

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 the broader environment of competency-based learning approaches (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 the use of data. We invite and encourage researchers, both those who are currently engaged in research on these topics or have a strong interest in breaking into the field, to respond.

All research partners will receive support in making connections with other researchers, institutions, and data for analyses, in addition to support in amplifying and disseminating findings and products. Beyond these supports, 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 e-mailed to postsecambe@air.org. The deadline for submission is 5:00 p.m. ET on **June 14, 2019**. Questions may be submitted until 5:00 p.m. ET on **May 31, 2019**, at postsecambe@air.org.

Request for Proposals

Competency-based approaches to teaching and learning often rely on learning-focused strategies aligned with one or both of the following approaches:

- **Competency-based education (CBE)** is a specific type of competency-based learning, which 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 should be assessed authentically. Examples include Direct Assessment programs and non-Direct Assessment CBE programs.
- **Competency-based learning approaches (CBL)** refers to the broader environment of 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 competencies. Examples include modules offered by institutions of higher education; prior learning assessment; military credit; apprenticeships, returnships, and other work-based learning; industry certifications; and government licensures.

Taken together, CBE and the broader environment of competency-based learning approaches have the potential to provide access to economic opportunity, through a postsecondary credential, for more learners. Still, despite this potential and growing popularity, CBE/L lacks a strong research base. Although efforts to build this base are under way, 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 the 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 prioritized research topics in the National Research Collaborative's research agenda will be funded in 2019. The average grant amount will be \$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 funded 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. No travel will be 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 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 the most pressing topics identified by key stakeholders across the CBE/L field.

The National Research Collaborative is seeking to support proposals that address CBE and/or competency-based learning approaches as defined on page 1. Researchers are invited to submit proposals for research related to (1) CBE programs in particular, (2) other competency-based learning approaches only, or (3) cross-cutting topics that engage with CBE and other competency-based learning approaches. Proposals must clearly articulate which of these areas will serve as the focus of the proposed project.

For proposals focused on competency-based learning approaches, preference will be given to proposals seeking to build foundational knowledge. In addition, preference will be given to those proposals focused on understanding the broader environment of competency-based approaches to teaching and learning rather than to those focused on individual programmatic components of competency-based learning approaches. For proposals focused on CBE and cross-cutting topics, priority will be given to those proposals addressing questions related to building foundational knowledge and contributing to the field’s understanding of design.

Research topics of particular interest in 2019 are denoted in bold in Table 1. Proposals for research partnerships without funding, 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. 2019 Research Agenda

Area of Inquiry	Research Question Topics
Foundational Knowledge: Understanding the landscape, efficacy and equity, and quality measurement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current Landscape: The types of programs that exist, where, and who they serve 2. Efficacy and Equity: Outcomes that programs achieve and for whom 3. Quality: Measurement and assessment of quality of these approaches 4. Definitions: How competency-based learning as an area of inquiry is conceptualized
Design: Digging deeper into how programs work and their connection with foundational knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Equity: How equity is incorporated into the design, structure, and goals 2. Workforce Alignment and Signaling: Alignment of competencies to credentialing and workforce opportunities

	<p>3. Program Implementation: Design and implementation elements and approaches, including learner support, technology services, and business processes</p> <p>4. Adoption Paths: Trends in adoption pathways or motivations</p> <p>5. Costs: The costs to students and providers</p> <p>6. Curriculum and Competency Architecture: Identification, architecture, and assessment of competencies</p>
Public Perceptions: Gauging stakeholder perceptions and understanding policy implications	<p>1. Policy: Policy implications or relevant policy considerations at the federal or state level</p> <p>2. Perceptions: Perceptions of value and efficacy by various stakeholders (employers, potential students, policymakers, or providers)</p>

Request for Proposals Guidelines

Interested researchers should respond to the following prompts in a narrative of five 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 ideas 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?

Frequently Asked Questions

Partners and Review Process

What are the expectations of partners?

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.

What are the benefits to partners?

Benefits available to all partners include

- connections with a community of other researchers to facilitate collaborative research, provide feedback on ideas, and provide support for addressing research challenges;
- connections to institutions that may be likely to provide you access to potential subjects of study (or have available data);
- technical assistance with research methods;
- amplification of any research findings or products; and
- for funded partners only, the additional benefit is financial support.

What if I'm not ready to be a full partner?

Potential partners who are interested in, but not yet ready, conducting research (as determined by the potential partner or the reviewers) are encouraged to reach out to us at postsecce@air.org. Based on early questions, we are considering creating an “interest group” for those interested in refining their questions and approaches if there is sufficient demand.

What does the review process entail? Is it the same for all projects?

All potential partner proposals will be reviewed by representatives of the National Advisory Board on CBE/L Research and will be evaluated on the thoroughness of the proposal, feasibility of the activities, alignment with the research agenda, and potential contribution to the goals of the National Research Collaborative.

Proposals seeking funding will be evaluated on a competitive basis. Those proposals will be evaluated on the following questions in addition to aforementioned criteria:

- What aspect(s) of the research agenda priorities does this project address?
- To what depth does this project go in addressing the research agenda priorities?
- Do the outcomes of this project address/support equity in postsecondary education?
- Does this project include cross-case and/or comparative analysis (when appropriate)?
- Does this project implement a rigorous and feasible research design to contribute high-quality research to the field?
- Does this project explore the research agenda priorities in new, creative, or innovative ways?

Partner proposals not selected to receive funding may still be invited to join the National Research Collaborative if they choose to continue to pursue the project without funding.

Proposals not seeking funding will be reviewed for fit and relevance to the National Research Collaborative, but this review is not competitive.

When can I expect to hear back regarding my application?

Applicants who submit a research proposal by June 14, 2019, at 5 p.m. ET can expect to hear back by August 2019.

Project Timelines

Is there a required timeline for projects?

For funded projects, all funded project leaders must submit final project (and financial) reports to AIR by October 31, 2020. For all other projects, there is no required timeline; however, there is a preference for projects with shorter term timelines when possible and appropriate.

Will there be checkpoints or initial report-outs for extended projects (i.e., longitudinal studies)?

There are no preset checkpoints; however, there should be periodic updates built into the proposed timeline, and project leaders will have the opportunity to share their in-progress research and lessons through National Research Collaborative activities.

Funding Restrictions

What is the allowance for indirect costs?

The limit for indirect costs is 20% of staff salaries and benefits, in line with Lumina Foundation's grant requirements. Please contact us if you have questions or concerns about this restriction.

What constitutes allowable or unallowable expenses?

Allowable expenses may include salaries, benefits, materials and supplies, equipment rental/purchase, travel, meeting/conferences, consultants, evaluation, and communication.

Can funding be used to “buy out” course time for instructors/faculty at institutions?

Yes, funding may be used to “buy out” course time if justified in the proposal narrative and budget.

Is there a minimum and/or maximum of funding that will be considered?

The average award will be approximately \$25,000, but there is not a predetermined minimum and maximum. We strongly encourage potential partners to apply for smaller grants when appropriate for the proposed project. If the proposed amount is substantially above the average and cannot be funded fully, we may contact you about an opportunity to fund a portion of the full amount.

Proposal Contents

Do proposals involving multiple sites need letters of support from each those sites? What do those letters need to entail?

Brief letters of support stating willingness to participate in the specified way would strengthen a proposal, particularly for projects seeking funding. If, however, the project partner hopes to use the National Research Collaborative to help identify appropriate sites, please indicate that in the proposal, and we will be happy to support connections (for both funded and unfunded partner proposals).

Availability of Data From the 2018 National Survey of Competency-Based Education

Are data from the National Survey on Postsecondary Competency-Based Research available for partners to use? If so, what restrictions apply?

There are opportunities for partners to engage with the data, but it will be on a case-by-case basis. Please e-mail us at postsecbe@air.org if your proposal includes utilizing the survey data set, and we will share the survey contents and discuss with you whether the data may fit your needs.

Miscellaneous

Can researchers use an international context as the primary basis of their project?

Our priority for funded projects is competency-based education in the United States, so we strongly encourage projects seeking funding to be focused on the U.S. Comparative/international studies that may be relevant to the U.S. are welcome; please use the proposal narrative to build a case for relevance. For projects not seeking funding, international contexts are more than welcome.

I'm interested in learning more about CBE/L. What resources are available to me?

Plenty of resources are available to help you build your own background about CBE/L and understand the research field to which your project might contribute. Some starting points are AIR's [Resource Database](#) hosting research articles on CBE/L, or the Competency-Based Education Network's (C-BEN) [Resource Library](#), a broad and wide-ranging collection of resources and information focused on CBE practice.