

# Big Disruption, Big Questions

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By **Paul Fain**

These are heady times for competency-based education, which raises fundamental questions about the structure and purpose of higher education.

Several colleges are taking the competency-based approach to its potential end game, by offering “direct assessment” academic programs that are untethered from both course material and the credit hour. At the same time, a small but growing group of accreditors, foundations and higher education associations have begun discussing what academic rigor might look like in this emerging model.

The Lumina Foundation, for example, is playing a lead role in arranging a meeting next week on competency-based education that will include representatives from 25 colleges that have dabbled in it, several sources said. Also attending will be officials from the U.S. Department of Education, state higher education agencies, and other foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

They will have plenty to talk about, as now five institutions are moving forward with online experiments in direct assessment.

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Officials from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the largest regional accreditor, said this week that they are collecting submissions from four institutions to participate in a direct assessment pilot group. The participants are Capella University, Northern Arizona University, the University of Wisconsin Colleges, a system of two-year campuses,

and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, said Jeffrey H. Rosen, the commission's vice president for accreditation relations.

Meanwhile, two such programs are already up and running. Capella launched an experimental pilot in January, which enrolls about 120 students in four undergraduate business courses and four master's in business administration courses. And Southern New Hampshire University last fall **introduced** a competency-based spin-off, dubbed **College for America**. (Read more about both programs in an upcoming *Inside Higher Ed* article.)

College for America offers a low-cost online associate degree in general studies, with annual tuition of \$2,500. It already enrolls students, who sign up via their employers. Partner organizations include ConAgra, the city of Memphis and FedEx.

The college last year received approval from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, a regional accreditor. It is expected to receive final approval from the Education Department as soon as this week, according to university officials.

### **Experimental Group**

Each of the five new competency-based credential paths will be different. But they will be the first wave to try direct assessment. Loosely defined, that means students will be able to complete assignments and tests at their own pace -- typically online -- and progress through academic programs whenever they are ready. The approach differs from other competency-based programs that **link student progress** back to the **credit hour standard**, which assumes one hour of instruction and three hours of coursework per week.

In direct assessment there is no required course material or structured direction through learning content by instructors. The programs establish competencies based on learning objectives, which should be similar to the concepts taught in a conventional course. And while they won't teach in the strict sense, faculty members will oversee the assessment process.

Officials from Capella describe a relatively intensive amount of back and forth between faculty members and students over assessments in their pilot program.

"It's a different model, but it's robust learning," said Cheryl Bann, a university

professor and program chair for Capella's M.B.A. program. "We're applying the horsepower of faculty in a different way."

Capella, a for-profit institution that offers fully online bachelor's and graduate degree programs, also has a heavy grounding in competencies. It began using competency-based assessments a decade ago, and now uses them in all courses and across curriculums.

The university and the other three institutions that are participating in the Higher Learning Commission's experimental group will also include some variety of tutors, mentors and advisers to help students stay on track and successfully tackle required competencies. Each student enrolled in Northern Arizona's direct assessment program, for example, will have a "faculty mentor to tutor them to ensure they master the material," Fred Hurst, the university's vice president of extended campuses, wrote in a recent [essay](#).

Even so, direct assessment looks nothing like a typical college class. As a result, it is both controversial and threatening to many in the academy. To some critics, testing competencies without teaching is not higher education.

A key concern is that there is little, if any, consensus in the academy about what competencies should be, said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

"We don't have agreement on what we mean by the term competency," said Schneider, who has [written](#) about the topic. And that confusion includes whether competencies are established at the course level or across a curriculum.

"You have to think about this in terms of how the competencies relate to the overall program," she said.

Schneider said a needed next step as higher education moves forward on competency-based education (and other emerging digital models) is a "shared framework" for competencies. Ideally this would establish the required knowledge, skill and demonstrated achievement that should go into college degrees, credentials and academic programs. And she said all of this should connect to the overall point of getting a higher education.

"We have a whole lot of conceptual work to do," she said.

**'Historic Shift'**

Competency-based education is hardly new. Western Governors University has been expanding its pioneering online degree offerings rapidly over the last decade. And other competency experiments go back much further, like programs created by Alverno College in the 1970s.

Schneider, who decades ago worked on [prior learning assessment](#), a related practice aimed at adult learners, said an oft-heard mantra then was, “We want to know what a student knows and can do with her knowledge.” That statement still applies.

But thanks to the college completion push and technological advances in digital learning, competency-based education is more en vogue than ever before, many observers say. Some predict that while massive open online courses get the bulk of mainstream attention, this rethinking of how higher education is conferred could be the true “disruption” to the industry.

The Education Department last month gave direct assessment a [boost](#) with a supportive open letter. And the White House and powerful lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have touted the emerging practice’s potential to help more students earn credentials, both quickly and affordably.

“We are in the midst of a long-term, historic shift,” said Schneider.

If so, regional accreditors will have a ringside seat.

The Higher Learning Commission, which oversees 1,000 colleges in 19 states, will conduct internal reviews of its new group of four competency-based projects. Then the accreditor will oversee peer reviews, Rosen said, where evaluators will apply the commission’s central “assumed practices” [guidelines](#).

“There will be panelists who will be assigned to review programs,” he said, adding that the process will be similar to the approval procedure for other distance learning degree programs.

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges, another regional accreditor, has produced a draft document offering guidance on competency-based education, sources said. But more clarity is needed.

“Both accreditors and institutions aren’t clear about what they can do and what the rules are,” said Michael Offerman, a former Capella official and expert on

competency-based education who is consulting for Lumina.

Even if the four institutions get a green light from the commission, their direct assessment programs would still need to earn the Education Department's approval to be able to participate in federal financial aid programs. College for America, however, appears poised to clear that hurdle. That means the college's students could begin receiving federal aid like Pell Grants sometime soon.

### **Shifting the Conversation**

Lumina has spearheaded influential efforts to better chart what a college credential should mean, most notably through its Degree Qualifications Profile.

That **project** has sought to encourage faculty members and college leaders to **define what students should know** at various degree levels. More than 200 institutions have used the profile, often called the DQP, in various ways.

But several observers said the DQP was not designed for approaches like direct assessment, which hangs all of a credential's value on assessed learning. So Lumina is working with the Gates Foundation and other groups to encourage experts to talk about how to begin defining "best practices" with direct assessment.

The meeting Lumina is helping to arrange next week grew out of a gathering the Education Department hosted last fall. That **summit** was on innovation in higher education, and competency-based education was a hot topic there. Lumina and other foundations offered to convene subsequent meetings to keep the conversation going.

While many questions remain about how competency-based programs might develop, the discussion about grounding academics in competencies is an "incredible opportunity for traditional higher education," said Holly McKiernan, Lumina's chief of staff and general counsel. That's because the industry as a whole can benefit from thoughtful discussions about what should undergird a credential.

McKiernan said she hopes the meeting next week will help to shift the conversation away from competency-based education being described as an "alternative" to it being an approach that "is at the very core of the enterprise."