Comprehensive Learner Records

Empowering Lifelong
Learning in the Digital Age

**Postsecondary perspectives
of preparation for and
implementation of CLRs**

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Comprehensive Learner Records: Empowering Lifelong Learning in the Digital Age

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Executive Summary

The Comprehensive Learner Record (CLR)—defined as a verifiable, portable, interoperable digital asset that recognizes all learning—is currently a topic of intense interest in the postsecondary and workplace ecosystem. In Summer 2023, CAEL (the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) and The EvoLLLution conducted a survey of CAEL higher education members and The EvoLLLution subscribers to investigate the extent to which their institutions are considering CLR implementation, and whether they are taking steps to reconceptualize their courses and credentials in terms of skills or competencies rather than credit hours. Follow-up conversations with select CAEL members who are taking steps to move towards skill-based credentialing models and an informal information-gathering roundtable at the 2023 CAEL Conference in November further informed the study.

This report summarizes:

The extent to which the responding institutions have identified a need to design educational programs around well-defined skills and competencies

The extent to which these institutions have started to define their course and program outcomes in terms of skills and competencies

Whether the institutions have started to implement (or lay the groundwork for) skills or competency-based transcripts or comprehensive learner records.

Key Insights:

More support needed

to help institutions adopt competency-based approaches.

CPL crosswalks provide entry

for institutions to gain initial acceptance among internal stakeholders.

Lone champions are not enough

Institutions need more than just one or two champions to ensure momentum.

Engagement across the organization is key

CLRs are an equity strategy

CLRs support learners by recognizing learning from all sources and acknowledging diverse pathways to a credential.

Institutions need models

Institutions are eager to access successful models and implementation practices.

Introduction

What are Learning & Employment Records (LERs)?

Although CLRs and LERs are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a difference.

LERs are defined by the T3 Innovation Networks (a project sponsored by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation) as a digital record that documents learning "wherever it occurs, including at the workplace or through an education experience, credentialing, or military training. It can also include information about employment history and earnings." According to the AACRAO definition, LERs contain "verifiable information about a person's achievements spanning an inclusive range of contexts to include the CLR, the higher education component of the LER." Therefore, while the underlying philosophy of portable and interoperable digital records is the same, CLRs are centered on the skills and competencies related to a learner's academic career (including prior learning, military learning, and experiential learning), while LERs are an expanded concept that also documents workplace-related progression.

Digital portfolio of learning. Universal talent passport. Portable, interoperable digital asset—all terms used to describe Comprehensive Learner Records (CLRs) that are beginning to seep into the higher education vernacular. While the descriptors may vary, they all unite around the idea that the CLR represents a verifiable record of all of an individual's learning, whether traditional, competency-based, or co-curricular, and that the CLR is a digital asset that can be shared with employers and updated with new learning and skills.

Interest in these digital assets has grown since 2015 when the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) received a $1.7m Lumina Foundation grant to pilot CLRs in collaboration with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). AACRAO continues to support institutions across the country that are implementing CLRs[1], recommending the use of the 1EdTech CLR Standard, defined as "the next generation of secure and verifiable learning and employment records supporting all nature of academic and workplace recognition and achievements, including courses, competencies and skills, and employer-based achievements and milestones."[2]

The concept of a portable, digital record of learning seems straightforward enough, but at its core, CLRs require a seismic shift from the century-long model of academic transcripts based on credit hours. As noted by EDUCAUSE, CLRs shift attention "away from seat-time metrics to richer measures of an individual's abilities."[3] Transitioning from a traditional degree model to one that instead centers skills and competencies is inherently challenging. But as institutions become increasingly aware of the need to accurately capture learner competencies in a more comprehensive and holistic manner—and given the strong demand for marketable skills and competencies among today's students and employers—CLRs start to take center stage.

[1] Details and list of locations/institutions can be found here: https://www.aacrao.org/signature-initiatives/learning-mobility/digital-credentials
[2] See the full definition here: https://www.1edtech.org/clr/faq#clrIntro
[3] https://library.educause.edu/resources/2019/1/7-things-you-should-know-about-the-comprehensive-learner-record

Methodology

The survey was administered online and ran for three weeks between July and August 2023. The link was sent in a mass email to more than 4,000 CAEL higher education members and to The EvoLLLution subscribers. A total of 173 responses were received (133 complete and 40 partial responses). Individuals represented 144 institutions (including 83 CAEL member institutions) and held a wide variety of positions within their organizations. The largest group of respondents were in leadership roles at their institutions. For the survey analysis, top level responses include all participants, while comparisons of institution type included only one response per institution.
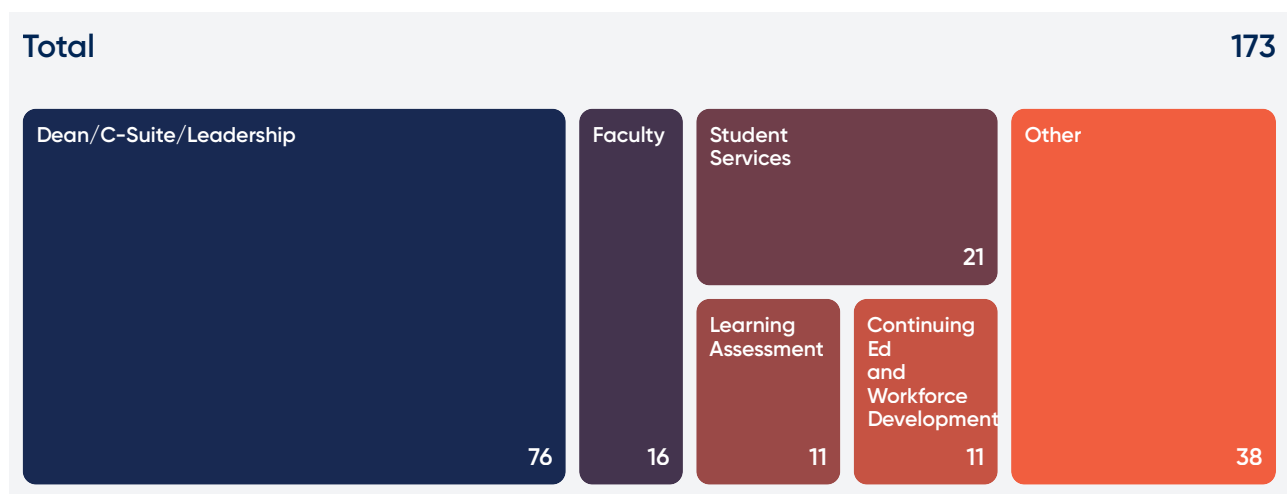
Figure 1: Respondent's role in their institution

Total					173
Dean/C-Suite/Leadership	Faculty	Student Services			Other
			Learning Assessment	Continuing Ed and Workforce Development	
76	16	21	11	11	38

Figure 2. Institution type (n=144)

- ● 4-year public
- ● 4-year private not-for-profit
- ● Community or technical college
- ● 4-year for-profit
- ● Other

48%
29%
15%
3%
3%
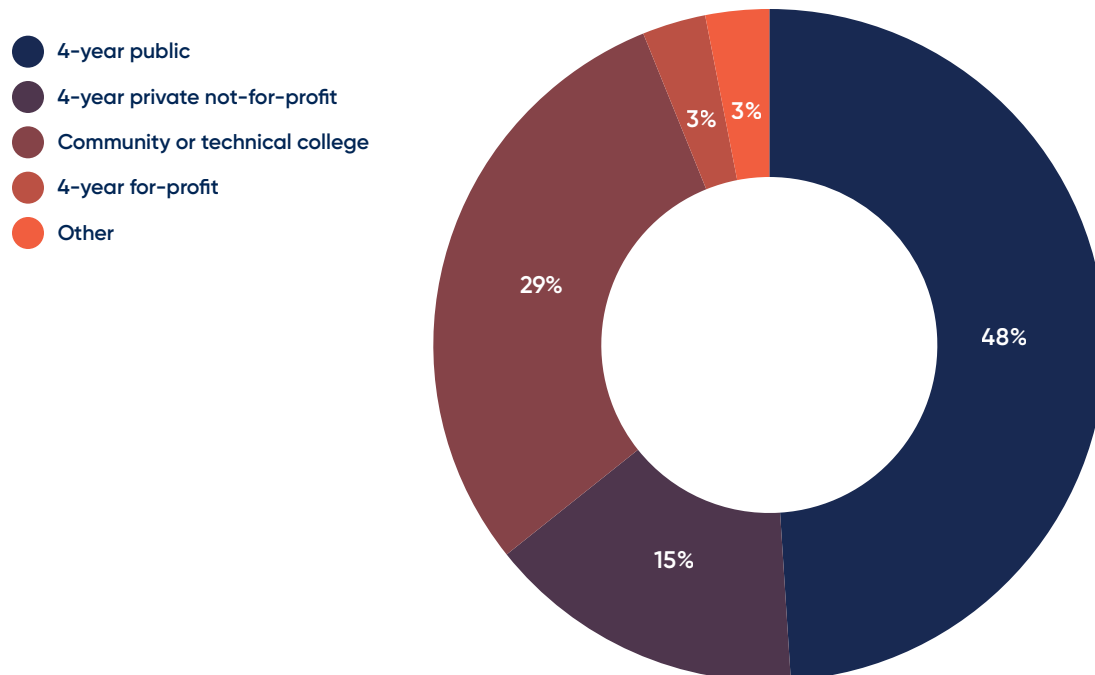
Key Findings

Identifying a Need to Develop Skills and Competencies

Before an institution can start to implement a comprehensive learner record, it must first adopt a unit of measure for learning that has meaning outside of higher education. The institution's courses and credentials then all need to be understood in the context of that new unit of measure. A more universal (and therefore comprehensive) unit of learning is competencies—simply described by the Competency Based Education Network (C-BEN) as "what an individual knows and can do."[4] A more extensive definition, offered by Holmes et al. (2021), defines competencies as the "integration of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that allow a person to be competent in a specific situation or task" (p. 42).[5]

