The Four Stages of Building an Effective and Inclusive CPL Program

And Why Building Internal Buy-in Is Stage 1

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Contents

Introduction

Credit for Prior Learning refers to various methods that postsecondary institutions use to evaluate students' experiential learning for college credit — you may also know CPL as prior learning assessment or recognition of prior learning. CPL is an important tool for supporting adult learners because it saves students time and money, it also drives higher credential completion rates, and it translates into higher tuition revenues for institutions. (See the findings in CAEL and WICHE's 2020 report, *The PLA Boost* at **cael.org/pla-impact**). CPL can be an important part of an adult learner strategy that helps students reflect on their learning and helps them make important connections between learning and work. But what does CPL look like in practice? Or a better question: what should — and could — CPL look like at your institution?

Every CPL program is different, reflecting the specific mission, resources, students, culture, and programs of an institution. This resource is intended to help CPL champions in their efforts to think through the design and implementation of a CPL program — or improvement of an existing CPL program — so that it meets the needs of your students while taking into account your specific institutional context. We provide suggestions and guiding questions that are based on CAEL's nearly five decades of work with postsecondary institutions. One lesson from this work with colleges and universities is that CPL champions are often tempted to dive in on the specifics of policies, practices, and processes without first focusing on what is perhaps most important: building internal support and defining their overall CPL strategy.

A better approach is to start with building buy-in and gaining the support from leadership. That sets the stage for what is ultimately possible when it comes to your overall strategy, program design, and implementation.

STAGE 1: Building buy-in and support for CPL, especially from leadership.

STAGE 2: Determining the strategy and scope of your CPL program.

STAGE 3: Designing the right CPL program for your institution.

STAGE 4: Maintaining your focus throughout implementation for continuous improvement.

These four stages are discussed in greater detail below, along with questions to guide you through the stages of building buy-in, determining strategy, designing the program, and maintaining a focus on your students' needs as you implement it. Within each stage, there are specific steps with more details. For those new to CPL, we suggest that you closely follow the sequence of these stages and their steps to ensure the best outcomes. For those with existing programs, you may choose to adapt the guiding questions and sequencing of activities to best build on what you already have in place.

Stage 1
Building Buy-in and Support for CPL, Especially from Leadership

Creating a comprehensive CPL program that meets the needs of adult learners can be a big undertaking because it requires cooperation and involvement from a wide range of players within your institution: marketing, enrollment, advising, registrar, program deans, faculty, assessors, and administrative staff. That's a lot of activity to coordinate and support, which can be more easily done when the institution's leaders see CPL as a priority as well. It's critical for all of these players to understand what CPL is, how it works, and why it needs to be an institutional priority. Your leadership's messaging and influence can help create a CPL-supportive culture, while also providing the financial resources for dedicated CPL staff, assessors, and other needs of the program. This is why it's important that your first focus be on building internal buy-in for CPL, especially from your leadership.

There is no single right way to approach this — every circumstance will be different. If you are not sure how to proceed, consider some of these steps:

Step 1: Do your homework.

Making a convincing case for investing in CPL can be bolstered by conducting a preliminary strategy exercise: thinking through the value proposition, considering your institution's strategic priorities, and collecting data.

- **Articulate your value proposition.** Get very clear on the value of CPL for your adult learners and for your institution. Why do you think CPL is an important part of your adult learner programming? Consider not only benefits like better retention and completion, but also the andragogical angle of an intentional focus on learning and helping students make connections between learning and work.
- **Consider institutional priorities.** How do the benefits from CPL align to your institution's strategic goals or mission? Listen to leadership about their priorities (for example, enrollment, student success, and equity), and customize your CPL business case to those issues and concerns.
- **Gather data.** Draw on the CAEL-WICHE research findings (**cael.org/pla-impact**) or survey your adult learners to gauge how much they would value having more CPL opportunities. Conduct an asset map of CPL policies and practices at your institution; they may vary considerably for different departments and disciplines as well as for different CPL methods. (The process for seeking credit through a CLEP test is very different than for that of portfolio assessment.) In departments where CPL is already used the most, collect data showing its usage (if available) and its impact on students.

Building allies can sometimes result in creating new champions. At one institution, a dean was impressed by CAEL's value proposition for CPL. He began to talk about it with everyone he met, ultimately serving as an important advocate to bring others on board.

Step 2: Find allies.

You don't have to be a lone wolf. Recruit some colleagues to work on this together.

- **Find other champions.** Present your case for expanding your approach to CPL to internal groups (for example, the faculty senate, enrollment management team, and department deans). Give them a chance to learn about CPL and ask you questions. Identify allies and other internal champions that could be part of a team that focuses on CPL.
- **Listen to those who are on the fence.** Pay close attention to any concerns raised by your colleagues. Note whether there are differences in how the various academic departments or administrative units feel about CPL. By understanding the different internal points of view, you will be better positioned to present a convincing case for CPL. Anticipate — and prepare responses that address — some common misperceptions (such as lost tuition revenue, fewer sections taught in certain departments, lack of academic rigor in the assessment process, credit being awarded for experience listed on a resume) or fears (such as a flood of students requesting CPL). Be prepared to address those issues, or figure out a way to convene people to help solve these problems. Also consider how to align CPL with your institution's academic philosophy and mission, and consider its relevance, from an andragogical perspective, to your students' engagement with their own learning process.
- **Convene your dream team.** A working group on CPL would include your allies and fellow champions, and ideally these would represent different parts of the institution. Work together to identify an action plan for your CPL planning and design process. Determine what you need from leadership work. Some "asks" you might consider include top-down messages, dedicated staff, curriculum development, resources for staff and faculty professional development, changes in policies, and resources for assessment.

Step 3: Engage your leadership.

With support at the top, you will have a lot more options for CPL program design and implementation.

- **Get an audience with the C-Suite.** Work with your team to find ways to engage with the leadership at your institution and present the larger business case (and connection to the leadership's priorities), data on current usage and impact, and a proposal for needed improvements and the resources to make it happen. If leadership sees CPL as a priority, ask them about what kind of scope and scale they will support. If they truly believe that CPL will provide real, tangible value to the institution, they need to make an investment that matches that value.

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP BUILD SUPPORT FOR CPL AT YOUR INSTITUTION

What are the most compelling arguments for CPL at your institution?

How do the benefits from CPL align to your institution's strategic goals or mission?

Who can serve as CPL champions?

What questions or concerns do your colleagues have about CPL?

Who can help you present a compelling case for CPL to your leadership?

Who can help you with planning, design and implementation?

Who can help with training or acquiring the appropriate resources?

Is your leadership already a fan of CPL? If you already know that CPL is a priority among senior leadership, skip ahead in the process and ask for their support in the creation of a CPL working group that will collect data, refine the value proposition for the institution, and develop an action plan to create a comprehensive approach to CPL at your institution.

Stage 2
Determining the Strategy and Scope of Your CPL Program

Once you have determined the level of commitment your institution has for CPL, next is the process of creating a CPL strategy that will work for your institution. In Stage 1, if you were able to secure institutional commitment, resources and support, your implementation activities should be designed to meet the needs of as many adult learners as possible. On the other hand, if support is limited, you may want to think about a scaled-back strategy that focuses on a specific program or a targeted population. A limited initiative that generates student interest and shows impact can then be used to foster greater interest in CPL with your leadership and colleagues.

SOME SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS DURING THIS STAGE:

- **Goals and priorities.** What do you hope to achieve, while being realistic about the scale and scope you think is viable right now? For example, increasing retention rates, helping students save time and money, or changing internal culture around valuing learning that takes place outside of a college classroom.
- **Target population.** Who are your adult learners? What learning and experiences do they bring to academia? Which CPL methods are best suited to the types of prior learning they bring? What kinds of support will they need to pursue CPL? Are they predominantly concentrated in particular degree programs? Are they in transfer or terminal degree programs? Do some of them come from traditionally underserved populations with unique needs?
- **Anticipated challenges.** Now that you have decided to launch this initiative (or expand your existing one), what challenges still remain to be addressed? These could be cultural, structural, financial, or procedural barriers.
- **Current state and existing resources.** Most institutions are not starting a CPL program entirely from scratch but, in fact, have some processes and policies in place even if they are not being used. Take an inventory of what you currently have in place in terms of policies, processes, and active assessment mechanisms (which may be confined to specific academic departments and not widely known), as well as state or system guidelines or regulations that may provide some guardrails. It is usually easier to amend and build upon existing elements than to start over. What kind of budget has already been committed to CPL at your institution? And if there is no dedicated budget, what existing resources could support your work? This includes drawing connections between your CPL program and your

ARE YOUR STATE OR SYSTEM POLICIES LIMITING CPL AT YOUR INSTITUTION?

You may discover that some state or system policies are restrictive or nonexistent. That could play a role in your ability to expand CPL offerings at your institution. This is all the more reason to gain the support of leadership. They may be able to address this issue at the state or system level to create real change.

institution's priorities, needs, and mission as well as existing adult learner initiatives.

The answers to these questions will help in the overall design parameters for your CPL program — what is possible both in the long term and the short term. It may be tempting to say you want to do all forms of CPL in all degree programs in a short amount of time, but that will require a lot of time and resources even in the best scenarios. And, even if you have strong leadership support, you may have limited staff time on your team — all with lots of other responsibilities they are managing. So it may be worthwhile to develop a strategy where you deploy (or improve/expand) CPL in iterative steps, rather than trying to tackle all CPL methods for all of your programs at once. If you have limited resources or scope, focus on shorter-term wins with lower administrative efforts to justify further investment. Above all, implement a system to document your successes, whether data or narrative, so you can demonstrate it to those who need to see it.

SOME OPTIONS FOR STARTING SMALL:

- **Limit to one or two degree or credential programs.** One approach you could take is to identify a specific degree or credential program that can serve as your test case or CPL pilot — simply because that is more manageable with available resources. A degree-focused approach may also be useful if overall institutional commitment exists but is not strong. Consider departments with a high volume of adult students or those already doing some CPL upon which you can build. For example, one large state university realized it needed to do more to serve the students in its newly created adult degree program. It decided to create a very thorough and well-run CPL program within that program alone as a first step. Keep in mind that even if you do limit it to select programs, you will still need the involvement of some campuswide administrative units, such as advising, registrar, and marketing.
- **Focus on offering a few CPL methods — and doing them well.** Another alternative way to limit the scale is to focus on a narrow set of CPL assessment types. For example, you could decide to focus on military credit or credit-by-exam, as these tend to have high utilization, high familiarity among faculty and staff, and lower rates of opposition. They also tend to require less administrative effort to implement. For example, CAEL recently

worked with several rural community colleges in the same system that wanted to make an impactful expansion of their adult offerings with limited resources. They decided to work together and focus on military credit, CLEP exams, and crosswalks from common industry credentials as an easy way to increase their offerings in a short amount of time.

- **Zero in on specific student segments.** When starting small, you could also consider focusing on a specific group of students at your institution, such as military service members and veterans, or students enrolling via a specific employer or industry partnership. Through a narrower focus, you may not need to take on all the CPL methods available; instead, you can build a success story on your campus to leverage toward expanding CPL within your institution.

