



Partners in a New Learning Model:

▶ Competency-Based Education and Credit for Prior Learning

Today's learners demand a new, agile model for education. They need options that are more accessible, flexible, and clearly aligned to careers. And to deliver on that, higher education has to break out of time-bound programs—15-credit hour semesters, two-year and four-year degrees—and concepts of learning that are strictly tied to traditional course-based instruction. Instead, higher education should be focused on what students actually know and can do, no matter where they learned it or how long it took.

Competencies Provide the Learning Currency of this Future.

They set clear expectations about knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors and center learning around their development and demonstration. This approach allows educators to unpack and rebuild courses and programs in ways that work better for learners, especially those who are already working, and the employers looking to hire them.

Both **competency-based education** (CBE) and **credit for prior learning** (CPL) operate within that framework. And both are receiving heightened attention as a growing number of education providers think differently about how to serve today's students during the COVID-19 pandemic recovery and beyond. While CBE and CPL work well together, each is distinct. Understanding those distinctions and how the two approaches can be fitted together is critical to using them as part of a new agile model for learning.

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What is Competency-Based Education?

Competency-based education focuses on student learning and the application of that learning—what they know and can do—rather than time spent in class. Competencies are clearly defined and measured through rigorous assessments and demonstrations. At its best, CBE requires learners to not only possess discrete knowledge and skills but also integrate them and be able to apply them across novel situations. That is true competence.

When designed carefully and rigorously competency-based education enables:

- Greater flexibility for the learner,
- Shorter time to credential,
- Reduced cost and thus risk, and
- Improved connections between learning and work.

Organizations such as the Competency-Based Education Network, with its Quality Framework, have already laid the groundwork for how to design programs that can deliver. Competency-based learning isn't simply a programmatic approach but creates a new framework for fitting learning—measured by competencies, not coursework—together. In that way, competency-based learning provides a structure that complements and magnifies the impact of practices such as prior learning assessment.

What is Credit for Prior Learning/ Prior Learning Assessment?

Credit for prior learning is an approach that uses assessments and reviews of noncredit training to evaluate knowledge and skills that a student has developed outside of the college classroom—including work experience, military training, internships, volunteer work, and self-study. If the student's knowledge is comparable to college-level learning, then the student can be awarded college credit by a postsecondary institution.

So, ultimately, CPL—or prior learning assessment (PLA), as it's alternately called — is about earning college credit for what you already know and can do. There are several different methods for evaluating prior learning, including:

- Standardized exams, such as the CLEP test;
- Challenge exams, developed by faculty for a specific course or subject;
- Portfolio assessment; and
- Other evaluations of formal learning experiences, such as licensing and military training.

In other words, CPL is a method for assessing raw knowledge and skills and translating them into the coin of the realm, whether that's traditional credit hours or competencies.

How do CBE and CPL Work Together?

CBE and CPL both share the guiding principle that colleges and universities should be more focused on recognizing and valuing learning itself — regardless of where that learning takes place, how long it takes, or how it is acquired.

Nevertheless, they play different roles in the learning ecosystem. CPL is a tool to translate raw learning to either credit hours or competencies. CBE, on the other hand, takes competencies and creates a new framework for credentialing, or more broadly for developing, assessing, and integrating learning, whether it happens as part of a formal education program or outside of it. With a CBE framework in place, CPL can be more easily and effectively integrated into credentialing programs.

In traditional higher education models, CPL typically maps to entire courses. Thus, if a learner only has half of the knowledge expected for a course, it's as if she has none and gets no credit. But if we're talking competencies, CPL can capture and give credit for precisely what that person knows. That credit maps to an overall outcome — competence in defined areas — rather than fixed courses.

