

## Borrowing From Bologna

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By [Doug Lederman](#)

That the Lumina Foundation for Education is enamored of the European process aimed at harmonizing what a college degree means across the continent is plain. The foundation has sponsored major studies of the process, known as "Bologna" for the Italian city where it was spawned, and initiated its own test run of what a system would look like across several American states.

But now Lumina is going quite a bit further, laying out in a paper it is circulating a [draft of a "degree qualifications profile"](#) that defines what graduates should be able to know and do when they receive associate, bachelor's and master's degrees, no matter where they earn them. While the paper notes that the profile "is in no way an attempt to 'standardize' degrees or to define what should be taught or how to teach it," any attempt to set a national standard for what students must know is likely to be viewed as a head start in that direction by faculty groups and others who are protective of institutional differences.

For the uninitiated, the Bologna process is the cross-European effort to make degrees awarded by the continent's colleges [more compatible and comparable](#), through a multi-year process that has both educational (ease of movement for students across countries) and quality assurance implications.

While the European effort is still a work in progress, it has been heralded in many quarters and watched closely elsewhere in the world, notably in the United States, where many of the same issues that Europe sought to attack -- great variation in types and quality of institutions, concerns about the lack of transfer of credit across institutions, and questions about the higher education system's performance and productivity -- are also in play.

Lumina, which has become an omnipresent force in American higher education (and higher education reform) since its founding in 2000, has made exploration of [Bologna's potential application in the United States a priority](#), funding in three states an experiment called "tuning" aimed at determining exactly what a degree in a given academic field stands for in terms of students' learning and competencies. (Lumina has also sponsored Bologna-related studies by several

leading researchers, including [Clifford Adelman](#).)

Lumina officials [signaled at this summer's meeting](#) of NAFSA: Association of International Educators that it would both expand the tuning experiment to more states and begin work on another part of the broader objective of setting up a qualifications framework: defining what a degree means, across disciplines, beyond the accumulation of credit hours.

"What do we mean as a country by what a degree represents and what the learning is that's behind a degree?" Holiday Hart McKiernan, senior vice president and general counsel at Lumina, asked at the NAFSA meeting.

The draft paper that Lumina officials are now circulating among a group of participants in a July 2009 meeting the foundation sponsored appears to be a first stab -- by a group of researchers and other experts on Bologna and higher education assessment generally, including Adelman, [Paul Gaston](#), Carol Schneider of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and Peter Ewell -- to create a "degree qualifications profile," which it defines as "a framework of specific student learning outcomes that define the associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees by showing at each level what students should know and be able to do with their knowledge."

The degree profile aims to define the competencies that students with the various degrees should have developed in four areas of learning: applied learning, knowledge, skills, and civic learning, with the idea that "students can attain these outcomes at any point in the course of their academic journeys." The competencies a student needs to have mastered for a master's degree build on, but are more sophisticated than, those for a bachelor's degree, and so on.

While the Lumina document is framed positively, as a way to help higher education leaders prove that they are serious about making sure that their students are learning, it also makes clear -- in the sort of language that tends to ruffle the feathers of those who view external demands for accountability skeptically -- that its authors and sponsors see a potential qualifications framework as an accountability tool.

"Institutions are similarly sidestepping public calls to clarify what their degrees represent in terms of student accomplishment by employing sample-based testing and assessment programs that say little about learning and even less

about what all students should attain," the document states. "In the absence of clear statements of intended learning outcomes, confusion and misunderstanding are to be expected, and they currently prevail."

Statements of that sort may stoke concerns among faculty and other groups that a process that starts with defining what degree earners need to know and be able to do will inevitably lead to an attempt to set national higher education standards, which many would oppose.

And while the document, and Lumina officials, say the framework will be meaningful only if it is developed and embraced by a wide array of people, and invite "all interested participants and observers of higher education in the United States to engage in a discussion of this profile," they appear to have shared it so far with a relatively narrow band of like-minded colleagues.

McKiernan, of Lumina, said via e-mail that Lumina wants "all who are interested in this concept to be part of the discussion -- the document is a work in progress for discussion and comment."

She said that after the Nov. 20 deadline for comments, the foundation would "consider the input and comments and create a 'proposed draft degree profile' that would then be piloted. It is our hope to have several different sorts of pilot projects through which the profile is implemented to learn how a profile might best add value in the context of US higher education."

She added: "The goal of this work is to develop a consistent understanding of what level of knowledge, skills and application a degree represents at each level of learning. The first part of the process is to begin a conversation and obtain widespread input. The second step is to pilot a degree profile to learn how it adds value to institutions and students.

"What happens next will depend on what we learn."