



**Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals**  
*Current Challenges and Future Directions*

Since they were adopted by the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice (Council) in April 2001, the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals have been used by many academic institutions and practice organizations and agencies throughout the United States. In addition, a vast number of discipline-specific competencies sets have been developed; by some estimates there are more than 100 sets of competencies in existence for health professionals.

Despite their widespread use, there is still much that is unknown about competencies and their impact on education and workforce development efforts. The Core Competencies were created as part of an effort to assure a well-prepared public health workforce capable of delivering Essential Public Health Services. In the pursuit of that goal, the field requires a better understanding of whether and how competencies use can lead to improved individual performance by front line, senior level non-supervisory, and management and supervisory staff, and in the aggregate, to improved performance by the public health agency or organization. If it is determined that competencies use leads to better performance and potentially enhanced health outcomes, the field needs tools to guide high-impact implementation of the competencies. This document enumerates questions about competencies and suggested activities to help the field more effectively use the Core Competencies and other competencies sets. These questions and potential activities are based on Council deliberations and forums held over the past three years.

If you have any questions or comments about these items, please contact Council staff ([jkronstadt@phf.org](mailto:jkronstadt@phf.org)).

***Research Questions About the Use and Impact of Competencies***

1. To what extent do competencies-based education and training lead to improved performance on the individual and agency levels?
2. How can competencies be incorporated into job descriptions? How can agencies and organizations design performance evaluations that are correlated to such competencies-based job descriptions? Do competencies-based job descriptions help to more effectively identify individuals who meet specific position requirements?
3. What quality standards, if any, exist to ensure that competencies-based courses provide learners with the best bang for their buck? How could state-based or national systems be implemented to raise the quality of competencies-based education and training? What incentives are being used or could be implemented to encourage course providers to elevate the quality of their products?
4. To what extent are the competencies measurable? How could they be made more measurable? Who would measure them?
5. What strategies can help agencies and institutions determine which set of competencies to use? How do the various competency sets fit together?
6. How can employers determine the competencies necessary for success in a particular position and design diagnostic tools that reflect those competencies?
7. Do competencies-based learning self-assessments reveal training needs or learner preferences? How can feedback from supervisors about an employee's ability to perform necessary tasks be integrated into those assessments? What time burden is acceptable for obtaining this type and amount of information from public health professionals?

8. What are the connections between organizational and individual competencies?
9. What are the implications of competencies on national credentialing and/or certification efforts?
10. To what extent is it necessary for public health workers in the field to understand the lexicon and structure of the competencies? Is it more effective to focus on teaching the content of the competencies—the knowledge, skills, and attitudes—without explicitly identifying them as competencies?
11. What tools are used by other fields to measure and improve individual competency? Can those tools be applied to public health?
12. What tools are available and what is still needed to help course providers design competencies-based courses and curricula? What guidelines can help trainers assign competencies and skill levels to existing courses?

### **Potential Activities**

The following initiatives may augment our knowledge of and ability to effectively use competencies. The Council may engage in some of these activities in the future. To help build a learning community in public health on the effective use of competencies, please share any work that you or your organization has conducted, or is planning to conduct, that fits in with these activities. Please contact the Council ([jkronstadt@phf.org](mailto:jkronstadt@phf.org)) so that we can develop a clearinghouse accessible to the public health community of competencies-related resources.

- ◆ Develop a one-page guide describing the Core and MPH Competencies sets and the uses of each. (The Council plans to create such a document in 2006.)
- ◆ Conduct a demonstration project to assess the effectiveness of integrating Core Competencies into a health agency's (or agencies') workforce development efforts to determine if competency-based training or assessment leads to improved employee performance and, potentially, enhanced health outcomes within the population the agency serves.
- ◆ Locate examples of how institutions and organizations have used the Core Competencies and other competencies sets. Build on those examples to develop a set of tools designed to better assist schools of public health and agencies in the implementation of the competencies. This would include assistance with writing competencies-centered job descriptions, assessing individual and organization-wide competencies gaps, crafting individual learning plans, and developing curricula and courses. These tools could be made available on a CD-ROM or through interactive online modules.
- ◆ Using the Core Competencies as a framework, as well as existing practices and available evidence, develop recommendations and/or model programs on the best ways to quickly introduce new workers to public health practice.
- ◆ Study and document ways in which multiple sets of competencies can be used to complement each other.
- ◆ Identify the Core and discipline-specific competencies that relate to the job functions of public health practitioners that may lead to better performance of those functions.
- ◆ Determine whether some or all of the eight new core content areas enumerated in the Institute of Medicine report *Who Will Keep the Public Healthy?* should be translated into additional competencies to be integrated into the Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals.