

Leadership against Standards Conflation: A CTC-Based Framework for Differentiating CTE and Adult Education Preparation

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How to cite this paper: Wang, V. (2026). Leadership against Standards Conflation: A CTC-Based Framework for Differentiating CTE and Adult Education Preparation. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 15, 67-88. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojl.2026.151004>

Received: December 29, 2025

Accepted: January 23, 2026

Published: January 26, 2026

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Abstract

This article argues that effective leadership in educator preparation requires resisting “standards conflation” between the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE) and Designated Subjects Adult Education pathways. Anchored in the author’s experience with CSULB’s longstanding nine-unit preparation models (dating to 1949), the analysis explains how conflation can blur competency claims, weaken standards-to-evidence alignment, and increase student risk through unclear advising, inconsistent assessment, and procedurally vulnerable program documentation. Using CSULB as an illustrative case, the article shows how a single institution can sustain two distinct designated-subject credential programs while maintaining coherent governance, candidate support, and continuous improvement. It then proposes a leadership-facing framework for compliance and program integrity: maintaining separate standards maps and evidence sets for CTE and Adult Education; permitting shared “foundations” only when supported by an explicit, documented crosswalk; formalizing governance, approval pathways, and teach-out/transition protections; and institutionalizing a standing advisory process to prevent ad hoc substitutions. The contribution is practical, offering a defensible, student-centered approach to aligning curriculum, assessment, and documentation with CTC expectations while preserving the distinct purposes and outcomes of CTE and Adult Education preparation.

Keywords

Standards Conflation, CTC Program Standards, Designated Subjects CTE, Designated Subjects Adult Education, Standards-to-Evidence Alignment

1. Introduction: Leadership and the Problem of Standards Conflation

In educator preparation, “standards conflation” occurs when leaders (or governance structures) treat two distinct credential pathways as if they can be justified by a single standards map, a single evidence set, or a single “model” of preparation—without an explicit crosswalk showing that the same curriculum, assessments, and supervised practice validly satisfy *each* pathway’s adopted standards. In California, this is not a semantic issue; it is a leadership and compliance issue because the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) evaluates approved programs against adopted standards through a formal review process intended to apply standards “consistently and rigorously”.

This article focuses on a recurring conflation risk within Designated Subjects educator preparation: collapsing Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE) and Designated Subjects Adult Education into a single preparation model or unified documentation package. Under CTC program standards, each pathway has a distinct standards logic and a distinct competence claim. For example, the CTC’s current republished CTE Preconditions and Program Standards specify a structured nine-semester-unit (or 135-hour) program aligned to state-adopted CTE curriculum standards and grounded in California’s Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs), with competence determined through documentation and verification. By contrast, the Adult Education Preconditions and Program Standards—also republished in 2023—define preparation anchored to adult teaching and learning research (including adult learning theory), with explicit candidate competencies tailored to adult education purposes and contexts (e.g., foundations of adult education, adult learning theory, adult-oriented curriculum planning, and technology use in adult learning settings). When leadership treats these as interchangeable, the program’s evidence can drift from “aligned and sufficient” to “mixed and vulnerable”.

Why does this matter? First, standards conflation increases compliance exposure. A single combined map often cannot show how each pathway’s distinct standards are met with fidelity, particularly when a program is asked to demonstrate coherent design, governance, supervised support, and documented determination of candidate competence. Second, conflation can compromise instructional quality: curriculum and assessment choices optimized for CTE teachers (workplace performance, industry-aligned curriculum, advisory committees, safety and equipment contexts) are not automatically optimized for adult education teachers whose practice may center literacy, ESL, citizenship, adult learner persistence, and andragogy-informed instructional design. Third, conflation creates material student risk. Candidates depend on accurate advising, transparent sequencing, and consistent assessments. When programs merge pathways informally, candidates can face contradictory requirements, delayed completion, or a credential recommendation package that is harder to defend during review—outcomes that are preventable leadership failures rather than inevitable bureaucratic burdens.

The argument here is not that programs must operate in silos. Instead, the leadership challenge is to enable efficient preparation without collapsing distinct standards. This is consistent with contemporary quality-assurance thinking in educator preparation, which emphasizes evidence-based evaluation, continuous improvement, and clear accountability for program design and outcomes. Anchored in the author's experience at CSULB—where the “9-unit model” has historical continuity (dating to 1949) and where designated subjects pathways were treated as distinct but coordinated—this article offers a leadership-facing framework for preventing standards conflation. As an illustrative external validation point, an accreditation team reviewing CSULB's Designated Subjects Vocational Education and Designated Subjects Adult Education credentials determined that “all program standards are met” for both and described the programs as “excellent models” providing comprehensive preparation across vocational and adult education contexts.

The thesis is straightforward: under California's state CTC standards, CTE and Adult Education preparation should not be conflated; effective leadership instead builds a transparent crosswalk (where overlap truly exists), maintains separate standards maps and evidence sets (where they must differ), and documents governance decisions to protect program integrity, instructional quality, and candidate success.

