

**Recognizing All  
Learning to Help  
California Achieve  
Educational and  
Racial Equity**



The Education Trust—West

# Californians Deserve Credit

## Helpful terms

**Competency-based learning** can include a number of different strategies that make sure all learning counts. Two of these are competency-based education and credit for prior learning.

**Competency-based education** programs are designed around an articulated set of competencies students must master. Students progress through their programs as they demonstrate mastery of those competencies, moving at their own paces.

**Credit for prior learning** gives credit to students for learning that has happened outside of their program of study. This could include experience gained on the job, learning from a previous education program, military credits, and more.

Imagine, for a moment, you are a 39-year-old single parent who has worked for two decades as an early childhood educator. You attended college for a year but never finished your degree because life got in the way, and you needed to devote your time and energy to taking care of your family. Now, you're being told that you are in danger of losing your job because you don't have the proper credentials. Even though you have all the skills necessary to perform your work, you are told you need to go back to school for your credential. And, because your previous classes were so long ago, those credits will not transfer. You're back to square one.

Wouldn't it be great if, instead of repeating classes you've already taken and sitting through classes that teach you things you already know, there were a more efficient way to earn your credential? Wouldn't it be great if all the learning you had done, all the skills you had acquired, and all the knowledge you had gained could be recognized and would count toward your credential?

Ensuring that all quality learning is recognized and counted toward credentials can help states like California ensure equitable outcomes, deliver high-quality education and credentials, possibly reduce the cost to obtaining a degree, and help states meet their attainment goals.

California could support and promote competency-based learning as a way to make sure that all learning counts. There are many different strategies associated with competency-based learning, but generally this encompasses the learning that happens outside a traditional classroom setting. In all forms of competency-based learning, robust assessments ensure that students progress through their academic careers based on what they know and can do, rather than on how many credit hours they have earned. Competency-based learning can especially help students who are returning to postsecondary education to complete their credentials and have accumulated credits and experience that can be translated into academic progress and students who have not been well-served by classroom-based postsecondary education.



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# Competency-Based Learning and California's Equity Imperative

To ensure that California can meet upcoming workforce demands, retain its status as the fifth largest economy in the world, and begin a successful recovery from COVID-19, the state will have to dramatically increase the educational attainment level of its citizens. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates that as many as 40 percent of California jobs will require a bachelor's degree by 2030.<sup>1</sup> Advocacy organizations have called for an attainment goal of 60 percent of Californians with a postsecondary credential by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

In order to meet these goals, California will need to close its racial equity gaps: 80 percent of Latinx adults and 64 percent of Black adults in the state do not have a postsecondary degree. In addition, about 16 percent of California's working-age adults have some college credit, but no degree.<sup>3</sup>

The characteristics of competency-based learning described below make it uniquely suited for increasing equitable outcomes. Competency-based learning strategies are ideal for working adult students, many of whom are people of color. Many institutions that are adopting competency-based education programs are doing so with the explicit goal of improving access and equity.<sup>4</sup>

This equity focus is supported by the types of programs most likely to be offered via competency-based education. In a recent survey of institutions offering competency-based education programs, 42 percent reported having a competency-based program in nursing and health professions.<sup>5</sup>

Competency-based learning approaches can help students earn credentials they need to keep up with state requirements. For example, early childhood center employees must have certain credentials. Like those being piloted in North Carolina, competency-based teacher education programs can help the lowest wage (usually non-White) workers make sure their jobs are safe and ultimately secure higher-wage positions.<sup>6</sup>

# Features of Competency-Based Learning that Ensure Equity

Competency-based learning can help California achieve its goals and close equity gaps,<sup>7</sup> due mainly to these key features:

## Transparent expectations, outcomes, and pathways

High-quality competency-based learning programs and options set clear expectations for what students must know, the intended outcomes, and how they might navigate through their academic careers to program completion—including how competence will be assessed and evaluated. This transparent approach to providing education can help promote equitable outcomes by removing some of the “naviguassing” involved in a traditional postsecondary experience—something that disproportionately bars first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color.

## Established supports that facilitate trust

Competency-based learning strategies are designed with a high level of student support. At adult-focused completion colleges that largely use competency-based approaches, like Thomas Edison State University and Charter Oak State College, students are assigned coaches or mentors who are in constant contact with individual students. Such supports foster a sense of community that helps students trust the system and thus become more likely to complete their programs. Additionally, this emphasis on community is more aligned with the cultural priorities of the most underserved learners.<sup>8</sup>

## The Student Experience

How students experience and progress through competency-based learning can differ from person to person, especially given the personalized and individualized nature of competency-based learning.

Take, for example, the scenario of the 39-year old single parent with some previous college experience and significant work experience. Assuming the parent could enroll in a competency-based degree program, they would work with an assigned mentor or coach to develop a plan for obtaining an associate’s degree in early childhood education. Flexible competency-based learning approaches may allow previous coursework to signal mastery of some competencies and count toward the degree. In addition, the parent may be able to quickly demonstrate mastery some of the identified competencies as well. Any competencies for which they could not demonstrate mastery of at the outset could be learned through online courses, experiential learning, or other methods the parent and their mentor discussed. Those could be taken at night, on weekends, or whenever their schedule allows.

