

# Scaling Competencies as the Currency of Learning and Equitable Opportunity

An Action Agenda for Accelerating the  
Adoption of Competency-Based Learning

CompetencyXChange



# Foreword

C-BEN was founded in 2017 as the only nonprofit organization in the United States supporting the scale of competency-based education (CBE) and systemwide competency solutions. The growth of the network over the past several years has been unparalleled in reform movements in higher education, growing from 30 founding members to over 600 institutions building competency-based programs. Our mission has always been to accelerate growth through quality, with C-BEN's Quality Framework serving as the foundation for the growth of postsecondary competency-based learning.

C-BEN's mission has also included supporting the community of practitioners and organizations' capacity-building to build or support competency-based solutions. C-BEN members and staff are frequently asked to help provide leadership and serve as a hub where organizations can come together to align on common agendas, facilitate connections, and advocate for change that best serves students and fuels the competency-based movement.

As C-BEN was listening to the community over the last year, we heard over and over again that new entrants to competency-based learning, along with a renewed interest in CBE, could benefit from the development of a common vision and agenda for how to scale. The urgency from across the field is clear. Collectively, we must work together to capture this moment to be responsive to learners' immediate needs and build a better system for future learners.

Hearing the call to help guide the community through this next phase of growth, C-BEN launched CompetencyXChange,

an initiative to empower the community to create a common agenda for how to systemically make competency the currency of learning. CompetencyXChange is a community space where common agendas can be formed and the interests of the collective field can find voice.

We ask that as you read through the agenda, identify places you are already working and look for opportunities to contribute in new ways. Through these moments of growth and change, we challenge the field to remain united and seek actions that support what is right for the collective movement, not individual interests. And, last, we ask our supporters and funders to join us in the work ahead by committing to an aspect(s) of the agenda, knowing more clearly how the field sees the various parts connected into a larger vision.

In closing, C-BEN commits to continuing to hold space for these conversations, supporting communications efforts across the community, monitoring progress toward goals, and identifying work aligned to our own capacity-building mission.

In celebration of how far CBE has come, along with refreshed perspective and renewed energy, let us all get to work on the items put before us in the CompetencyXChange agenda.



Charla Long,  
President



Amber Garrison Duncan,  
Executive Vice President

# Acknowledgments

CompetencyXChange is representative of a community with a shared vision for how competency-based solutions can scale in the United States. The individuals on this list have shared wisdom and insights to develop and refine this action agenda with a commitment to equitable education and economic opportunity.

## VISIONARY GROUP

Derrick Anderson, **American Council on Education**  
Michael Collins, **Jobs for the Future**  
Jacob Fraire, **Diana Natalicio Institute for Hispanic Student Success, University of Texas at El Paso**  
Shannon Gilkey, **Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner**  
Paul LeBlanc, **Southern New Hampshire University**  
Nicholas Moore, **Office of the Governor, Alabama**  
Jane Oates, **Working Nation**  
Cheryl Oldham, **US Chamber of Commerce**  
Rhianna Rogers, **RAND Corporation**  
Deborah Santiago, **Excelencia in Education**  
Yolanda Watson-Spiva, **Complete College America**

## COMMUNITY WORKGROUP

John Gabrieli, **Trio New College Network (lead)**  
Sallie Glickman, **The Graduate! Network**  
Khary Golden, **Camden U**  
Chad Rountree, **Propel America**  
Chandra C. Scott, **Alabama Possible**  
Brian Vas, **Southern New Hampshire University**  
Jake Weissbourd, **Future of Higher Education**  
Michael Williams, Jr., **Nellie Mae Education Foundation**

## EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY WORKGROUP

Naomi Boyer, **Education Design Lab**  
Sarah DeMark, **WGU, Open Skills Network**  
Jeff Grann, **Credential Engine**  
Mark Leuba, **1EdTech**  
Michael Simmons, **AACRAO**

Jason A. Tyszko, **U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation**  
Kate Valenti, **Unicon (lead)**

## EMPLOYER WORKGROUP

Wendi Copeland, **Goodwill Industries International**  
Haley Glover, **Aspen Institute (lead)**  
Mackenzie Tallman, **Walmart**

## HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDER WORKGROUP

Marni Baker-Stein, **Western Governors University**  
Brooks Doherty, **Rasmussen University**  
Laurie Dodge, **University of Massachusetts Global**  
Kate Ferrel, **Nicolet College**  
Larry Good, **Corporation for a Skilled Workforce**  
Eric Heiser, **Central Ohio Technical College**  
Mark McConahay, **AACRAO**  
Lisa McIntyre-Hite, **Guild Education (lead)**  
Richard Senese, **Capella University**  
Julie Uranis, **UPCEA**

## POLICY WORKGROUP

Alison Bell, **Three Arrows Up Consulting**  
Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, **Higher Learning Advocates**  
Julie Peller, **Higher Learning Advocates**  
Jamie Fasteau, **Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice and Southern New Hampshire University (lead)**  
John Lane, **State Higher Education Executives Officers**  
Lisa Lutz, **Solutions for Information Design**  
Candace Williams, **Advance CTE**

Amanda Winters, **National Governors Association**  
Jillian Klein, **Strategic Education, Inc.**

## RESEARCH WORKGROUP

Tesha Graham, **University of Mary Hardin-Baylor**  
Willis Jones, **University of Miami**  
Amardeep Kahlon, **Unity College, Maine**  
Jessica Mason, **American Institutes for Research (co-lead)**  
Vicki Mason, **Institute for CBE at Texas A&M University-Commerce**  
Michelle Navarre Cleary, **College Unbound**  
Kelle Parsons, **American Institutes for Research (lead)**  
Ryan Specht-Boardman, **University of Wisconsin-FLEX**  
Christin VanKauwenberg, **Nicolet College**  
Yinqi Wang, **Institute for CBE at Texas A&M University-Commerce**

## QUALITY ASSURANCE WORKGROUP

Deb Bushway, **Northwestern Health Sciences University (lead)**  
Karen Elzey, **Workcred**  
Jennifer Graebe, **American Nurses Credentialing Center, ANA Enterprise**  
Sarah Hazelton, **Tennessee Board of Regents**  
Harmony Little, **Kentucky Community and Technical College System**  
Yvonne Villanueva-Russell, **Texas A&M University-Commerce**

Throughout the document, you will see student quotes captured during a panel facilitated at the Arizona State University and Global Silicon Valley (ASU+GSV) Summit in March 2022. We celebrate the learners' many successes and thank them for being willing to share their experiences so that more students can benefit.

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“*If I wasn't in a program like this, I would have had to drop out during the pandemic because my job was so demanding. With this program, I was still able to stay in the game.*” —CBE student





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# Introduction

This is a pivotal moment in postsecondary education. Colleges and universities have started to embrace competency-based education (CBE)—with about 600 two- and four-year institutions offering more than 1,000 CBE-based programs.

And there's an appetite to grow those numbers. Recent [research shows](#) that 82% of institutions expect CBE programs to grow over the next five years.

**For good reason:** CBE can enable a much broader swath of learners to tap into opportunity. That's especially true for women and people of color.

“For me to be the first generation in my home and soon be a graduate, I'm just walking with confidence.” —CBE student

This centers around putting what a person actually knows and can do front and center rather than where or how they learned it. That enables people to get credit for competencies—knowledge, skills, and behaviors—they've already learned on the job or on their own and to focus their education on the competencies they still need to develop to earn a credential, unlock a better career and advance economically.

“The thing I love the most about this is that it forces you to master your competency.” —CBE student

Done well, this can make credentials more flexible, relevant, and valuable while boosting completion rates.

But many barriers—in policy and regulation, in institutional structures and practices, and in how education is incentivized and funded—stand in the way of using competencies as the currency for the future of work. That's why the field needs the CompetencyXChange initiative.



At a high level, the initiative is about positioning competencies as the currency of equitable economic opportunity and increasing the adoption of high-quality competency-based learning solutions.

At a practical level, that means **developing an agenda for breaking down those barriers—not in a couple decades but in the next three to five years.** The ideas and concrete steps in this document, workshopped over the past six months, present that agenda.

**Why the urgency?** More than 39 million Americans have started a college education but have never finished a degree or other credential. Many of them have developed knowledge, skills and career-relevant behaviors on the job, but they don't have a good way of translating those into a credential that would help them advance in their career. And millions more Americans have earned bachelor's degrees but are underemployed—often because they lack critical knowledge

and skills needed for higher-paying jobs or their degree doesn't do a good job of showing that they actually have those competencies. Women, people of color, and first-generation college graduates are especially likely to fall prey to the latter.