By reducing the scale of your CPL efforts to a specific program, set of methods, or student population, you can learn from the experience, collect success stories and testimonials, build a strong case with recorded data, and expand your group of internal champions. With these success stories and data, you can reengage your senior leaders, staff, and faculty, increase their level of CPL commitment, and eventually expand your scale and scope.

Stage 3
Designing the Right CPL Program for Your Institution

Once you understand the commitment level and CPL strategy for your institution, you are then ready to consider the program design that needs to be in place for your CPL program to be successful. Several vital elements need to be considered for the creation of a robust and high-quality CPL program. Important ones to start your design process include:

- CPL policies (including methods and fees).
- CPL process.
- Data tracking.
- Advising and other student supports.
- Quality assurance and academic integrity.
- Staffing and professional development.
- Marketing and outreach.

When addressing each of these elements, you will need to establish a design team and engage with multiple stakeholders at your institution. Be sure to submit your design plans to the appropriate internal committees for review and approval. Some institutions prefer to have a formalized task force or committee, designated by leadership, to undertake this work.

CPL Policies

CPL policies are typically all about what internal "guardrails" are established — what can CPL credit be used for in a degree plan (for example, electives, general education requirements, and major requirements), which degree or credentials, any caps on applying a certain number of CPL credits toward a degree or credential, what methods are used, and what fees are imposed. To determine most of these policies, you will need to work closely with the registrar and the chief academic officer, and perhaps also the deans of individual colleges or departments. In some cases, you may need to craft a new policy, but in others you may need to examine old policies and decide if they are still serving their intended purpose and supporting your CPL goals.

Throughout your work, **consider whether your existing policies seem needlessly restrictive or do not have any clear purpose.** In CAEL's experience, engaging in a policy review can often lead to questioning why certain policies exist at all. Usually, policies have been set so far in the past that no one remembers the rationale for why they were originally established, or they were established out of fear that students would earn too many

credits through CPL (even though such fears are rarely borne out in a well-managed program based on clear quality standards). These discussions can lead to decisions about making CPL policies less restrictive and therefore more beneficial to students.

Unless you are limited by your accreditor, **it's important that you not treat CPL differently from other types of credit awards** (for example, transfer credits); if you are awarding CPL credits, you should do so only because you believe the student has that learning. Putting CPL credits into a separate credit category undermines the whole purpose of recognizing learning. Aligning your CPL policies with your transfer credit policies might be the most straightforward approach to take.

Consider, too, how CPL credits are listed on the student's transcript.
Will they be clearly identified as CPL credits? Some institutions clearly label credit from standardized exams and other methods as "testing credit." Some institutions opt to treat portfolio assessment and challenge exams as residential or native credit because the institutions' own faculty members are the ones evaluating the students' learning for credit. This can have implications for how CPL credit limits are calculated.

These examples are nowhere close to exhaustive; many institutions will need to consider policy decisions from a wide range of academic and administrative concerns. Also, it is important not to create limitations or policy hurdles for the sake of having them. Rather, think carefully about how each policy decision will affect the flow of students toward your institution's CPL goals. Also, it is important to consider how certain policies might affect certain subpopulations of students. For example, if policies make navigating the system difficult or require students to undertake actions during the normal working day, how will this affect students who work full time or who are first-generation college students?

A NOTE ON FEES

When it comes to setting fees, encourage your design team to weigh access to CPL against other considerations. For example, an institution that views CPL as a support for adult student recruitment and success could treat CPL as a kind of "loss leader." In that case, CPL pricing can be set low because greater returns are expected over time that make CPL a net positive for the institution. (CPL could also be offered at no charge — see one institution's rationale on this decision here: **cael.org/news-and-resources/we-wanted-to-increase-use-of-pla/cpl-so-we-stopped-charging-for-it.**) To learn more about CPL and pricing, read CAEL's *PLA is Your Business* report found at **cael.org/hubfs/2015_PLA_Business_Model-FINAL.pdf**.

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU DEFINE YOUR CPL POLICIES

What methods will be used to evaluate student learning for the purpose of awarding CPL credits?

What fees, if any, will need to be charged for the different CPL methods? Can your institution offer CPL for free, or provide CPL scholarships?

Does your CPL program value an inclusive range of learning experiences?

Will your institution accept CPL credits awarded by a student's previous institution as part of the transfer process?

If there are existing eligibility requirements for the CPL program, could the institution find ways to eliminate unnecessary or arbitrarily-defined requirements?

Will there be an appeal process in cases where the student is not awarded credit?

If there are existing limits on the number of CPL credits a student can use toward a degree or credential, is there a justifiable reason for these limits to exist? Are there any caps that are established by your regional accreditor?

How are CPL credits listed on the student's transcript? Which types of CPL credit could be considered residential credit, rather than transfer or testing credit?

Which courses can and cannot be earned through CPL?

Are all of your policies published publicly and easy to find on your website?

Will students view your policies as fair and transparent?

A NOTE ON CPL METHODS

Your CPL program can use various assessment methods to determine how to award CPL credit. The amount of credit (or other recognition) students can earn for their prior learning can be determined through several distinct types of assessments. There are three general categories of methods:

1. **Exams.** These can include standardized exams such as CLEP, UExcel, and DSST exams, all of which have been reviewed by American Council on Education and recommended for credit. In addition, your institution can provide its own faculty-developed exams (sometimes called "challenge exams" or "departmental exams"), which can be more customized to the courses at your institution. These are fairly common for lower division courses.

