

Request for Proposals: Potential Research Partners

National Research Collaborative
on Competency-Based Education and Learning



MAKING RESEARCH RELEVANT

Overview

The National Research Collaborative on Competency-Based Education and Learning (National Research Collaborative) at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) supports research in competency-based education and learning (CBE/L), with the primary mission of building research to answer key questions prioritized by policymakers and practitioners. AIR, with support from Lumina Foundation, is soliciting brief proposals for activities such as research projects, research partnerships, and field-building tools that are tied to research, continuous improvement, or use of data. We invite and encourage researchers, both those who are currently engaged in CBE/L research activities or have a strong interest in breaking into the field, to respond.

All research partners will receive support making connections with other researchers, institutions, and data for analyses, in addition to support amplifying and disseminating findings and products. Beyond this, a limited number of research projects aligned to the National Research Collaborative's research priorities will receive funding, with an average grant amount of \$25,000. The final number of projects and amounts funded will be based on proposals received and their fit with the National Research Collaborative's research agenda. Proposals should be emailed to Jessica Mason and Mark Hatcher at postsecambe@air.org. The deadline for submission is 5:00 p.m. ET on **December 7, 2018**. Questions may be submitted until 5:00 p.m. ET on **November 16, 2018**, at postsecambe@air.org.

Request for Proposals

Competency-based learning (CBL) includes structured and unstructured opportunities for learning and/or the assessment of learning, both self-created and those designed by employers, educational institutions, and training providers, which are aligned to workplace-relevant competencies. Examples include modules offered by institutions of higher education; prior learning assessment; military credit; other work-based learning, apprenticeships, and returnships; industry certifications; and government licensures. Competency-based education (CBE) provides structured learning opportunities designed by postsecondary institutions that lead to recognized educational credentials, created by backward design from a disciplinary perspective on what a credential holder should know and be able to do and assessed authentically. Examples include Direct Assessment programs and non-Direct Assessment CBE programs. Taken together, CBL approaches and CBE have the potential to provide access to economic opportunity, via a postsecondary credential, for more learners.

Despite its growing popularity, CBE/L lacks a strong research base. Although efforts to build this base are underway, additional research is needed to address unanswered questions and ultimately to inform the actions taken by policymakers, practitioners, and students.

The National Research Collaborative supports research in CBE/L, with the primary mission of building research to answer important questions from practitioners and policymakers through three strategies:

1. Collaboratively **developing a research agenda** for CBE/L by focusing on core questions on enrollment, efficacy, and efficiency as well as implementation.
2. **Engaging researchers and practitioners in building evidence** related to CBE/L by seeding the field with a broader range of experts on the topic and building capacity for ongoing research.
3. **Translating findings and data** for critical audiences whose actions may affect the field of CBE/L.

AIR, with support from Lumina Foundation, is soliciting brief proposals for two tracks of activities: the first track is for research projects that advance the National Research Collaborative's research agenda, which may be funded; and the second track is other field-building activities and collaborations that are tied to research, continuous improvement, and/or use of data. We invite and encourage researchers, both those who are currently engaged in CBE/L research activities and those who have a strong interest in breaking into the field, to respond. The National Research Collaborative will offer space for researchers to engage with each other and connect around research topics of interest. All research partners working in both tracks of activities will receive the following support:

- facilitated connections with other researchers to support collaborative research and analyses using data from multiple institutions;
- facilitated connections between researchers and institutions, with the goal of connecting researchers to available data; and
- amplification of any research findings or products.

Beyond this support for all research partners, a limited number of research projects aligned to the National Research Collaborative's research agenda first priority questions will be funded in the first year of this opportunity, with an average grant amount of \$25,000. The final number of projects and amounts funded will be based on proposals received and their fit with the National Research Collaborative's research agenda.

All National Research Collaborative partners will be expected to participate actively in this community of researchers, including virtual attendance at a minimum of two events per year (e.g., webinars, research presentations), sharing progress and findings with other members of the collaborative, and helping build connections through personal and/or professional networks whenever possible. In-person meeting and travel opportunities are optional, but not required.

Strong applications will draw clear connections to the established research agenda priorities, demonstrate how the proposed work fits within the broader research agenda ([Table 1](#)), and have a clear plan for disseminating findings and/or engaging with the field. Proposals for research studies must include concise, specific descriptions of methods and outcomes of interest. We emphasize building the evidence base on CBE/L by using rigorous research designs and cross-case/comparative analyses.

Proposals that include a request for funding will be reviewed by representatives of the National Advisory Board on CBE/L Research.

Areas of Focus

This opportunity is driven by the National Research Collaborative’s research agenda, which aims to answer, in priority order, the most pressing questions identified by key stakeholders across the CBE/L fields. For the current request for proposals, partnerships and funding priority will be given to research projects seeking to answer questions related to Priority 1. Proposals and inquiries related to other areas of the research agenda (Priorities 2 and 3) will be also considered for partnership without funding (and/or potential funding in the future).

Proposals for research partnerships, tool development, or other activities will be considered for partnership and should still be aligned to the research agenda priorities. These partnerships will not be eligible for funding.

Table 1. Research Agenda Priorities

Priority Level	Focus Area	Key Questions
Priority 1	Foundational Knowledge: Understanding the landscape, efficacy and equity, and quality measurement.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current Landscape: What is the state of the field? 2. Efficacy and Equity: Does CBE work, and for whom? Do CBE programs promote equity? 3. Quality: How is quality measured and assured in CBE programs?
Priority 2	Design: Digging deeper into how programs work and their connection with the foundational questions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Workforce Alignment and Signaling: How is CBE aligning to workforce opportunities for students? 2. Program Implementation: How are institutions designing and implementing CBE programs? 3. Costs: What are the costs of these programs? 4. Redesigning the Building Blocks: How are programs approaching curriculum, content, and competency design?
Priority 3	Public Perceptions: Gauging stakeholder perceptions of CBE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Policy: What are the policy implications of CBE? 2. Perceptions: What are stakeholders’ perceptions of CBE and related approaches?

Request for Proposals Guidelines

Interested researchers should respond to the following prompts, in a narrative of 5 pages or less (single spaced, 1-inch margins on all sides). In keeping with the innovative nature of CBE/L, creative proposals are welcome. We offer guidelines for two types of responses: (1) research projects (eligible for funding priority or potential funding) and (2) other activities, including partnerships and resource development.

For proposed research projects

- **Research question(s):** What are the key research questions to be answered? Within which research agenda priority is the question situated? How does the question address equity?
- **Research design:** What are the key methods, sample, unit of analysis, and expected outcomes? How will this research design serve to strengthen the evidence base on CBE/L?
- **Outcomes and implications:** What new knowledge will the proposed study add to the CBE/L field? What implications will the study have for research, policy, and practice?
- **Products and dissemination ideas:** What publications or products will the proposed work result in? What creative ideas do you have for disseminating this work and supporting more interest in your work and the work of the National Research Collaborative?
- **Resources:** What resources will you need to complete the proposed work (including financial resources)? For example, will you need support finding or accessing data, making connections with other partners, or getting methodological advice? If you are pursuing funding, please include a high-level budget, including personnel, supplies, travel/meetings, and other expenses.
- **Key Staff:** Who will be doing the proposed work, and what makes them a great fit for the National Research Collaborative?

For proposed partnerships, resource development, and other ideas

- **Research interest(s):** What are you working on right now that would be enhanced by participating in the National Research Collaborative? Or, what ideas for new work would you bring to the National Research Collaborative? How will your idea advance the goals of the National Research Collaborative?
- **Participation interest(s):** How do you see yourself getting involved in the National Research Collaborative? As a collaborator-partner? Creating tools or other research-based products for the field? In a new, creative way not described here?
- **Outcomes and implications:** What new knowledge will the proposed work add to the CBE/L field? What implications will the work have for research, policy, and practice?
- **Products and dissemination ideas:** What publications or products may the proposed work result in? What creative ideas do you have for disseminating this work and supporting more interest in your work and the work of the National Research Collaborative?
- **Resources:** What resources will you need to complete the proposed work? For example, will you need support finding resources or making connections with other partners?
- **Key Staff:** Who will be doing the proposed work, and what makes them a great fit for the National Research Collaborative?