While competency is often synonymous with skill, the former implies a greater measure of self-directedness and autonomy on the part of the learner (Holmes et al., 2021). To explore respondents' perceptions of this topic, the survey asked about the importance of developing skills and competencies within their own institutions and the demand for competency transparency from employers and students.
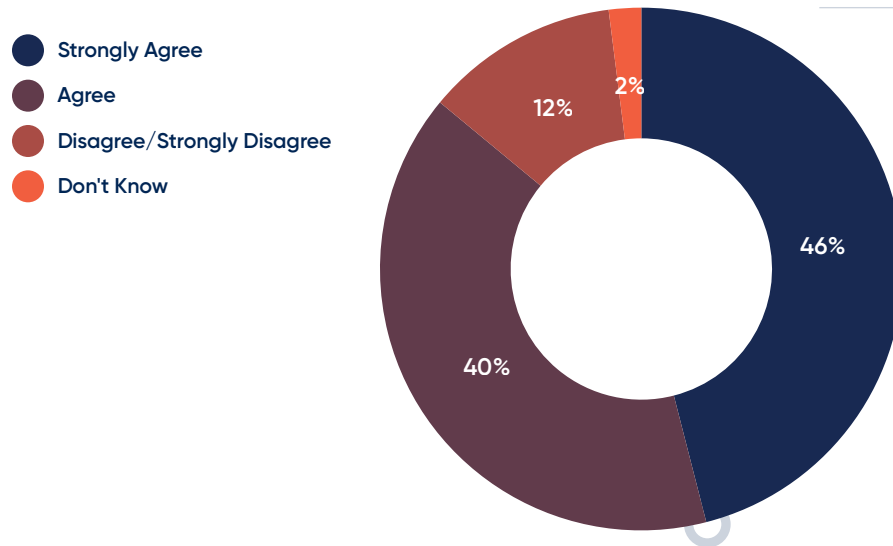
Competencies may be a more meaningful measure of learning than courses or credentials

[4] https://www.c-ben.org/about-us/

[5] Holmes, A.G.D., Tuin, M.P., & Turner, S.L. (2021). Competence and competency in higher education, simple terms yet with complex meanings: Theoretical and practical issues for university teachers and assessors implementing Competency-Based Education (CBE). Educational Process: International Journal, 10(3): 39-52.

Awareness of the Need to Design Programs Around Competencies

Legend:
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree/Strongly Disagree
- Don't Know

Donut chart values: 46%, 2%, 12%, 40%

Approximately 86% (n=149) of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that postsecondary education models need to be designed around well-defined skills and competencies needed for today's workplace.
Figure 3

Figure 3. Level of agreement with the statement "All postsecondary education models need to be designed around well-defined skills and competencies needed for today's workplace."

Half-donut chart: Yes, for some — 46%; No — 18%; Don't Know — 13%; Yes, for all — 23%
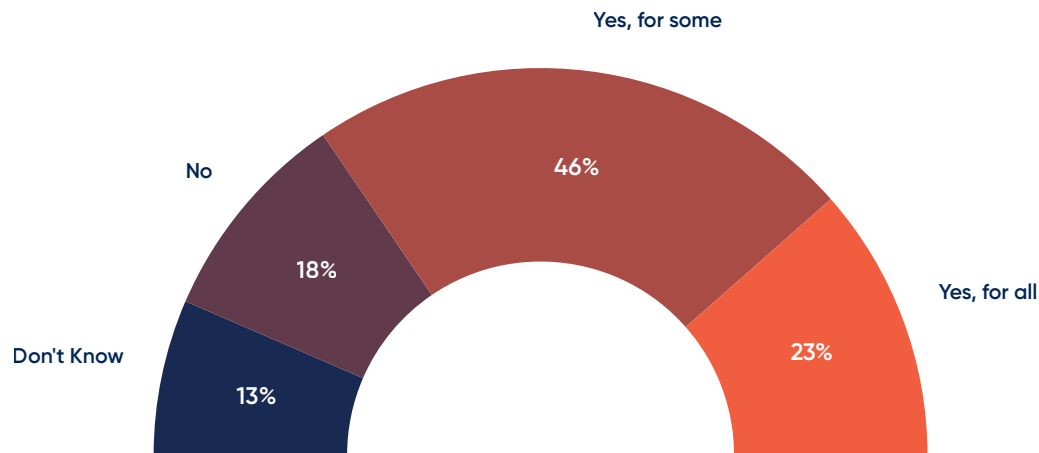
Of those who agreed/strongly agreed that education models should be competency-based, just under half who responded to a later question (46%) said that their institutions had these models in place for some courses and programs, while 23% had them in place for all courses and programs.
Figure 4

Figure 4. "Has your institution developed skill/competency frameworks for all of its courses and programs?" (Responses of those who agreed/strongly agreed that postsecondary models should be designed around competencies.)

The Demand for Competency Transparency

Most of the respondents said that their institutions are already communicating with key constituencies on how their courses and programs translate to skills and competencies.
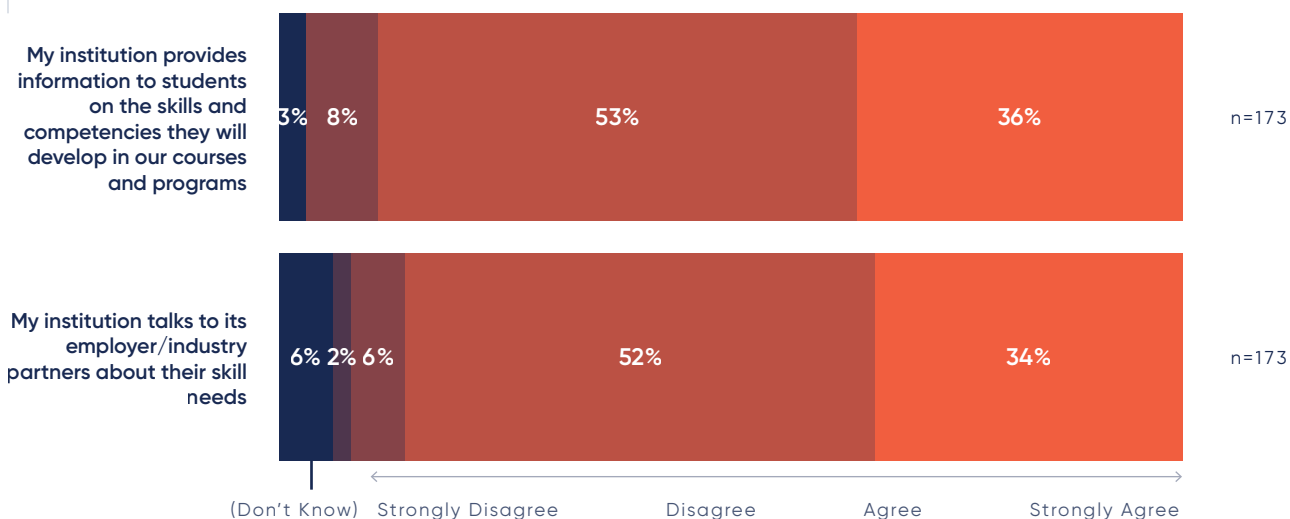
My institution provides information to students on the skills and competencies they will develop in our courses and programs

3% | 8% | 53% | 36% | n=173

My institution talks to its employer/industry partners about their skill needs

6% 2% 6% | 52% | 34% | n=173

(Don't Know) Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly Agree

Figure 5. Most institutions are communicating about skills and competencies with students and employers.

89%

said that their institutions communicate to students about their skills and competencies

85%

say their institutions talk to employers about their skill needs

Figure 5

Establishing a Framework

Establishing a common competency framework that defines the set of demonstrated competencies, knowledge and skills required for learners on a course or program is critical. According to Baker and Jankowski (2020, p. 8), "learning frameworks provide connective tissue to talk across different ways of doing things—frameworks do not outline how to do it, instead they provide a point to drive toward."[6]

Only 22% (n=34) of the respondents stated that their institution has developed skill/competency frameworks for all of their courses and programs, while 44% said that their institution has done so for some courses and programs.

Respondents from community colleges and technical colleges were more likely to state that their institution had skills and competencies in place for some or all programs (73%) than those from four-year institutions (61%)
Figure 6

4-Year (n=89) — 16% | 24% | 44% | 17%

2-Year (n=40) — 15% | 13% | 48% | 25%

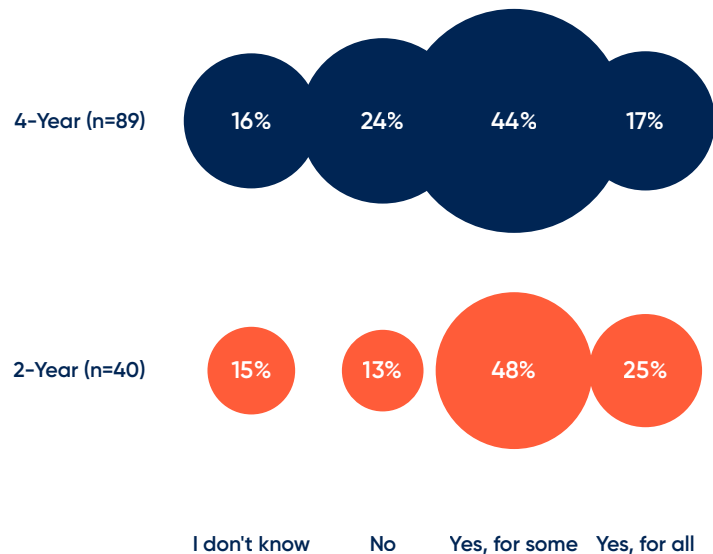I don't know | No | Yes, for some | Yes, for all

Figure 6. More individuals from 2-year institutions than 4-year institutions say that their institutions have developed skill/competency frameworks for all courses and programs.

[6]Baker, G. R., & Jankowski, N. A. (2020, June). Documenting learning: The comprehensive learner record. (Occasional Paper No. 46). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Terminology

Regarding terminology, more respondents from 2-year institutions referred to skills and competencies as "competencies" than those from 4-year institutions. Overall, "learning outcomes" was by far the most common term used by respondents from all institution types

Figure 7

4-Year Institutions
9% · 9% · 9% · 72%

2-Year Institutions
24% · 10% · 7% · 59%

Legend:
- "Competencies"
- "Learning Outcomes"
- "Skills"
- Other

Figure 7. Most responding institutions use term learning outcomes rather than skills or competencies.

Use of External Competency Frameworks

There are a number of organizations and other entities that offer skill and competency frameworks designed to help education providers translate their courses and programs into these different units of learning. Over the years, there have been various initiatives designed to test these different frameworks. The survey respondents indicated which, if any, they have been using in their own efforts to establish competency frameworks for their own programs.

Of the 101 respondents who answered this question, 66 stated that they used one or more frameworks. A plurality (34%) of respondents referenced skill frameworks promoted by the U.S. Department of Labor, with the next most popular being Ed Design Lab's 21st Century Skills (26%), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)'s VALUE Rubrics (23%) and Lumina Foundation/Corporation for a Skilled Workforce's Connecting Credentials (15%). Other frameworks that respondents stated they were consulting included CAEL, Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, the U.S. Department of Education Employability Skills Framework, Lightcast, professional accreditation standards, and Canadian sources.
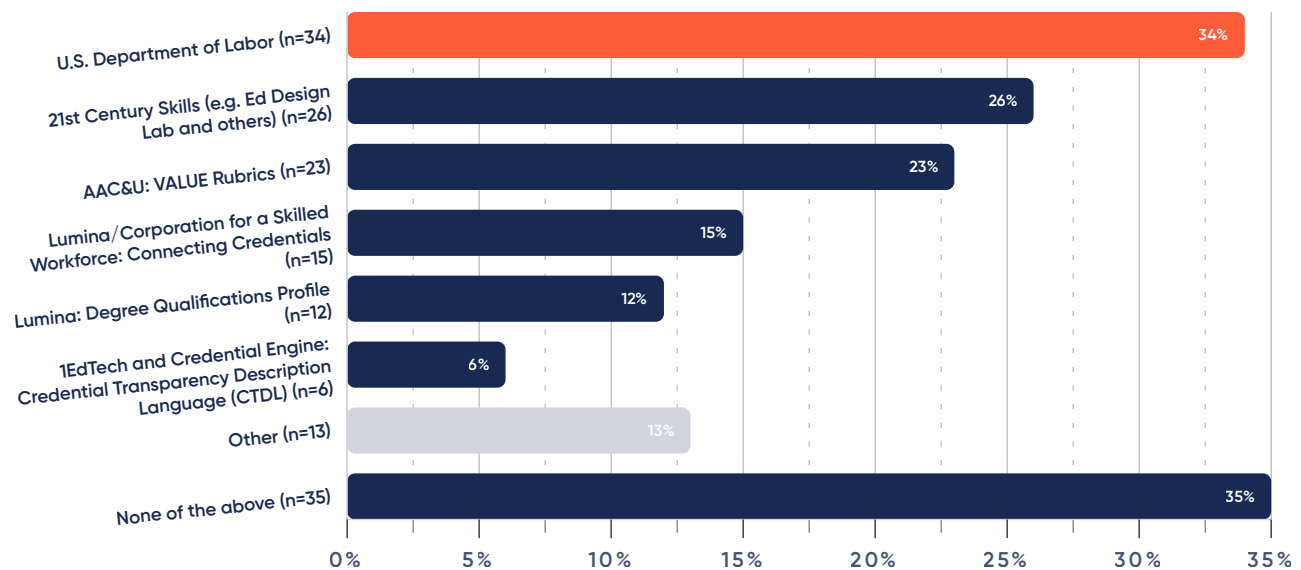
Figure 8

Figure 8. Competency frameworks used by institutions

Assessing Skills and Competencies

Competency frameworks are an important building block for CLRs. But for an institution to say that a student has a particular competency requires that the institution knows for sure whether the student has that competency.

Of the respondents (n=66) currently implementing competency frameworks for at least some of their courses and programs, approximately 41% said that their institution assessed each required skill or competency, while 56% said that their institution assessed some of these skills. Only 3% stated that their institution did not directly assess skills or competencies
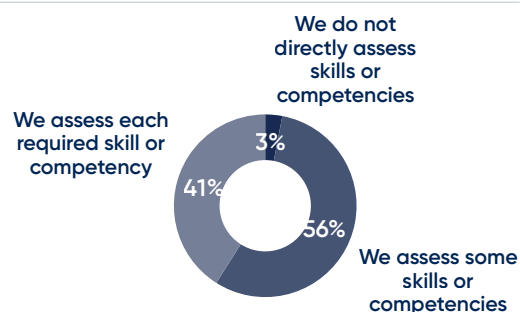
Figure 9

Figure 9. Most institutions who have skill/ competency frameworks in place assess at least some of the required skills and competencies.

However, when asked whether their institutions had standard processes for assessing these competencies, 28% of respondents stated that they did not and 13% did not know.
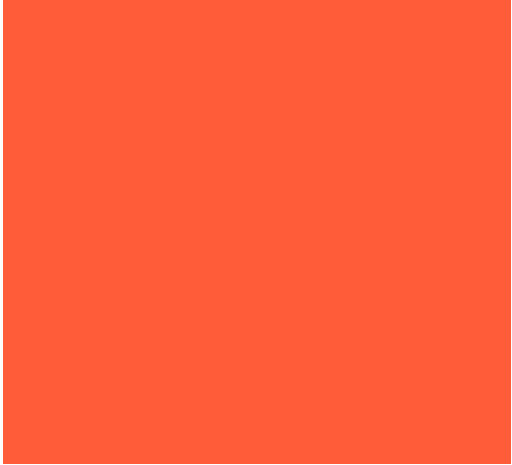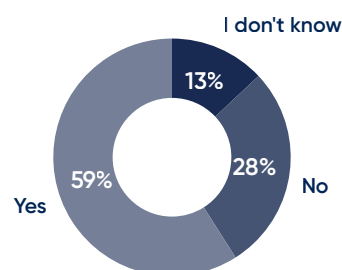
Figure 10

Figure 10. Of those who stated that their institutions assess at least some skills or competencies, over half (59%) said that they had standard processes in place for assessing these competencies.

The importance of assessing skills and involving employers in the process was highlighted by one interviewee from a four-year CAEL member institution. When discussing how her institution connected industry-specific skill needs to the curriculum, she explained that students could earn digital badges for non-credit-bearing microcredentials on some courses—which are awarded in addition to the traditional transcript. The microcredential signals the mastery of specific competencies that have been identified by employers. She explained: "Students that choose to enroll in these credit-bearing courses are getting those core learning experiences that are developed by faculty in collaboration with our workforce and industry partners." The assessment for the competency-based microcredential takes place as part of the course. As employers have been involved in the development of the microcredential from the start, "they see the appropriateness of [the assessment] as a demonstrated way for the students to show their skill that they've attained," she added.

