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## ABSTRACT

These proceedings include an overview of the meeting, at which 75 leaders from secondary and postsecondary education, business, and state agencies met to discuss competency-based education systems and updates on the status of competency-based admissions in a number of states. The proceedings also provide a list of suggested regional activities to promote competency-based systems in northeast region of the U.S. as well as information on other resources that are available. Symposium participants identified a number of general models, practices, and lessons learned to be shared and cultivated throughout the region. These steps and considerations of competency-based system design were highlighted: (1) create a clear, consistent understanding of competency-based admissions; (2) identify advocates within each stakeholder group; (3) align standards and proficiencies; (4) provide training and support for those responsible for implementation; (5) use a systems approach; and (6) create a data collection and evaluation system. A number of potential challenges must be addressed by any state that attempts to build a competency-based system, including defining and assessing the competencies, securing resources, and ensuring that transcripts and credentials can be recognized and accepted throughout a region. Suggested regional activities fall into the categories of information sharing, model creation and dissemination, piloting, and aligning regional systems. (SLD)

# Moving toward Competency-Based Admissions: A Northeast Regional Symposium (New Hampshire, October 22, 1998)

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## Moving Toward Competency-Based Admissions A Northeast Regional Symposium

Sponsored by: The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, Jobs for the Future, The Higher Education Information Center, The National Commission for Cooperative Education, The National School-to-Work Office, The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, The New England Board of Higher Education, The New Hampshire School-to-Work Office, The United States Department of Education, and The United States Department of Labor

### Symposium Proceedings

These Symposium Proceedings include an overview of the meeting; updates on the status of competency-based admissions in a number of states; key learnings and challenges identified during the day; a list of suggested regional activities to promote competency-based systems in the Northeast; and information on other resources that are available.

#### Introduction

On October 22, 1998, seventy-five leaders from secondary and postsecondary education, business, and state agencies gathered in New Hampshire for a symposium on competency-based educational systems, focusing primarily on admissions to postsecondary institutions. Participants came from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Puerto Rico.

Competency-based systems measure and record student achievement against an agreed upon set of standards, rather than norm-referenced tests or traditional grades. Students can demonstrate what they know and are able to do in a variety of ways (e.g., in traditional classroom settings, independent projects, or work-based learning experiences); however, the standards remain constant. Many secondary and postsecondary schools today are moving toward the development of competency-based systems of instruction, assessment, and admissions. Evidence of competencies mastered are documented in secondary programs and used in postsecondary admissions decisions, as well as in employers' hiring processes.

While much development work is being done on the local and state levels, competency-based systems have regional implications and importance. Many students travel across state lines for postsecondary education and employment. For a statewide competency-based system to be sustained over time, it must be understood and accepted throughout a region. By working together, states can ensure that student records and credentials remain portable.

#### Goals of the Symposium

The symposium was designed to:

- ✱ Examine promising practices in documenting student competencies, using competency-based systems for postsecondary admissions processes, and involving the business community in use of competency-based credentials for employment purposes;
- ✱ Create opportunities for states within the region to share information on activities currently underway related to competency-based credentials, transcripts, admissions, and hiring; and
- ✱ Begin regional coordination of state initiatives related to these topics.

Visit the Moving Toward Competency-Based Admissions Symposium Web Site  
[www.jff.org/programs/cluster2/index.html](http://www.jff.org/programs/cluster2/index.html) and click on "Competency-Based Admissions to Postsecondary Institutions"

## Status of Efforts in Competency-Based Admissions

Three leading state models of competency-based admissions were presented at the symposium. Case studies from California, Oregon, and Wisconsin were provided in the meeting materials, and presenters offered further explanation and updates on work. In addition, symposium participants from the region discussed the status of competency-based systems in their states.

Two New England states have begun intensive work in the area. Over past two years, New Hampshire has developed a framework for a competency-based system that has broad stakeholder input and buy-in, and this year, four communities will pilot a competency-based transcript. Working with the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, Rhode Island has established a steering committee with K-16 representation which has outlined alternatives to the traditional admissions process based on Carnegie units.

Competency-based admissions have not been a high priority for other states in the region; however, school reform efforts (especially the school-to-career and standards movements) are leading to the exploration of competency-based systems. This symposium provided an early forum for these discussions in the Northeast.

