guiding the entire learner lifecycle and learning journey.

- All eight of the comparative frameworks have at least one standard that addresses a part of this quality element. The OLC Scorecard addresses faculty and staff performance standards. The GLQF and Quality Matters address learning assessments. The other frameworks have standards for intentional design.
- The Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials denotes standards of Equity (providing on-ramps and practical supports for learners) and Transparency (information is clear, accessible, uses common language and frameworks, and can be compared).
- Some of the frameworks (e.g., Connecting Credentials and DQP) provide supplementary materials to support standards that align with this quality element.

One concern in competency-based education is the need to show substantive meaningful interaction between the students and the faculty subject matter expert. This is especially critical to meet federal financial aid regulations and some regional accreditation standards. The C-BEN Quality Framework standards in this quality element specifically sets expectations to meet the federal requirements of a competency-based program and this is unique to this framework. This quality element aims to strengthen students' educational experiences and ensure that they are supported throughout their lifecycle in the program.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 6: Collaborative engagement with external partners.* The sixth quality element contains four standards focused on collaborating with and seeking feedback from external partners to ensure authentic learning experiences that are current and relevant.

- Two of the comparative frameworks (OLC Scorecard and Quality Matters) do not have standards that address this quality element.
- All of the frameworks have used input into and feedback from different constituents in the development of the framework.
- The Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials has parallel standards in the areas of Portability, Relevance, Transparency, and Equity that address the input and feedback from external stakeholders and continuous updating of programs based on the feedback.
- The NACE Career Readiness Competencies was developed and are continuously reviewed by a cross-section of education and industry partners.
- The guidebook for the Connecting Credentials Framework provides strategies for comparing and aligning different credentials spanning education and industry.

The C-BEN Quality Framework provides guidance on involving a diverse constituency in the design, evaluation and improvement of competency-based programs. Like the Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials, this quality element is concerned with the portability, relevance, transparency and equity of competency-based programs.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 7: Transparency of student learning.* The seventh quality element contains five standards focused on the learning, expectations, assessment methodologies, and performance requirements that are articulated clearly to students and other stakeholders. In addition, transcription and credentialing of the competencies clearly articulate mastery that is transparent to other institutions and employers and are translatable to their expectations.

- The Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials addresses some of the standards listed in this quality element under the areas of Transparency and Equity. The Dimensions framework specifies that competencies should be clearly defined and help learners understand and document their own knowledge, skills and abilities.
- The Connecting Credentials Framework, DQP, and GLQF articulate competency alignment in their standards. The latter two emphasize this in aligning levels, while the Connecting Credentials Framework provides tools to determine and assure alignment across different educational and industry competencies and credentials.
- The NACE Career Readiness Competencies address this quality element only through their standard that states there

needs to be a deep alignment of the competencies to workforce needs.

- The OLC Scorecard and the LEAP Essential Outcomes do not address this quality element.

The C-BEN Quality Framework provides guidance regarding the visibility and transparency of competencies within a credential. These standards emphasize the articulation of exactly the competencies that a student has mastered. In many ways, the Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials is the only other framework that directly addresses these same focal points.

*C-BEN Quality Framework, Quality Element 8: Evidence-driven continuous improvement processes.* The eighth and final quality element provides four standards that emphasize commitment to and adoption of processes to assess and improve competency-based programs.

- The OLC Scorecard and Quality Matters have specific

standards for assessing and improving programs.

- The Connecting Credentials Framework and the DQP have resources that support the assessment and improvement of programs.
- The rubrics for the LEAP Essential Outcomes are widely recognized by regional accrediting bodies and other institutions, but there are no direct standards for assessing and improving programs.
- The Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials, the NACE Career Readiness Competencies, and the GLQF do not address this quality element.

The C-BEN Quality Framework directly addresses the processes of assessing and improving competency-based programs. The standards clearly indicate the elements needed to have a successful evidence-driven continuous improvement program.

**Table 1:** Summary of the Results of the Quality Elements and Standards Content Analysis

| C-BEN Quality Framework   | Connecting Credentials           | Degree Qualifications Profile    | Global Learning Quality Framework | Dimensions of Quality for Connected Credentials | NACE Career Readiness            | AAC&U LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes | OLC Scorecard                    | Quality Matters                  |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (1) Demonstrated Institutional Commitment                           | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards  | Very few or no related standards                | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards       | Several Related Standards        | Some Related Standards           |
| (2) Clear, Measurable, Meaningful and Integrated Competencies       | Several Related Standards        | Several Related Standards        | Several Related Standards         | Very few or no related standards                | Several Related Standards        | Several Related Standards              | Very few or no related standards | Several Related Standards        |
| (3) Coherent Program and Curriculum Design                          | Some Related Standards           | Some Related Standards           | Several Related Standards         | Some Related Standards                          | Very few or no related standards | Several Related Standards              | Some Related Standards           | Some Related Standards           |
| (4) Credential-Level Assessment Strategy with Robust Implementation | Some Related Standards           | Several Related Standards        | Some Related Standards            | Very few or no related standards                | Very few or no related standards | Several Related Standards              | Very few or no related standards | Some Related Standards           |
| (5) Intentionally Designed and Engaged Learner Experience           | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards  | Some Related Standards                          | Very few or no related standards | Some Related Standards                 | Some Related Standards           | Very few or no related standards |
| (6) Collaborative Engagement with External Partners                 | Several Related Standards        | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards  | Several Related Standards                       | Several Related Standards        | Very few or no related standards       | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards |
| (7) Transparency of Student Learning                                | Several Related Standards        | Several Related Standards        | Several Related Standards         | Several Related Standards                       | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards       | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards |
| (8) Evidence-Driven Continuous Improvement                          | Some Related Standards           | Some Related Standards           | Very few or no related standards  | Very few or no related standards                | Very few or no related standards | Very few or no related standards       | Several Related Standards        | Some Related Standards           |