By leveraging prior learning and experience, the parent would be able to earn the associate’s degree more quickly and affordably than if they had to start all over again.





### Personalized, individualized experiences

With competency-based learning, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, each learner has a tailored, transparent pathway to achieving their goal. By not forcing adults returning to college to repeat coursework, this individualized approach allows them to maximize their workforce experiences. It allows flexible scheduling for those with work constraints or family obligations. It allows learners to progress at their own paces and fully master topics and concepts without artificial time constraints, thereby increasing their chances of success.<sup>9</sup>

### Increased affordability

Competency-based learning can help make postsecondary education more affordable in a number of ways. Especially for learners who are returning to college, competency-based learning approaches can ensure that they will not have to repeat coursework. And, for learners who have developed skills through on-the-job training or extensive experience, competency-based learning can help shorten the time to completion. Finally, given the individualized nature of competency-based approaches, students can move through their programs more efficiently and effectively.

# Policies and Practices to Make All Learning Count

A number of policy considerations would ensure that all learning, including competency-based learning, is supported in California. As discussions about statewide support for competency-based education progress, policymakers and other stakeholders should consider:



## **State funding to encourage competency-based learning and ensure all learning counts.**

Across the nation, there has been concern that competency-based approaches will lead to less funding because the fundamental state funding source for higher education has largely been based on the credit hour. One alternative funding approach that is consistent with competency-based learning and ensuring that all learning counts is performance-based funding. California's recent evolution towards performance-based funding for community colleges is a good example of how the state might encourage institutions to explore competency-based learning approaches. Any further implementation of performance-based funding must avoid unintended or inequitable outcomes.



## **State financial aid programs that support competency-based learning and prior learning assessment.**

Federal financial aid is based on satisfactory academic progress based on the credit hour—and cannot be used for prior learning assessment. Recent efforts to modernize the Cal Grant program, including expanded access to summertime aid, may help students who are engaged in competency-based learning. As the Cal Grant program continues to undergo reform and discussion, options for expanding access to aid for competency-based approaches could be considered.



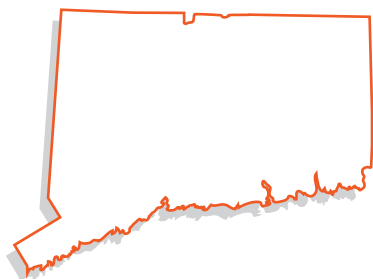
**Tuition policies to support students in flexible educational structures.** Institutions that move toward competency-based learning approaches may be less tied to term-based schedules. Thus, the term-based tuition policies at California's public institutions may need to be revisited. Often, institutions that offer competency-based education, for example, base tuition charges on competencies or percentage of program completion.



**Transfer policies that allow students to transfer all learning between institutions and do not limit what students can transfer.** California's transfer policies, while intended to be flexible, transparent, and all-encompassing, can be difficult to navigate. As competency-based approaches take a foothold in the state, it will be important to ensure that learning assessed and validated through competency-based learning approaches is transferrable and that transferred learning is applicable to the degree or credential requirements—not simply transferred as elective credits.

# States that are Making All Learning Count

Across the nation, there are already a number of states that encourage competency-based learning.



## Connecticut

Connecticut enjoyed great success at re-engaging adult learners through its Go Back to Get Ahead initiative. This program included grants to students and pathways for students to complete their degrees at one of Connecticut's colleges. In the initial period during which this program ran, over 900 adult learners re-enrolled in college.<sup>11</sup> Charter Oak State College served as the "completion college" for students who had acquired many credits and needed to assemble them into a coherent program.<sup>12</sup> Charter Oak is experienced with prior learning assessment<sup>13</sup> and flexible learning pathways that can help adults who are re-enrolling finish their degrees as efficiently as possible.



## Indiana

In the 2016–2019 Indiana Commission for Higher Education strategic plan, *Reaching Higher, Delivering Value*, competency was one of three pillars. Indiana focused on creating a list of competencies, which helps translate coursework for transfer and makes learning outcomes across the state clear and transparent. In this plan, Indiana also set a goal of making its financial aid program more inclusive of competency-based approaches by basing satisfactory progress and aid awards on percentage of program completed, rather than on credit hours.<sup>14</sup>



## Texas

Texas supports competency-based learning both through a state-funded center and through the Texas Affordable Baccalaureate (TAB) program. The Institute for Competency-Based Education (ICBE), housed at Texas A&M, Commerce, is the state's research and resource center for promoting competency-based education. Founded in 2015, ICBE is a collaboratory that helps increase understanding of competency-based education both within the state and across the nation, with the purpose of encouraging innovation.<sup>15</sup> The TAB program provides funds for Texas institutions designing low-cost baccalaureate programs for students.<sup>16</sup>





## Endnotes

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