*“I was having a lot of trouble with the standard college track ... Once I got into a CBE program, I was able to get my associate and bachelor's degrees.” —CBE student*

All this exists at a time when 11.2 million jobs, many of them good jobs, remain unfilled. And women, Black, and Latino workers are especially likely to be locked out of those jobs and the opportunities they open up.

**Learners need a better—and more equitable—path forward.**

As the federal government and states put billions into economic recovery, we can't afford to send that money through the same old education and training systems that have failed us before. CBE offers a much-needed alternative. This document is not just a call to action but a blueprint for the needed change over the next three to five years.

*“I'm thankful that I've been in this type of program versus the traditional setting.” —CBE student*

**This agenda focuses on seven core areas: policy, quality assurance, employers, providers, education technology, research, and community.** It was developed by a team of national leaders who share both deep expertise and an unwavering commitment to equity. The agenda has action items geared towards a wide range of stakeholders.

**It is a vision not just for where higher education can be in a decade or two but for what higher education can—and must—do now.**

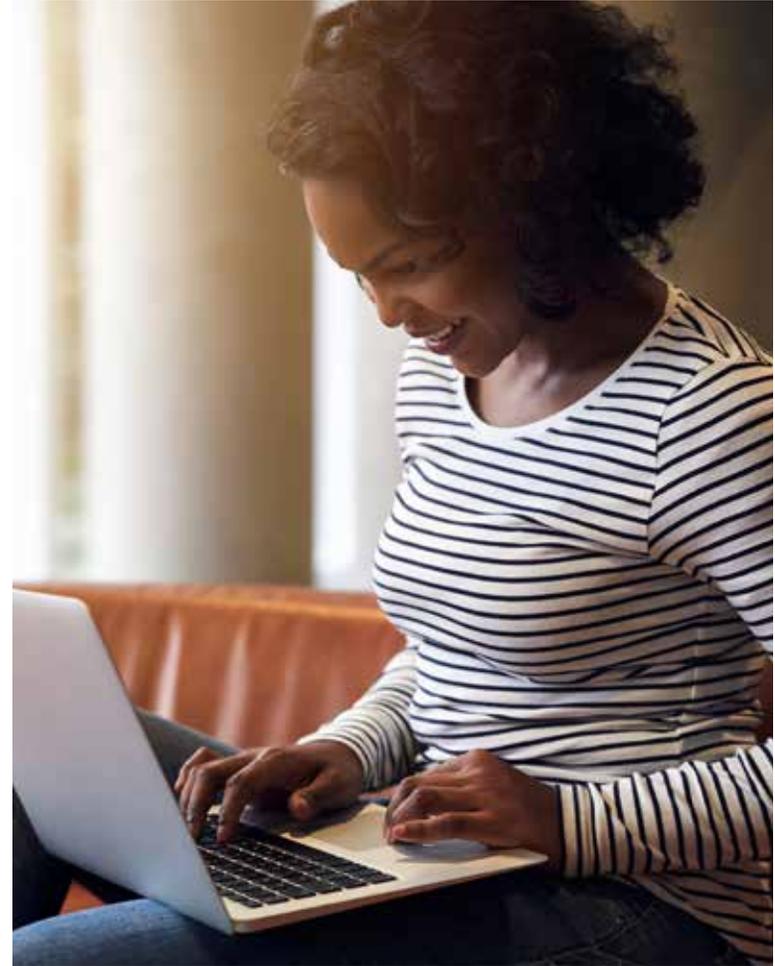


# Vision and Design Principles

CompetencyXChange benefits from a group of national higher education leaders committed to quality and equity. The visionary group members understand the need for a broader shift to lifelong competency-based solutions to meet the talent needs of our nation while providing equitable access to economic opportunity. They also understood that to sustain and grow the movement, there is a need for a collective agenda.

In the creation of high-quality CBE programs, a shared vision for learner success and program design is clearly articulated. Design principles are used in developing CBE programs to intentionally construct a learning journey that can lead to mastery of competencies and is created to ensure every learner reaches mastery. For CompetencyXChange, we used a similar approach by asking the visionary group to create design principles aligned with the vision. Each workgroup then used those principles as touchstones to ensure each area created an agenda that would be cohesive and deliver on the vision.

To guide the development of a CompetencyXChange agenda, the visionary group created a unified vision and design principles to guide the development of the agenda.



## VISION

The visionary group envisions a world in which it can meet the nation's talent needs by ensuring all learners have access to credentials that demonstrate mastery of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to thrive in their lives and chosen career.

## DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1. **Focus on competencies as the currency of learning and equitable opportunity**—a competency is the demonstrated capability to apply or use a set of related knowledge, skills, and intellectual behaviors to thrive in life and a defined field or career setting. Competencies tell us what a learner or worker knows and can do. In doing so, they enable education institutions and employers to move beyond time- and reputation-based measures of learning. CBE makes credentials more flexible, relevant, and valuable while boosting completion rates.
2. **Advance equity in education and employment**—the charge here is to harness the power of CBE to build toward longer-term prosperity and a more equitable world of education and work. By putting what a person actually knows and can do front and center—rather than where they learned it or how long it took—CBE can enable a broader swath of learners to tap into opportunity. That’s especially true for women and people of color. Individuals, employers, and policymakers all feel a sense of urgency around these issues, and we must develop a plan for an asset-based approach over the next three to five years.
3. **Embrace a pivotal moment for CBE**—a clear disconnect exists between K-12, higher education, and what it takes to succeed in today’s workforce. Significant numbers of recent high school and college graduates are underemployed, while employers struggle to find workers with the right skills. Learners are interested in education that is personalized and flexible so they can quickly move them up the economic ladder, and the federal government and the states are pouring billions of dollars into getting Americans the education and training they need to fill urgent workforce needs. Now is the time to ensure those

investments prioritize CBE, its commitment to high-quality credentials, and tackling inequities in learner outcomes and economic mobility.

4. **Prioritize actionable outcomes**—each workgroup’s agenda will have content that is relevant for its audience; that is the why. Additionally, the agenda must be actionable so the audience can take actions and make decisions based on it; that is the how. Given that the workgroups will include representatives from higher education, workforce, and community groups, the visionary group expects that each group will come to the table with its own set of needs, interests, challenges, and solutions. The workgroups’ agenda should seek to identify areas of commonality across different sectors where mutually reinforcing actions can be taken rather than attempting to address everything brought to the table.
5. **Facilitate work across sectors**—to be successful, this work must cut across K-12, higher education, communities, government, and industry. To be an effective currency and to identify actions that drive scalable competency-based-solutions, competencies must be recognized across the entire education-work continuum.

“*My management skills have increased tremendously. I went from a community field coordinator and was immediately promoted to the dean of students. This was a direct connection from what I was learning and applying.*” —CBE student

# Action Agenda

CBE is possible due to the efforts of many to shift the systems of learning from time-based measures to the flexibility provided by competency-based measures. That involves seven key areas where organizations are working to enable competency-based solutions and create a more equitable system of learning.

Workgroups were composed of experts and leaders from each of the seven areas to review the vision and design principles and, accordingly, identify an action agenda for how actors in that area can systematically ensure that CBE options are more accessible to learners. The seven key areas and overall outcomes are summarized in the following visual.



## POLICY

Enabling competencies as a currency nationwide requires shaping the state and federal policies and regulations that govern how education and workforce training operates. To help scale CBE, the policy workgroup's recommendations and action plans support innovative policies across K-12, higher education, workforce training and licensure, and Veterans Affairs. All recommendations are grounded in bipartisanship as competency-based solutions seek to improve access, equity, and economic opportunity for all Americans.

“*The most important thing to understand about this type of program is that failure doesn't exist.*” —CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

### STATE POLICY

1. **Develop a legislative joint resolution** underscoring the importance of CBE, credit for prior learning, and other flexible learning approaches.
2. **Help transition state student financial aid and performance-based funding models** to accommodate competencies instead of enrollments and traditional measures of progress like credit accumulation and grades.
3. **Require state quality nondegree credential criteria** for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding and use of open taxonomy of competencies.
4. **Help transition state licensure** from proxies based on time and incomplete assessment methods to competencies and performance-based assessments.
5. **Create a state standard** for reporting CBE as part of the statewide course numbering system.
6. **Work with system leaders** to consider/address needed infrastructure, technologies, professional development, funding, and policies to support widespread adoption of CBE.
7. **Require higher education institutions** to recognize and accept a diploma and learning gained in a competency-based program.
8. **Support professional development** for faculty, including adjuncts, and staff on competency-driven education models, including developing statewide professional learning communities for such faculty and staff.

