Gearing Up:

How Competencies Enable the Agile Work-Learn Model

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Introduction: The Future Is Here

In education circles, there's a growing trope about the pandemic: It exposed all the things that weren't working, and then it made them worse. At the beginning of the year, some **36 million Americans** had attended college but never earned a degree. In just eight months, it appears the pandemic has added millions more to those roles — with **28 million adults** saying they have cancelled their education plans because of the fallout from COVID-19. Low-income, Black, and Latino or Hispanic learners are especially likely to have put college on hold, perhaps indefinitely.

Workers who have found themselves out of a job, or who fear they soon will be, recognize that they will need **additional education** and training to re-enter the workforce. But even as institutions are **fielding more calls**, those working learners **aren't showing up** like they have in past recessions. There's **evidence** they may be opting for short-term training instead, in hopes of a quick path back to a job. But concrete numbers for bootcamps, on-ramps, and other non-degree programs are still hard to come by.

What is clear: The future we've all been talking about — waves of automation, massive employment churn, dire need for upskilling and reskilling — is here. A slow burn has become a raging fire. And we've yet to build the next generation of education models that we need to meet the challenge. Those models will not only need to be flexible enough to meet the needs of increasingly diverse working learners (see box) but also must close the space between working and learning. Even as employers have increased education requirements, they have **grown increasingly skeptical** about what the traditional, credit hour-based degree tells them about the knowledge, skills, and abilities candidates possess. Only about half of employers in a major national survey before the pandemic said that degrees are a "fairly reliable representation" of skills and knowledge, and two-thirds said they were actively moving to **prioritize competencies** in hiring or were seriously considering such a shift. The economic fallout from the pandemic may lead employers to fall back on the degree as a blunt instrument to cut through the sudden flood of applications, but the longer-term trend remains. As more and more employers reassess their talent needs, we can expect demonstrable competencies, not just degrees, to increasingly matter in hiring. In many cases, they'll be asking for both.

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Many existing tools, initiatives, or entire approaches to learning attempt to create the kind of model working learners and employers need — and they're getting renewed attention now. Prior learning assessment, for example, is designed to capture college-level learning wherever it happens; microcredentials aim to give learners just-in-time skills to help them quickly advance or find new work; and stackable pathways aim to layer credentials in ways that create momentum and sustained growth in education and career. They are key components to building a system that is more flexible and provides more on-ramps and off-ramps for learners. Hundreds, if not thousands, of institutions are now planning to grow those approaches — or are giving them a fresh look — as are the foundations, policymakers, investors, and other stakeholders that are both demanding and financing next-gen approaches.

All stakeholders feel a new sense of urgency, but too often, those efforts are still happening in isolation. Everybody is trying to serve working learners better. But they aren't pulling the pieces together. And that knitting together is where true progress will happen — because we don't need more initiatives; we need a next-gen model of postsecondary education. Competencies can be that thread, the new currency of learning that pulls all this work together.

That is true across institutions, whether you've been offering competency-based education programs for years or don't even have a passing interest in formal CBE programs. Having a new way to talk about and measure learning — knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors — will allow educators to unpack what matters and rebuild it in ways that work better for working learners and employers. Competencies can provide the common currency that moves us from new approaches to a next-gen model — a work-and-learn model that is just as agile as we're asking students and workers to be.

Working learners are a large and important group of students who require flexible approaches to improve their educational success and economic mobility. They are adults 18+ who are working or actively participating in the labor market and who are enrolled in postsecondary education or need additional education to advance in their career. Some 88 million Americans are working learners, and their role in the nation's companies, communities, and future prosperity is vast.

To better serve them, we need to create an integrated learner experience and support systems, build a next-gen teaching and learning model, redesign legacy structures and systems, and move beyond employer advisories to creating deep connections to employers and the labor market. (For more on this framework, see Guild Education's recent white paper "**The Working Adult Learner Imperative.**" This paper focuses on the potential of competencies to unlock the next-gen learning model and revolutionize how we serve working learners.)

What We Need

An agile work-and-learn model must be accessible, flexible, and clearly aligned to skills needed for both immediate and long-term economic mobility. Microcredentials, credit for training, prior learning assessment, and stackable credentials will all be important components of this model. To achieve their full potential, however, they must all work together to create a new model for working learners. Those connections can't happen without deliberate focus. Specifically, we must invest in:

Robust student supports, such as stronger coaching and advising. Learning marketplaces like Guild Education and services like InsideTrack are providing robust coaching supports for learners and refining the approach for the field. At Guild, 76% of learners note that coaches had an impact on their success.

A well-designed **learning journey** that helps, not hinders, student progress. The **Guided Pathways** movement among community colleges is a leading example of this kind of approach. Implementing streamlined **pathways** that still allow choice and experimentation in different potential career fields up-front has proved challenging, but the goal is right: reforming the self-service model of higher education that leaves learners to choose among hundreds of different courses and too often leads to dead ends or detours.

Data collection, technology, and legal and ethical frameworks to create **open, interoperable data systems**. While adoption has been incremental, organizations like IMS Global and Credential Engine are leading the way on this by creating a data ecosystem that provides the foundation for tools that will ultimately enable policymakers, educators, and working learners to make better decisions about education and career.

Repository of assessment tools and competencies that are criterion referenced and performance based. The Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, for example, created a **centralized set** of competencies, assessments, and rubrics for early childhood education programs in partnership with 75+ higher education institutions in the state. This kind of repository, if utilized by institutions, improves the transfer process and allows learners to move seamlessly across institutions and other training providers and into the workplace.

A **credentialing strategy** that is focused on capturing postsecondary learning in all its various forms and creating a verifiable, sharable record of it. A **comprehensive learner record** would support formal academic programs, non-credit ones, informal learning, and employer-based training by capturing all the knowledge, skills, and achievements in verifiable, digital form.

Engaged employer partners, who are committed to working with postsecondary institutions to better align education and workforce demand. Major employers like JPMorgan Chase, **AT&T**, and Walmart are showing the potential of partnerships that are more than skin deep. Walmart, for example, recently expanded its Live Better U program to pay for employees to earn a degree in business, IT, or STEM — all areas of future growth for the company and the economy more broadly — from **Southern New Hampshire University**. The university, in turn, works with Walmart to understand how employee training and on-the-job experience could apply toward the degree programs. It's a pioneering partnership that is both workforce-aligned and substantive.

Shared language of competencies for employers and higher education. The **Open Skills Network** is working to accelerate a shift to skills-based education and hiring by establishing a network of open skills libraries and data. Similarly, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Jobs Data Exchange and T3 Innovation Network are working to create a shared framework for the competencies required for certain job roles and to connect those to the language of academic programs.

Each of those innovation areas and the leaders in those fields could be their own white paper, and indeed, much has already been written about the work happening and yet to be done. In this paper, we focus on unpacking one piece — a shared language of competencies — because we believe that competencies are the connective tissue necessary for much of the other work to have a real impact. Just as connected data will provide the technical underpinning of the next-gen model for working learners, competencies will provide the learning currency to make it function.

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Competencies break learning into a set of gears that can be fitted together in different ways to create a coherent whole. For those competencies to best function, enabling gears, from student supports to a shared language, have to be in place. Together, they form a sort of gearbox — the structure of the agile work-learn model.

AGILE WORK-LEARN MODEL

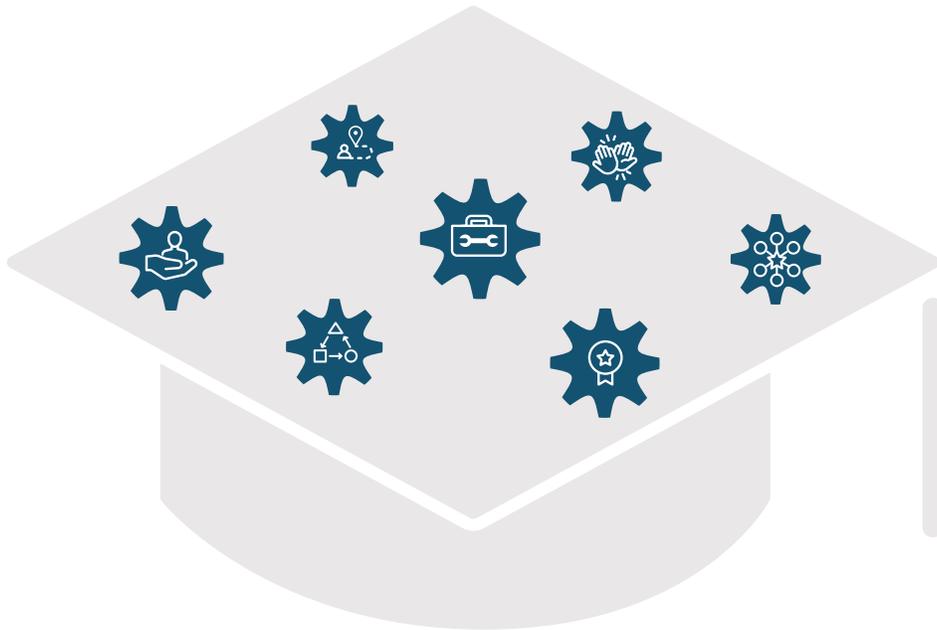Student Supports · Learner Journey · Interoperable Systems · Assessment Repository · Credentialing Strategy · Engaged Employers · Shared Language

Competencies: The Currency of the Agile Work-and-Learn Model

Competencies provide the learning currency of the future. They create both greater clarity and flexibility for working learners and employers by focusing on clear expectations about knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors, along with rigorous assessment and required demonstration of capability. When done with careful design and rigor, competency-based learning enables greater flexibility for the learner, can speed time to credential, reduce cost and thus risk, and improve connections between learning and work, all without sacrificing quality. Organizations like the Competency-Based Education Network, with its **Quality Framework**, have already laid the groundwork for how to do so.

It's important to note that competency-based learning has a broader definition than competency-based education, which only includes formal learning opportunities designed by academic institutions that lead to degrees and other recognized credentials. Competency-based learning includes formal and informal opportunities for learning or assessment, offered by colleges, non-college providers, or employers. This can take the form of college coursework but also can happen through work-based learning, industry certifications, military training, government licensures, and prior learning assessment tools.

In this way, competency-based learning isn't simply a programmatic approach but creates a new currency for understanding, documenting, and exchanging learning. With competencies as the underpinning of the postsecondary system, colleges and
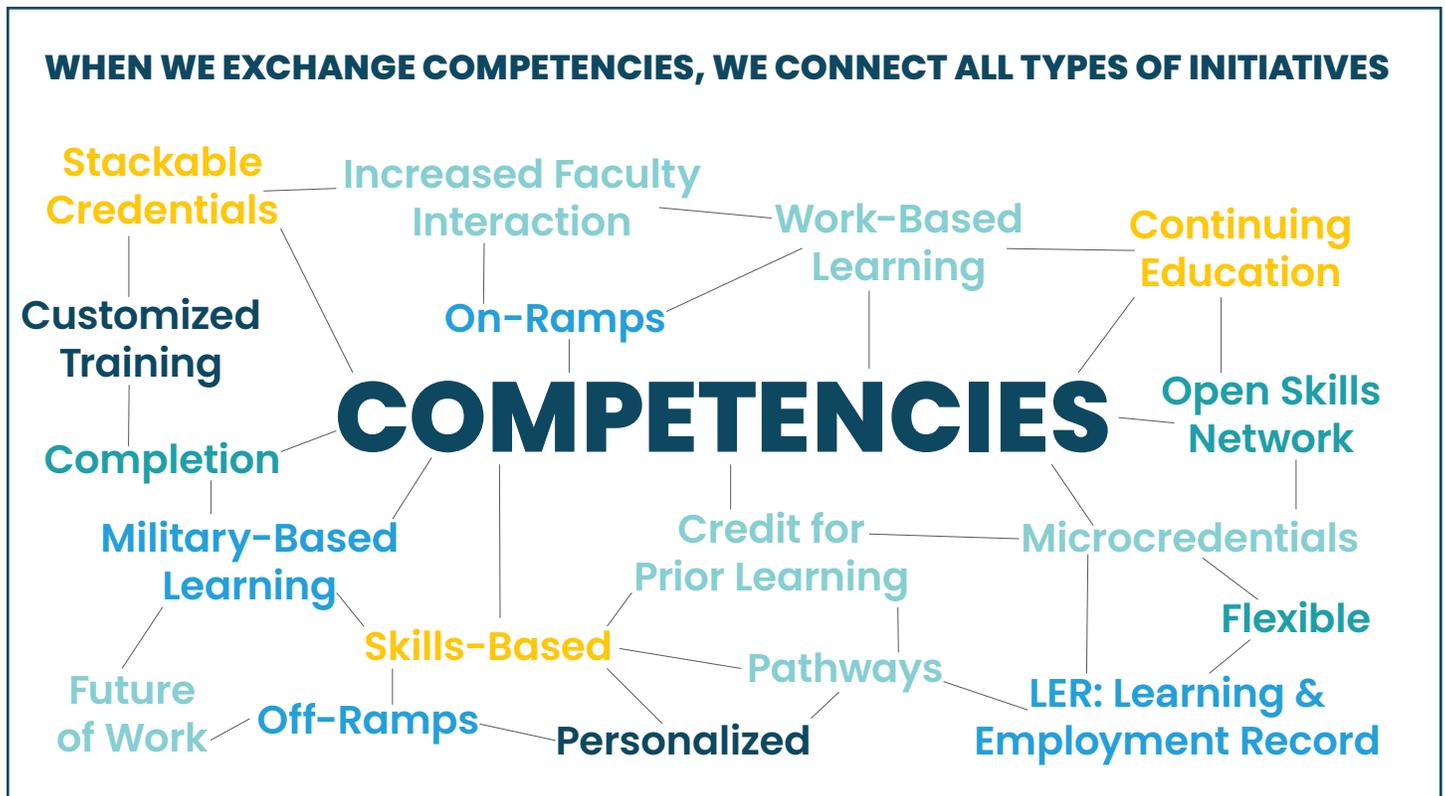
COMPETENCY DEFINED

