

Understanding Competency-Based Education, Credit for Prior Learning, and Other Flexible Learning Approaches in California



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About the California EDGE Coalition



The [CA EDGE](#) Coalition is a statewide advocacy organization that unites business, labor, social justice, education, and workforce organizations with a mission to build a broadly shared prosperity by advancing state workforce policies and investments to create economic mobility for all Californians.

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Introduction

Postsecondary credential attainment is a primary path to economic and social mobility. However, more than 5.5 million Californian adults have some college but no degree and are no longer enrolled.¹ For millions more who are juggling personal and work responsibilities, fitting college into an already hectic life seems impossible. More flexible postsecondary learning approaches would enable Californians—regardless of their prior education and current life circumstances—to participate in postsecondary learning, achieve marketable skills and credentials, and obtain family-sustaining careers.

Flexible learning approaches are those that are: responsive to each learner's unique learning needs, goals, and prior learning experiences; accessible at any time learners are able to engage in postsecondary learning activities; delivered via nontraditional methods that best suit each learner's education and training preferences; inclusive by formally recognizing and "crediting" college-level learning that takes place inside and outside of traditional education and training structures, and adaptive to changing economic and labor market conditions.

A more flexible postsecondary learning system is within reach in California and at its core are two widely recognized approaches that many colleges are implementing, experimenting with, or beginning to explore further--they are credit for prior learning and competency-based education. Credit for prior learning (CPL) enables learners to obtain credit for experiences that result in college-level competence gained outside of college or university credit-bearing, course classrooms. Competency-based education (CBE) allows learners to engage and progress through education and training

Two widely recognized flexible learning approaches are Credit for Prior Learning and Competency-based Education.

Credit for prior learning (CPL) enables learners to obtain credit for experiences that result in college-level competence gained outside of college or university credit-bearing, course classrooms.

Competency-based education (CBE) allows learners to engage and progress through education and training programs at their own pace obtaining credit and credentials based on demonstrated competence.

programs at their own pace obtaining credit and/or credentials based on demonstrated competence. Other flexible approaches being implemented in California include a hybrid flexible learning model (referred to as HyFlex). Additional definitions of these flexible learning approaches are provided in the appendix.

Recently, much work and attention has been paid to CPL; however, less is known about CBE in California. Additionally, what is not understood is California stakeholders' perceptions of flexible learning approaches including whether they see a pressing need; potential benefits and risks; challenges or barriers for implementation; essential practices for ensuring high-quality, equitable outcomes; and which flexible learning approaches postsecondary education and training institutions are already implementing. A more thorough understanding of flexible learning approaches, and stakeholders' perceptions of them, is necessary for identifying building blocks and establishing enabling conditions for greater adoption and implementation. It is within this context that a field study was undertaken to more fully understand the perceptions and endeavors of California postsecondary education practitioners and staff from business/industry, workforce development, and community-based organizations related to competency-based education, credit for prior learning, and other flexible learning approaches.

Flexible learning approaches are those that are:

- responsive to each learner's unique learning needs, goals, and prior learning experiences;
- accessible at any time learners are able to engage in postsecondary learning activities;
- delivered via nontraditional methods that best suit each learner's education and training preferences;
- all-encompassing by formally recognizing and "crediting" college-level learning that takes place inside and outside of traditional education and training structures; and
- adaptive to changing economic and labor market conditions.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey. 2018 5-Year Estimates Data Profile. Table DP02.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

Overall, there are multiple key findings and recommendations stemming from the field study as follows.

- There is keen interest in flexible learning approaches because of their potential promise for improving postsecondary and career outcomes particularly for students of color and adult learners with historically lower postsecondary participation and/or completion rates.
- There are multiple, compelling rationales for increasing flexible learning approaches including achieving equitable postsecondary outcomes, expanding learning options and choices, and increasing postsecondary completion; however, there are differences among stakeholder groups as to which rationales they consider most compelling and why.
- Unprecedented times are driving greater need for flexible learning approaches mostly due to the pandemic and increased equity consciousness.
- Stakeholders see many potential benefits of flexible approaches including improving postsecondary completion in a shorter period of time and/or at a lower cost; meeting the needs and motivations of diverse learner populations; and bridging gaps between postsecondary institutions, workforce development agencies, and employers.
- Several potential risks of flexible learning approaches were identified, however intentional safeguards and high-quality, equitable practices could mitigate most or all of them.
- There are a multitude of distinct practices that were identified as being “absolutely essential” for ensuring high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches.
- Multiple obstacles or barriers were identified as potentially significant for the adoption and implementation of flexible learning approaches.
- There are limited examples of flexible postsecondary education and training approaches being implemented in California and, of these, most are nascent.
- Ten building blocks for creating the enabling conditions for seeding the development and growth of flexible learning approaches have been identified.
- Twenty-three policy recommendations for state administrators and the legislature, employers, educational systems, and philanthropic organizations are provided in an effort to raise awareness of flexible learning approaches and to create enabling conditions to implement equitable, high-quality approaches, namely competency-based education and credit for prior learning.



Rationale for Expanding Credit for Prior Learning, Competency-Based Education, and Other Flexible Learning Approaches

As mentioned previously, most stakeholders participating in this field study indicated CPL, CBE, and other flexible learning approaches have the potential for better postsecondary and career outcomes, however, there were some differences in stakeholders' perceptions of the most compelling rationales for expanding them.

Community college and university practitioners were more likely to perceive increasing equitable outcomes, expanding learners' choices or options, and improving postsecondary completion as compelling reasons for expanding flexible learning approaches. Employers and workforce development practitioners view increasing skill alignment and attainment, learner personalization and customization, and equitable postsecondary outcomes as compelling reasons. The most common compelling reasons provided by stakeholders from community-based organizations were achieving more learner-centered education and training, accommodating life-long learning, expanding choice, and improving postsecondary completion.

“ The students who really need the educational system the most are ones who are least able to access it because they don't have the flexibility of doing it anytime, anywhere. This has implications for equity. Our educational system was developed centuries ago and we haven't changed much until we were forced with the pandemic to go completely online. The more there are opportunities [through CPL and CBE] for underserved students to see how far they can go...the further they'll go. It is the answer, in my opinion, for people being able to get out of poverty but they can't get out of poverty if they have to work within our constraints.

[Community College Administrator]

Interestingly, even though supporting a strong economy with a workforce that has adequate postsecondary credentials is often utilized as a rationale for the need for credit for prior learning and competency-based education, this was the least compelling rationale among stakeholders.



Top 3 Compelling Rationales for More Flexible Learning Approaches

Community Colleges and Universities

1. **Increase Equity:** equitable outcomes are more likely achievable with flexible learning approaches
2. **Expand Choice:** provide more options for a diverse range of students to participate (lifelong) in higher education that suits their learning preferences, time, pace, life circumstances, etc.
3. **Improve Postsecondary Completion:** with more flexible approaches, not bound by time and other constraints, more students will be able to complete degrees and credentials

Employers/Workforce Development

1. **Skill Alignment and Attainment:** ensure students have multiple ways to acquire and demonstrate proficiency in essential skills aligned with further postsecondary and career success
2. **Personalization and Customization:** there is a need for learning approaches that conform to students' individual learning experiences and needs that meets students where they are and allow for individualized progression
3. **Increase Equity:** equitable outcomes are more likely achievable with flexible learning approaches

Community-Based Organizations

1. **Student-Centered Learning:** because flexible learning approaches “meet students where they are” they promote student-centered learning and achievement
2. **Lifelong Learning:** flexible learning approaches are necessary as lifelong learning becomes essential
3. **Expand Choice:** provide more options for a diverse range of students to participate (lifelong) in higher education that suits their learning preferences, time, pace, life circumstances, etc.
4. **Improve Postsecondary Completion:** with more flexible approaches, not bound by time and other constraints, more students will be able to complete

“ We are simply going to have to figure out how to address inequities, with flexible approaches we can discover what the possibilities and opportunities are and maybe through this kind of initiative it can help address issues around equity and inequality in some significant way.
[Workforce Development Leader]

“ Ultimately equity gaps and skills gaps in our state can be addressed by providing additional opportunities for flexible modalities for learning.
[Community College Administrator]

Potential Benefits and Risks

In addition to these most compelling rationales a multitude of additional potential benefits, specifically for learners, were identified including increasing retention for those struggling to balance work, school, and life; accelerating postsecondary completion (in a shorter period of time) and at a lower cost; meeting the needs and motivations of diverse learner populations; facilitating life-long learning; and bridging gaps between postsecondary institutions/credentials and employers/careers.

A few potential risks were also identified, but these risks could be mitigated by ensuring safeguards and

implementing high-quality and equitable practices that are discussed later in this report. These potential risks include concerns or biases about the quality of flexible approaches (especially those offered primarily through remote learning) by higher education practitioners, employers, and learners; learners not fully understanding or underestimating their readiness and/or likeliness for success in specific flexible learning approaches; and continuing gaps between postsecondary credentials, business/industry needs, and employment/career requirements.