1.1. Research Questions

- 1) How do educator-preparation leaders operationalize “efficiency” (shared coursework, shared assessments, shared supervision) without collapsing distinct CTC standards for Designated Subjects CTE and Adult Education?
- 2) What documentation practices (standards maps, assessment systems, competence verification) most effectively prevent standards conflation during internal review and external accreditation?
- 3) What candidate outcomes (time-to-completion, advising accuracy, perceived preparedness) are **most** sensitive to pathway conflation versus pathway differentiation?
- 4) In CSU contexts, what governance structures best sustain distinct pathways over time while still supporting collaboration across designated-subject programs?

Context: CTC Designated Subjects pathways and why “distinct” is the default.

Under the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the Designated Subjects system is not a single “generic” credentialing pathway. It is a set of distinct authorizations with distinct program purposes, outcomes, and evidence expectations. That “distinctness” is not merely a preference; it is embedded in how CTC publishes and maintains separate Preconditions and Program Standards handbooks for Designated Subjects Adult Education and for Career Technical Education (CTE), each with its own adoption history and competency structure. The

Adult Education handbook was republished in November 2023 (standards adopted November 2010), while the CTE handbook was republished in November 2023 (standards adopted August 2008).

Two credential purposes, two candidate outcome targets (CTE vs. Adult Education).

CTC's standards make the "default distinction" visible in Standard 1 (Program Design and Rationale) for each pathway.

For Designated Subjects Adult Education, the program rationale is explicitly anchored to "the knowledge base of adult teaching and learning research", preparing adult educators to facilitate adult students' educational goals within adult education contexts, and the program structure includes a 9-semester-unit minimum with defined supervised instructional events and a culminating activity. Adult Education's Category II standards then foreground adult-learning foundations (e.g., adult learning theory, interpersonal relationships and the learning environment, and standards-aligned andragogical instructional practices).

For CTE, Standard 1 is anchored differently: CTE preparation is designed to prepare teachers to help students "perform in a competitive workplace", aligned to state-adopted 7 - 12 CTE curriculum standards/framework and tied to California's Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs). Category II further emphasizes occupational curriculum development, workplace-relevant competencies, integration of CTE and academic standards, and documented determination of competence based on thorough evidence.

Leadership implication: When leaders "combine" Adult Education and CTE standards into one conflated model, they are not merely reorganizing content. They are substituting a different purpose statement, a different outcomes logic, and a different evidence chain—creating predictable compliance exposure and student risk because the program can no longer show a clean, standards-to-evidence line for either credential.

Leadership responsibilities: governance, documentation, continuous improvement, and defensible decisions.

CTC's Designated Subjects standards repeatedly signal that program sponsors must be able to document design choices, supervise and assess candidates systematically, and verify competence through written evidence (e.g., supervised events, feedback cycles, and verification that standards have been met). In CTE, for example, the standards explicitly require determination of competence "on the basis of thorough documentation and written verification", using formative and summative assessments aligned to the standards. Adult Education similarly emphasizes aligned preparation anchored to adult teaching and learning research and standards-aligned curriculum and assessment practices.

That expectation parallels contemporary accreditation and quality assurance logic in educator preparation: programs must operate a coherent quality assurance system, use multiple valid measures, involve stakeholders, and show evidence-based continuous improvement. This matters for leadership because "de-

fensible decision-making” is not rhetoric—it is the ability to show, on demand:

- 1) Which standard set applies (Adult Education or CTE);
- 2) Where each standard is taught (curriculum mapping);
- 3) How it is practiced (clinical/supervised events);
- 4) How it is assessed (key assessments, rubrics, decision rules), and;
- 5) What evidence verifies competency (documentation and verification).

When leaders collapse two standards systems into one, they typically break at least one link in that chain (most often the mapping and assessment validity), making the program vulnerable in internal review, external review, and candidate appeals.

What “alignment” means in practice (standards map → curriculum → assessment → evidence).

In standards-based systems, “alignment” is not a slogan. It is the process of ensuring curriculum actually provides opportunities to learn what the standards require, and that assessments gather evidence that those standards were met. The practical leadership move is to treat each credential as its own alignment problem:

- 1) Build a standards map (Adult Ed standards-to-courses; CTE standards-to-courses).
- 2) Specify assessments that are valid for that specific standard set (performance tasks, observation tools, portfolio artifacts).
- 3) Apply decision rules that match the credential outcomes (competence verification that clearly corresponds to Adult Ed or CTE competencies).
- 4) Maintain an evidence system (organized documentation) that can withstand scrutiny (CTC, internal review, and—if needed—third-party evaluation).

The author’s scholarship aligns with this logic. The author’s Adult Education scholarship emphasizes andragogy, adult learning theory, and program-level design tensions created by external pressures—explicitly calling attention to academic integrity and the need to resist political/social interference with curriculum.

The author’s CTE scholarship likewise underscores that CTE is contextual (not “one size fits all”) and elevates leadership and governance of curriculum as central concerns—exactly the terrain where standards conflation becomes a leadership failure rather than a technical mistake.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This section frames the article’s argument using a standards-based leadership perspective in educator preparation, in which program integrity is demonstrated through transparent alignment among adopted standards, curriculum, assessment, and auditable evidence. Because the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) publishes distinct Preconditions and Program Standards for Designated Subjects Adult Education and for Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE), leadership is expected to preserve distinct standards claims unless a written crosswalk and pathway-specific evidence justify shared elements (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). The framework below integrates standards-based

governance, alignment theory, field-specific learning theory, and activity theory to explain how conflation occurs and how it can be prevented through defensible, student-centered program design.

Lens 1—Standards-based governance and accountability. CTC’s Adult Education and CTE standards handbooks define different program purposes, competency emphases, and verification expectations; accordingly, leadership responsibilities include maintaining pathway-specific standards maps, supervising candidates through standards-aligned experiences, and documenting competence decisions through written verification (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Complementary quality-assurance guidance in educator preparation underscores the need for coherent systems, the use of multiple measures, and evidence-based continuous improvement (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2021). Within this lens, governance is the mechanism that prevents informal equivalencies from substituting for documented standards alignment.

Lens 2—Alignment theory and the evidence chain. Alignment is treated as an evidence chain connecting standards to learning opportunities, assessments designed to elicit targeted competencies, and evidence systems that can be reviewed and aggregated for program improvement. This operational view reflects established guidance on aligning standards, curriculum, and assessment in standards-based systems (Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation, 2018). Under this lens, “standards conflation” is understood as a predictable breakdown in the evidence chain that occurs when one standards map, one assessment system, or one evidence set is used to justify two distinct credential outcomes (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Lens 3—Field-specific learning theory for differentiating purposes and outcomes. Adult Education preparation is anchored to andragogy and adult learning research that shapes instructional design, learner support, persistence, and assessment in adult-serving contexts (Wang, 2025). CTE preparation is anchored to occupationally situated learning and workplace performance outcomes, requiring curriculum and assessment decisions that are responsive to industry contexts and career pathways (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2024). These field-specific foundations clarify why similar pedagogical language can mask different competency claims and why pathway-specific assessment and evidence remain necessary under CTC standards (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Lens 4—Activity theory as a diagnostic lens for organizational drift. When an institution attempts to impose a unified model across distinct credential systems, structural contradictions may emerge among rules (standards), tools (maps, rubrics, evidence systems), community (faculty, partners, reviewers), division of labor (who approves substitutions and recommendations), and the object of the activity (credential-specific purposes and outcomes). Activity-theory-informed analysis helps explain how conflation can arise from governance pressures, resource constraints, or role ambiguity rather than from candidate deficits, and it supports leadership responses that correct system contradictions through documentation,

review routines, and evidence integrity (Wang, 2025).

Synthesis. Together, these lenses support a leadership proposition that organizes the remainder of the article: sustainable efficiency is achieved through shared infrastructure and transparent crosswalks, not through collapsing standards claims. The practical framework presented later operationalizes this proposition through four requirements—separate standards maps and evidence sets, explicit crosswalks for any shared foundations, governance and change-control discipline, and student protections that preserve cohort continuity and reduce misassignment risk (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

1.3. Research Methods

This article uses a qualitative approach that combines document review with a phenomenological orientation to lived experience. First, a systematic document analysis examines the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) Preconditions and Program Standards for Designated Subjects Adult Education and Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE), alongside supporting accreditation and program documentation, to identify purpose statements, competency claims, and evidence expectations that define each pathway (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2015). Second, the analysis incorporates the author's lived experience with CSULB's longstanding nine-unit preparation models (dating to 1949) as an experience-near source of meaning and interpretation, consistent with qualitative phenomenological inquiry that foregrounds how practitioners make sense of practice contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). The two strands are integrated through an explicit audit trail that links each leadership claim to (a) a standards-based requirement located in the reviewed documents and (b) an illustrative practice episode drawn from the CSULB case narrative. To strengthen trustworthiness, the article maintains document provenance, tracks analytic decisions through memoing, and checks interpretations against the internal consistency of the standards-to-evidence chain (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2015). Clarification: lived experience uses retrospective field notes (phenomenological), not formal autoethnography.

Lived experience case anchor: CSULB's 9-unit model tradition (1949-present).

In the author's experience working with Designated Subjects educator preparation at CSULB, the "9-unit model" functioned less as a symbolic number and more as a leadership decision about program coherence: how to deliver a minimum, standards-aligned preparation sequence that is developmentally organized, evidence-producing, and realistic for candidates who are often already employed in classrooms. That design logic remains relevant because both the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) Designated Subjects Adult Education standards and the Designated Subjects Career Technical Education (CTE) standards recognize a minimum 9-semester-unit program structure (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

What the 9-unit model was designed to accomplish (scope, sequencing, candidate support).

