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PLA AND CBE ON THE COMPETENCY CONTINUUM

The Relationship between Prior Learning Assessment and Competency-Based Education

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Competency-based education (CBE) is the hot new thing in higher education. While forms of CBE have been around since the 1970s, there has been a surge of interest in CBE, with more than 600 postsecondary institutions now reporting that they are either offering competency-based degree programs or are planning to do so. Similarly, institutional interest in prior learning assessment (PLA) has also been growing, with both CBE and PLA seen as important strategies for supporting degree completion, particularly for the nontraditional (e.g., adult, independent, working) learner.

CBE and PLA intersect in many ways, leading some in higher education and policy circles to ask, "What is the difference between CBE and PLA?" or "What is the relationship between PLA and CBE?" In CAEL's view, PLA and CBE occupy intersecting spaces on a competency continuum. They are ideal companion tools that help postsecondary programs focus on student learning while being highly flexible and student centered.

First, Some Definitions

Prior learning assessment, or **PLA**, is a term used for various institutional strategies for evaluating the college-level learning that a student has acquired outside of a formal college course, for college credit. Nontraditional students often come to a postsecondary institution bringing learning from years on the job, corporate or military training, non-college training programs, or self-study. Institutions can assess that learning, determine whether it is equivalent to the learning outcomes a student is expected to have gained in college coursework, and award credit (or advanced standing) to that student. With PLA credit, students can progress more quickly toward a credential, and CAEL research has found that adult students with PLA are two and a half times more likely to complete their degrees.[1] (See box at the end of this brief for descriptions of the most common methods of PLA.)

Although the term PLA references *prior learning*, the *prior* is a misnomer since *any* learning – prior or current – that is acquired outside of the institution may be assessed through PLA. *Other terms for PLA include Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL, Europe), Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR, Canada), and Assessment of Prior Learning (APL, England).*

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[1] See *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*, www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf

Institutions typically charge fees for assessment of prior learning, but these fees are almost always lower than the cost of enrolling in the equivalent courses at that institution.

Competency-based education (CBE), meanwhile, is a term used for programs that focus more on what students have learned, rather than where or how long the learning takes place. Instead of evaluating student progress primarily on the amount of time spent in a classroom (using the credit hour, which is the default standard for measuring progress), students receive college credit based on their actual demonstration of skills learned. Because many competency-based education (CBE) programs have been designed to allow students to learn and progress at their own pace, students with learning from life and work experience can save considerable time in earning a degree. In addition, some of the newest CBE models have leveraged technology in order to lower the cost. But above all, CBE programs are designed to improve the quality of higher education by putting the focus squarely on demonstrated learning outcomes.

There is no single "right way" to do CBE, but there are two different ways to approach it, as defined by the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (2015):

- In a **course/credit-based approach**, "the demonstration of competencies is embedded into a conventional curriculum comprised of courses to be completed to earn credits toward a degree or credential. Course/ credit-based programs generally enroll students in traditional academic terms and award credits for courses successfully completed. Students may accelerate their learning and they receive credit for the course when they have demonstrated mastery of the competencies by passing a summative assessment."

- **Direct assessment**, in contrast, represents a subset of competency-based education "that is not based on semesters (or academic terms) or credits. The direct assessment approach thus disregards conventional courses and bases both the evaluation of student achievement and the award of a degree or credential solely on the demonstration of competencies. Direct assessment programs allow students to proceed at their own pace rather than to progress through courses offered in a traditional academic term. [...] Students demonstrate the competencies while they are enrolled in the program; transfer credit or prior learning assessment is not permitted in direct assessment programs [...] Direct assessment programs establish "credit-hour equivalencies" for the student learning outcomes they evaluate and may choose to provide a transcript indicating course/ credit equivalencies in addition to the competency transcript."

What PLA and CBE Have in Common

PLA and CBE should not be seen as separate strategies or approaches to degree completion. Their relationship is a close one, and this relationship needs to be understood in terms of both their philosophical underpinnings, their shared approach to assessing learning outcomes, and their operational compatibility at the institutional level.