One experience with micro-credentials shows the importance of skill assessments and involve-ment of employers
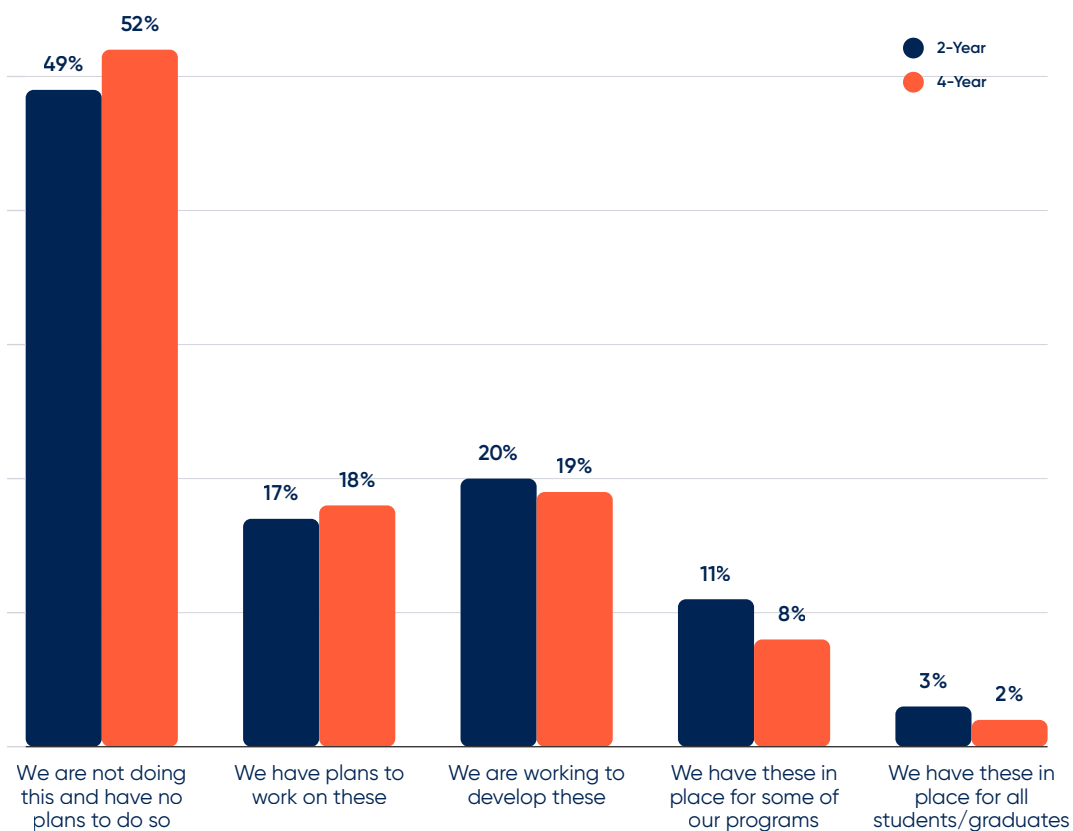
Implementing CLRs

While respondents were largely able to answer questions related to the development of skills and competencies, far fewer were able to respond to questions about CLRs.

Current State of CLR Development

Only one in ten respondents (11%) said that their institutions had implemented CLRs for some or all of their programs, while 37% said that their institutions either planned to or were working to develop CLRs. In contrast, half of the respondents (51%) said that their institutions had no plan to implement CLRs.

Figure 11. More than half of all respondents from 4-year institutions and nearly half of those from 2-year institutions state that they have no plans to implement CLRs.

Legend: ● 2-Year ● 4-Year

Category	2-Year	4-Year
We are not doing this and have no plans to do so	49%	52%
We have plans to work on these	17%	18%
We are working to develop these	20%	19%
We have these in place for some of our programs	11%	8%
We have these in place for all students/graduates	3%	2%