## FEDERAL POLICY

- 1. Partner with the Department of Education** to develop and research a new means of Title IV distribution decoupled from time-based distribution; develop an understanding of how to implement such changes; and develop best practice, quality, and accountability metrics, such as developing:
  - **New means of measuring learning progress and distributing aid for direct costs and indirect costs.**
  - **New, related definitions of academic and award year, and full-time and part-time students.**
  - **New reporting for transparency and accountability.**
  - **Related definitions of full-time and part-time students.**
  - **New cost of attendance calculations.**
- 2. Update data for accountability and transparency** to better reflect progress and pace of CBE; support student agency and learning portability; measure quality and cost; and require disaggregation of such data.
- 3. Provide support and share best practices on student supports** for understanding progress and pace through CBE; advising, academic coaching, and career supports; and funding for wraparound services and basic needs.
- 4. Update accreditation requirements to be data driven,** including on student outcomes and aligned program improvement.
- 5. Require institutional and programmatic accreditors** to understand CBE models, measure learning, differentiate progress and pace, and support more inclusive transfer of credit policies.
- 6. Support development of credit for prior learning assessments** and their use and incentives for providing credit for prior learning, including transfer of credit. With the Department of Education and other stakeholders, work to reduce or eliminate students' financial barriers to utilizing credit for prior learning.
- 7. Work with the Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and state approving agencies** to review military funding program approval processes and accommodate a competency-driven learning ecosystem with revised regulations and policies.
- 8. Work with the Department of Labor** to align workforce policies, programs, and regulations to support and recognize competency-driven learning.

“*The flexibility and time for me was really essential ... I just hop on the computer after work.*” —CBE student

# QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality assurance is foundational in the shift to viewing and treating competencies as currency in educational environments. Additionally, a shift to outcomes-based quality assurance has proved to be an effective means to center competency development connected to post-completion outcomes. As such, effective quality assurance practices should follow a rigorous set of standards for establishing, measuring, and maintaining a CBE program. Those standards exist within C-BEN's Quality Framework for CBE Programs—a framework defining the eight elements of quality and accompanying standards. Leaning on our Quality Framework, this action agenda drives educational institutions and accreditors' awareness and adoption of the quality framework for all CBE programs.

“*I love how the program is set up. There are instructions, criteria for the project, and checklists. I just go down that outline. They set it up for you.*” —CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

1. **Determine key outcomes and satisfactory progress metrics** to be measured in any credential (e.g., employability, wage increases post-completion, number of attempts to achieve mastery, time to completion, quality of faculty-student interaction).
2. **Assist institutions with tracking outcomes** from the individual assessment level through to programmatic level. Work with technology providers to make this type of data collection part of standard services offered.
3. **Incentivize CBE programs to post key outcomes data**, including targeted and actual performance. Encourage institutions to publicly report on key outcomes and benchmark against peer institutions.
4. **Encourage the pursuit of national and specialized accreditors' adoption** of outcome-based quality assurance processes using a competency-driven model.
5. **Gain veterans affairs state approving agencies' adoption** and integration of the pillars.
6. **Work with certification bodies** to articulate how their quality assurance processes are aligned to the pillars.
7. **Achieve buy-in from certification bodies** to recognize the utility of an open taxonomy of competencies and performance-based assessments.
8. **Create a public service campaign** to help consumers purchase education based on outcomes that institutions achieve.

## EMPLOYERS

Employers play a pivotal role in the expansion of competency-based learning and scaled recognition of noninstitutional learning toward credentials. As both the primary beneficiaries and customers of competencies and as education providers themselves, employers are in a position to both demand quality and action on the part of higher education and to contribute meaningfully to solutions. CBE provides more flexible, accessible, and cost-effective ways for current employees to acquire new skills, and it expands the workforce by helping learners acquire in-demand credentials. The employer workgroup's work highlights steps employers can take to support scaled CBE models in education, credentialing, and hiring to benefit from larger and more diversified talent pools.

The workgroup outlines key ways employers can positively contribute to the expansion of CBE and recognition of learning.

“*This approach [of applied learning] helps me navigate issues in my job related to management, team building, cultural diversity, etc.*” —CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

1. **Support education benefits designed for frontline workers** that result in high-quality credentials and, where appropriate, partner with higher education to recognize work-based learning for credit through education programs.
2. **Clearly articulate the competencies and methods** by which employees gain competencies through work-based learning, while demanding more streamlined and cost-effective tools for translating work-based learning toward credentials from education intermediaries and institutions.
3. **Write job descriptions based on competencies and skills.** Use competency frameworks to support promotions and advancement.
4. **Advance employer awareness and understanding** of the value of CBE by supporting and participating in research to better define the impact of CBE on key metrics, including employee retention and financial return on investment.
5. **Work internally** to ensure corporate policies and practices encourage the needed activities, observations and documentation of employee competencies gained through work-based learning are incentivized and valued.
6. **Work externally with policy and advocacy organizations to create incentives** to enable scaled recognition of work-based learning toward credentials, improved articulation of work-based learning, and to create structures and policies to streamline efforts.

## PROVIDERS

There are various ways that the U.S. supports education—through K-12, higher education, military, and workforce development agencies. All play a key role in learning and ultimately career outcomes. CBE helps those organizations evolve their programs to better serve learners by focusing on competencies—what people know and can do—and measuring learning through mastery not coursework. The providers' workgroup envisions at least one-third of all U.S. institutions offering outcomes-based, competency-driven models of learning. Toward that goal, the group outlines how an increasing number of providers can adopt CBE models to speed time to a credential, reduce costs, and boost completion rates among all learners.

“*I am able to take the content I'm learning and apply it immediately. So, I really get a value out of it that you don't normally get.*”  
—CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

1. **Partner more closely with employers and community partners** to achieve equity by designing and delivering programs that lead to economic opportunities and a more fulfilled life.
2. **Work collaboratively with employers** to define and use competencies in design of education, assessment, hiring, and promotion.
3. **Mobilize with policy and quality assurance organizations** to highlight and promote high-quality, outcomes-driven CBE.
4. **Demonstrate the efficacy of high-quality competency-driven models** to meet the needs of every learner, including first-time learners, first-generation learners, and learners from traditionally underserved populations, especially Black, Latino, and Native American learners.
5. **Facilitate provider alignment to a shared, open taxonomy** of competencies to assist in learning mobility between settings such as K-12, higher education, workforce, and military.
6. **Spur broad adoption of the learning and employment record and digital wallets** to enable individuals to manage and curate their competencies over time.
7. **Elevate learners' and workers' demand** for outcomes-based competency-driven models of learning.
8. **Support faculty and instructional designer professional development** in CBE, including effective practices in learning and assessment.
9. **Create a marketing and communications strategy** to explain the role and value of CBE and gain buy-in.

# EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

Education technology is essential for teaching, learning, and assessment within CBE. Scaling CBE models within different learning environments and diverse learner populations requires ed tech firms to ensure their platforms accommodate learners' collaboration, communication, and assessment needs. The ed tech workgroup addresses how technologies support interoperability and open standards to create a CBE-friendly ecosystem. It also provides guidance on how ed tech can boost companies', learners', and educational institutions' adoption of learning and employment records (LERs).

“*I appreciate the fact that the coaches would not let me stop and that's how I was able to finish my associate degree in seven months; they were on me like a hawk.*” —CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

1. **Create a technology architecture framework and road map**, along with technical assistance, for scaling a competency-driven learning ecosystem of interoperable ed tech products, based on C-BEN's Quality Framework and the use of open standards.
2. **Promote the inclusion of competency-based features** in current ed tech product road maps.
3. **Create incentives for interoperability innovation** by showcasing ed techs who support quality CBE implementation, including publishing a catalog of competency-friendly ed tech products by product type.
4. **Encourage ed tech products to use research typology** of CBE models to enable the diversity of CBE programs.
5. **Design and publish representative models** for user-centered workflows end-to-end to demonstrate both tech interoperability and human process considerations.
6. **Facilitate coordination between ed tech ventures (funding sources) and the CBE field** to match supply and demand; prioritize solutions that consider the entire education-work continuum.
7. **Define a theory of action** across different stakeholders to demonstrate the actors and outcomes for the guidance above.

## RESEARCH

Research is critical to understanding the strengths of existing CBE models and the areas for further improvement and growth. It helps the field better understand what constitutes effective practice and demonstrate how competencies can be applied and scaled in different educational environments and for diverse learner populations. The research agenda outlined here will provide a grounding for advocacy—demonstrating to policymakers, educational institutions, employers, and workforce development agencies that competency-based learning done well can enhance learner outcomes and economic mobility.

The research community can play a key role by developing and interrogating a set of common research actions. The creation of a clear action research agenda can support the field by expanding the literature about the state of the field, design and models of CBE, and effectiveness and equity. A clear research agenda also allows for a community of scholars and researchers to evolve and grow alongside practitioners, creating knowledge communities where scholarly activities can be fostered and rewarded.

