

# CAEL's Ten Quality Standards for Assessing Prior Learning

## CAEL AND ASSESSMENT

Since 1972, CAEL has held the belief that assessment is more than just a tool for measuring learning. High-quality assessment methods and standards can help faculty better understand how students learn, can ensure that programs and processes are academically sound, and should be an integral part of every learner's academic journey. Assessment is not a goal or an endpoint but rather an ongoing and essential part of the learning process. It is furthermore a tool for enabling and generating future learning.

## WHAT IS CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING?

Credit for prior learning, or CPL, is a term for the various methods that colleges, universities, and other education or training providers use to assess learning that a student has obtained outside of the traditional academic environment. CPL can be used to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. Other common terms for this process include prior learning assessment, recognition of prior learning, and recognition of learning.

Valuing the skills and knowledge adult learners bring to the academic community can be an important and powerful tool. Credit for prior learning has the potential to save students time and money, while also boosting completion rates and empowering adults by validating them as learners.

## CAEL'S TEN STANDARDS FOR ASSESSING PRIOR LEARNING

Colleges and universities often question exactly how to conduct prior learning assessment in a way that is equitable, meaningful, and academically rigorous. This toolkit for the quality assessment of prior learning features CAEL's Ten Standards, each of which includes a description of its meaning along with considerations for application and examples to guide campus conversations. While each standard functions as its own guiding principle, combined these standards provide a framework that ensures that assessment is measurable and that outside learning truly aligns with equivalent coursework. Many of the descriptions are based on language from the CAEL-published book, [Assessing Learning: Quality Standards and Institutional Commitments](#), by Drs. Donna Younger and Catherine Marienau. Additional tools, resources, and research can be found at the end of this guide. The CAEL standards align with institutional accreditors' standards and policy guidance, particularly with respect to: requiring documentation/evidence of learning in order to award credit, involving faculty in the process, and providing transparency in how CPL credits are awarded.



STANDARD I

## Credit or Competencies Are Awarded Only for Evidence of Learning, Not for Experience or Time Spent

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Adult learners often come to institutions of higher learning with a wealth of knowledge and professional experience. It is for each institution to determine if that learning is “college-level” and how to most appropriately evaluate that learning for academic credit. While personal and professional experiences can be rich and rewarding, they do not always produce evidence that the student has amassed enough knowledge or skill to meet criteria established by the department or institution awarding the credit. Learning is ripe for assessment when supporting evidence and/or documentation shows that the learner fully participated in the experience(s) and can convincingly demonstrate that learning.

Evidence of learning, within the context of CPL, can take various forms, for example, work artifacts, research or reports, professional development or training and education documents, and professional certifications. Common methods for assessing a student’s prior learning may include departmental challenge exams, standardized exams (e.g. CLEP, DSST, AP), credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE) or the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) through the review of noncredit training, or through the institution’s evaluation of individual learning portfolios. A professional resume may contain details about titles, work experience, and time in a role, but it rarely provides sufficient evidence of learning from work experience. For this reason, a resume may supplement additional evidence of learning but should never be a primary source.

### APPLICATION

Within the context of CPL, evidence of prior learning will rarely look like the evidence and artifacts produced by students in the context of a classroom. Supporting evidence could be reports, spreadsheets, or a detailing of created processes specific to a particular organization; it may also be the culmination of several trainings and certifications within a particular industry. Obtaining a supporting letter from a supervisor, department head, or military commander can serve as a compliment to a professional resume if it details the learning associated with the student’s work role and not merely the experience or time spent in a role. Considering all the possible learning pathways a student may have traversed before enrolling at your school not only increases the potential for utilization of CPL opportunities, it fosters a more thoughtful and sustainable CPL program.

**“Standards are important because they set the guardrails of performance and they help to level set expectations of evaluation and quality. They also help to convey the benefits of doing assessment well. Some of the phrases related to assessment that stood out to me are: competencies, evidence of learning, integral to learning, equity, and access. These resonate because they provide a snapshot of everything clear and good assessments can achieve.”**

**RADHIKA KRISHNADAS,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
LEARNING DESIGN &  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
LSU ONLINE & CONTINUING  
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STANDARD II

## Assessment is Integral to Learning Because It Leads to and Enables Future Learning

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Learning is the connective tissue between experience and education, which, according to experiential learning theory, is a recurring cycle of transforming experience into learning and learning into knowledge (Kolb, 2015).

Reflection on the part of the student is the foundation for understanding and interpreting lived experience in a way that transforms it into learning. Assessment may (or may not) lead to the awarding of academic credit but it can also serve as a feedback loop that allows for — and even generates — future learning.