At its core, the 9-unit model was designed to meet three practical constraints while preserving standards integrity. First, it provided a standards-based minimum that remained instructionally meaningful. The Adult Education Preconditions and Program Standards outline a structured program with a minimum of nine semester units, paired with supervised instructional events and a culminating activity (CTC, 2023a). Similarly, the CTE Preconditions and Program Standards specify a nine-semester-unit minimum (with an alternative LEA route described in the standards) and emphasize alignment to state-adopted CTE curriculum standards and the Teaching Performance Expectations (CTC, 2023b). In practice, the nine-unit footprint created sufficient time for foundational pedagogy, context-specific instructional design, and the development of defensible evidence of candidate competence (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Second, the model supported a sequenced pathway that matched candidates' employment realities. The CSULB accreditation team observed that candidates often needed to begin preparation quickly because they were already teaching or were urgently needed by employing schools (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). A sequenced nine-unit model enabled leaders to stage preparation so candidates received early orientation and essential teaching tools, then moved into standards-aligned planning and assessment, and finally completed supervised performance evidence and reflection without requiring an impractically long program timeline (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Third, the model was designed to strengthen candidate support through intentional advising and operational infrastructure. The CSULB accreditation team highlighted supports that reduced candidate confusion and improved follow-through, including the presence of a credential analyst at the first class meeting to assist candidates with registration and program questions, staff availability during the start of evening classes, and a strong advisement system that supported retention of qualified candidates (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). In leadership terms, these supports convert a minimum-unit structure into a reliable pathway that protects candidates from preventable delays and missteps (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

How CSULB operationalized distinct preparation while serving overlapping communities.

The key "distinct-by-default" lesson from CSULB is that overlap in candidate communities does not justify collapsing standards. Vocational/CTE and adult education communities often intersect through shared regional labor markets, shared districts, and shared adult-serving institutions; however, CSULB treated the two designated-subject pathways as distinct while still coordinating improvement efforts. The accreditation team praised the Designated Subjects Advisory Committee for its active role in recommending revisions to syllabi, materials, technology use, and program offerings "to ensure quality" for both vocational and adult edu-

cation credentials, noting that recommendations were documented and led to meaningful modifications (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). This provides a leadership model: shared governance can strengthen both pathways, but standards integrity is preserved through pathway-specific alignment and evidence (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

CSULB also demonstrated that efficiency can come from shared infrastructure rather than merged standards. Advising systems, onboarding processes, scheduling practices, and candidate support mechanisms can be shared, while standards maps, key assessments, and evidence sets remain distinct. That approach is consistent with the logic of standards-based accountability: a program is defensible when it can show a clear line from standards to curriculum to assessment to evidence for each credential authorization (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). In addition, the accreditation team identified diversity as a program strength, reporting that candidates felt prepared to work in diverse settings and with diverse learners (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). This reinforces that maintaining distinct pathways is not about limiting access; it is about ensuring fit-for-purpose preparation while serving diverse communities effectively.

External Validation point: “Standards Met” and “Excellent Models”.

The strongest external validation supporting this lived-experience anchor is the CSULB accreditation team’s explicit conclusion that, after reviewing documentation and conducting interviews, “all program standards are met” for both the Designated Subjects Vocational Education Teaching Credentials and the Designated Subjects Adult Education Teaching Credentials (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). The team further described the two programs as “excellent models” offering comprehensive preparation for vocational and adult education contexts (California State University, Long Beach, 2007). In leadership terms, this validation supports a generalizable claim: a single institution can sustain two distinct designated-subject pathways, meet standards for both, and still deliver timely, candidate-centered preparation—provided leaders maintain standards integrity, document alignment, and invest in support structures that prevent candidate derailment (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

Limitations note: The 2007 CSULB accreditation report predates the 2023 republished handbooks; however, the elements used here as validation points are structurally stable across standards versions (e.g., separate Adult Education and CTE standards systems, the minimum 9-unit program footprint, supervised practice expectations, documented competence verification, and advisory/governance routines). Accordingly, the report is used to corroborate durable program-design, governance, and candidate-support practices—not to claim one-to-one alignment to every line of the republished 2023 handbook text.

Where conflation breaks programs: four predictable failure points leaders can detect early.

When leaders attempt to “combine” Designated Subjects CTE and Adult Education into one model, the problem is rarely philosophical disagreement. The breakdown is usually technical and documentable: the program can no longer

demonstrate a coherent chain from standards to curriculum to assessment to evidence for each authorization. Because CTC publishes distinct program standards handbooks for Adult Education and for CTE—with distinct program rationales, competency emphases, and evidence expectations—leaders should treat “distinct” as the default and require a crosswalk before claiming overlap ([California Commission on Teacher Credentialing \[CTC\], 2023a, 2023b](#)). Four predictable failure points show up early, long before an external review. Activity-theory link: each failure point below can be read as a specific contradiction among rules (standards), tools (maps/rubrics/evidence systems), community (faculty/advisors/reviewers), division of labor (approval authority), and object (credential-specific purpose) that produces organizational drift toward conflation.

1) Standards mapping failure: one map forced onto two distinct outcomes.