The workgroup put forward the following agenda for consideration in the research community.

“It’s rewarding that I’m getting feedback on my writing and research skills. There’s a rubric that lets me know what I need to improve on ... My research skills have definitely gotten better.”

—CBE student

## ACTION AGENDA

- 1. Monitor and describe the state of the field** and adoption of competency-based learning and solutions. Answer questions about where adoption is taking hold, how adoption is changing over time, and what the forecasted impact or implications of growth are. Examine how to learn from other innovative movements.
- 2. Understand how competency-based learning models vary** in design and dimensions. Researchers can contribute by exploring what choices institutions make around the design and model of CBE programs, then enabling exploration of aspects like equitable pedagogy and supports and how that influences learning outcomes, student agency, and other key outcomes.
- 3. Examine the effectiveness of CBE programs;** the extent to which student outcomes are equitable by race and ethnicity, gender, and income; and the metrics and methods that are most appropriate to measure and describe success.
- 4. Expand the research community** for competency-based solutions by rewarding scholarly activities. We believe it is necessary to create more opportunities to build and maintain accessible, legitimate publishing outlets to share research. Embed community voice in research agenda formation, community action research, and sharing results. Advocate for supporting new researchers and institutions with methodologies for data collection, analysis, and sharing results in major research forums such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA), National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE).

# COMMUNITY

Community-based organizations (CBOs) bring knowledge of specific learner populations and their communities that can help shape CBE programs and increase awareness and learner participation. As true partners in economic development with education providers, workforce development agencies, and employers, CBOs ensure that people in communities can lead economic development movements, ensuring that efforts do not replicate barriers that leave out specific groups and leveraging trust, increasing access, and deploying resources to connect learners—especially those from under-resourced communities—to CBE. The community workgroup details how educational institutions and others can harness the power of CBOs to engage learners with CBE.

“Everything is geared towards support. You don't have a chance to fall off because they are right there to catch you.”  
—CBE student

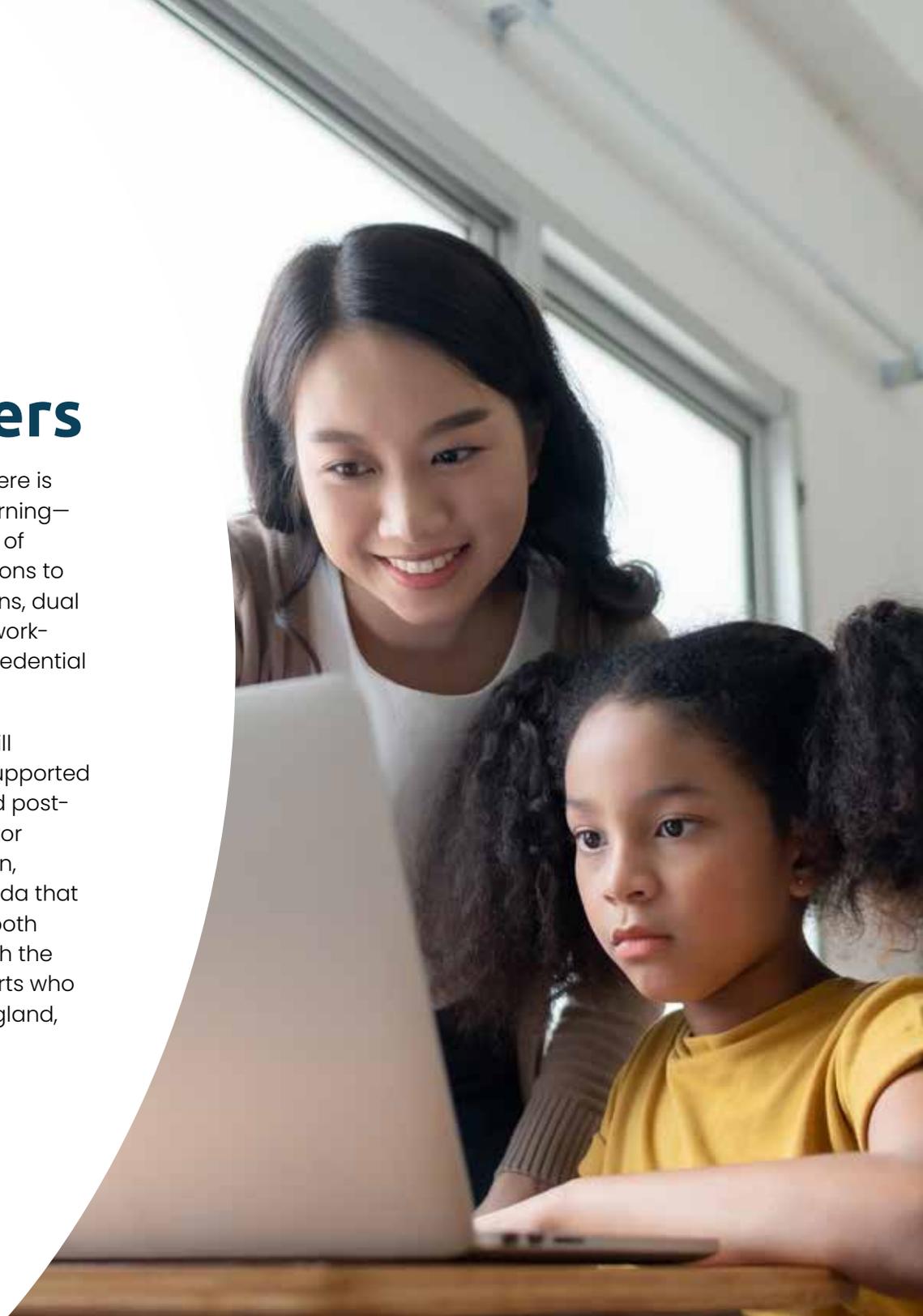
## ACTION AGENDA

1. **Identify and empower community leaders** who can be the access point, be clear on the activities, and bridge the gap between now and a future where competencies are currency for learning. Go together with community partners to advocate for good jobs and eliminating wage gaps and educational and occupational segregation.
2. **Integrated data systems drive impact.** Equip local leaders with actionable data. Competency as currency for learning works; prove that at the local level through data systems that enable alignment.
3. Experimentation, expertise, and flexibility—the development of competency-based programs at the local level is constantly growing and changing, which means everyone is an architect! **Learning and lessons should flow reciprocally** in the building phase and incentivize community partners to build evidence-based scaffolding for students.
4. **Define business models** that can support partnerships between education providers and CBOs, including business cases, shared roles, and sustainability.
5. **Center the sharing of success stories and outcomes** from competency-based programming around creating substantive policy change. Include working collaboratively to provide revolutionary leadership and revolutionary support across the partnership.
6. **Encourage and incentivize community partners' experimentation** to develop new models to support access to and through education as well as employment.
7. **Explore whether CBE community partners need an organizing entity or umbrella structure** to provide support, learning, sharing, professional development, advocacy, and awareness.

# Next Step: Engage K-12 and International Partners

While the action agenda addresses higher education, there is even greater opportunity for learners if all systems of learning—in the U.S. and abroad—make competency the currency of learning. Just within reach are competency-based solutions to connect learning through performance-based admissions, dual credit based on competencies, credit for prior learning, work-based learning, and competency-based international credential evaluation.

The CompetencyXChange conversation and planning will continue by working with organizations who have long supported competency-based learning to bring K-12 education and post-high school education colleagues to create a cross-sector agenda in each of the seven areas. We are eager to learn, partner, and co-create with our K-12 colleagues an agenda that will reflect the needs, opportunities, and insights across both sectors. We also look forward to connecting agendas with the growing number of international organizations and experts who join C-BEN from around the world, including Australia, England, Germany, India, Mexico, South Africa, and Singapore.





# Call to Action

The CompetencyXChange agenda is just the beginning. Now it is your turn to engage. We ask every organization and institution to consider signing on to CompetencyXChange by adding your commitment along with the many organizations listed here to show that you recognize the need for change and to embrace this moment.

1. Find the section of the agenda most relevant to your organization, and commit to items your organization can address.
2. [Sign this commitment](#) to let C-BEN know which action items you commit to work on and to receive CompetencyXChange news and updates.
3. Consider new projects within or across areas you may pursue, and keep us posted so we can support and share activity across the network.
4. Sign up for CompetencyXChange [updates and news](#).
5. Refer a colleague, and help share the agenda with partners in your own network.

## Additional Notes:

# CompetencyXChange

[www.cbenetwork.org](http://www.cbenetwork.org)

1417 Hanson Drive Franklin, TN 37067  
[info@c-ben.org](mailto:info@c-ben.org)