“ Without strong structures based on industry standards you can invest a lot [in flexible learning approaches] and still not have better career outcomes.
[Workforce Development Leader]

“ Flexible learning approaches” make it more likely adults will have an efficient route to upskilling over a lifetime.
[Community-Based Organization Leader]

“ Credit for prior learning sends students a message that you are already doing college-level work and you belong in college. It can incentivize grit, perseverance, and give students evidence of success already under their belts which can also be a strong boost to one’s self-perception, particularly related to their ability to complete college.
[University Administrator]

Unprecedented Times Drive Greater Need for Flexible Learning Approaches

“ Because of COVID, everyone is looking at more flexible approaches.
[Workforce Development Leader]

“ Flexible learning options have become a must given the current COVID-19 pandemic and the need for academia to be nimble and adaptable.
[Community College Administrator]

“ Now is the time to be creative as we've pushed the envelope on virtual learning.
[Community College Faculty]

“ Where people are and where they need to be (for career success) are constantly changing therefore we need to rethink how learning is delivered to close the gaps.
[Workforce Development Leader]

The field study revealed unprecedented times are also driving a greater need for more flexible learning approaches mostly stemming from the immediate shift (due to the pandemic) of postsecondary education and training to remote learning, the expansion of alternative postsecondary providers and credentials, and a significant increase in equity-consciousness and growing imperative for equitable learner outcomes. More specifically, nearly three-quarters (74%) of individuals interviewed for the study indicated the need for flexible learning approaches is greater because of the pandemic. Additionally, 89% indicate there is a greater need due to the heightened awareness of the importance of equity. Many stakeholders spoke to how the pandemic is connected to equity awareness as it uncovered structural

and systemic inequities that were either hidden or hypothesized but not necessarily confirmed or their extent fully realized.

Many field study participants indicate today's most common learning approaches may be antiquated given expanding and diverse learner populations and rapidly changing technologies and business and industry conditions. The most commonly antiquated issue mentioned was the rootedness of the Carnegie unit and credit hour within many postsecondary education constructs, policies, and metrics—even though neither the Carnegie unit or credit hour were not originally intended to determine or restrict learning approaches or to serve as a proxy for learning attainment.

“ The Carnegie unit was established to calculate teacher pensions. It continues to be misused as an organizational structure for learning and skill attainment. Our ability to honor previous learning outside of the classroom and to utilize flexible assessment approaches is long overdue.
[Community College Administrator]

“ Seat time” as a measure no longer has any value with the amount of information available to all. Learning happens in many ways over a lifetime.
[Community-Based Organization Leader]

Essential Practices for High-Quality, Equitable Flexible Learning Approaches

A multitude of distinct practices (26) were identified by most field study participants as being “absolutely essential” for ensuring high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches. These practices are not uniquely correlated with credit for prior learning, competency-based education, and other flexible learning approaches. In fact, most stakeholders indicate these practices are essential for ensuring optimal learner outcomes irrespective of learning approach. However, we have chosen to illuminate these practices in the field study and this report for three meaningful reasons. The first reason is to capitalize on lessons learned from existing approaches and from the recent transition to remote learning to improve and achieve equitable outcomes. Second, as institutions undergo extensive planning, development, and implementation activities for commencing flexible learning approaches, these practices should be considered and incorporated. Third, these practices undergird the building blocks and policy recommendations discussed later in this report. All twenty-six, absolutely essential practices are provided in the appendix. The top 10 practices for ensuring high-quality, and top 10 practices for ensuring equitable, flexible learning approaches are summarized in the table that follows.

Absolutely Essential Practices for High-Quality, Equitable Flexible Learning Approaches	
High-Quality Practices	Equitable Practices
1. There is widespread portability of credit earned through flexible approaches (transferable from one institution to another)	1. Transparent and clear information is provided to learners to make informed choices about participating in CPL, CBE, and other flexible approaches including pros/cons and differences between options
2. Program transparency (e.g., transparency about curriculum, assessments, learning methods, etc.) is ensured	2. Systemic bias and structural inequities are identified and eradicated in the development, implementation, and evaluation of flexible learning approaches and in the administrative processes and support services learners’ encounter
3. External employer/business partners are involved in competency identification, definition, assessment methods, etc.	3. Ample learner supports are provided (readiness, programmatic, financial, etc.)
4. Rigorous, quality assessments are utilized	4. (tie) Culturally-responsive and -inclusive instruction, support, process/systems, assessments, etc. are implemented

“ We need to take it apart [our current approaches] and try to put it back together in a way that provides the quality, the transparency, and the equity . . .
[Workforce Development Leader] ”

Absolutely Essential Practices for High-Quality, Equitable Flexible Learning Approaches

High-Quality Practices	Equitable Practices
5. Data (including disaggregated data) is continuously collected, analyzed, and utilized to improve programs/practices and document what does and does not work	4. (tie) Learners are equipped with all technologies, learning resources, information, and support services necessary for full and timely participation, progress, and goal attainment
6. (tie) Learner transparency is achieved by providing frequent information and feedback on learner's progress, proficiency, and pace	6. (tie) There are consistent expectations and understanding of proficiency
6. (tie) Responsive approaches are designed and implemented to meet learners where they are, responding to their goals and personalizing and customizing their learning	6. (tie) There is widespread portability of credit earned through flexible approaches (transferable from one institution to another)
6. (tie) Applied projects and assessment activities are utilized for learning and demonstrating proficiency	8. (tie) Multiple assessment methods are provided whereby there are multiple ways for learners to demonstrate proficiency
9. Ample professional development, technical assistance, and other supports are provided for faculty, staff, and administrators	8. (tie) Ample information and support is provided to learners to ensure smooth and successful transitions to further education (transfer) and employment
10. There is clear understanding, by stakeholders, of flexible approaches being implemented including benefits/challenges, pros/cons, and how to implement them	10. Evidence is provided that demonstrates equitable learner access, participation, progress, and success



Keen Interest, Nascent Implementation

We found limited examples of flexible postsecondary education and training approaches being implemented in California and, of those we identified, most are nascent in their implementation. However, we did ascertain there is keen interest in implementing flexible learning approaches by colleges, universities, and workforce development organizations. Most of this implementation interest is centered on CPL and slightly less on CBE. While further examination of the underlying motivations behind institutional interests that are driving implementation was beyond the scope of this field study, we did uncover some indications. CPL may have more interest/implementation due to institutions' desire to serve active military personnel and veterans with prior military experience, recent CPL policies requiring all community colleges in California to adopt policies to implement CPL by the end of 2020, and the relative ease of implementing CPL (compared to CBE) within existing structures/parameters particularly those pertaining to the well-established credit hour and Carnegie unit. This later reason may also account for our discovery of a greater interest in implementing CBE in noncredit, not-for-credit, and/or continuing education programs.

Examples of flexible learning approaches identified during this field study included community colleges establishing local CPL policies and piloting CPL in various disciplines and programs, expanding CPL activities and services for veterans, experimenting with offering CBE noncredit

courses and programs, and working with employers to develop competency frameworks and constructs that drive curriculum and program development. We ascertained universities are implementing CPL, offering CBE continuing education programs, and utilizing HyFlex learning approaches. We also uncovered workforce development organizations implementing CPL in pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs and defining and using competencies to coach individuals on recognizing and conveying their capabilities, especially for employment purposes.

What we were not able to glean from these examples, which warrants further examination, are evidence of outcomes including ascertaining any differential outcomes by learning approach and by learner population; learners' perspectives on and/or experiences with different learning approaches; and a more in-depth understanding of matters that are crucial for successfully implementing flexible learning approaches such as accreditation, funding models, mechanisms to ensure credit portability, and more. It will also be important, while pursuing these areas of further inquiry, to prioritize equity-mindedness and frame what is learned within an equity paradigm.



Potential Challenges or Barriers

Several potentially “significant” challenges or barriers were identified for commencing and implementing flexible learning approaches. Participants in the field study did not view these challenges or barriers as insurmountable, deterrents, or overshadowing the potential benefits of these approaches. Rather, they were identified in an effort to raise awareness of additional matters that will most likely need to be addressed in order to achieve wide-scale implementation. They are also useful for planning and taking proactive measures to mitigate impediments to progress.

Potentially Significant Challenges or Barriers to Flexible Learning Approaches

(in order by number of field study participants who indicated them as significant)

- Aligning programs, competencies, curriculum, etc. to meet ever-changing needs of learners and marketplace
- Generally, a lack of awareness or understanding of purpose/value of CPL, CBE, and/or flexible learning approaches
- Myths and misconceptions of CPL, CBE, flexible learning approaches
- Portability/acceptance of credits earned through CPL, CBE, other flexible approaches
- Bureaucratic, rigid systems and processes
- Equity concerns
- Technical challenges including modifications to Student Information Systems (SIS), Learning Management Systems (LMS), other information systems, credit transcription, interoperability of information systems, etc.
- Rules/standards set by other, external agencies (e.g., accreditors, Department of Education, NCAA, state and federal funding regulations, financial aid regulations, etc.)
- Understanding and capacity (among administrators, faculty, staff, etc.) necessary for leading and implementing flexible approaches
- Covering additional costs and additional resources needed
- Developing applied learning projects and activities
- Developing multiple, quality formative and summative assessments
- Defining and aligning competencies

“ I hope this will be a step in that direction by taking flexible learning approaches and other modalities and cobbling them together to make a path to achieving more equity.
[Community College Administrator]

Enabling Building Blocks

Overall, we have identified ten building blocks for creating the enabling conditions for seeding the development and growth of flexible learning approaches. The building blocks were derived from themes that emerged from field study interviews, pre-interview surveys, and contributions from advisors. Additionally, the building blocks address the absolutely essential practices for high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches and may be able to mitigate potential risks, challenges, and barriers previously discussed in this report.