2. **Individualized assessments of student portfolios that summarize their noncredit learning.** Portfolio assessment allows for great flexibility for the student to earn credit for a wide range of learning from various experiences because it is easier for students to reflect upon a wide range of knowledge sources, especially less formalized learning experiences such as on-the-job training. It is also particularly useful for upper division courses for which no examinations or direct evaluations exist. Internal subject matter experts like your own faculty are the ones who assess the student's learning and make recommendations for credit awards. Portfolio assessment is a powerful tool for helping students process their own learning, connecting learning with work, and providing a great deal of flexibility in your CPL, but it requires training of staff and faculty, and it can be the most labor-intensive for students, faculty, and staff. It requires careful management and resources to do well.

3. **Evaluation of noncredit or noncollege programs.** The National College Credit Recommendation Service and ACE conduct evaluations for a fee of training offered by employers or the military. For example, in military training, institutions typically review a service member's Joint Services Transcript, which lists ACE credit recommendations for the individual's military training and military occupations. Outside of recommendation services, individual postsecondary institutions can also conduct evaluations of corporate and other noncollege training programs rather than external evaluation entities like NCCRS or ACE. Many institutional evaluations focus on industry credentials, licensures, and even local employer trainings in what are often called noncredit-to-credit crosswalks or mappings. These are great tools also for boosting tangible industry-education partnerships.

In addition to the above methods, institutions may offer credit based on performance assessments or skill demonstrations.

In all of your offerings, consider how to be inclusive of learning that comes from a wide range of work and life experiences. Students from underrepresented populations tend to bring knowledge from a wider range of sources and therefore may benefit from having more options. For example, question any biases that may exist within your institutions about whether certain types of work or other learning experiences are treated as more "CPL-worthy" than others; adhering to those kinds of biases can create inequities in terms of which students can pursue or receive CPL credit.

When all CPL policies have been finalized, create a document that summarizes those policies. Once completed, be sure to make that document accessible to staff, students, and faculty.

CPL Process

After the main policy considerations have been addressed, consider how your students will learn about PLA/CPL, how they will access PLA, what steps they will take in the process of earning credit for their prior learning, and what help they may need along the way. You will need to consider how the student's interaction with your CPL programs will require engagement and coordination with marketing, advising, admissions, technology tools, financial aid, the registrar, academic departments, and learning evaluators.

A good exercise is to create a **visual map of the CPL process** for the student as well as for internal staff and faculty. The process map will help you identify the different decision points and transition points where students — or the overall process — could get bogged down. Your goal should be to find ways to simplify the overall process and its various transition points. Consider what could be automated or centralized. Think through at which points the student may have questions or need support; providing that kind of support can help ensure student success, particularly for students who are historically underrepresented. (For more on this topic, see the CAEL and WICHE report, *Equity Paradoxes in The PLA Boost,* at **cael.org/news-and-resources/pla-cpl-equity**.) Share the current state and ask everyone involved what is working and is not working. And then make sure that everyone involved — students and staff alike — understand how the process will work.

Note that there are likely to be different processes for the different methods of CPL that you offer. Make sure the role of advisors and faculty assessors is clearly outlined for each CPL method. Some methods will be more complicated than others. Portfolio assessment, for example, will have a process that includes how a faculty assessor will be assigned to evaluate a portfolio, determining which tools (for example, rubrics) assessors will use to determine PLA credit, establishing what conditions need to be met for assessment approval, and establishing processes for providing feedback to the student and/or for an appeals process.

A sample CPL process map is available at **cael.org/lp/credit-for-prior-learning-champions**, but keep in mind that this sample was developed for a specific institution. Your CPL program will likely be structured differently, and so you will want to use this sample to give you ideas for how to develop your own. The exercise of developing your own process map will be a way for your team to identify roles and responsibilities and think through how things might be done more effectively and efficiently.

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP MAP YOUR CPL PROCESS

What does the CPL process look like from the student's perspective? Where do they first hear about CPL, and what are the specific steps in the process of applying for CPL credit? Is the onus placed on the student to initiate and carry through the process?

At what point in a student's career should they be able to initiate the CPL process (for example, upon admission, after a full semester, etc.)? How long should the process be expected to take?

At what points in the student's CPL process are they likely to have questions or need encouragement or support? Are there points where students may fall through the process because of gaps? How can you anticipate those needs to reduce the burden on the student?

Where might you want to provide additional encouragement and support to students that are historically underrepresented?

What staff and faculty are involved at the different stages of the student's CPL process?

Are there ways to simplify or improve the process for the student?

Are there ways to simplify or improve the process for the faculty and staff asked to administer it?

Are there ways to simplify the processes behind the scenes so that there are fewer transition points that could create delays in the learning evaluations or in the awarding of credit?

Is the existing process working as intended, and does everyone involved have the resources (staff, knowledge, awareness, guidance, inputs, etc.) to do their part?

Quality Assurance/Academic Integrity

In designing your program, you will need to be intentional and proactive in ensuring that your CPL program adheres to accepted standards for assessing learning. This is critical for the purposes of quality assurance and maintaining academic integrity. Failure to maintain high standards for the awarding of credit for prior learning can jeopardize the CPL program, damage your institution's reputation, and disrupt your students' degree plans and overall academic success.

As you review your policies and processes for awarding credit for prior learning, refer to CAEL's "Ten Standards for Assessing Learning" at **cael.org/ ten-standards-for-assessing-learning** to ensure they are meeting quality assurance and academic integrity standards.

1. Credit or competencies are awarded only for evidence of learning, not experience or time spent.
2. Assessment is integral to learning because it leads to and enables future learning.
3. Assessment is based on criteria for outcomes that are clearly articulated and shared among constituencies.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels are made by appropriate subject matter and credentialing experts.
5. Assessment advances the broader purpose of equity and access for diverse individuals and groups.
6. Institutions proactively provide guidance and support for learners' full engagement in the assessment process.
7. Assessment policies and procedures are the result of inclusive deliberation and are shared with all constituencies.
8. Fees charged for assessment are based on the services performed in the process rather than the credit awarded.
9. All practitioners involved in the assessment process pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs are regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised to respond to institutional and learner needs.