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

The crosswalk analysis of the C-BEN Quality Framework to other educational frameworks provided an in-depth examination of the features across the frameworks and specific standards addressed in each. The most significant finding was that each of the frameworks had a different purpose, scope and range. Some of the comparative frameworks overlapped in sections with the C-BEN Quality Framework, but some standards were unique to the C-BEN Quality Framework.

The C-BEN Quality Framework is designed specifically for developing, implementing and evaluating competency-based programs. The framework is extensive, providing standards for every aspect of program design and sustainability with a specific focus on competency-based programs. None of the other frameworks provided a comprehensive examination of what needs to be considered to implement, evaluate and improve a competency-based academic program. That said, the C-BEN Quality Framework did not provide detailed standards that examined the depth and breadth or levels of learning. As a result, the other frameworks studied provide complementary standards that can augment the C-BEN Quality Framework. For example, the DQP provides standards for the outcomes of the associate, bachelor's and master's degree. When designing a competency-based program, the DQP could be used to frame which competencies are included to ensure the program fits the intended credential. The GLQF provides overarching competencies to define college-level. These could be used to design specific competencies at a course level. Quality Matters provides insight for providing on-line delivery of competency-based programs. Institutions should consider using these other frameworks to fine tune their program development as they use the C-BEN Quality Framework.

Defining quality was another theme that evolved from the analysis. Many of the comparative frameworks did not include a definition of quality. The C-BEN Quality Framework defined quality, as well as provided the standards to ensure quality. The concept of quality and the process to ensure quality is paramount, especially at a time when competency-based education is under scrutiny. Institutions should take the effort to discuss quality within their competency-based programs and think through and implement processes to ensure quality is designed and sustained in their programs.

Another significant area that is unique to the C-BEN Quality Framework is the provision of standards that guided institutions to ensure that there is institutional commitment to and capacity for competency-based programs. Institutions need to examine their commitment and capacity to sustain competency-based programs, and what is required to provide the resources necessary to support students and successfully deliver the intended learner experience. Institutional commitment expands beyond a department offering a competency-based program and may touch all aspects of institutional offices and functions. A wide-spread analysis of who is involved in the process and how those people are supported and provided professional development around competency-based education is critical to the on-going sustainability and growth of programs.

The academic structure, design and implementation of a competency-based program is strongly centered in the C-BEN Quality Framework. The framework drives the coherency of the program and the curricular design. In addition, standards focus alignment of assessments to the program and learning. These are critical academic standards that connect directly to the quality of a program. Institutions should take time to work with the faculty during program design and delivery to implement these standards purposefully and continuously.

The C-BEN Quality Framework specifically sets expectations to meet the federal requirements for substantive and regular interaction, which has been an area of scrutiny regarding competency-based programs. The quality standards aim to strengthen the students' educational experiences and ensure that he students are supported throughout the program lifecycle. Although the C-BEN Quality Framework addresses substantive and regular interaction with students, as federal requirements change, a need to realign these standards with updates and guidance from the Department of Education may be needed.

Ongoing program improvement is also addressed in the C-BEN Quality Framework. Although some of the other frameworks also address continuous improvement, it was not uniformly addressed across all the frameworks – and yet, one of the most critical features of any educational program to ensure quality. Institutions should use the C-BEN Quality Framework standards initially in competency-based program design to build in procedures to assess the impact of the program and ways in which to improve.

The C-BEN Quality Framework does not address all aspects of an educational program. The areas of career readiness, acquiring and stacking credentials, and integrating prior learning were identified as not being addressed in the C-BEN Quality Framework, while touched upon by some of the other frameworks. Either the other frameworks could be used in conjunction to address these areas, or the C-BEN Quality Framework could be revised to include these areas. Another recommendation is to create sections in the User's Guide that help institutions integrate other frameworks while using the C-BEN Quality Framework.

The C-BEN Quality Framework is a comprehensive and adaptable framework that brings great value to the design, implementation and continuous improvement of competency-based programs. Dissemination of the framework across a broad constituency is essential to help ensure quality programs. As a greater user base is developed, feedback mechanisms need to be in place to assist in the adaptation, review, and revision of these standards over time.

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