What it looks like. A single standards map is used to justify both pathways. The map either (a) omits Adult Education-specific competencies (e.g., adult learning theory and adult-oriented instructional planning), or (b) omits CTE-specific requirements tied to CTE curriculum standards and workplace-facing preparation. This creates “coverage gaps” that cannot be repaired later by adding random artifacts because the curriculum-to-standards rationale is already incoherent ([CTC, 2023a, 2023b](#)). Activity-theory diagnostic: a rules–tools contradiction (one tool—the map—cannot validly operationalize two different standards-rule systems).

Early warning signals:

- 1) A standards matrix that has identical “course addresses standard” markings for both credentials.
- 2) Overreliance on generic pedagogy language, with little Adult Education or CTE contextualization.
- 3) “Equivalency” statements without a written crosswalk showing how shared assignments validly meet different standards.

Why it matters: standards-based systems assume alignment: standards define intended outcomes; curriculum provides opportunities to learn; assessments produce evidence of competence. If leaders collapse two outcome systems into one map, they remove the program’s ability to make a defensible claim that each credential’s standards are met ([CTC, 2023a, 2023b](#)).

Leadership fix. Require two maps (Adult Education and CTE) as a non-negotiable baseline, and permit “shared foundations” only if the program documents a crosswalk that names (1) the shared learning outcome, (2) the credential-specific competency claim, and (3) the distinct evidence used to verify that claim ([CTC, 2023a, 2023b](#)).

2) Evidence integrity failure: mixed artifacts that can’t substantiate distinct competency claims.

Portfolios, observation forms, key assessments, and verification documents become a blended “bucket” of artifacts. The same lesson plan, reflection, or observation is used as evidence for two different standard sets without showing that the task was designed to elicit the distinct knowledge/skills each credential requires.

Over time, the evidence system turns into what curriculum scholars warn against: a program that cannot distinguish “the written, the taught, the supported, the tested, and the learned curricula” in a way that supports valid claims (Wang, 2025). Activity-theory diagnostic: a tools-object contradiction (a blended evidence tool-set no longer substantiates the credential-specific object/outcome).

Early warning signals:

1) Candidates are told “just submit the same portfolio” regardless of credential pathway.

2) Key assessments are not tagged to a specific standard set.

3) Documentation is hard to audit: no clear archive structure, weak version control, unclear decision rules for “competent/not yet competent”. A CSULB accreditation team flagged the need for “a more effective system of archiving program documents and student portfolios...to help guide the collection of aggregate data and foster program improvement”, illustrating how quickly evidence problems become program-level risk (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

Why it matters, CTC standards repeatedly emphasize documented determination of competence and written verification tied to standards-aligned assessments (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Accreditation logic (e.g., CAEP’s quality assurance and candidate competence expectations) similarly relies on traceable, quality evidence connected to standards and continuous improvement cycles (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2021).

Leadership fix. Treat evidence integrity as a governance task: implement a pathway-specific evidence taxonomy (Adult Education vs. CTE), require rubric tagging by standard, and adopt an archiving system that supports audits and aggregate analysis (CAEP, 2021). If a single assignment is used across pathways, leaders should require distinct scoring criteria or distinct add-on tasks that produce pathway-specific evidence.

3) Advising/candidate support failure: unclear pathways, misassignment, delayed completion.

Candidates receive inconsistent guidance about which courses, supervised events, or culminating requirements apply to their credential recommendation. When programs are conflated, staff may unintentionally advise candidates into the wrong pathway, creating delays, rework, or preventable frustration—especially for working adults who need predictable sequencing (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Activity-theory diagnostic: a community-division-of-labor contradiction (role ambiguity and inconsistent advising shift work onto candidates and disrupt the object of timely completion).

Early warning signals:

1) Advising sheets that use combined language (“CTE/AE”) with few pathway-specific requirements.

2) Candidates reporting they “didn’t know there were two sets of standards”.

3) Faculty giving contradictory instructions about portfolio requirements or supervised practice.

Why it matters: standards compliance is also a student-success issue: unclear

requirements increase time-to-completion and can undermine confidence in the program's integrity. CSULB's accreditation report highlights the opposite pattern—constant follow-up, ongoing advisement, and consistent support—showing that leadership can operationalize clarity and reduce candidate risk (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

Leadership fix. Publish two one-page pathway maps (Adult Education and CTE) with: (1) entry requirements, (2) course sequence, (3) supervised events, (4) key assessments, and (5) completion/verification steps, and require advisors to document pathway confirmation at admission and at mid-point check (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

Candidate outcomes most sensitive to conflation (explicit answer to Research Question 3): time-to-completion lengthens when candidates are misadvised, placed in the wrong sequence, or required to redo pathway-specific assessments; advising accuracy declines when pathway requirements are presented as interchangeable; and perceived preparedness drops when coursework and supervised feedback are not clearly situated in the correct teaching context (adult-serving settings vs. workplace/CTE settings) and not transparently tied to the pathway's adopted standards, assessments, and verification decision rules.

4) Procedural failure: undocumented substitutions, ad hoc approvals, inconsistent governance.

What it looks like. To keep a conflated model “moving”, leaders permit informal substitutions (“this course counts for both”, “use last year's rubric”, “we'll accept this artifact instead”) without documented standards rationale or formal approval. Over time, the program becomes procedurally fragile: decisions vary by person, not policy, and the program cannot explain why a given candidate was recommended as competent under a specific standards set (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Activity-theory diagnostic: a rules–division-of-labor contradiction (undocumented approvals replace governed rules, allowing expedient tools to redefine the object).

Early warning signals.

- 1) Changes implemented by email or hallway conversation, not through documented governance.
- 2) Lack of minutes, decision logs, or change-control records for standards maps and assessments.
- 3) “Temporary” arrangements that persist across cohorts.

Why it matters: governance is where standards compliance becomes leadership practice. When program decisions are not documented, leaders cannot show consistent application of standards or defend candidate competence determinations—exactly the kind of vulnerability standards-based review is designed to surface (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

Leadership fix. Establish a simple change-control protocol: any substitution must include (1) a standards crosswalk, (2) evidence impact analysis, (3) approval authority, and (4) an effective date for cohort applicability. Tie this to a continu-

ous improvement cycle so modifications are data-informed rather than expedient (CAEP, 2021).

1.4. A Leadership Framework to Prevent Conflation and Protect Program Integrity

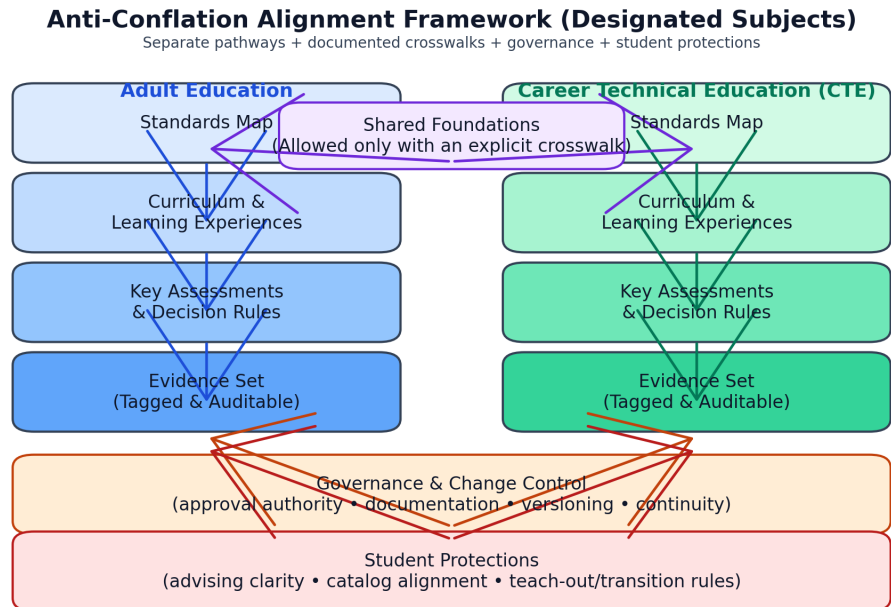


Figure 1. Anti-conflation alignment framework for CTC designated subjects programs.

Interpretation. **Figure 1** summarizes a defensible anti-conflation approach: (1) Adult Education and CTE operate as separate alignment lanes with distinct standards maps, assessments, and auditable evidence sets; (2) shared foundations are permissible only when an explicit, written crosswalk specifies pathway-specific competency claims and the evidence used to verify them; (3) governance and change-control processes (approval authority, documentation, versioning, continuity) prevent ad hoc substitutions from becoming hidden policy; and (4) student protections (advising clarity, catalog alignment, teach-out/transition rules) reduce misassignment risk and stabilize candidate progress.

Distinct outcomes require distinct claims: each pathway’s standards map must trace to pathway-specific assessments and evidence.

Crosswalks preserve efficiency without conflation: shared coursework is valid only when the crosswalk and evidence rules are explicit.

Governance prevents drift: documented approvals and version control stop ad hoc substitutions from becoming hidden policy.

Student protections reduce risk: advising clarity and transition plans prevent misassignment and delayed completion.

Preventing “standards conflation” is fundamentally a leadership task: it requires governance discipline, documentation discipline, and a student-protection mindset. Because CTC publishes separate Preconditions and Program Standards for Designated Subjects Adult Education and for Designated Subjects Career

Technical Education (CTE), “distinct” should be treated as the default unless leaders can document (in writing) how any shared component meets both sets of standards (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2023a, 2023b). The framework below translates that default into four practical principles and the concrete artifacts leaders should require.

Principle 1: Separate standards maps and separate evidence sets (non-negotiable).

Leadership claim: Leaders cannot credibly assert that two different credentials are met with a single standards map and a single evidence set. Standards-based systems assume a coherent chain from standards → curriculum → assessment → evidence. When the chain is blurred, the program’s competence claims become procedurally vulnerable and difficult to defend.

What leaders require (minimum artifacts):

1) Two standards maps: one mapping Adult Education standards to courses, supervised events, and key assessments (CTC, 2023a), and one mapping CTE standards to courses, supervised events, and key assessments (CTC, 2023b).

2) Two “evidence architectures” (folders, tags, naming rules): Adult Education evidence must be auditable as Adult Education evidence; CTE evidence must be auditable as CTE evidence.

3) Two competence-verification checklists: each checklist names the decision rules and required evidence for recommendations under that credential pathway (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Early compliance test leaders can run pick one standard from Adult Education and one from CTE and ask: “Show me exactly where candidates learn this, how they practice it, how it’s assessed, and what evidence verifies competence”. If the answer is “the same artifact covers both”, the program is already drifting toward conflation (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

This is consistent with broader accreditation logic emphasizing coherent quality assurance, valid measures, and evidence-based continuous improvement in educator preparation (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2021).

Principle 2: Shared “foundations” allowed only with an explicit crosswalk and justification.

Leadership claim: Shared coursework can be efficient and defensible, but only if leaders treat it as a *crosswalk problem* rather than a shortcut. A “shared foundations” course may support both pathways, but it does not automatically satisfy both sets of standards unless the program documents equivalence and gathers pathway-specific evidence (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Crosswalk rules leaders should enforce:

1) **One shared course = two claims.** For each shared element, document (a) the Adult Education standards addressed, (b) the CTE standards addressed, and (c) what is different about the competency claim in each pathway (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

2) **One assignment cannot do two jobs unless it is designed to.** If the same

assignment is used, leaders require either (a) separate scoring criteria aligned to each pathway's standards, or (b) pathway-specific add-ons that generate distinct evidence.

3) **No crosswalk, no sharing.** If the crosswalk cannot be written without hand-waving (“it’s basically the same”), leaders treat that as a signal that the shared element is not valid for one of the pathways.

Practical artifact: a one-page “Shared Foundations Crosswalk” template with four columns: Shared Element → Adult Education Standard(s) → CTE Standard(s) → Evidence produced (Adult Ed)/Evidence produced (CTE). That document becomes the program’s first line of defense in internal review, external review, and candidate questions (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

Principle 3: Governance clarity (who approves what, how changes are documented, succession/continuity).

Leadership claim: Most conflation begins as a governance failure, not a curriculum failure. When approval authority is unclear, leaders (or intermediaries) authorize substitutions, merge requirements, or “temporarily” combine pathways without written rationale. Over time, these ad hoc decisions become “the new normal”, leaving the program unable to demonstrate consistent standards alignment and consistent competence verification (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Governance design leaders should adopt:

1) **Approval authority map:** one page naming who approves (1) standards maps, (2) key assessments/rubrics, (3) substitutions, and (4) candidate recommendation decisions—and how approvals are recorded (minutes, decision log, signed memo).

2) **Change-control protocol:** any substitution or model change must include (a) a standards rationale, (b) an evidence impact analysis, (c) cohort applicability (effective date), and (d) archiving/version control so the program can reproduce what applied to a given candidate cohort (CAEP, 2021).

3) **Succession/continuity plan:** a brief plan for what happens if the program coordinator or managing editor changes roles—who holds the “system knowledge”, where the evidence system lives, and how decisions remain consistent.

This governance clarity is not bureaucracy for its own sake; it is how leaders preserve program integrity and ensure continuous improvement cycles are evidence-driven rather than personality-driven (CAEP, 2021).

Principle 4: Student protections (teach-out/transition rules; transparent advising and catalog alignment).

Leadership claim: A conflated model often harms students first: unclear pathways, inconsistent advising, delayed completion, and uncertainty about “what counts”. Student protections therefore belong inside the anti-conflation framework, not as an afterthought.

Student-protection practices leaders should require:

1) **Transparent advising:** publish two pathway sheets (Adult Education vs. CTE) that specify entry, sequence, supervised events, key assessments, and com-

pletion checkpoints (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Require an “advising confirmation” at admission and mid-program to prevent misassignment.

2) **Catalog alignment:** ensure published program requirements (catalog, website, handbooks) match the approved pathway requirements and the standards maps. Catalog inconsistency is a predictable trigger for disputes and delays.

3) **Teach-out/transition plan for program changes:** if leaders change requirements or discontinue a pathway, they should adopt teach-out planning norms used in accredited higher education: identify affected students, map remaining requirements, provide a schedule of offerings/substitutions, and communicate clearly (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), n.d.; National Academy of Education, 2025; WASC Senior College and University Commission, n.d.). CSU campus discontinuation policies commonly emphasize a commitment to teach out currently enrolled students and specify that teach-out plans include student lists, requirements completed, planned offerings, substitutions, and communication plans (California State University, Monterey Bay, n.d.). That same student-first logic applies to credential pathway changes even when the institution is not “closing” a degree.