Reviewing your policies and process against these standards will help ensure that your CPL program has the correct checks and balances to ensure that credit is being awarded for college-level learning. For additional insight and guidance, consult *Assessing Learning: Quality Standards and Institutional Commitments (3rd Edition),* available through Kendell Hunt, **he.kendallhunt.com/product/ assessing-learning-quality-standards-and-institutional-commitments.** (A CAEL member discount for this book is available upon request.)

KEY QUESTIONS TO HELP ENSURE QUALITY AND INTEGRITY IN YOUR CPL PROGRAM

How will you assure quality in the process of awarding of credit for each method of CPL offered? What are the standards that you have established for ensuring quality and integrity?

How will you communicate your process for ensuring the integrity of CPL credit awards to faculty and staff?

Are your quality assurance efforts meeting the needs of your chief academic officer and department heads? Have they contributed to the design and plans for managing quality assurance and integrity?

Data Tracking

In addition to quality assurance and academic integrity, setting up a reliable data tracking system will be pivotal for the success of your CPL program. Collecting, managing, and analyzing student data will help you and your colleagues answer several questions and concerns related to the success of your CPL program. Importantly, if you are not already tracking these data, you should start as soon as possible (even before policy, process, support, and quality issues are resolved). The sooner you have data, the easier it will be to determine whether your efforts are having the desired outcomes. Some of these questions include:

- How many credits are being earned through CPL, in which academic programs, and by which assessment methods? Are these students in terminal degree programs, or do they hope to transfer?
- How many students are successfully earning CPL, how many are unsuccessful, and how many credits per student are being earned on average?
- Are there ways to capture individual stories of student success?
- Is CPL used by all student subgroups, particularly those historically underrepresented in higher education (for example, students of color, lower-income students)? Which subgroups may need additional outreach, guidance, encouragement, or support?
- Are students providing negative or positive feedback about their experience applying for and receiving CPL credit? Do they believe they are getting the support they need to be successful with CPL?
- What do you know about the work experience of the students who successfully earn CPL? Is there diversity in the work experience, or does CPL seem to be awarded more frequently to some types of learning than others?
- How many faculty members are participating in the evaluation or assessment process?
- How consistent are advisors in referring students to CPL options?
- What is the overall cost per CPL credit, both for students and the institution?
- What are the credential completion rates of students who earn CPL compared to those who don't? What are other student outcomes?

DATA WILL HELP YOU WITH:

- **Making better administrative decisions about your CPL program.** Data will help your institution understand where additional investments of time and money might be needed. It might also inform some of your policy and process decisions.
- **Building internal support for CPL.** With data on how students use and benefit from CPL and with individual student success stories, you can make a stronger case for the value of CPL to your students.
- **Ensuring equity.** An effective data-tracking system will help you understand who is using CPL and who is not, allowing you to be strategic about how to direct outreach and additional resources.
- **Evidence for further refinement.** Data will help you determine what is working and what is not on a regular basis — and, therefore, where further improvements can be made.

KEY QUESTIONS ABOUT CPL DATA TRACKING

What data are you currently tracking regarding CPL usage at your institution?

What kind of CPL reporting does your institution have the capacity to provide? What, to whom, and how often?

Do you have the ability to connect CPL data to student demographic and academic outcomes, especially credential completion or progress toward completion? Are you using these data to help you ensure your program is helping to support equity goals?

How can you collect information from students directly about their experiences with CPL?

Advising and Other Student Support

Advisors play a critical role in your CPL program. As you will likely identify in the CPL process mapping exercise, there are many parts of the CPL process where students will need guidance, encouragement, and support. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators has outlined best practices for advisors working within CPL programs, which include communicating CPL processes and policies to advisors, offering advisors CPL professional development opportunities, and supporting activities and events where advisors can connect with and learn from students to understand how students' experiences may fit CPL credit.[1] These recommendations align with New America's statement that "the single most important thing that colleges can do to strengthen their prior learning for credit programs is to create strong advising programs that help students take advantage of (CPL) opportunities."[2] New America also suggests that advising is so important that you may want

1 Wesley, A., and Parnell, A. (2020). Advising and Prior Learning Assessment for Degree Completion. wiche.edu/ key-initiatives/recognition-of-learning/pla-advising/
2 Palmer, I. & Nguyen, S. (2019). Connecting Adults to College with Credit for Prior Learning. newamerica.org/ education-policy/reports/lessons-adapting-future-work-prior-learning-assessment/recommendations

to consider specialized CPL advisors to ensure student success.[3] Given that research has shown that certain student populations — particularly Black and lower-income adult students — may be less likely to engage with CPL[4], advisors should make a special point to explore CPL possibilities with these students and to provide additional encouragement for those who might be good CPL candidates.

Whether at enrollment or advising sessions, don't expect students to make the connection haphazardly. Integrate CPL discussion into established processes that take place early in the student's career at your institution.

The role of admissions and enrollment advisors. During the admissions and enrollment processes, advisors can help adult learners consider whether CPL could provide a way for them to save time and money in reaching their goals. These discussions could include addressing topics such as estimates for receiving CPL credits. (Note: CAEL members have access to a free credit predictor tool.) These conversations should take place as early as possible to avoid students enrolling in unnecessary courses. Think carefully about what expectations you will have for advisors to talk to adult learners about CPL and what resources you will provide advisors.

The role of academic advisors. Academic advisors should also play a role and reinforce messages about the value of CPL for the student. They can work with adult learners within the CPL process to take initial CPL credit estimates and incorporate them into degree plans, with considerations for the student's entire academic record, including reviewing and confirming if the student has any transfer credit and registering that credit within the registrar's office. If the student's educational plans involve transferring to another institution, advisors need to help students consider what kind of CPL credits will transfer to the next institution. Academic advisors also will need to discuss the range of CPL methods available for different types of learning that the students may have (for example, ACE military credit recommendations for service members, CLEP for a range of common courses, formal reviews or crosswalks for licenses and certifications, etc.). Academic advisors should also help students begin the process of applying for credit, provide information on available support in developing portfolios or preparing for exams, and guide students through the appeals process, if needed.

KEY QUESTIONS ON DEFINING YOUR NEED FOR ADVISING AND STUDENT SUPPORT

Who serves as advisors to students at different stages of their interaction with your institution?

What kind of training do the various advisors receive on your CPL program offerings and CPL process?

What kind of tools or job aids are needed to help in the CPL advising process?

How might academic support services be leveraged to help a student with their CPL applications, portfolios, or examinations?

How might advisors provide additional encouragement and support to students who may not be as confident in themselves as learners, and who therefore might not see themselves as having "CPL-worthy" learning?

What kinds of questions should advisors ask to determine if a student might be a good CPL candidate?

Do advisors feel comfortable answering most students' CPL questions or know where to quickly get answers?

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3 Ibid.
4 Klein-Collins, R, et al. (2020). The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes. www.cael.org/pla-impact.

Staffing and Professional Development

In order for all of the pieces of the process to work well, it can be helpful to **have at least one staff person who monitors activities and data, coordinates activities across the institution, ensures that students and staff have the information and resources they need, and can serve as a central point of contact or liaison for CPL at the institution.** Having a dedicated staff person or team will require an investment of staff and other resources — in other words, a commitment that is reflected in the institution's budget. In addition, there may need to be other time commitments from other staff and faculty to provide advising and support to students as well as to carry out the CPL assessments or evaluations of external programs.

Consider, too, where the CPL staff is housed. You may have practical or pragmatic reasons for housing CPL as a certain part of your institution, but keep in mind that the location could signal the kind of priorities that you are placing on it. It may make a lot of sense, for example, to house CPL with career and technical programs, or within an adult-focused division, and yet this could ultimately limit broader engagement with CPL throughout your institution.

Because the success of your CPL program depends on many different people in several areas of your institution, you will need to **ensure that everyone involved has a strong understanding of the value of CPL and how it works for students at your institution.** Consider designing a CPL training that can be available as individual modules specific to certain roles and levels of understanding. For example, you may need an introductory training about what CPL is and why people should care (countering negative myths, sharing research, etc.) for everyone in the process. The basic introductory training should help people understand what CPL is (and what it is not), the value proposition for students and the institution, what CPL assessment methods are offered, the CPL process at your institution (use that handy process map!), and the importance of adhering to quality standards for assessing learning for your CPL program. You may then need specialized training modules for advisors, faculty assessors, etc. Similarly, you may want to create written resources or guides that are specific to certain job roles. *If you're ready to dive deeper, consider some of CAEL's professional development courses on CPL, or check out our online CPL-focused microcourses at cael.org/membership/professional-development-and-training.*

Treat CPL training as you would any other learning exercise and get specific about what the intended learning outcomes or competencies are for those training. Reinforce the training through less formal opportunities such as staff/faculty meetings, reminder emails, job aids, and training manuals on your CPL policies and procedures.

KEY QUESTIONS ON CPL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What kind of CPL training efforts have been conducted previously, who got it, and how were they received?

Which staff and faculty are currently in need of CPL training? Which roles require a general overview of CPL, and which require more role-specific training?

How might CPL training be offered through a combination of workshops, in-services, externally provided courses, and job aids?

What kind of process can be established for refresher training or training of new staff and faculty?

Marketing and Outreach

Marketing and outreach refers to contacting students within and outside of the institution, both of which require different ways of presenting the value proposition of CPL to students across multiple touchpoints. As mentioned earlier, there is an important role for enrollment or admissions advisors, academic advisors, and faculty in this process, but there is also a need for the marketing team to support CPL outreach efforts. Your program can also share information about your CPL program with local employers or workforce boards with whom you may already be developing joint programming for jobseekers and incumbent workers. General communications with the community might also include messaging about CPL to show that you are an institution that is adult-friendly.

One important component is providing information on your website about CPL for both prospective and current students at your institution. This page should always lead with why students should care about CPL (that is, it will save them time and money) rather than a technical description of what it is. Further, the webpage should not be buried on the site nor should key details be scattered throughout the course catalog and other documents. Rather the webpage should be a one-stop that provides information about CPL opportunities that outlines why and how students participate in a CPL program, what the step-by-step processes are, who they specifically should talk to, what the limitations and opportunities are, and where they can earn credit. It should provide clear concise answers, avoiding statements that send students digging around for more information from other people and documents. The page could also include a credit predictor tool to help students visualize how PLA credit can fit their academic plans. As a promotional tool, the webpage should be more student-facing than policy-laden, although policies should still be posted on the webpage if adult learners want to learn more about the technical details for each CPL opportunity.

For students already enrolled within your institution, CPL marketing can take the form of flyers or notices posted around campus, social media, and email drip campaigns. You can target adult students only, or subgroups like military veterans. You may also want to specifically target messages to students who are historically underrepresented, as they may not alway see themselves as having college level learning from their life and work experiences. For students outside the institution, the marketing team should be working with the student recruitment team to make sure that messages about CPL are included in communications strategies designed to engage prospective students.

Be ready to interact with these students you reach out to. While it is a common misconception that institutions will receive a flood of CPL applicants, you do want to make sure your processes and supports are all in place so you are ready to serve students when they begin to ask questions.

Does your website provide details about what CPL is, the benefits to students, how students can get started, and whom to contact for more information? How easy would it be for a prospective student with no knowledge of CPL or its terminology to find this information?

Does the institution's communications to prospective students include messages about the benefits of CPL?

Is CPL covered in orientation for adult students?

Do students know where to go (or whom to contact) for more information about CPL?

Are there messages about CPL that students will hear at multiple touch points during admissions and enrollment?

Are there CPL messages that are targeted to historically underserved students?

For more tips on outreach and marketing, with real examples for your student communications, see the Student Outreach guide available in the CPL Champion Resource Kit at cael.org/lp/cpl-pla

Stage 4
Maintaining Your Focus throughout Implementation for Continuous Improvement

When you have all of your campus support, policies, processes, program design, training, and resources in place, then comes implementation. This is when you need to make sure you have a few additional elements in place:

- Laser focus on quality assurance and student support
- Ongoing data tracking for program evaluation and storytelling
- Planning that leads to continuous improvement and innovation

Laser Focus on Quality Assurance and Student Support

You can best support your program's implementation by making sure that everyone with specific responsibilities in the CPL process is doing their part well — this is particularly important for ensuring ongoing quality, integrity and rigor in the awarding of credit, as well as in making sure that students are getting the encouragement and support they need. Having someone in place who is responsible for monitoring that process is important, with frequent monitoring discussions during early implementation. They will need to make sure that there are no short-cuts when it comes to providing student support or adhering to quality assurance standards like the use of scoring rubrics or the need for subject matter experts making credit recommendations.

Ongoing Data Tracking for Program Evaluation and Storytelling

Once you have established data collection processes outlined above, you will need to regularly examine that data to understand how well your program is working for your students and your institution. Regularly review reports on the metrics that you have prioritized and use that information to identify where you might need to invest more resources — for example, in outreach to underrepresented student groups, advising, or student supports.

Be in the habit of sharing reports with key decision-makers in your institution so they can see how many students are using it, which students, the number of CPL credits awarded, the types of CPL methods that are used, and so on. This should be done at least annually. Your ability to advocate for and report CPL student trends and outcomes will be strengthened if the data show progress in terms of the number of students engaged.

Telling student stories is also important for making a strong case for increasing internal support for CPL. Those stories help bring the program to life, both for the people within your institution that need to understand the impact of CPL, and for current and prospective students who might be inspired by hearing real-life stories of how someone's prior learning (or otherwise extra-institutional learning) can count toward their educational goals. For help with storytelling about your CPL program, consult resources such as National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's *Building a Narrative via Evidence-Based Storytelling: A Toolkit for Practice* to create compelling infographics and narratives at **learningoutcomesassessment.org/evidence-based-storytelling/#1613707771766-335edf21-b21c**. Armed with student stories, you can expand your influence as a CPL advocate on your campus while also building a foundation for future program improvements.

Planning that Leads to Continuous Improvement and Innovation

During your program implementation, consider also how you might continue to improve your CPL program. This cycle of improvement should include:

- Reviewing points of strength and weakness within your CPL program with special attention toward the data you have collected along with opportunities to expand its scope and scale.
- Creating an action plan to build on what is working and improve weaknesses in the program.
- Taking action; follow your action plan to make program improvements.
- Reviewing how the actions you have taken have impacted your program.

If you keep this planning and continuous improvement framework in mind throughout the implementation phase of your program, your CPL program will become more reliable and sustainable as an institutional resource for student success. In addition, consider what new opportunities there might be for expanding your program in new ways, with new technologies or processes, with new forms of learning evaluation, or with new audiences. Innovation is the key to making the benefits of CPL more accessible to more students, and your program may hold that key.
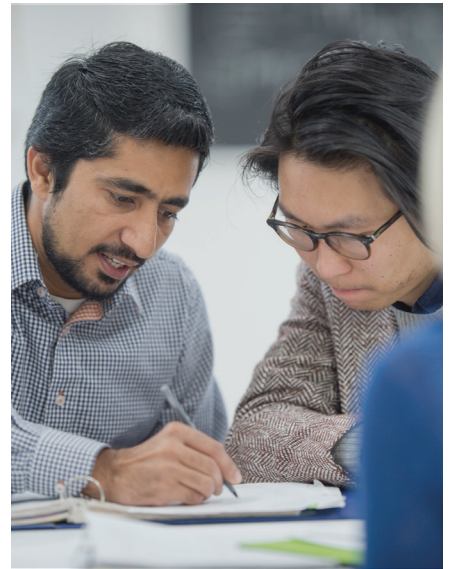
Conclusion

Once your CPL program is in place, your team's goal is to manage the program to produce positive student outcomes sustainably. Constantly reflect on your CPL program goals regarding usage, equity, and budgetary impact — and share that information with others at your institution. If you notice that your program is making satisfactory progress, keep doing what you are doing while being mindful of emerging trends and potential risks that may affect the adult learners who use your CPL program. If, on the other hand, you notice areas for improvement, take on the challenge to make your CPL program even better for students. This effort may include investigating where there may be problems within your policies, processes, or implementation phases of the program.

Whether you are documenting positive results or taking on unfamiliar problems, strive to learn from the experience and improve your CPL program. Every academic year will bring new students, new challenges, and new ways to help students attain their degrees through CPL credit. Managing a CPL program is a cycle of continuous improvement.

As you experience this cycle of improvement, remember that you might not be able to do it all on your own. Consider forming partnerships with other institutions (particularly institutions within your system or region) to help conduct some of your CPL program offerings or expand assessment capacity when needed. Your ability to provide a comprehensive CPL program will require internal staffing support, and it also will require internal training for faculty or developing a network of external (adjunct) faculty assessors with varied expertise. If you don't have that kind of capacity, you may want to join forces with others or find ways to draw on external support. This will likely be an ongoing process, as new staff members join the institution and additional departments and faculty become interested in CPL. If your institution is part of a more extensive postsecondary system or network, consider joining forces to build systemwide CPL crosswalks and policies. With a constructive mindset, no problem is too large to overcome for your CPL program.