Equity: *intentional focus and measures are undertaken to ensure the development and implementation of flexible learning approaches safeguard against systemic biases, structural inequities, and disproportionate learner outcomes by race or gender, and to promote culturally-affirming pedagogies and practices.*

Extensive efforts and resources should be expended to commence flexible learning approaches and it is imperative to take all necessary precautions and actions to ensure these learning approaches do not repeat, extend, or widen historical, postsecondary education inequities.

Collaboration: *cross-sector stakeholders coalesce to develop and implement equitable, high-quality flexible learning approaches.*

Field study participants and contributors emphasized the need for the right individuals and stakeholders, including employers and diverse learners, to be actively engaged in all aspects of the design, development, and implementation of flexible learning approaches (refer to policy recommendations section for more information on individuals to be included and/or engaged). In addition to creating learning approaches that meet the needs of all learners and stakeholders, it is thought that collaboration will increase buy-in, allay concerns about equity and quality, and alleviate issues with the portability of learning and credits from one institution/organization to another.

Responsiveness: *timely, direct, and equity-driven responses to diverse learner's educational needs, preferences, and progression and also to business and industry workforce needs are essential design elements and implementation practices of flexible learning approaches.*

Several objectives related to responsiveness were underscored by field study participants which were: to provide more learner-centered and personalized learning approaches; to meet the needs of businesses, industries, and California's economy; and to provide learning approaches that can quickly adapt and respond to changing conditions.

Transparency: *clear, accessible information about flexible learning approaches and learner progression enables informed, consistent expectations and effective decision-making.*

Transparency is necessary for multiple audiences—learners, stakeholders, and decision makers. For learners, transparency about each learning approach (including similarities, differences, pros/cons, and what types of learners are successful in them) will enable better-informed choices. In addition, transparency is necessary for learners to adequately gauge progress and proficiency attainment during participation in flexible learning approaches. For all other stakeholders, transparency about underlying competencies, curriculum, instructional and assessment methods, and outcomes could dispel quality and equity concerns and ease the transfer, portability of learning and credits. Additionally, transparency about implementation challenges is necessary for garnering support and resources learners, institutions, and systems will need to succeed.

Portability: *widespread acceptance of authenticated learning and competencies and credits awarded through prior learning, competency-based education, and other flexible learning approaches.*

Policies, practices, and other mechanisms should be undertaken to ensure credits earned through flexible learning approaches are readily transferable between postsecondary institutions and applied towards credential completion and employment/career requirements.

Learner-Support: *ample information, resources, and services tailored to unique and diverse characteristics of flexible learning approaches and participating learners.*

Attention and resources must be sufficiently directed toward learner supports. Much has been learned about inadequacies with information, accessibility, resources, services, and other supports with the recent, abrupt transition to remote learning due to the pandemic. These lessons—along with a long-standing, under-emphasis on learner support in postsecondary education and training—should be addressed with the development and implementation of flexible learning approaches. In the words of one study participant “*We spend so much time on education and training and overlook support that individuals need.*” [Workforce Development System Leader]

Learning Authentication: *multiple rigorous, applied, and authentic assessment methods and documentation methods utilized for authenticating learning and competence.*

The measurement of learning, competencies, and proficiencies is presently an area needing further development for all learning approaches. Introducing flexible approaches into the learning ecosystem presents opportunities for advancing assessment, learning authentication, and documentation methods; for addressing issues with assessment design and practices that disproportionately impact learner populations; and for including multiple stakeholders in assessment development. Additionally, field study participants recommend, for equity purposes, providing learners multiple assessment options so they may choose one that will optimize their performance and best reflect or demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Furthermore, adequate resources should be allocated to

support assessment-related professional development activities, documentation tools (e.g., transcripts, badging, etc.), and to cover the cost of assessment activities to both institutions and learners.

Capacity-Building: *commitment, understanding, and capability to implement equitable, high-quality accredited flexible learning approaches is nurtured, including with extensive professional development and technical assistance.*

As mentioned previously, there were multiple potential capacity-related challenges and barriers identified including lack of awareness or understanding, myths and misconceptions, technical challenges, and more. Additionally, 28 absolutely essential practices were identified for ensuring high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches. Extensive capacity-building efforts must be supported and undertaken to address the challenge/barriers and implement essential practices—to facilitate implementation and ultimately to ensure optimal learner outcomes.

