

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

Executive Summary

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 or credential and are no longer enrolled. 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 attend college, achieve credentials, and obtain family-sustaining careers. Flexible learning approaches are responsive and accessible to learners, delivered via nontraditional methods, recognize and credit all college-level learning that occurs in and out of traditional learning organizations, and adapt to changing economic and labor market conditions.

A flexible, personalized postsecondary learning system is within reach and at its core are two widely recognized approaches—they are credit for prior learning (CPL)¹ and competency-based education (CBE)². Recently in California, much work and attention has been paid to CPL, however, less is known about CBE (and other flexible approaches in use in California such as the HyFlex³ learning model). Additionally, what is not understood in California are stakeholders' perceptions and experiences with flexible learning approaches and their views on what are essential practices for ensuring these approaches are high-quality and equitable. To gain a better understanding, the California Edge Coalition with funding from Lumina Foundation, conducted a field study of California postsecondary education practitioners and staff from business/industry, workforce development, and community-based organizations. This is a summary of the findings and recommendations.

Rationale for Expanding Flexible Learning Approaches.

California stakeholders see multiple, compelling rationales for increasing flexible learning approaches. Most common rationales are: expanding learning options/choices for a diverse range of learners; increasing and achieving equitable postsecondary completion; enabling student-centered, personalized, life-long learning; and achieving closer alignment between postsecondary credentials and employer/economic needs.

¹ 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.

² 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.

Unprecedented Times Drive Greater Need for Flexible Approaches. Stakeholders indicate there is a greater need for more flexible approaches due to rapidly changing conditions such as: the shift to remote learning as a consequence of the pandemic; the growing diversity of learning populations; heightened equity consciousness and imperative for equitable postsecondary learner outcomes; increasing alternative learner providers and credentials; emerging technologies; and shifting business and industry needs.

Essential Practices for High-Quality, Equitable Flexible Learning Approaches. Overall, stakeholders identified 26 distinct practices as absolutely essential for ensuring high-quality, equitable flexible learning approaches which are detailed in the report. Most often cited high-quality and equity practices include: portability of credit earned; program transparency; employer/business partner involvement; rigorous, quality assessments; transparent information for learners; identification and eradication of systemic and structural inequities; ample learner supports; and culturally-responsive and -inclusive instruction, services, and processes.

Keen Interest, Nascent Implementation. There is keen interest for implementing flexible learning approaches particularly for CPL (likely due to recent policy changes, a desire to serve military personnel, and its relative ease of implementation) and slightly less for CBE which is more difficult to implement. In contrast to the level of interest, we found only a handful of institutions/organizations implementing flexible approaches (most in nascent stages). These approaches include: community colleges establishing local CPL policies and piloting CPL; community colleges experimenting with noncredit CBE programs; universities offering CPL, HyFlex learning models, and CBE continuing education programs; and workforce development agencies integrating CPL in pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs.

Potentially Significant Challenges and Barriers.

Participants in the field study indicate there are several potentially significant barriers to implementing flexible

³ HyFlex learning is where courses combine face-to-face and synchronous and asynchronous, online instruction and the learner chooses the learning modality for any or all portions of the course.

learning approaches, however they did not see them as insurmountable, or as over-shadowing the potential benefits. They are highlighted to raise awareness and so that planning efforts can be undertaken to anticipate and mitigate them. The significant challenges/barriers most often identified are: aligning programs, competencies, curriculum to the everchanging needs of learners and the marketplace; myths, misperceptions, and lack of awareness/understanding of purpose/value of flexible learning approaches; portability of credit earned; bureaucratic and rigid systems and processes; and equity concerns. The remaining, potentially significant challenges and barriers are detailed in the report.

Enabling Building Blocks. The study illuminated, from themes that emerged, ten overall building blocks for creating the enabling conditions for seeding the development and growth of flexible learning approaches. Collectively the building blocks address all the absolutely essential practices and could mitigate many of the challenges/barriers that were identified. The building blocks, fully detailed in the report, are as follows:

- Equity
- Collaboration
- Responsiveness
- Transparency
- Portability
- Learner Support
- Learning Authentication
- Capacity Building
- Infrastructure, Resources
- Evidence

Policy Recommendations. Several policies are recommended and aimed at raising awareness of flexible learning approaches; creating enabling conditions to implement equitable, high-quality approaches (namely CBE and CPL); and to address the ten building blocks listed above. The recommendations are segmented by four groups: administration and legislature, employers, educational systems, and philanthropy. The recommendations, summarized below, are detailed in the report.

Recommendations for the Administration and Legislature

- Establish a statewide taskforce to provide systematic attention to flexible learning approaches
- Statement from the Governor of California uplifting the potential of CBE and CPL and request postsecondary system leaders implement them
- Develop a legislative joint resolution underscoring the importance of CBE, CPL, and other flexible learning approaches
- Work with system leaders to consider/address needed infrastructure, technologies, professional development, funding, and policies to support widespread adoption of CBE and CPL
- Explore alternative funding models that would support more flexible learning approaches
- Consider the ongoing need to call for a new/updated Master Plan for Higher Education that includes a wide range of learning approaches (including CBE and CPL)

Recommendations for Employers

- Raise awareness of the benefits of both competency-based hiring and competency-based postsecondary credentials
- Empower employers to participate in advocacy related to CBE and CPL
- Include employers in developing CBE education and training programs
- Assume a leadership role in creating employer demand for flexible learning approaches

Recommendations for Educational Systems

- Support/prioritize the development of high-quality CBE in array of disciplines, modalities, and approaches
- Continue work to understand/address needed infrastructure, technologies, funding, and policies to support widespread adoption of CBE and CPL
- CCC, CSU, and UC system leaders should issue a joint statement in support of CBE and CPL and commit to addressing needed policy changes
- 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
- Prioritize professional development, technical assistance, and resources for increasing capacities to implement CBE and CPL

Recommendations for Philanthropy

- Support the development of the evidence-base and roadmaps to achieve greater access to CBE and CPL
- Support building the evidence-base that demonstrates the effectiveness of CBE and CPL for increasing success and credential attainment for diverse students
- Support development, validation, and dissemination of performance-based assessments
- Support professional development efforts for developing and implementing CBE and CPL
- Develop the case for support that demonstrates a Return on Investment (ROI) for the state to invest in CBE and CPL
- Support efforts to explore alternative funding models to support flexible learning approaches
- Support research activities to garner learners' perspectives on CBE and CPL