Consider becoming a CAEL member to unlock access to additional CPL resources and a license to our free credit predictor tool. Or enroll in our professional development courses that provide more in-depth training on building CPL programs. If you still need help, reach out to CAEL at cael.org/about-us/contact-us for direct assistance.

Summary of Guiding Questions to Build an Effective and Inclusive CPL Program

Leadership and General Buy-In

Key Questions to Help you Build Support for CPL at Your Institution

- What are the most compelling arguments for CPL at your institution?
- How do the benefits from CPL align to your institution's strategic goals or mission?
- Who can serve as CPL champions?
- What questions or concerns do your colleagues have about CPL?
- Who can help you present a compelling case for CPL to your leadership?
- Who can help you with planning, design and implementation?
- Who can help with training or acquiring the appropriate resources?

CPL Strategy and Scope

Key Questions to Help you Determine the Strategy and Scope of Your CPL Program

- What are your goals and priorities for CPL?
- Who are your students, and what extra institutional learning (prior learning) do they bring?
- What new or existing resources (staff, funding) could support your work?
- What challenges do you expect to encounter?

CPL Program Design

Key Questions to Help you Define Your CPL Policies

- What methods will be used to evaluate student learning for the purpose of awarding CPL credits?
- What fees, if any, will need to be charged for the different CPL methods? Can your institution offer CPL for free, or provide CPL scholarships?
- Does your CPL program value an inclusive range of learning experiences?
- Will your institution accept CPL credits awarded by a student's previous institution as part of the transfer process?
- If there are existing eligibility requirements for the CPL program, could the institution find ways to eliminate unnecessary or arbitrarily-defined requirements?
- Will there be an appeal process in cases where the student is not awarded credit?
- If there are existing limits on the number of CPL credits a student can use toward a degree or credential, is there a justifiable reason for these limits to exist? Are there any caps that are established by your regional accreditor?
- How are CPL credits listed on the student's transcript? Which types of CPL credit could be considered residential credit, rather than transfer or testing credit?
- Which courses can and cannot be earned through CPL?
- Are all of your policies published publicly and are easy to find?
- Will students view your policies as fair and transparent?

CPL Program Design *(continued)*

Key Questions to Help You Map Your CPL Process
- What does the CPL process look like from the student's perspective? Where do they first hear about CPL, and what are the specific steps in the process of applying for CPL credit? Is the onus placed on the student to initiate and carry through the process?
- At what point in a student's career should they be able to initiate the CPL process (for example, upon admission, after a full semester, etc.)? How long should the process be expected to take?
- At what points in the student's CPL process are they likely to have questions or need encouragement or support? Are there points where students may fall through the process because of gaps? How can you anticipate those needs to reduce the burden on the student?
- Where might you want to provide additional encouragement and support to students that are historically underrepresented?
- What staff and faculty are involved at the different stages of the student's CPL process?
- Are there ways to simplify or improve the process for the student?
- Are there ways to simplify or improve the process for the faculty and staff asked to administer it?
- Are there ways to simplify the processes behind the scenes so that there are fewer transition points that could create delays in the learning evaluations or in the awarding of credit?
- Is the existing process working as intended, and does everyone involved have the resources (staff, knowledge, awareness, guidance, inputs, etc.) to do their part?

Key Questions To Help You Ensure Quality and Integrity in Your CPL Program
- How will you assure quality in the process of awarding of credit for each method of CPL offered? What are the standards that you have established for ensuring quality and integrity?
- How will you communicate your process for ensuring the integrity of CPL credit awards to faculty and staff?
- Are your quality assurance efforts meeting the needs of your chief academic officer and department heads? Have they contributed to the design and plans for managing quality assurance and integrity?

Key Questions on CPL Data Tracking
- What data are you currently tracking regarding CPL usage at your institution?
- What kind of CPL reporting does your institution have the capacity to provide? What, to whom, and how often?
- Do you have the ability to connect CPL data to student demographic and academic outcomes, especially credential completion or progress toward completion? Are you using these data to help you ensure your program is helping to support equity goals?
- How can you collect information from students directly about their experiences with CPL?

Key Questions on Defining Your Need for Advising and Student Support
- Who serves as advisors to students at different stages of their interaction with your institution?
- What kind of training do the various advisors receive on your CPL program offerings and CPL process?
- What kind of tools or job aids are needed to help in the CPL advising process?
- How might academic support services be leveraged to help a student with their CPL applications, portfolios, or examinations?
- How might advisors provide additional encouragement and support to students who may not be as confident in themselves as learners, and who therefore might not see themselves as having "CPL-worthy" learning?
- What kinds of questions should advisors ask to determine if a student might be a good CPL candidate?
- Do advisors feel comfortable answering most students' CPL questions or know where to quickly get answers?

CPL Program Design *(continued)*

Key Questions on CPL Professional Development
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- How might CPL training be offered through a combination of workshops, in-services, externally provided courses, and job aids?
- What kind of process can be established for refresher training or training of new staff and faculty?

Key Questions on Marketing and Outreach for CPL
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- Does the institution's communications to prospective students include messages about the benefits of CPL?
- Is CPL covered in orientation for adult students?
- Do students know where to go (or whom to contact) for more information about CPL?
- Are there messages about CPL that students will hear at multiple touch points during admissions and enrollment?
- Are there CPL messages that are targeted to historically underserved students?

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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 national membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.