Infrastructure and Resources: *processes, systems, standards, policies, regulations, and funding created, modified, and/or augmented to support flexible learning approaches.*

Flexible learning approaches—particularly CBE which is untethered from the Carnegie unit and credit hour—will require extensive infrastructure modifications for which ample leadership, support, and resources will be needed to ensure complete, efficacious, scaled, and sustained implementation.

Evidence: *evidence-base established to evaluate and demonstrate efficacy of flexible learning approaches.*

Data (including disaggregated data) should be continuously collected, analyzed, and used to demonstrate efficacy, improve flexible learning approaches, and document what does and does not work for which students. This evidence is also useful for increasing stakeholder understanding, decision making, and for addressing misconceptions or concerns.

Policy Recommendations

Lastly, we conclude with policy recommendations which are intended to raise awareness of flexible learning approaches and create enabling conditions to implement equitable, high-quality approaches, namely competency-based education (CBE) and credit for prior learning (CPL). These recommendations address the building blocks outlined previously in this report including the need for an evidence-base to be established for both CBE and CPL, with emphasis on CBE, to demonstrate value and worthiness of further investment.

It is important to note that although CBE and CPL are often discussed and explored together, they are very different things. As noted in their description in the introduction, CBE allows learners to engage and progress through education and training programs at their own pace obtaining credit and credentials based on demonstrated competence and CPL enables learners to obtain credit for experiences that result in college-level competence gained outside of college or university credit-bearing course classrooms.

Recommendations for the Administration and Legislature

1. Establish a state taskforce of key stakeholders to provide systematic attention to flexible learning options (including CBE and CPL) and build roadmaps to achieve what is laid out in the building blocks explained in this report.
 - a. This work could be assigned to an existing body instead of creating a new taskforce. However, it is imperative this body has appropriate stakeholders at the table including postsecondary and secondary institutions, systems, governance bodies, and students (including those most likely to participate in flexible learning approaches such as adult learners); workforce development and apprenticeship systems and organizations; employers; business, industry, and economic development organizations and associations; and union representatives.
 - b. Taskforce member participation will need to be incentivized.
 - c. The taskforce should be appropriately staffed to ensure it can carry out its charge.
 - d. The taskforce should be led by a high-level individual or team, possibly appointed by the Governor, who has credibility and visibility.
 - e. The taskforce should establish workgroups to further explore topics requiring further inquiry including those identified in this report (e.g., funding models, transfer, etc.). These workgroups should include members with topic-related expertise along with stakeholder representation and engagement.
2. Statement from the Governor of California uplifting the potential of CBE and CPL as an equity strategy and request that postsecondary system leaders collaborate on integrating them as integral components of postsecondary education.
3. Develop a legislative joint resolution underscoring the importance of CBE, CPL, and other flexible learning options as critical equity and acceleration strategies.
4. Implement pilot programs to build the evidence-base for further investment for widespread implementation of CBE.
5. Work with system leaders to consider and address needed infrastructure, technologies, professional development, funding, and policies to support widespread adoption of CBE and CPL.
6. Explore alternative funding models that would support more flexible learning options (this could be assigned to an existing or new taskforce or to a workgroup established by this recommended taskforce).
7. Consider the need to call for a new Master Plan for Higher Education that outlines new priorities for building California's economic strength, and the equitable economic and social mobility of its residents, through postsecondary attainment including a wide range of learning options (including CBE and CPL) and credentials.

Recommendations for Employers

1. Raise awareness of the benefits of both competency-based hiring and competency-based postsecondary credentials.
2. Empower employers to participate in advocacy related to CBE and CPL.
3. Include employers in developing competency-based postsecondary education and training programs including the defining and assessing of competencies.
4. Assume a leadership role in creating employer demand for and collaborating in the development of flexible learning options (including CPL and CBE) and competency-based hiring.

Recommendations for Educational Systems

1. Support and prioritize the development of high-quality CBE in an array of disciplines, modalities, and approaches such as direct assessment, course-based, credit, and non-credit.
2. Continue work to understand and address needed infrastructure, technologies, funding, and policies to support widespread adoption of CBE and CPL.
3. CCC, CSU, and UC system leaders should issue a joint statement in support of CBE and CPL and should commit to addressing the policy changes needed to implement, including portability of credits across educational segments.
4. Create an intersegmental task force (CCC, UC, and CSU) to develop policies that provide for the seamless transfer of credits earned through CBE and CPL.
5. Prioritize professional development, technical assistance, and resources for increasing the capacity of faculty, staff, and administrators to implement quality, equitable, and accredited flexible learning options including CBE and CPL.

Recommendations for Philanthropy

1. Support the development of the evidence-base and roadmaps to achieve greater access to CBE and CPL.
2. Support building the evidence-base that demonstrates the effectiveness of CBE and CPL for increasing success and credential attainment for diverse students.
3. Support development, validation, and dissemination of performance-based assessments that are trusted by educational institutions, employers, and learners.
4. Support professional development efforts for developing and implementing CBE and CPL, including faculty training on authentic assessment and other effective assessment practices that apply to the broad scope of learning modalities and options.
5. Develop the case for support that demonstrates a ROI for the state to invest in CBE and CPL, for educational institutions and workforce development agencies to offer CBE and CPL, and for employers to hire based on CBE and CPL.
6. Support efforts to explore alternative funding models that could support more flexible learning options.
7. Support research activities to garner learners' perspectives on CBE and CPL.

APPENDIX

DEFINITIONS OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING APPROACHES

Credit for Prior Learning

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) is also commonly referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). For purposes of this field study and report, we have defined CPL as “enabling learners to obtain credit for experiences that result in college-level competence gained outside of college or university credit-bearing, course classrooms”. Below are additional definitions from national, leading CPL/PLA organizations and higher education systems in California.

American Council on Education (ACE). Academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the 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 portfolios.

Lakin, M.B., Nellum, C.J., Seymour, D., Crandall, J.R. (2015). Credit for prior learning: Charting institutional practice for sustainability. A report published on behalf of American Council on Education (ACE), Center for Policy Research and Strategy, and the Center for Education Attainment and Innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Charting-Institutional-Practice-for-Sustainability.pdf>.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Prior Learning Assessment, is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom (or from non-college instructional programs), including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service. PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2010, March). Fueling the race to postsecondary success: A 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes. Retrieved from http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/premium_content_resources/pla/PDF/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Prior learning is a term used by educators to describe learning that a person acquires outside a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or noncollege courses or seminars. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a term used to describe the process by which an individual's experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA and, when properly conducted, all ensure academic quality: (1) national standardized exams in specified disciplines, e.g., Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Excelsior College exams, DSST (DANTES Subject Standardized Tests); (2) challenge exams for local courses; (3) evaluated non-college programs, e.g., American Council on Education (ACE) evaluations of corporate training and military training; and (4) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments.

Klein-Collins, R., Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. (2012). Competency-based degree programs in the U.S.: Postsecondary credentials for measurable student learning and performance. Retrieved from <https://www.cael.org/cbe/publication/competency-based-programs-us>.

California Community Colleges. Credit for prior learning is college credit awarded for validated college-level skills and knowledge gained outside of a college classroom.

Success Center for California Community Colleges Credit for Prior Learning Initiative. (n.d.). Findings and recommendations to expand credit for prior learning as a vision for success strategy. Retrieved from <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCO-Website/Reports/success-center-cpl-initiative-report-for-ccco-final.pdf?la=en&hash=2B50F17C0A47775A58EAF6631613B6A4D537CB8F>

Competency-Based Education

For purposes of this field study and report, we have defined competency-based education as “allowing learners to engage and progress through education and training programs at their own pace obtaining credit and/or credentials based on demonstrated competence”. The following are definitions from national, leading competency-based education organizations, accrediting organizations, and higher education systems in California.

Competency-Based Education Network (CBEN).

Competency-based education combines an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and the expectations about learning are held constant.

Students acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities and experiences that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. Students receive proactive guidance and support from faculty and staff. Learners earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment, often at a personalized pace.

Competency-Based Education Network. (2017). Quality framework for competency-based education programs. Retrieved from <https://www.cbenetwork.org/competency-based-education/>

Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC).

In general, competency-based education is an outcomes-based approach to earning a college degree or other credential. Competencies are statements of what students can do as a result of their learning at an institution of higher education. While competencies can include knowledge or understanding, they primarily emphasize what students can do with their knowledge. Students progress through degree or credential programs by demonstrating competencies specified at the course and/or program level. The curriculum is structured around these specified competencies, and satisfactory academic progress is expressed as the attainment or mastery of the identified competencies. Because competencies are often anchored to external expectations, such as those of employers, to pass a competency, students must generally perform at a level considered to be very good or excellent.

Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions. (n.d.) *Statement of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). Framework for competency-based education.* Retrieved from <https://www.wscuc.org/content/competency-based-education-statement-c-rac>

Education Commission of the States. Competency-based education offers a flexible way for students to earn credit based on demonstration of subject-matter knowledge learned either through personalized guided instruction or examinations based on mastery of competencies.

Education Commission of the States. (2017, June). Competency-based education policy snapshot. Retrieved from <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/PS-Competency-Based-Education.pdf>

WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies

(WCET). Competency-based education is an educational delivery model which assesses a student’s mastery of pre-defined competencies for advancement toward a credential. Competency-based education uses learning instead of time as the measure of student success.

WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies. Retrieved from <https://wcet.wiche.edu/focus-areas/student-success/competency-based-education#:~:text=Competency%2Dbased%20education%20is%20an,for%20advancement%20toward%20a%20credential.&text=While%20many%20are%20still%20debating,help%20meet%20national%20completion%20goals>. WCET is a division of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

California Community Colleges (pending approval and adoption). Direct assessment competency-based education is an intentional outcomes-based, equity-minded approach to earning a college degree with the expectations of learning held constant, but time is variable through a flexible, self-paced, high-touch and innovative learning practice.

California Community Colleges. (2020, October 29). 15-day notice of modifications to text of proposed amendments to California Code of Regulations, Title 5 regarding direct assessment competency-based education. Retrieved from <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCO-Website/Office-of-General-Counsel/15-day-notice-of-rulemaking-for-cbe-ally.pdf?la=en&hash=311E5C602660E495D2B9C6BEB6F6A69E6666741E>

Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) Learning

Below, are two definitions from a national, higher education organization and from San Francisco State University where HyFlex was originated by Brian J. Beatty, Associate Professor of Instructional Technologies.

Educause. The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex, course format is an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in-person, synchronously online, and asynchronously online. Students can decide—for each class or activity—how to participate.

Educause. (2020, July). 7 things you should know about they HyFlex course model. Retrieved from <https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2020/7/eli7173.pdf>

San Francisco State University Academic Senate Policy S16-264. HyFlex courses are class sessions that allow students to choose whether to attend classes face-to-face or online, synchronously, or asynchronously.

B. J. Beatty (Ed.). (2019, October). Hybrid-Flexible Course Design. EdTech Books. Retrieved from https://edtechbooks.org/pdfs/print/hyflex/_hyflex.pdf

ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR HIGH-QUALITY, EQUITABLE FLEXIBLE LEARNING APPROACHES

The following twenty-six, distinct practices were identified by most field study participants as being “absolutely essential” for ensuring high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches.

High-Quality Practices

- Program transparency (e.g., transparency about curriculum, assessments, learning methods, etc.) is ensured
- External employer/business partners are involved in competency identification, definition, assessment methods, etc.
- Rigorous, quality assessments are utilized
- Data (including disaggregated data) is continuously collected, analyzed, and utilized to improve programs/practices and document what does and does not work
- Responsive approaches are designed and implemented to meet learners where they are, responding to their goals and personalizing and customizing their learning
- Applied projects and assessment activities are utilized for learning and demonstrating proficiency
- Ample professional development, technical assistance, and other supports are provided for faculty, staff, and administrators
- There is clear understanding, by stakeholders, of flexible approaches being implemented including benefits/challenges, pros/cons, and how to develop and implement them
- What individuals have learned by other means (e.g., work experience, military experience, other) is formally recognized (by awarding credit)
- There is shared vision and high institutional commitment to flexible learning approaches
- Orientation programs and learner self-assessments are utilized to ensure learners are adequately prepared to succeed in each type of flexible learning approach

Equity Practices

- Transparent and clear information is provided to learners to make informed choices about participating in CPL, CBE, and other flexible approaches including pros/cons and differences between options
- Systemic bias and structural inequities are identified and eradicated in the development, implementation, and evaluation of flexible learning approaches and in the administrative processes and support services learners’ encounter
- Ample learner supports are provided (readiness, programmatic, financial, etc.)
- Culturally-responsive and -inclusive instruction, support, processes/systems, assessments, etc. are implemented
- Learners are equipped with all technologies, learning resources, information, and support services necessary for full and timely participation, progress, and goal attainment
- There are consistent expectations and understanding of proficiency
- Ample information and support are provided to learners to ensure smooth and successful transitions to further education (transfer) and employment
- There is timely assessment, monitoring, feedback, intervention, and support to ensure learner progress, proficiency, and pace
- Frequent coaching, advising, mentoring, both academic and career, is provided
- Micro-credentialing, badging, or other methods for recognizing and documenting competency proficiency in addition to credit attainment is employed
- Continuous assessment and improvement processes are employed to identify and respond to inequitable learning outcomes

Both Quality and Equity Practices

- There is widespread portability of credit earned through flexible approaches (transferable from one institution to another)
- Multiple assessment methods are provided whereby there are multiple ways for learners to demonstrate proficiency
- Research and evidence on effective policies, practices, and more—and for which student groups (using disaggregated data)—is widely available and utilized
- Learner transparency is achieved by providing frequent information and feedback on learner's progress, proficiency, and pace

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