- Knowledge: What do I need to know?

- Skills and abilities: What do I need to be able to do?

- Intellectual behavior: What dispositions must I display?

- Application and transfer: Where must I be able to apply the knowledge, skills, and abilities and at what level?

If, for example, a student were enrolled in a leadership program, they should possess the:

- **Knowledge of how to manage conflict in the workplace,** including Thomas-Kilmann's five major styles of conflict management, when each style should be used, and methods of evaluating the importance of the individual and issue involved in the conflict.

- **Skills and abilities to handle conflict** by mediating resolution to issues by using the proper style for the given context, encouraging debate, and offering opposing ideas in a constructive manner.

- **Intellectual behavior to engage with those involved in conflicts** by demonstrating composure, emotional regulation, and approachability.

universities take on a heightened role as the validators of learning, guiding how it is assessed, documented, and organized into degrees and other credentials. This sense-making role is critical: Competencies create the gears, and educators must help learners pull them together in ways that create a coherent whole.

By creating a common language for unpacking and repackaging learning, competencies can unlock the full potential of several growing approaches to education — prior learning assessment, microcredentials, and stackable pathways — bringing them together to create an agile work-and-learn model for today's learners.

WHEN WE EXCHANGE COMPETENCIES, WE CONNECT ALL TYPES OF INITIATIVES

Stackable Credentials

Increased Faculty Interaction

Work-Based Learning

Continuing Education

Customized Training

On-Ramps

COMPETENCIES

Open Skills Network

Completion

Military-Based Learning

Credit for Prior Learning

Microcredentials

Flexible

Future of Work

Skills-Based

Off-Ramps

Personalized

Pathways

LER: Learning & Employment Record

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT 2.0

To build a new model for working learners, we must create a credentialing system that recognizes college-level learning no matter where it happens. Eight in 10 institutions already recognize some form of prior learning — or concurrent learning — as they offer credit through standardized assessments like AP and CLEP, the evaluation of non-college programs, portfolios and other individual assessments, or faculty-developed exams. And a major **new study** by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) found that students who received credit for prior learning were more likely to graduate than those who did not and they progressed more quickly. The boost was particularly large for community college students, Latino students, and Pell Grant recipients.

Nevertheless, very few institutions use PLA strategically but instead offer it inconsistently and often rely on students to drive the process and faculty to determine whether learning meets their individual expectations. As a result, even at institutions considered leaders in the practice, only about 11% of students had earned credit from prior learning assessment. Expanding its use and targeting the worker learners who are most likely to have relevant experience could significantly improve graduation rates and time to degree.