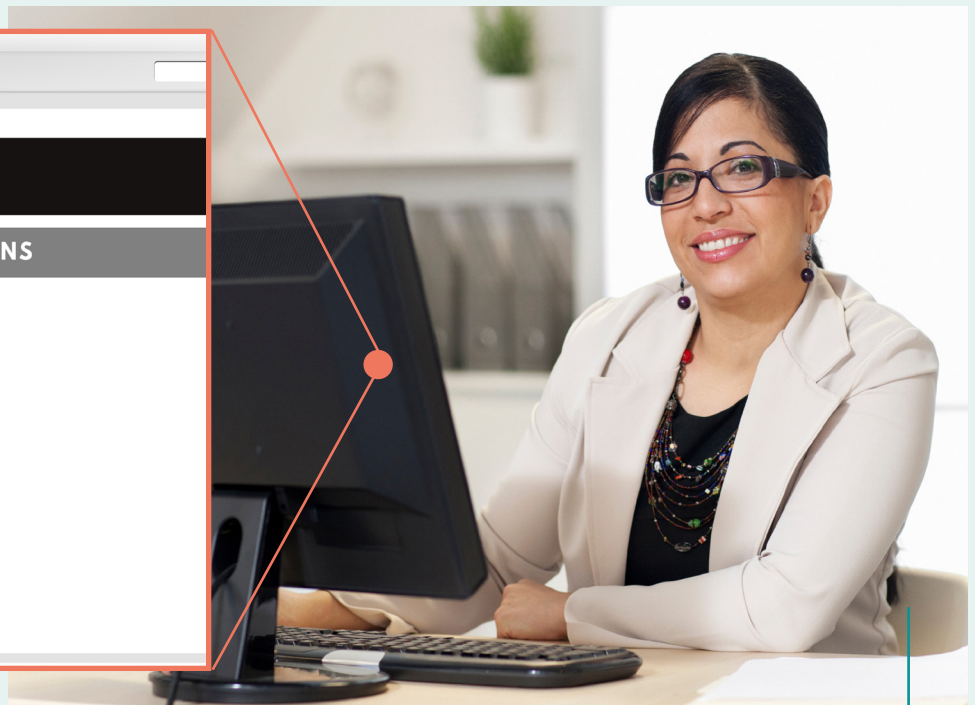
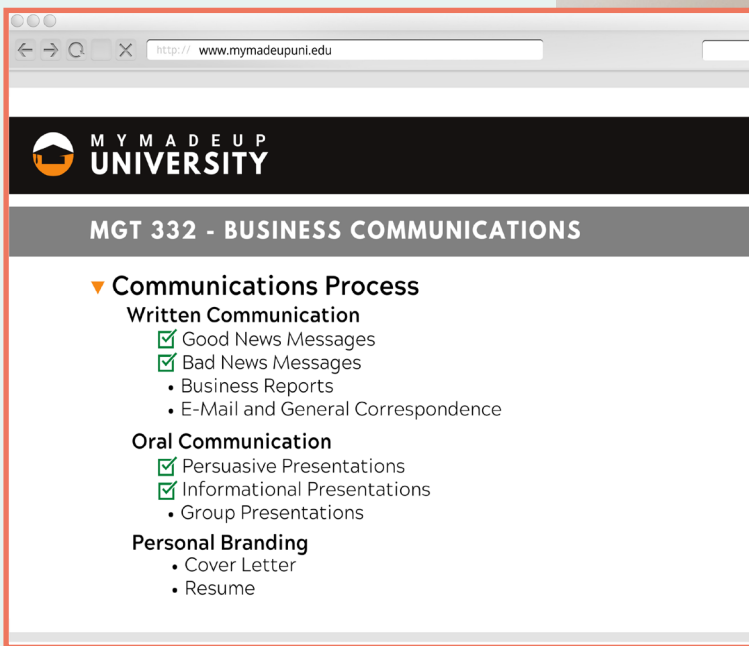
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Meet Gwendolyn

Gwendolyn started as a customer service representative for an international hotel chain. Over the course of several years, she took multiple training classes through her employer, completed a continuing education class at the local community college on supervision, and participated in a Toastmasters group.

In three years, she worked her way up to the customer service manager position on the second shift. She regularly handles customer complaints, especially contentious ones. She speaks with clients to defuse hostility, writes letters to address service failures, and coaches employees on customer service skills.

Gwendolyn finds a CBE course that could help further her career even more.



Using the traditional model, Gwendolyn would take the whole class, including areas where she already has competence.

Using the CBE framework combined with CPL, Gwendolyn would only complete modules in which she has no prior experience.

In this way, CBE not only integrates well with CPL, but also supercharges its potential to capture all relevant learning.

Potential Impact

Examinations of both CBE and CPL, or PLA, have shown that they can independently speed time to credential, increase attainment, and reduce costs for students. In a major analysis of PLA, for example, CPL credit increased the likelihood of an adult student completing a credential by 17 percent. Combining CBE and CPL in well-designed programs likely only magnifies their individual impact.

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Learn More

Whether your institution is new to credit for prior learning or has been offering it for decades, pairing CPL with competency-based education can boost your efforts to better serve learners. If you'd like to have a conversation about how to make the most of your prior learning program, reach out to C-BEN at charla@c-ben.org or CAEL at cael@cael.org.



About CAEL

Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Visit cael.org and stradacollaborative.org to learn more.



About C-BEN

C-BEN is a network of institutions, employers, and experts who believe competencies can unlock the future of learning — making postsecondary education and training more flexible, responsive, and valuable. We support stakeholders across the spectrum of competency-based learning, from institutions and employers who want to embed competencies into their existing programs to those looking to design full competency-based degree programs from the ground up. Across all our work, our aim is to make education and training more flexible, responsive, and valuable. Visit www.cbenetwork.org to learn more about our work.