### Key Learnings

Symposium participants identified a number of general models, practices, and lessons learned to be shared and cultivated throughout the region. Specifically, the following key steps and considerations in designing and implementing a competency-based system were highlighted:

#### **Create a clear, consistent understanding of competency-based admissions.**

First, "competency-based systems" must be defined within the individual state's context so that the concept can be easily understood. Proponents of competency-based systems should frame and communicate clear goals which outline how the system will benefit students, parents, educators, employers, and other constituencies. For example, the Oregon PASS Project created fact sheets and other information resources that were widely distributed to educate concerned groups about the new competency-based admissions process. Participants at the symposium noted that, since arguments against competency-based systems are similar in all the states that have launched efforts, states can learn from and adapt successful communications strategies that have been used elsewhere. For example, many people believe that the "elite" colleges and universities will not accept alternative or competency-based transcripts; however, the California Transitions Project has worked to ensure that students from the pilot schools can use their competency-based transcripts to apply to Stanford University. The example of Stanford's participation in the Transitions Project can be useful in "selling" competency-based systems in states other than just California.

### Updates on Leading States

#### California

- ✱ Pilot schools and project partners are developing assessment rubrics.
- ✱ The National Center for Research in Vocational Education is conducting an evaluation of the project and student data is now being tracked.

#### Oregon

- ✱ The state is maintaining the timeline for implementation.
- ✱ The PASS Project staff have developed a process planning guide for other states/systems to use.

#### Wisconsin

- ✱ The state has developed statewide academic standards. Previously, all standards were locally defined.
- ✱ The university system is looking at alignment of admissions proficiencies with new standards which will require revisiting and reworking the current proficiencies and documentation.
- ✱ A report on the second cohort has been released.

## Symposium Agenda

### Welcoming Remarks

- ✳ Elizabeth Twomey, Commissioner, New Hampshire State Department of Education

### Break-Out Sessions: State Models

- ✳ *Oregon*: Christine Tell, Co-Director, PASS Project, Oregon State System of Higher Education
- ✳ *Wisconsin*: Fran Garb, Director, Competency-Based Admissions Project, University of Wisconsin System
- ✳ *California*: Tony Smith, Transitions Project Coordinator, Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools

### Working Lunch

Seated by states. Discussion of the following:

- ✳ Useful information or strategies shared in the break-out sessions.
- ✳ State-level challenges to moving toward a competency-based admissions system.
- ✳ Existing structures or current efforts within states that would support or advance competency-based systems.

### Break-Out Sessions: Role-Alike Groups

From the perspective of specific roles within the system, discussion of:

- ✳ The institutional barriers to moving toward a competency-based K-16 system.
- ✳ Strategies that could be used to advance this type of system.
- ✳ Information and assistance needs for implementation.
- ✳ Potential Northeast Region activities that would advance competency-based admissions.

### National Perspective & Wrap Up

- ✳ Paul Leather, Director, New Hampshire School-to-Work Office
- ✳ Stephanie Powers, Director, The National School-to-Work Office

### *Identify advocates, especially those in leadership positions, within each critical stakeholder group.*

Since competency-based systems represent a relatively new approach, awareness of and support for these systems is not yet widespread. Representatives from K-12 schools, post-secondary education, business, and the community need to be engaged in the process of shaping a competency-based system from the beginning. This engagement is best achieved by identifying common interests. For example, parents may be nervous about changes especially if they see them as lowering, rather than raising, expectations for students. For all audiences, "language barriers" must be overcome by avoiding jargon and clearly explaining the goals and structure of a competency-based system.

New Hampshire conducted extensive research in the first phase of its work on developing a competency-based transcript. The focus groups held both gathered input from specific stakeholders and began the crucial education and "buy-in" process within the state. It is critical to engage the leadership of the various interest groups as early as possible, so they can advocate and promote competency-based systems within their respective institutions and peer groups.

### *Align standards and proficiencies.*

As states determine which specific competencies will be used for competency-based assessments and admissions, they need to examine student standards that have been defined by various groups (e.g., high school diploma requirements, state curriculum standards, certificate of mastery proficiencies, and postsecondary entrance and placement tests). They can then make explicit the connections between the various sets of standards while attempting to eliminate any mismatches. In this effort, it is critical to keep the student perspective in mind. Students must understand what they need to know and be able to do to succeed in school and work. They also need to know how they are to demonstrate these competencies. It is important that students not be confused by a myriad of standards.

One example of clearly aligning student standards comes from Colorado. The state is redesigning its K-12 education system to promote academic standards for all students. A task force of K-12 teachers and higher education

faculty have "cross-walked" the Colorado K-12 model standards in core academic areas with five sets of cross-curricular competencies outlined in *Ready and Able: College Entry-Level Competencies* (a document produced by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education).

***Provide training and support for those responsible for implementation.***

In particular, faculty members, guidance counselors, and admissions officers need opportunities to develop their understanding of new approaches through professional development if competency-based systems are to work. Those who will be implementing the competency-based system need time not just to learn about any new mechanisms (e.g., what new transcripts will look like), but also to think about what implications a competency-based system has for how they think about teaching and learning; therefore, states should involve teacher preparation programs as well as provide in-service training. Colorado has taken this dual approach to professional development by providing, through six colleges and universities, professional development activities for both in-service and pre-service teachers. These activities focus specifically on promoting understanding and effective implementation of the student competencies created in the state's standards-based education reform efforts.

***Use a systems approach.***

First, it is important to be aware of system incentives and disincentives: what supports competency-based systems, and what will impede them? States will benefit from mapping the current policies and practices in their states that would support a competency-based system. In addition, states can learn from existing models in industries such as medicine. Many private companies use competency-based systems to screen job candidates, evaluate workers, and frame training. These industry models may offer "benchmarks" against which a competency-based educational system could be measured. Finally, stakeholders must be aware that this is a long-term process. While state efforts may begin as pilots involving just a few high schools and postsecondary institutions, it is critical to keep the bigger (state and regional) picture in view throughout the process.

***Create a data collection and evaluation system.***

When competency-based admissions are piloted, it is critical to track student outcomes using accepted comparisons (e.g., ACTs, SATs, and grades) to build evidence of the validity and reliability of competency-based assessments. The Wisconsin system, for example, is evaluating how well competency-based student profiles predict retention and success in postsecondary education compared to how well high-school grade-point averages and standardized tests (such as the ACT and SAT) can predict those outcomes. Competency-based admissions can be evaluated on a number of other measures as well, such as the efficiency of the process for colleges and universities. System evaluations should also include stakeholder input, especially from teachers, admissions officers, guidance counselors, parents, and students.

**Cross-Cutting Challenges**

Any state attempting to build a competency-based system faces a number of potential challenges. In the various sessions of the symposium, participants outlined the following as key questions to consider:

***Who drives the process?***

There are "turf issues" between K-12 and postsecondary schools that must be resolved for them to work together; there must be a true partnership between the two for competency-based admissions to succeed. In the Northeast, this is further complicated by the dominance of private institutions. A few private colleges and universities, particularly Ivy League schools, have tremendous influence on parent and student school aspirations. Many symposium participants pointed out that they would need to be able to assure parents that any new system or

educational reforms would not hurt a student's chances of getting into the elite private schools. These private schools, therefore, are *de facto* drivers of the process and must be engaged.

***How are the competencies defined and how will they be assessed?***

Building a true system requires input from and buy-in of all stakeholders on a common set of standards and competencies. In many instances, state standardization needs to be balanced with local and institutional independence. This also leads into complicated questions of assessing and documenting student achievement. How are student competencies assessed, and by whom? How are validity and reliability assured? Developing assessment rubrics for the standards is a difficult but necessary process. In New Hampshire, the four communities that will pilot the competency-based transcript are working with an expert on assessment and rubric design. This spring, they will develop rubrics for the five cross-cutting competencies (problem solving skills; decision making and self management; communication skills; ability to work with others; and information/use of technology, research and analysis) recorded on the transcript. Eventually, rubrics will be developed for the core academic areas as well.

***Will competency-based credentials and transcripts be portable?***

To provide students with the broadest opportunities in our highly mobile society, their transcripts and credentials must be recognized and accepted throughout a region. States must, therefore, work together to ensure the portability of new student documents. California, Oregon, and Washington have all begun statewide competency-based system building efforts, and those three states are working with each other to ensure regional portability of the student documents that are created.

***How can resources be secured for system design and implementation?***

Competency-based systems demand extensive "front loading" and planning. All partners commit resources of time and work to the design and implementation. In addition, funding for professional development (in both K-12 and postsecondary) is necessary. Resource allocation will, of course, vary from state to state. In some states, Oregon and Wisconsin for example, staffing and funding for building the competency-based system has come largely from the state higher education systems. In other states, such as New Hampshire, the state's K-12 system has provided those resources. The California Transitions Project has taken yet another approach of working under the auspices of non-state school reform networks, particularly the Coalition of Essential Schools. Promising practices can be shared across state lines, and states can work together to better leverage regional resources.

**Suggested Regional Activities**

Participants at the Regional Symposium on Competency-Based Admissions showed great interest in the topic; however, there remains tremendous work to be done in the region to advance competency-based systems. During discussion sessions, symposium participants made a number of suggestions about how best to continue to advance competency-based systems in the region (at both the state and regional levels). These activities fall into four broad categories: information sharing; model creation and dissemination; piloting; and aligning regional (cross-state) systems to promote competency-based efforts at all levels.

***Information Sharing***

Because the concept of competency-based systems is relatively new to many key stakeholders in the region, participants at the symposium felt ongoing information sharing was the most important potential regional activity. There was great interest in receiving updates on other states' activities and progress in building competency-based systems. Participants also found the "role-alike" discussions very useful and recommended some continued information sharing in that format. Suggested groups for structured dialogues included postsecondary leadership

(especially college and university presidents), secondary leadership (especially superintendents and principals), admissions officers, guidance counselors, and faculty (K-16).

Newsletters, internet services, and meetings were identified as potential forums for information sharing on state activities and among role-alike groups. Organizations that are not state specific (such as the sponsors of the symposium) are in a good position to act as channels for ongoing information sharing. Perhaps the foremost need in information sharing was to broaden dissemination into a larger stakeholder awareness and public engagement campaign.

#### Further Resources Available

##### **[www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)**

Jobs for the Future has created a Web page dedicated to the regional symposium at [www.jff.org/programs/cluster2/index.html](http://www.jff.org/programs/cluster2/index.html) (click on "Competency-Based Admissions to Postsecondary Institutions"). Materials related to the symposium can be read and downloaded from the site. In addition, there are links to the symposium partners and relevant reports and publications. If you would like to add information or materials to the site, please contact Chris Hogan via email ([chogan@jff.org](mailto:chogan@jff.org)).

##### **[www.lab.brown.edu](http://www.lab.brown.edu)**

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (the LAB) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges have conducted a series of regional dialogues on postsecondary involvement in school-to-work initiatives. The findings of these dialogues have important implications for competency-based systems design and implementation. For more information, visit the LAB's Web site at [www.lab.brown.edu](http://www.lab.brown.edu) or call the LAB at 800/521-9550.

##### **[www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org)**

The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and ACT, Inc. will soon be releasing a report, "Statewide Strategies for Implementing Competency-Based Admissions Standards." Visit SHEEO's Web site ([www.sheeo.org](http://www.sheeo.org)) for this report.

#### ***Model Creation and Dissemination***

As states begin to design, pilot, and implement competency-based systems, they will inevitably develop materials, tools, and frameworks that would be useful for other states. As this collection of materials grows, some of them could become the basis of models that could be adapted by individual states. Symposium participants identified public engagement materials, stakeholder engagement processes, competency-based transcripts and/or certificates, assessment rubrics, and admissions processes as examples of the tools and models that they would find most useful. Organizations that work in a number of states could contribute to regional competency-based system building efforts by developing these models and tools.

#### ***Piloting***

To build awareness of and evidence for competency-based admissions, it was suggested that one or more higher education institutions in each state create a pilot program. These institutions might work with a group of schools within their respective states to develop a model, or they could agree to accept alternative transcripts or admissions applications processes being developed in a number of states (perhaps even states beyond the Northeast region such as California, Oregon, and Wisconsin). The pilot would be used primarily to track two things: first, the relative success of students admitted and placed through non-traditional methods, and secondly, the time and training necessary to implement the new admissions model.

#### ***Aligning Regional Systems***

There are a number of systems that cross state boundaries and could provide leverage points for promoting competency-based assessment and admissions. Teacher preparation and certification, institutional accreditation for K-12 and postsecondary schools, and federal funding streams and programs provide incentives and supports to all states in the region; therefore, their policies and programs have tremendous potential for promoting competency-based systems.





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