50/50

When compared by institution type, there was little difference in responses from 4-year and 2-year institutions
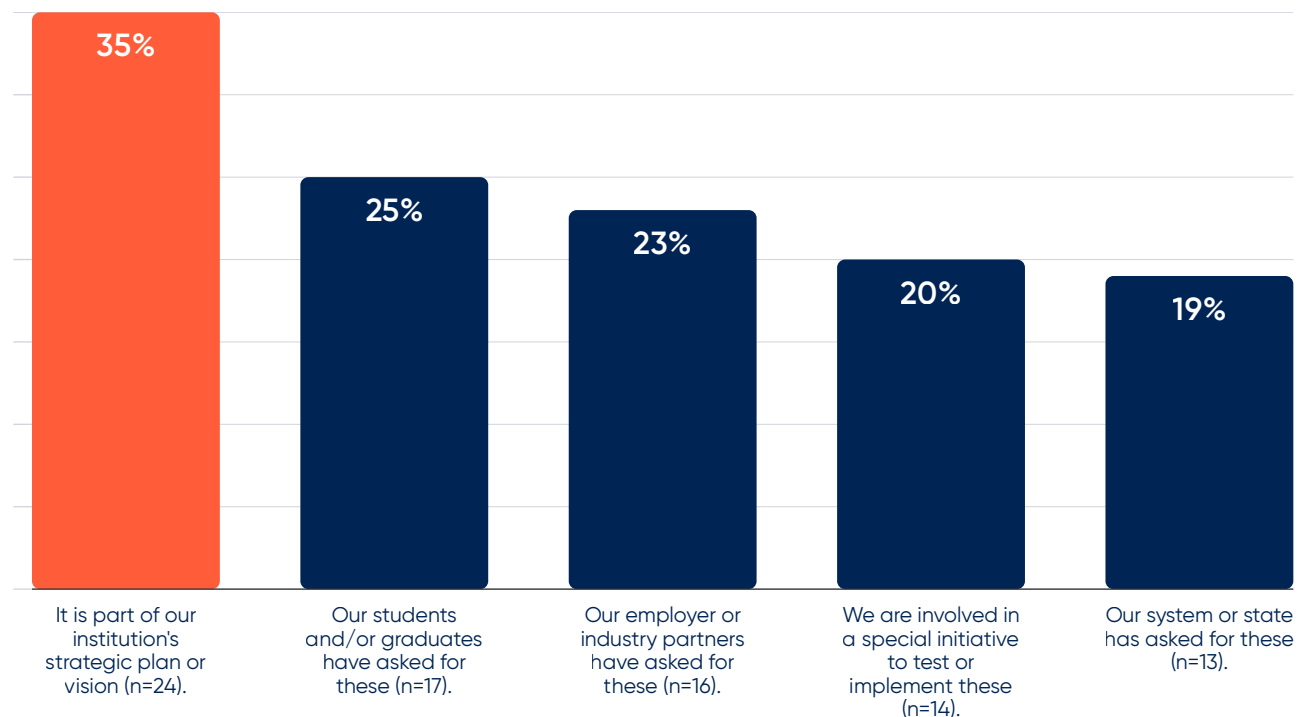Figure 11

CLRs as a Response to Multiple Market Pressures

There are many different constituencies that are invested in moving the CLR concept forward, including employers, students, systems, and state leaders. However, the most common response to a question about why the institution is moving forward with CLRs (24 institutions, or 35% of those responding to the question) is that the interest is internal, with CLRs built into the institution's larger strategic plan or vision

Figure 12

Figure 12. Internal interest is driving the move toward competency-based transcripts or CLRs.

35%	25%	23%	20%	19%
It is part of our institution's strategic plan or vision (n=24).	Our students and/or graduates have asked for these (n=17).	Our employer or industry partners have asked for these (n=16).	We are involved in a special initiative to test or implement these (n=14).	Our system or state has asked for these (n=13).

Most institutions that are moving forward with CLRs are doing so due to internal interest of having CLRs built into the institution's larger strategic plan and vision.

To meet the needs of modern learners, an increasing amount of higher ed leaders agree that CLRs are the right thing to do.

Of those who provided additional responses to the question, one stated that CLRs were "Being explored by our college but not others on campus." Several responded that implementing CLRs was "the right thing to do" for their students. In a follow-up interview, one CAEL member described her institution's strategic alignment with competency-based assessment as being rooted in what she termed "social sustainability" — a perspective that focuses on equity and an awareness of the need to recognize diverse learning and abilities that their students bring with them to college (including service-based, work-based, and other experiential learning).

Having a system in place to recognize the skills and competencies that the students have developed from these experiences requires support "at the highest level of the university." She noted, "At our institution, we knew that any movement in this direction really needed to have institutional commitment. Our president had our vice president for strategy and program innovation establish a core research committee that embarked on looking into the research around microcredentials and digital badges. That resulted in a white paper that was published internally and shared with stakeholders and the community. That really gave definition and substance to the model that we have now implemented." While the institution is focused first on digital badges and aligning competency-based microcredential programs with workplace skills, the next step is to expand opportunities for experiential learning and work-based learning, and with that, digital credentials that account for all of this learning.

Having a system in place to recognize skills and competencies requires support at the highest level of the institution.

Getting Started

But how are institutions approaching CLR development? While the survey did not dive into the logistics or processes of implementing CLR, interviews and conversations with member institutions who have started down this path offer some insight.


To build internal buy-in, use a pilot to show "proof of concept"

One interviewee from a four-year institution said that his college (professional and continuing education) aimed to show "proof of concept" on the non-credit side as they venture into the digital credential space. By successfully piloting the concept initially in his own college, he has been able to gain acceptance from different departments across the institution—starting with the registrar's office and up to the university provost. By involving faculty in the development of competency-based digital credentials, his institution has been able to explore potential routes to developing CLRs by taking a comparatively lower-stakes approach. "You first need buy-in from the registrar, from IT for data security, and then over time, faculty really won't need to be too concerned by it, because if we build the system and we are able to deconstruct courses so that students can extract skills and competencies from various courses, that should happen automatically behind the scenes," he said.

Rethink the curriculum to focus on building skills through project-based learning.

The idea of working with faculty to promote the value of developing a portfolio of learning assets to students was shared by another interviewee, also from a four-year institution. She commented: "Are there course-embedded experiences that they could identify on a syllabus? Or let students know, 'you're going to be working on a group project. This is a really good opportunity for you to create something that you could use as an artifact in your portfolio for a transferable skills digital badge down the road.'" She noted that by approaching competency-based digital badges in this way, it helped faculty see the value of giving students projects and experiences academically that would lead them to successfully transition into their career. It also helps them understand the set of skills and knowledge they'll gain from their academic program.
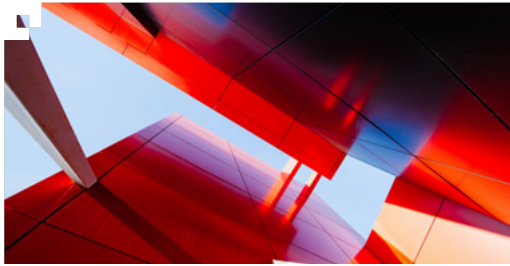
Recognize the different parts that will need to support the whole institution.