- **Common philosophy.** First, PLA and CBE in all their forms share a common underlying philosophy that higher education needs to value *and reward* what a student knows and is able to do, regardless of how the student learned, where the student learned, and how long it took the student to learn—as long as the learning is at the college level. With both PLA and CBE, students can apply their prior learning – or really *any* learning that they

may have acquired outside of an institutional setting – to their current degree or credential program. With PLA, students earn college credit for what they learned outside of the institution. With CBE, students have the option to draw on their prior learning to demonstrate the competencies in the program through required assessments; students do not need to learn content or competencies they have already mastered, but rather only need to engage in instructional activities for the content or competencies they do not yet have. Both are student-centered approaches that build on what a student already knows.

- **Shared approach to learning assessment.** In traditional higher education courses, there may be clearly-defined learning outcomes that all faculty members use as a guide, but the assessment of student learning is typically determined solely by the individual faculty instructor using grading criteria determined by that instructor. With both PLA and CBE, best practice[2] dictates that the assessment of learning uses a more uniform process and that the assessment processes used are criterion referenced, meaning that they measure student learning against pre-determined criteria and not by a subjective process.

- **Operational compatibility, existence on a continuum.** Most CBE programs can be—and are—offered with PLA as an integral part of the program. In fact, PLA can be an important gateway to the CBE program, with several PLA methods offered to students so that they can demonstrate required competencies based on their extra-institutional learning. This is typically called the "hybrid" approach to CBE, in which there is a lot of flexibility for students to earn credit – and demonstrate competencies – through a variety of pathways. Students can bring in transfer credit, credit from CLEP exams, credit or competencies from portfolio assessment, and credit awarded for non-college training and credentials; and they can have it all "count" towards a competency-based degree. Individual competencies that the student does not yet have can be learned through online adaptive learning competency modules, open educational resources, or a combination of these options and traditionally-delivered coursework. This is one important way that "hybrid" programs differ from the Direct Assessment form of CBE, which is currently offered by only a handful of institutions and tends to employ highly structured learning and assessment environments that do not allow that kind of flexibility.
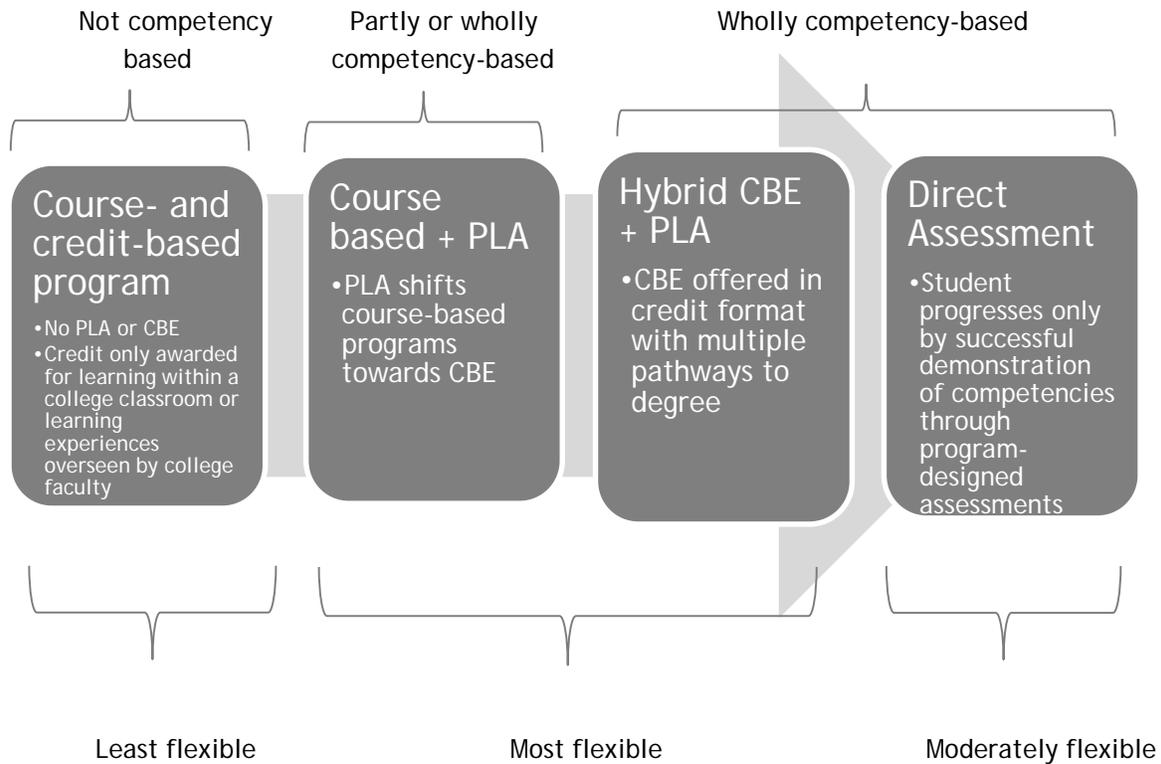
PLA, CBE, and Intersecting Spaces on a Continuum

When PLA is used to demonstrate both what a student knows and is able to do, it is itself a type of competency-based approach to degree completion, and this is true whether students are matching their prior learning to a course-based program or a competency-based program. Students are required to prove and demonstrate, through assessment, what they know and can do. When integrated into traditional course based programs, PLA therefore brings a CBE component to those programs, allowing them to become partly competency-based in the process. PLA therefore serves as a stepping stone from traditional non-CBE programs to CBE, while supporting both traditional degrees and competency-based ones.

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[2] For PLA best practice, see Standard #2 in CAEL's Ten Standards for Assessing Learning (www.cael.org/pla.htm). With CBE, CAEL contends that this is a best practice even though best practice or quality standards have yet to be clearly defined or put forth by any formal organization or group of organizations.

If you envision a competency continuum of postsecondary programs, the non-competency end of that continuum would be occupied by traditional course-based programs that are not designed around nor assess competencies,[3] while the other end of the continuum would be hybrid CBE and Direct Assessment programs (see figure). PLA, whether paired with a course-based or competency-based program, helps to move programs toward the wholly competency-based end of the spectrum.

Not competency based	Partly or wholly competency-based	Wholly competency-based	
Course- and credit-based program •No PLA or CBE •Credit only awarded for learning within a college classroom or learning experiences overseen by college faculty	**Course based + PLA** •PLA shifts course-based programs towards CBE	**Hybrid CBE + PLA** •CBE offered in credit format with multiple pathways to degree	**Direct Assessment** •Student progresses only by successful demonstration of competencies through program-designed assessments
Least flexible	Most flexible		Moderately flexible

Direct Assessment programs, on the other hand, do not employ the familiar methods of PLA such as CLEP tests or portfolio assessment. Rather, in these programs, the assessment of prior learning is incorporated into the overall design of the program. Students with considerable prior learning can draw on that learning to complete the required assessments and thus be able to progress more quickly toward the degree. On the one hand, this approach is highly innovative in that it is not based on courses and does not list the course equivalencies for the degree program. But on the other hand, some students with considerable documentation of their prior learning cannot present that documentation for evaluation but instead must demonstrate the competence within the overall program design and sequence. Direct Assessment programs recognize a

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[3] Note that course- and credit-based programs *can* also be competency-based if they define competencies required for graduation and assess for those competencies. Most course-based programs, however, are currently not designed around — nor assess for — competencies.

student's prior learning only when it supports completion of prescribed assessments. It is a more structured and less flexible approach.

So is the solution that Direct Assessment becomes the end goal for all of higher education? Some advocates do think so even though the actual number of institutions practicing it with approval from their accreditors and the Department of Education is currently very small. However, even if questions around financial aid and accreditation are resolved for Direct Assessment, and even if student outcomes for these programs are proven to be as good as or better than traditional programs, there is still considerable value in offering students greater flexibility in how their competencies are learned and demonstrated. Employing PLA and CBE in partnership provides that highly flexible competency based approach.

References

Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions [C-RAC]. (2015, June 2). Framework for competency-based education. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/C-RAC%20CBE%20Statement%20Press%20Release%206_2.pdf

PLA Methods

Prior learning assessment is not just one method or tool. It includes methods such as:

- **individualized student portfolios** or portfolio assessments, conducted by individual colleges or a third party like CAEL's LearningCounts, a national online prior learning assessment service;

- **evaluation of corporate and military training** by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS); ACE and NCCRS publish credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-college programs;

- **program evaluations** done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies; also known as local evaluation of training;

- **challenge exams** or customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement; these may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill; and

- **standardized exams** such as Advanced Placement Examination Program, or AP Exams, offered by the College Board; College Level Examination Program, or CLEP Exams, also offered by the College Board; Excelsior College UExcel Exams (formerly Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams); and The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams, conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric.