

## Approaches to Prior Learning Assessment Course Match Assessment Models

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Capella University is a competency-based institution serving over 37,000 adult learners. Capella's curriculum is focused on learning outcomes aligned with professional standards and employer needs. These program outcomes, in combination with standardized course competencies, form the basis of how credit is awarded for prior learning for more than 300 courses. The prior learning assessment (PLA) process at Capella University follows the "Ten Standards for Assessing Learning" established by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to recognize learning outside of academic course work (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006). Within the course match model of prior learning assessment, Capella University has two approaches to capture learning – the competency-based and scenario-based assessment methods. These can be implemented regardless of origin of the knowledge (formal or informal training, on-the-job experience, certification, self-study, research, learning from MOOCs, volunteer work, etc.). This paper will highlight the strengths of both course match assessment models.

In Capella University's course match model, standardized competencies and outcomes are established for each individual PLA-eligible course. This leads to consistency in the subject, academic level and amount of credit awarded, allowing for clarity and focus of what learning is being demonstrated by the learner and assessed by the academic expert. Both of Capella's course match PLA models utilize the competencies as a basis of the assessment to determine whether credit should be granted. The standardized competencies also serve as a rubric for the faculty subject matter experts to rate competence and provide feedback to the learner.

The same introduction section is incorporated in both assessment templates. The assessment forms begin with a required section that learners fill out including profile information and enrollment status, as well as policy and assessment fee acknowledgements. Learners provide the faculty reviewer with an overview of why they are requesting credit for the course, summarizing how their knowledge correlates to the course competencies.

### Competency-Based Approach

In the competency-based approach, the learner responds directly to each competency, answering two questions:

1. What do you know about this competency?
2. How have you applied that knowledge?

For each competency, the learner provides a written analysis to demonstrate his or her knowledge and supportive documentation that correlates with the competency. The assessment template is divided into three columns. The first column houses the course competencies. The learner's response to the competency is in the middle column, and the right-hand column is a space for learners to provide supportive documentation

correlating to the knowledge they have described in their learner narrative. The columns in the assessment form aid the expert reviewer in understanding the correlation of the supportive documentation to the narrative for each competency.

Competency-based assessments have a number of strengths. The depth and length of the narrative and documentation depends on the particular competency, as well as the learner's background. Competency-based assessments provide learners a great deal of latitude to decide how to address each competency. For example, project managers work in many different industries managing projects with a similar knowledge base of how to manage a project from inception to completion. The competency-based assessment allows project managers in different industries such as construction management and information technology to describe their knowledge of project management principles in their own context utilizing the common project management terminology. Faculty reviewers acknowledge learning that comes from many sources, and is substantiated in a number of different ways, while still maintaining the academic rigor of each course.

Supportive documentation could include artifacts such as resumes, work products, training records, letters of recommendation and so forth. Some fields lend themselves toward more documentation. However, some learners cannot release relevant materials due to employer restrictions. These learners have the flexibility to write lengthier, more detailed learning narratives related to the competencies.

Utilizing standardized competencies allows a small PLA staff to maintain assessment forms for over 300 courses. The PLA staff is able to retrieve current course competencies for eligible courses to populate the first column of the standardized competency-based assessment form resulting in minimal development time, cost and upkeep.

### **Scenario-Based Approach**

The scenario-based assessment was created to aid certain learner populations to articulate their knowledge in response to a faculty written scenario because they were challenged with directly addressing the competencies. In this model, faculty subject matter experts develop a scenario that learners respond to and directives of artifacts required from the learner to comprehensively address the course competencies. Similar to the competency-based assessment template, the scenario-based assessment template begins with the acknowledgement agreement section and concludes with the faculty reviewer rubric to determine whether credit should be awarded as well as provide feedback on the learner's narrative.

The scenario-based approach has a number of advantages for learners. The scenarios for each assessment are written by subject matter experts with deep knowledge of the curriculum. They know the learner population well enough to design a scenario that will help the learner address the competencies. As a result, it is a very clear process, with detailed expectations for how learners demonstrate competence. Learners and faculty appreciate that the scenarios are targeted at the competencies, so expectations are very clear on both sides from the beginning. Learners do not spend time writing irrelevant responses and faculty reviewers do not have to coach learners on addressing the competencies. Learners, in particular, appreciate that the scenarios are practical and similar to the type of work they do as part of their professional responsibilities. They feel more comfortable writing about their expertise and learning from a practical perspective.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined two different course match assessment models to evaluate PLA, providing examples for insight among the PLA field. Each method has its unique strengths targeted to aid different student populations to best articulate their knowledge, and faculty evaluators to easily determine what knowledge has

been demonstrated. These models have both proven effective and enable Capella to execute PLA on many courses with clear expectations for learners and faculty.

### **Reference**

Fiddler, M., Marienau, C., & Whitaker, U. (2006). *Assessing learning: Standards, principles, & procedures* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing.