# STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCORPORATING COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION IN FLORIDA'S STATEWIDE COURSE NUMBERING SYSTEM

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Competency-based education is an approach to teaching and learning that transparently articulates the competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) that students must master in order to graduate. In many states, policymakers are trying to understand how they can create a supportive policy environment for the institutions that are developing and expanding competency-based programs. A number of state policy areas, as described in the brief *State Policy Considerations for Competency-Based Education,might affect competency-based education*. One such area is transfer and articulation agreements.

Transfer and articulation policies help ensure students know and understand how learning at one college or university can apply to their academic program at another and make those pathways clear. This includes students who are transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions, students who are transferring from one college to another of the same level and students who are transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. Some states use a common course numbering system in which equivalent courses at different institutions are given the same title and number. This system ensures standardization across institutions so students can seamlessly transfer courses.

Transfer and articulation agreements might serve traditional education well, but they pose challenges for institutions interested in developing and growing competency-based education programs. Competency-based education programs are focused on the knowledge, skills and abilities that students must master, so the specific courses that students complete become less important. As institutions in states with common course numbering systems begin to develop competency-based education programs, policymakers and institutional leaders and faculty need to have conversations about how those programs should be included.

Many Florida institutions have started to explore, design and implement competency-based education. And, they will continue to do so as the new strategic plan calls for competency-based education programs to be offered at half of the state's universities. State policymakers at the Department of Education, the Florida College System and the Florida University System, along with leaders at Complete Florida (a statutorily created body charged with helping adults return to college to complete their degrees), have begun to explore ways to ensure that competency-based education programs can comply with the SCNS. This document summarizes those conversations and offers next steps for Florida institutional and system-level stakeholders.

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## Florida's Statewide Course Numbering System and Competency-Based Education

In Florida, the Board of Governors and College System are responsible for approving new degree programs. As part of the approval process, the courses in those programs must use the SCNS. Florida's SCNS "is a key component of Florida's K-20 seamless system of articulation."[1]

Florida statutes call for the Department of Education along with the Board of Governors to maintain the SCNS. Faculty committees are tasked with assigning course levels and numbers within the system.

Two Florida institutions, Broward College and Polk State College, have developed competency-based education programs. They are using two different strategies for aligning their competency-based programs with the SCNS. One is developing competencies, and then mapping them to the SCNS (generally three competencies equate to one course in the SCNS). The other is starting with the course and determining three competencies for that course.

Although these two institutions found strategies to comply with SCNS, a number of challenges persist. Many institutional stakeholders feel as though there is no clear direction on how to deconstruct course models as they relate to transfer. Additionally, there is currently no solution on how to transcript a one-credit course so that it can be broken down into the three individual parts. Finally, technological challenges include that the software platform that houses the SCNS is a barrier to including non-course information in the SCNS.

## Considerations for Florida Policymakers and Potential Next Steps

During an in-state meeting in 2016, Florida institutional and system-level stakeholders shared their thoughts about how competency-based education programs could be aligned with the SCNS—and how the state could support them— through a number of methods, including surveys, individual conversations and a cross-institution meetings. These conversations revealed that there is a high interest in implementing competency-based education.

Florida stakeholders surfaced a number of options for further consideration, noting that institutions currently implementing competency-based education should be relied upon for guidance. State support might include:

- Creating a common definition or lexicon around competency-based education. This affects all areas of implementation of competency-based education programs, including how best to align competency-based education programs with the SCNS;

- Providing clear guidance on how to translate courses to competencies;

- Creating a state standard for reporting competency-based education as part of the SCNS; and

- Designing a library of competencies and courses.

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1    Florida Department of Education, Statewide Course Numbering System, website accessed from: http://scns.fldoe.org/scns/public/pb_index.jsp.

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In terms of next steps, Florida stakeholders discussed the following options:

*Continue to develop a state-level understanding of the role of competency-based education—facilitating and advocating for the benefits.* This would include educating and developing partnerships with all relevant audiences, such as K-12 and workforce.

*Explore ways to alter language in existing legislation around the SCNS to make it more inclusive of competency-based education.* For instance, some states have identified competencies, rather than courses, that are agreed upon as the transfer currency. This would require a complete redesign of Florida's SCNS. Another option might be to maintain the current SCNS structure and develop a competency option within the system that sits alongside and is mapped to the current course structure. Both options would require collaboration of institutions across the state.

*Create a task force to more fully explore integrating competency-based education into the SCNS.* This group could:

- Explore the potential for altering the SCNS as described above;

- Develop pilots for aligning competency-based education programs with a small number of courses and walk that through to building a program, and document the best practices; and

- Use the study and pilots to make recommendations about the SCNS.

*Work to ensure that technology does not inhibit innovation.* For example, the current technological infrastructure for the SCNS cannot accommodate additional characters in column headings. The state should explore ways to ensure that such limitations do not limit institutions' ability to innovate. Even if large-scale changes are needed, technology should encourage innovation, not stifle it.