

Side by Side: Comparing Credit for Prior Learning and Competency-Based Education

As Californians work to rebuild the world's fifth-largest economy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the state's workforce will need flexible and affordable pathways to degrees, credentials, and career opportunities. State leaders need alternative approaches through underused tools to close educational gaps and promote economic gains, especially for those who are most vulnerable to being left behind. Two such tools to boost attainment are credit for prior learning (CPL) and competency-based education (CBE). Although both tools assess valuable knowledge and skills to accelerate the attainment of valuable postsecondary credentials, there are major differences to both as outlined below. The table on the following pages underscores these differences in credentialing knowledge and compares them to traditional seat-time based education.

Credit for Prior Learning and Competency-Based Education Definitions

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) awards and evaluates eligible credit to students for previous collegiate-level learning gained outside of a recognized college classroom. Types of people who would benefit include:

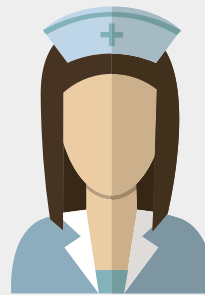


Military Veterans



Tradespeople

Competency-Based Education (CBE) allows students to earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace. Types of people who would benefit include:



Health Professionals



Working Parents

	Credit for Prior Learning (also known as Prior Learning Assessment)	Competency-Based Education	Traditional Seat-Time Based Education
What are the California definitions?	CPL is academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the accredited college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as a portfolio. ¹	CBE measures learning and grants credit for students who acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. ²	Traditional education awards students credit toward graduation based on completion of actual hours spent in the classroom (known as seat-time) and mastering the competencies. ³
What student populations would potentially benefit the most?	People who have learned college-level content/material in a nonaccredited space/system. Hundreds of thousands ^{4, 5} of Californians would likely benefit from expanding CPL policies.	Students who are not served well by existing postsecondary programs and want a more flexible option, which is often less expensive than a traditional program.	Traditional learners for whom this model was developed, typically full-time, residential college students without significant obligations outside of their postsecondary educations.
How do students earn credit or advance toward program completion?	<i>Exam:</i> By satisfactory completion of an institutional examination created and/or administered by a faculty subject-matter expert. <i>Portfolio:</i> By developing a portfolio of the student's learning and submitting it for assessment by a faculty subject matter expert. <i>AP/IB exam:</i> By achieving an accepted score on an AP or IB exam or through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). <i>Previous military training:</i> Military service, training, and experience as recommended by the ACE directory. ⁶	<i>Demonstrating proficiency:</i> By demonstrating sufficient proficiency of every competency in the student's educational program. ⁷	<i>Attending classes and completing coursework in those classes:</i> A typical three-credit course, for example, meets for three hours per week over a fifteen-week semester. A student would earn fifteen credit hours per semester en route to a four-year bachelor's degree requiring a total of 120 credits. ⁸
How do students benefit?	<i>Higher completion rates:</i> More CPL students earn postsecondary degrees than non-CPL students. <i>Reduced time to degree:</i> Average time to degree for CPL students is shorter than for non-CPL students. <i>Lower costs:</i> CPL could cut down costs if students don't have to pay to retake course information they've already completed through work, volunteering, etc. ⁹	<i>Designed for the individual student's needs:</i> CBE programs transparently articulate what a student must know and demonstrate to earn a credential, ensuring the needed proficiency level is achieved, often more quickly and at a lower cost. ¹⁰	<i>Strictly structured for the student:</i> Traditional students don't have to pace themselves, which is beneficial to students who need more structure. ¹¹
How does the state benefit?	<i>Cost savings to state:</i> If students reduce their time to degree through CPL, the state would save approximately \$6,750 per full-time equivalent student attending a CCC. ¹²	<i>Higher savings, higher persistence rate, and faster rate of attaining credentials with online courses:</i> A learner going through a CBE program (such as Capella University's FlexPath program) finishes a bachelor's degree faster, borrows less in federal financial aid, and persists at higher rates than similar learners in credit hour-based programs. ¹³	<i>Credit hour/traditional and familiar measurement:</i> The traditional credit hour is a standard measure that has essentially the same meaning across thousands of institutions and over time. Many financial aid programs are tied to enrollment as measured by credit hours. ¹⁴

	Credit for Prior Learning (also known as Prior Learning Assessment)	Competency-Based Education	Traditional Seat-Time Based Education
How does the workforce benefit?	<i>Reduced workforce gaps:</i> CPL acknowledges learning done on the job and can close workforce gaps that require a postsecondary credential. ¹⁵	<i>Immediate applicability:</i> What students learn today can be applied and demonstrated today in enhanced job performance. ¹⁶ <i>Stackable/microcredentials:</i> Given the focus on competencies and direct assessment, many CBE programs are built using modules, which allows students to focus on the specific content needed to qualify for new jobs or roles in the workplace.	<i>Recognized measure of learning:</i> Traditionally, employers understood that seat-time has been presumed to get learning results, and that those results add up to knowledge that translates into the skills needed in the workforce. ¹⁷
How do employers benefit?	<i>Greater ease of skill assessment by employers:</i> Acknowledging and recording CPL credit could help employers better gauge skill attainment of employees. ¹⁸	<i>Transparency:</i> Employers understand what students are paying for because programs explicitly state what the person must know and demonstrate. ¹⁹ <i>Relevance:</i> CBE programs are often based on competencies sought by employers.	<i>Familiarity with measure of learning:</i> Similar to the benefits of seat-time to the workforce, employers are familiar with seat-time as the measurement of learning. ²⁰
How do higher education institutions benefit?	<i>Increased capacity and access:</i> CPL helps accelerate degree completion and promotes access for students to help close equity gaps. ²¹	<i>Increased degree completion while closing equity gaps:</i> CBE shifts the education paradigm from a standardized group experience to an individual journey (student-centered). ²² <i>Increased student learning outcome:</i> Because students must master or demonstrate proficiency, it is not enough for the student to pass with 60 percent understanding. <i>Connection with workforce:</i> Because CBE is often developed with labor-market-valued competencies in mind, higher education's connection to employers increases.	<i>Convenience in setting administrative functions:</i> This convenience includes determining state and federal funding, setting faculty workloads, scheduling, recording coursework, awarding credit to transfer students, and determining whether students are attending college full time. ²³
What is the faculty's role?	<i>Evaluate and assess prior learning:</i> For all three segments (CCC, CSU, and UC), the role of faculty is to evaluate portfolios, provide assessments based on students' learning, and compare their current credit work against evidence submitted for credit. ²⁴	<i>Facilitate learning:</i> Faculty are viewed more as "coaches" than a "sage on the stage," promoting learners' ability to assume more agency over their learning. <i>May need more professional development supports:</i> Faculty may need more support to help them redevelop and redesign curricula to facilitate more individualized learning. ²⁵	<i>Educate as measured by time and credit hours:</i> A faculty workload, as measured by seat time, is reduced to credit hours, which helps set a college's budget. In faculty contracts, compensation is often connected to time and the number of students taught. ²⁶
How do students receive financial aid?	<i>This process lacks clarity on how students receive financial aid:</i> Currently, because the cost of prior learning assessments cannot be included in the cost of attendance, and federal aid pays for new learning, not the transcription of prior learning, students are unable to apply their financial aid awards to CPL credits. ²⁷	<i>Programs must meet specific criteria to receive federal aid (similar to credit hour):</i> Institutions must state the academic terms, satisfactory academic progress, etc. CBE programs meet these criteria by cross-walking back to a credit-hour model as this is the only method currently available.	<i>Credit hour establishes a basis for measuring ability for federal funding:</i> A credit hour is a proxy measure of a quantity of student learning. This measure provides assurance that a credit hour has the necessary educational content to warrant the amounts of federal funds that are awarded to participants in federal funding programs. ²⁸
What institutions offer this type of learning?	Technically, CCC, CSU, and UC all offer CPL, but there is variation in how CPL policies are implemented within each segment. ²⁹	Mainly, large public 2- and 4-year institutions, private nonprofit liberal arts, and for-profit institutions offer CBE (e.g., Western Governors University, Brandman University, Southern New Hampshire University's College for America, and Calbright). ²⁹	All California public higher education segments offer traditional programs.

Learn more about how a student receives a degree through different forms of learning and credentialing: CPL and CBE.

Credit for Prior Learning

(also known as Prior Learning Assessment)

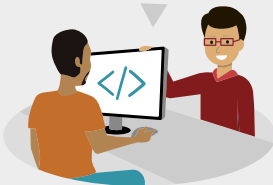


Kevin is a 27-year-old who started working as an information technology (IT) security specialist at a major technology corporation after graduating from high school. He wanted to pursue an associate's degree in enterprise security to advance his career and become a senior security specialist.

He previously completed his Systems Security Certified Practitioner (SSCP) certification via his employer's educational reimbursement program



Kevin enrolled in his local community college and received credit for his certification and work experience demonstrated through an assessment from the IT department faculty.

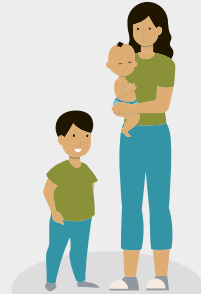


Receiving those credits gave him the head start he needed to earn his degree in one year rather than the two years it would have taken if he hadn't received credit for his professional experience and certification.



Competency-Based Education

Grace is 35 years old, working as a registered nurse with two young kids. She has always wanted to go back to school to receive her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) so she can increase her wages. However, Grace felt that she did not have the money or time to go back to school. She didn't want to sit in a classroom all day learning things she already knew from being an RN.



Grace decided to apply to a CBE program offered online. She liked that the program was designed for working nurses and focused on the learning competencies that she's heard others talk about at work.



Once Grace applied, a program mentor helped her with a personalized degree plan, which is a detailed blueprint of the competencies she will need to know and demonstrate to earn her degree in nursing.



The online CBE program pleasantly surprised Grace. As a nurse and a single mother, Grace has an unpredictable schedule, but she was still able to build a study plan that fit with her life. She took classes when her schedule allowed—usually in the evenings when her kids were in bed. She also found that she breezed through some courses and demonstrated her skills and knowledge of those courses by completing assessments (e.g., papers, tests, case studies).



For courses with material new to her, she was able to slow down and dig into the topic.

After two years, Grace received her BSN, which allowed her to advance at work. If she had pursued a similar program via a traditional seat-time-based program, it would have taken her four years to complete.

Notes

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