Both formative and summative assessments are a critical part of the overall learning process. Summative assessment occurs at the end of a unit, course, or program, serving as assessment of learning. A formative assessment approach features assessment for learning, where students are offered facilitated feedback as their learning proceeds to help them revise their thinking or means of expression. Ideally, formative assessment engages learners as partners in an iterative process of reflecting on what has been learned in one context and transferring it to another.

Optimally, assessment helps the learner generate not just knowing more about what is already familiar, but also assists in helping them see their experiences and learning in a new way. Assessment that enables future learning involves both assessment for learning (formative) and assessment of learning (summative). Assessment that includes a continuous feedback loop is most powerful when it is incorporated into the ongoing work of learning and teaching, not treated as a separate add-on.

Given that most adults seeking higher learning are rich in experience, learning how to learn from experience should be a central objective for institutions of higher learning.

FIDDLER, MARIENAU, & WHITAKER, 2006

### APPLICATION

Advisors can use any CPL credit award as an opportunity to engage with students on their prior learning and encourage them to reflect on and deepen their existing learning. The portfolio method of CPL is particularly useful for these kinds of reflection exercises. Students choosing to demonstrate learning by constructing a portfolio are required to reflect on that learning and then align it with specific course or program learning outcomes. The formative feedback-revision cycle, when applied throughout the portfolio construction process, provides students an opportunity to examine their prior learning through an academic lens. Then, via summative feedback, we have an opportunity to engage students in conversations about what they earned credit for and encourage them to consider how and why their previous learning applies to their current pursuit of new skills and knowledge.



STANDARD III

## Assessment is Based on Criteria for Outcomes That Are Clearly Articulated and Shared Among Constituencies

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

While each of CAEL's ten standards reinforces various aspects of quality in assessing learning, this third standard is pivotal. When criteria for learning outcomes are clearly articulated and communicated among all stakeholders, the established quality standards are better understood, allowing for greater trust in the process. Having trust in the assessment process, and in the awarding of CPL credit, is important within the institution as well as for external parties such as accreditors, institutions receiving students in transfer, government agencies, and employers.

Transparency and communication are key cornerstones of every successful CPL program. When assessment criteria, policies, and practices are the result of inclusive deliberation, a shared understanding and support for the CPL program is built. This deliberative process should be owned by the institution so that the resulting criteria are an expression of the institution's standards and academic character. Engaging internal and external stakeholders from across the institution or educational system not only fosters transparency but also garners a shared understanding of and support for CPL programs.

Criteria for assessment are another cornerstone for the foundation of a CPL program. Stated program or learning outcomes based on criteria encompass three critical components:

1. Assessment, whether formative or summative, is dependent on indicators of progress toward a predetermined endpoint.
2. Criteria are to be thoughtfully derived from carefully selected sources — whether from existing curricula from industry-professional standards, constructed anew by faculty or subject-matter-experts (SMEs), or in partnership with each learner.
3. Criteria need to be carefully and clearly expressed if they are to be utilized by stakeholders engaged in every part of the assessment process: advisors, faculty assessors, learners, registrar.

Practically speaking, these components provide a clear process of articulating criteria through deliberation and consensus among faculty and relevant SMEs. Faculty play a critical role in examining learning outcomes in existing curricula, so the outcomes are measurable in terms of content, levels of learning, and connection with outcomes of other courses.

### APPLICATION

One of the challenges for CPL is establishing it as a legitimate academic exercise that is based on evidence of learning — and not just “giving away credits.” By establishing clear criteria for when and how credit is awarded, and then being transparent with internal and external constituencies about the criteria and the process, the institution can build trust in the assessment process and the awarding of credit based on that process. This is one reason why many postsecondary systems spend time working to reach agreements across multiple institutions on a common approach to CPL. When the criteria and processes are clear and transparent — and shared — the system as a whole can have greater trust in CPL more generally.



STANDARD IV

## The Determination of Credit Awards and Competency Levels Are Made by Appropriate Subject Matter and Credentialing Experts

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The fourth standard speaks to issues of both quality and equity in assessment. Academic credit and professional designations are based on demonstrated learning and/or skill that depends on the judgment of experts — typically, faculty members or someone else who is qualified due to an appropriate knowledge base. On occasions when students present evidence of learning in subject matters not represented among the faculty, external content experts should be consulted. Without expert judgment, credit decisions could be indiscriminate — based on a general, sometimes superficial, understanding of the meaning and intention of assessment criteria or of the context in which they should be applied. A generalist might understand if a student's treatment of a learning outcome is relevant, but only a subject matter expert (SME) would be able to determine if it is sufficient and accurate.

To ensure equity throughout the assessment process, it is important to have diversity among faculty assessors. Assessment should be holistic and considerate of learning and work experience across groups, cultures, and perspectives.

In the case of industry-based or other specialized credentials, the awarding of credit or its equivalent should be informed by credentialing experts who know the basis for those credentials.

Multiple assessors may be needed in some cases. A faculty member may be qualified in part of the content and in part of the appropriate assessment procedure, but not necessarily in all of both.

### APPLICATION

There are times when CPL assessment is simply outside the scope or role of the full-time faculty — and departments must rely on part-time faculty or outside SMEs for evaluation. As an academic department or institution moves forward in determining who should serve as an assessor(s), there are a few important questions you can use to guide discussions:

- Which full-time faculty, part-time/adjunct faculty, or outside SMEs are best positioned to assess content and evaluate assessment procedures?
- What roles can outside experts play in the assessment of learning? What rationale is required to gain approval for their involvement?
- If an SME is the most appropriate choice for an assessor, how do SMEs learn to use their expertise for purposes of assessment and not just for instruction?



STANDARD V

## Assessment Advances the Broader Purpose of Access and Equity for Diverse Individuals and Groups to Support Their Success

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

This standard recognizes that access extends far beyond getting students through the door of our institutions. Access also entails a hospitable environment that offers variable opportunities for learning and recognizing evidence of learning that is both congruent with the individual learner and established learning outcomes. When it comes to honoring the prior learning that a diverse student population brings to our academic communities, access and equity work hand in hand.

Traditionally, CPL programs were mainly focused on providing opportunities for students who obtained learning from work in occupations such as business administration, healthcare, or information technology (IT). Today, adult learners are more diverse in their life and work experiences than ever, and they come to institutions from a wide variety of occupations, workplaces, and communities. As such, it is critical that we ensure CPL practices acknowledge the college-level learning that takes place in all of the spaces from which our students have experience, knowledge, and skills.

When the criteria for learning outcomes make room for the voice and context of each individual, when multiple forms of evidence of learning are supported, and when the right experts are examining learning outcomes, the pathway is cleared toward advancing access and equity for all learners.

**“A university with a well-put-together set of standards for PLA [CPL] will be able to market their program to businesses and community partners — as well as to adult learners who have gained learning and evidence of that learning.”**

ANGELA ADAMS  
DIRECTOR OF ACADEMIC  
PROGRAMS FOR CONTINUING  
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MARTIN UNIVERSITY

### APPLICATION

Research from CAEL and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) showed that CPL has a strong positive effect on adult student credential completion, benefitting all student subgroups, regardless of race-ethnicity, age, gender, or sector. This suggests that CPL can be an important tool to help students that have been historically under-represented within higher education. However, the study found an equity paradox: Black and lower-income adult students received strong boosts to credential completion from CPL credit — but they were the least likely to receive such credit. Institutions may need to take extra measures to ensure that important student populations know about CPL and have the ability to access it. This requires that institutions prioritize equity in the design of CPL programs, develop financial supports for low-income students or provide CPL free of charge, ensure that students hear about CPL early and often, improve data infrastructure and analysis to understand where equity gaps exist, provide CPL offerings for learning that occurs in a wide range of occupations, and scale processes for more accessible CPL methods such as crosswalks between industry-developed skills and academic programs (Klein-Collins, Bransberger, & Lane, 2021).



STANDARD VI

## Institutions Proactively Provide Guidance and Support for Learners' Full Engagement in the Assessment Process

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Institutions need to proactively engage and support students in assessment processes — from matriculation to graduation. Students should be regarded as central actors in, not just as objects of, the process of assessing their prior learning. Academic growth occurs when we encourage learners to holistically engage in the assessment journey.

In order for students to be partners in assessment, they need to understand the terminology, policies, and options that are related to the assessment of learning in its various forms. Guidance and support from faculty, advisors, and academic stakeholders are needed at all stages of the educational journey, from pre-admission through graduation. Adult learners want a plan for completion, and CPL should be part of that plan from the very start. This means incorporating CPL into a student's initial degree plan, setting timelines for completion, and providing information and accountability for completion of the CPL process. Support for students should also include communication of complete information using consistent language over multiple mediums (e.g. the institution's website, admissions collateral, departmental documents, and information contained in your LMS) as well as advising, screening, coaching, and instruction on how to explore and choose best-fit CPL opportunities.

### APPLICATION

Within the context of CPL, this standard speaks to the importance of proactive advising as well as pre-and post-matriculation screening interviews. These provide students ample opportunities to express the breadth and depth of learning they are bringing to the institution, so faculty are able to efficiently determine if a student is a candidate for assessment. Faculty and advisors can also use any CPL credit award as an opportunity to provide a feedback loop, engaging with students on their prior learning and encouraging them to reflect on and deepen their existing learning.

Once it is determined that a student is a viable candidate for CPL, academic and student service departments should collaborate across campus to ensure students are fully supported throughout the CPL journey. This is particularly important for students engaging with portfolio assessment opportunities.

Think about all the departments that carry a piece of your institution's CPL process. This list could include but is certainly not limited to: faculty, advisors, the registrar, academic resource/writing/testing centers, disability services, IT/LMS management, marketing and communications, institutional research/effectiveness, and the bursar.



STANDARD VII

## Assessment Policies and Procedures Are the Result of Inclusive Deliberation and Are Shared With All Constituencies

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

If we are truly concerned with building, maintaining, or expanding a CPL program that is efficient and academically sound, bringing stakeholders from every part of campus to the table is absolutely critical. Establishing policies that are a true collaboration and deliberation of faculty and academic stakeholders ensures quality and rigor while the inclusive crafting of processes creates a streamlined system that everyone can more easily navigate.

The “inclusive deliberation” that leads to practical assessment criteria, policies, and processes contributes to a positive climate for CPL and assessment. Inclusive deliberation also does much to advance a more embedded CPL culture within the institution by valuing the experience, knowledge, and perspectives of a variety of stakeholders.

### APPLICATION

Who are our CPL stakeholders across campus? Here are a few to consider:

- **Faculty.** Input from academic departments across campus not only fosters an institution-wide awareness about CPL but also provides opportunity for collaboration on academic matters such as assessment methods and CPL faculty roles.
- **Student Services: Academic Advising, Registrar, and Financial Aid.** From the registrar to professional advising offices, academic service departments provide end-to-end support to CPL programs in the same way they support other academic programs. The registrar’s involvement is particularly important for determining how CPL would be transcribed, how CPL interacts with federal financial aid’s Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements, and overall consistency in how CPL is applied across programs. Coordination with financial aid is also critical, as credits earned through CPL could affect SAP and other eligibility calculations. Collaboration and communication can help these offices in advising the student on how and when CPL credit should be applied to maximize the student’s overall affordability and academic success.
- **Enrollment Management.** What do we want to say to potential and incoming adult learners about our CPL opportunities? Inclusive deliberation on messaging and outreach informs the marketing and enrollment process for admissions professionals as well as assists in setting expectations for matriculating learners.
- **Academic Resources.** If your CPL method includes the campus testing center, writing lab, library, or information resources, be sure to also include these departments in your deliberations. Additionally, where CPL methods could require reasonable accommodations, consulting with your campus’ disability services professional is necessary.





STANDARD VIII

## Fees Charged for Assessment Are Based on the Services Performed in the Process Rather Than the Credit Awarded

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

This standard is intended to ensure both the integrity and the sustainability of the institution's CPL assessment services. Credit-based tuition (for enrolled courses) is based on the full service of the institution, including curriculum development and instruction as well as the costs associated with providing academic and administrative support services. By developing a separate CPL fee structure, predicated on the cost of delivering and supporting the assessment process, the institution can ensure its capacity to comply with this standard and provide sufficient assessment options for its students.

Institutions should be careful to avoid the moral hazard of linking fees to the awarding of credit; institutions that use a fee structure based on credits awarded run the risk of being perceived as selling credits without adequate service or educational value. Fees for assessment, when used, should reflect the cost of assessment services, and should be used to support and communicate that the institution regards assessment as an essential component of the academic process. When considering a fee structure that will ensure high-quality assessment, it is critical to consider all transactional costs, including stipends or compensation to faculty assessors. CPL program administrators should also consider fixed costs, such as having a dedicated CPL or assessment office staff. Other expenses may be more integrated into the larger system, such as enrollment management, technology or LMS support staff, and professional development.

### APPLICATION

It is important to recognize that the fees associated with CPL can be an issue of equity and access for the students who would likely benefit most. The fact that CPL fees are not eligible expenses for Pell grants and federal student loans can present a significant obstacle. It is important to consider how fee structures for assessment can not only provide financial stability for your CPL program but also encourage and foster diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Due to equity concerns, many institutions offer CPL free of charge or maintain a scholarship fund to cover CPL fees.

Innovative institutions have found outside sources of funding for CPL by partnering with:

- Corporations offering tuition benefits that extend beyond tuition to cover CPL fees
- Community organizations with established scholarship funds (e.g., local and regional nonprofits and charities; also American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, for military-affiliated students)
- Existing and potential institutional donors and supporters
- Grants from government agencies designed to support key adult learner groups (e.g. Department of Education)



STANDARD IX

## All Practitioners Involved in The Assessment Process Pursue And Receive Adequate Training and Continuing Professional Development for the Functions They Perform

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Assessment is a specialized role for faculty — as specialized as curriculum development and instruction. Although many educators view assessment as loosely embedded in the instructional process, assessment of learning is distinct from teaching. Assessment is a subfield with its own philosophies, standards, and best practices.

Engaging faculty in assessment can be a challenge for many institutions, not because faculty do not want to enhance and improve student learning outcomes but because assessment is just one more major initiative to be incorporated into a host of other responsibilities. While compensation for assessment-related activities should be considered, plans and provisions for how the facilitation of the entire assessment process impacts workload for faculty should be made. In order to mitigate “assessment fatigue,” faculty and other stakeholders in the institution need incentives and rewards to invest in building another area of capability. Because educators are committed to continuous learning in their disciplines and fields, one suggestion is to make sure that they include assessment in the ongoing learning agenda. While some individuals or groups may be designated as the in-house experts and custodians of assessment, anyone who interacts with assessment of learning (and certainly assessment of prior learning) is obliged to learn as much as possible about it.

Standard IX speaks not only to educators needing to seek opportunities to learn about assessment but also to improve their practice in assessment. Conversely, this standard also speaks to the institution, which should provide ample opportunities for initial and continuing training and development in learning assessment.

“CPL standards are also important to our institution ... Our school would be able to list these standards or a derivative of them for marketing purposes attracting more students and enrollment. This will also help our faculty as they will be able to use a university-wide standard to provide credit for individual programs.”

DON GALBADAGE,  
PUBLIC HEALTH FACULTY  
BIOLA UNIVERSITY

### APPLICATION

Opportunities for professional development around CPL are plenty, and CAEL membership provides many useful resources to learn about how to assess prior learning. CAEL offers formal professional development workshops in CPL assessment as well as regular learning opportunities through our community of practice hub, toolkits and job aids, regular webinars, informal peer-led discussions, and CAEL’s annual conference.



STANDARD X

## Assessment Programs Are Regularly Monitored, Evaluated, and Revised to Respond to Institutional and Learner

### WHAT THIS STANDARD MEANS AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The increased focus on learning outcomes in both higher education and within the workplace compels assessment programs to be agile and responsive to changing program requirements and learner needs. It is imperative that assessment programs stay current with:

- Changes in curriculum and delivery structures.
- Policies issued by regional and ancillary accrediting bodies.
- The expanding knowledge base that informs assessment.

Assessment programs should be monitored frequently and evaluated to determine whether and how well the intended learning outcomes are being achieved. Reviews can be overarching or might be targeted on a particular area or standard, which signals the need for persistent attention to how assessment practices support the aims of access and equity and, ultimately, the students' success. While it might seem most logical to align program evaluations with other academic cycles (e.g. updating the academic catalog or site visits from accrediting bodies) review and revision of assessment programs need not wait a year or more for evaluation.

Gathering meaningful data that identify the direct and indirect impact of CPL on your students, department, and campus is imperative to a sustainable program. Engaging your institutional research (IR) or institutional assessment (IA) team is critical as you plan and implement programming, determine the most effective ways to measure impact, collect and analyze data, report the results, and develop strategies for continuous improvement. Examples of critical data points include but are not limited to: the number of students using CPL, the method of CPL students are attempting for a given course or program, pass and failure rates, how many credits students are earning through CPL, and demographic characteristics. Since data are often collected by a host of different campus offices, using a variety of student support platforms, your IR or IA office can help ensure data sources interface and the data you are collecting is most effectively aggregated and shared.

**“I feel the 10 standards are pretty comprehensive in that they consider the individual learner, the reviewer, the process and policies, and institutional expectations.”**

**RADHIKA KRISHNADAS,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
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### APPLICATION

To promote better approaches to learning assessment, many institutions have established institution-wide “teaching, learning, and assessment” (TLA) centers, with some having governance sub-committees or even departmental TLA committees. The TLA entities may be best suited to monitor assessment policies and practices on a regular basis and conduct targeted reviews of specific components that can be revised or created on an as-needed basis.



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