While getting buy-in and acceptance for competency-based credentials is the first step, making that connection and achieving convergence between digital badges and the traditional academic transcript involves making radical changes to process. As an indication of how complex the process is, another interviewee, whose two-year institution is already deep in the process of developing competency-based programs as part of a pilot program, said that they were still figuring out the transcript piece: "We haven't launched into that yet. The big things that we've been focusing on so far have been the faculty, the curriculum, the academic calendar, financial aid, and student supports. So those have been the big things, and we haven't really gotten into the weeds with transcripts yet."

Be aware that there are a lot of vendors in this space—and entering it.

When interviewees described considerations involving which credentialing tool to select, one person expressed concern over the issues of permanence and security of the digital assets as vendors come and go. Institutions should acknowledge that where the data lives will likely change and evolve over time. What may be more important is to structure your competencies and competency definitions to align with a standard language, like the 1EdTech Competencies and Academic Standards Exchange (CASE).

Institutions should acknowledge that where the data lives will likely change and evolve over time. What may be more important is to structure your competencies and competency definitions to align with a standard language.

Key Insights

From the survey findings and post-survey conversations, it is clear that there is a burgeoning interest among institutions in venturing at the very least into developing comprehensive frameworks for skills and competencies, if not yet for implementing CLRs. While there is a lot of curiosity around CLRs, the magnitude of the change involved in putting them in place can give some institutions pause. The following is a list of key takeaways from the survey and our conversations:

More support is needed to help institutions adopt competency-centric approaches.

Implementing a competency framework for all courses and programs is a critical first step towards a system of CLRs, but few institutions have established that important building block.

CPL crosswalks can be one way in.

Using digital badges to recognize competencies in the non-credit space as a "test kitchen" to gain acceptance among stakeholders can be a first step, particularly when it involves working with faculty on these credentials and aligning competencies with employers' skills needs.

Relying on one or two internal champions is not the way to ensure momentum.

Implementing CLRs is a long-term process that can take years. Sometimes the process involves only a few key personnel who are championing the implementation. As one roundtable participant remarked, the danger of turnover — and loss of institutional knowledge — will set back the process. Keeping the momentum going will be key.

Engagement across the organization is key.

Higher education institutions tend to operate in silos (both disciplinary and departmental) and this will slow down progress. Institutional leadership should take a holistic approach to explore the development of CLRs from a systems perspective, given the need to involve multiple departments in the planning.

Institutions are eager to get access to successful models and implementation practices.

Institutions in this space need guidance. They are keen to learn and derive support from peers who are also taking steps towards skills and competency-based credentials and CLRs. This can help to accelerate the developmental path to CLRs.

CLRs are an equity strategy.

From an equity perspective, the implementation of CLRs can support learners in significant ways:

- CLRs will make it easier to formalize and standardize the recognition of prior learning obtained outside of the classroom. Embedding the recognition of experiential learning, and the underlying metadata, in a verifiable, durable digital asset ensures that an individual will have that record with them as they traverse their academic and work pathways.
- CLRs will also help learners who take a break from college—the approximately 40 million individuals (the majority of whom are adult learners) that the National Student Clearinghouse refers to as "Some College, No Credential." Having adult learners' skills and competencies captured in a CLR will attest to the knowledge that they have developed during their time in college, as well as the learning that is acquired through work, life and military experiences.

Conclusion

This exploratory study sought to learn about the extent to which postsecondary institutions have identified a need to design educational programs around well-defined skills and competencies and whether the groundwork is being laid for CLR implementation. While institutions are largely aware of the need to make the deep changes that this requires, few seem to be moving this concept forward with any sense of urgency.

At this moment, higher education may be falling behind as other segments of our learning ecosystem move towards the competency-based approaches valued by learners, employers, and as our study showed, the colleges and universities themselves. To make CLRs a reality for all learners, institutions need to make significant changes. Stronger engagement by institutional leadership is needed to help institutions invest in the process and provide the resources needed, particularly time, guidance and technical support.

About CAEL

Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, employers and industry groups, and 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 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Workplace™ certified and is a part of Strada Collaborative, a mission-driven nonprofit. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

About Modern Campus

Modern Campus is obsessed with empowering its 2,000+ higher education customers to thrive when radical transformation is required to respond to lower student enrollments and revenue, rising costs, crushing student debt, and administrative complexity.

The Modern Campus engagement platform powers solutions for non-traditional student management, web content management, catalog and curriculum management, student engagement and development, conversational text messaging, career pathways, and campus maps and virtual tours. The result: innovative institutions can create a learner-to-earner lifecycle that engages modern learners for life, while providing modern administrators with the tools needed to streamline workflows and drive high efficiency.

Learn how Modern Campus is leading the modern learner engagement movement at moderncampus.com and follow us on LinkedIn.

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The EvoLLLution is an online publication focused on the transforming higher education industry. Publishing articles and interviews by higher education leaders on the evolving postsecondary space since 2011, The EvoLLLution was founded by Modern Campus to create an open environment for higher education's most innovative thought leaders to come together and set out a new vision for what the industry can be. With over 60,000 monthly visitors, The EvoLLLution has become the go-to source for opinions and information on non-traditional higher education. Visit evoLLLution.com