Institutions have yet to do so, in part because the process of assessing and translating learning to courses is often clunky and complex. Learners often put in substantial time documenting their learning only to find out that it doesn't align neatly with any single course. Competency-based learning can solve for both challenges by providing a consistent unit for measuring learning and a way to count learning that doesn't conform with a single course. That latter point is particularly important, because competencies for the first time create a common language for talking about both bite-size learning (mastering a set of Excel analyses, for example) that doesn't add up to a full course and broader learning (think problem-solving or creativity) that transcend a single course.

Validated competencies create a currency for recognizing and translating prior learning that makes "trading" learning across institutions, employers, and a whole range of other contexts far more seamless than it otherwise is. This is especially important for recognizing learning that doesn't happen in formal education or training. At Walmart, for example, the company's Live Better U program enables employees to pursue a college degree from institutions like Purdue Global, Southern New Hampshire, and the University of Florida at very low cost. But more than that, the academic programs are designed to give employees credit for training and on-the-job learning that meets college standards. A focus on competencies makes that possible.

In other words, competencies are key to creating an agile work-and-learn model that can accomodate the way working learners actually accrue knowledge and skills: over extended periods of time and in a lot of different places.

MICROCREDENTIALS

Learners starting out or returning to education to reskill or upskill often don't need or want a full degree program — and microcredentials, from badges to micromasters, enable them to turn targeted, bite-size learning into meaningful credentials. Such programs confer and certify meaningful new knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable working learners to progress in their careers without requiring the time and cost of a degree program.

Microcredentials grew out of two streams in the past half dozen years. The first innovation was digital badging, particularly for platform-specific expertise that is essential but perishable. Think app development using IBM Watson AI, digital marketing on Facebook, and data analytics using Tableau. Those are, almost by definition, competency-based learning, with badges or certifications issued based on whether the learner meets a certain threshold on an assessment or demonstrates competency through a final project.

The second innovation was the evolution of MOOCs to group courses into specializations, largely with a focus on postbaccalaureate training in in-demand fields. They are designed to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that have immediate work relevance and can be completed more quickly than a degree or even certificate program. Louisiana State University's MicroCred programs, for example, take about 18 hours to complete, while its certificate programs are typically 30 hours or more. Like many institutions in this space, LSU offers term-based microcredentials, but its competency-based options truly unlock flexibility for learners, enabling them to start at any time and complete at their own pace.

Beyond flexibility, using competencies to underpin such credentials ensures their relevance — a completer hasn't just put in the time but has proved their capabilities in the focus area — and allows that learning to stack toward additional credentials and certifications with value in the workplace. That is about far more than transferability and credit, though that's certainly a consideration. It's about ensuring that knowledge and skills developed over years or even decades don't just stack to a degree but actually add up to a coherent set of capabilities that can be reliably applied in a given project, job, or field. That's critical to ensuring that microcredentials don't operate in isolation but rather serve as a component of the next-gen model we're building.

STACKABLE PATHWAYS

Stackable pathways are where learning comes together over time. They acknowledge that learners often can't or won't commit to a degree in one fell swoop. Instead, they are looking for programs and credentials that can meet their immediate training needs and move them back into the labor market quickly. But those short-term credentials — whether they are microcredential, professional certifications, or certificates — shouldn't be a dead end but rather need to create pathways to advanced education, alongside pathways to work.

Such stackable pathways have been much talked about in recent years, but few institutions have mastered the approach beyond a handful of disciplines like healthcare. Nursing, for example, has both a clear progression of skills and a well-delineated job hierarchy based almost entirely on level of training. Thus, in that field, a number of institutions have succeeded in creating truly stackable pathways that enable learners to go from certificate to associate and bachelor's degree. But even those are typically stackable within a single institution, not across institutions. Learning based on validated competencies would enable the much broader stackability needed to create a next-gen model for education. In fact, it would enable us to create an agile model that is less about stacking credentials and credit hours than it is about layering learning.

A certificate in medical device manufacturing from Salt Lake Community College may cover different material than the first year of a biomedical engineering degree at the University of Utah. But basing those certificates on competencies, rather than just on courses, provides a clearer picture of what the learner knows — which enables the receiving institution to focus on developing the additional competencies the learner needs, no matter where they may typically fall in the

degree progression. That would save students both time and frustration. And overall, it would be a much more efficient model than the current one, in which more than 40% of credits are lost in transfer.

When you move away from swapping inflexible "credits" to allowing learners to trade in competencies, you open up entirely new ways of bringing learning together over time into progressive certifications and credentials. In fact, the process becomes less about stacking pre-determined "blocks" of learning than about layering more nuanced competencies into a coherent whole.

Competencies developed in a wide range of settings can come together within the frame — the gearbox — of the agile work-learn model. In this way, discrete competencies gained over time come together to create a new, coherent whole.

METHOD FOR GAINING COMPETENCIES

Prior Learning Assesment | Military -Based Learning | Civic Engagement | Work-Based Learning | Microcredential | Stackable Certificate | Non-Accredited Training | Higher Ed Learning

Cultural Competence

Functional Expertise

Technical Expertise

Communication Competencies

Management Competencies

Interpersonal Competencies

Leadership Competencies

Personal Competencies

Intellectual Competencies

When It All Comes Together

No matter how promising next-gen approaches may be in isolation, they can't achieve their full potential if they don't coalesce into a new model. Competencies provide the underpinning — the currency — that provides that coherence. To further envision how it does so, it's useful to think through a single learner's journey.

When a working learner arrives at a postsecondary provider, either straight out of high school or after years in the workforce, they show up with all kinds of information, skills, and behaviors. Competencies give us a language for sorting through all that and providing meaning. It creates a set of gears for operationalizing learning. Some learning won't be college-level, and some will otherwise be irrelevant. The goal, after all, is for educational providers to help learners sort existing knowledge and add competencies with an end goal in mind — a collection of capabilities that not only add up to a credential but to a shape that has meaning in the learner's career and life.

How you fit the gears together matters. And colleges and other postsecondary providers play a critical role in providing the gearbox that gives those competencies shape. That gearbox is built by new approaches to academic structure, assessment, and support like PLA, microcredentials, and stackable credentials.

To achieve fit, quality competency-based learning stresses context and applicability. Competencies are discrete, but they are also deeply interrelated — and a learner needs to be able to draw on multiple competencies at once and in different contexts in order to complete projects and solve problems and thrive in a career. Performance demonstrations, which bring competencies together in context and ask students to apply them, are a critical component of competency-based learning. It's that work that lets the gears and the learning all work together.

With competency as the currency — the denomination of learning — we can at last make those connections. We can create a coherent new whole: an agile education model for the agile learner.

About Us

C-BEN

C-BEN is a network of institutions, employers, and experts committed to unlocking the potential of competency-based learning to ensure education and training is more flexible, responsive, and valuable. C-BEN is the go-to source on competency-based learning — home to practitioners and leaders who are reimagining education and helping others design and build high-quality offerings. Through our work, we aim to advance the understanding of competency-based learning, accelerate its development and scale, develop and maintain quality standards, and remove barriers to its continued growth.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION NETWORK

GUILD

Guild's mission is to unlock opportunity for America's workforce through education, with a double bottom-line business model that does well by doing good.

Guild's Learning Solutions team develops new strategies for leading educational institutions and other learning providers to serve working adult learners. Our team of higher education and learner experts helps institutions improve the learner experience, build next-generation learning models, develop new programs and business models, conduct strategy and opportunity analyses, and engage in better decision making through market insights.

GUILD

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Dr. Charla Long is the executive director for the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), an international consortium of higher education institutions and statewide systems seeking to design, develop, and scale new models of student learning. Additionally, she leads C-BEN's Consulting Services, which is dedicated to helping institutions with competency-based learning. In 2016, Long was recognized by The Chronicle of Higher Education as one of the Top 10 Most Influential People in Higher Education for her work in competency-based education. Long is co-author of "The Leader's Guide to Competency-Based Education" (2018). Previously, Long was the founding dean of the College of Professional Studies at Lipscomb University and the creator of its nationally acclaimed CBE model and badging ecosystem. Long has over 20 years of higher education experience at both public and private institutions in the United States.

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