Bottom line: leaders who want efficiency should pursue *shared infrastructure* (advising systems, scheduling, candidate onboarding, assessment platforms), not shared standards claims. When the four principles above are implemented, programs can collaborate without collapsing distinct CTC requirements—and leaders can defend program decisions with clarity, documentation, and student-centered integrity (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

1.5. Implementation Toolkit: What Leaders Can Do in 30 - 90 Days

Leaders can prevent standards conflation quickly—not by “writing more documents”, but by building a small set of decision-grade artifacts that make alignment visible, auditable, and sustainable. The goal in the first 30 - 90 days is to establish (a) two pathway-specific compliance packets, (b) a standing review cycle that produces documented decisions, (c) clear communication that prevents candidate misassignment, and (d) a small dashboard of metrics that signals drift early. This toolkit assumes the “distinct-by-default” reality reflected in CTC’s separate Designated Subjects Adult Education and CTE Preconditions and Program Standards (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2023a, 2023b).

1) **Create a two-pathway compliance packet (maps, assessments, evidence checklists).**

Deliverable by Day 30 - 45: “Adult Education Packet” + “CTE Packet”.

Each packet should be short (15–30 pages), version-controlled, and usable for onboarding faculty, advising candidates, and responding to internal/external questions.

1.6. Packet Contents (Minimum Viable Set)

A. Standards map (one per pathway).

Use a matrix that connects each program standard to: course/module, supervised practice event(s), and key assessment(s). This is the operational definition of alignment (standards → curriculum → assessment → evidence) used in standards-based quality systems. CTC's handbooks explicitly frame program design as a purposeful, developmentally designed sequence; mapping is how leaders show "purposeful" is real rather than rhetorical (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

B. Key assessment set (one per pathway) with decision rules.

Identify 4 - 8 key assessments that collectively verify pathway competence (e.g., lesson design, observed teaching, assessment of learning, reflection, and a culminating demonstration). Build a short scoring guide and decision rule (competent/not yet competent/remediation). CTC standards emphasize documented determination and verification of competence; leaders should ensure assessments are clearly tagged to pathway standards (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

C. Evidence checklist and file taxonomy (one per pathway).

This is the "audit readiness" component: a one-page checklist for candidates and reviewers showing exactly what artifacts must exist and where they are stored (folder structure + naming conventions). Evidence integrity is easier when artifacts are pre-classified by pathway and by standard, consistent with the alignment guidance that emphasizes transparency and consistency across curriculum and assessment systems.

D. Crosswalk appendix (shared foundations only).

If any shared components are allowed, include a one-page crosswalk per shared element: shared learning target → Adult Education standard(s) → CTE standard(s) → pathway-specific evidence produced. This protects the program from "one artifact covers all" logic and makes overlap defensible under separate standards (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

Leadership checkpoint: If leaders cannot complete the two maps without forced equivalencies, treat that as an early detection signal that the program is sliding toward conflation. Alignment work is diagnostic; it reveals where governance needs to choose "separate" rather than "merged".

2) Establish a standing review process (annual crosswalk audit; documented decisions).

Deliverable by Day 45 - 60: a standing review calendar + decision log.

Leaders prevent conflation by institutionalizing review. This aligns with quality assurance expectations in educator preparation that emphasize continuous improvement and evidence-based decision-making (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2021).

1.7. Standing Process Components

A. Annual crosswalk audit (1 - 2 meetings).

Once a year, review every shared element (if any) and answer three questions:

1) Is the crosswalk still accurate for current standards language and program design? (CTC, 2023a, 2023b)

2) Are we collecting pathway-specific evidence that actually substantiates distinct competency claims?

3) Did any “temporary” substitution become permanent without documentation?

B. Semester “change-control” review (30 minutes).

At the start (or end) of each term, review any requested substitutions, staffing changes, rubric edits, or course revisions. Require: standards rationale, evidence impact, cohort applicability, and version update in the packet. This is how leaders stop ad hoc approvals from becoming hidden policy (CAEP, 2021).

C. Decision log + archive.

Keep a simple log: date, decision, affected pathway, rationale, evidence impact, approver. This creates procedural defensibility and continuity when personnel change—one of the most common points where conflation risk increases (CAEP, 2021).

3) Communication plan: advising sheets, faculty guidance, and change-control rules

Deliverable by Day 30 - 75: “two pathway sheets” + “faculty one-pager” + “change-control memo”.

Confusion is a leading indicator of conflation. A program communication plan should make pathway distinction unavoidable while keeping operations simple.

A. Two advising sheets (Adult Education vs. CTE).

Each should be one page and include: entry steps, course sequence, supervised events, key assessments, completion checkpoints, and who to contact. Because CTC’s Adult Education and CTE standards specify purposeful sequences and minimum unit structures, the advising sheet should mirror that sequence and reduce candidate misassignment risk (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

B. Faculty guidance one-pager.

Include three rules:

1) Do not tell candidates “the same portfolio covers both pathways” unless an approved crosswalk exists.

2) Use pathway-tagged rubrics and evidence checklists.

3) Route any substitution request through change control.

C. Change-control rules (student-facing).

Publish a short statement: “Requirements are cohort-based; substitutions must be documented and approved; candidates will receive written confirmation”. This supports transparency and consistency—hallmarks of standards-based systems.

4) Metrics: completion patterns, assessment validity, candidate feedback, and audit readiness

Deliverable by Day 60 - 90: a small dashboard (5 - 8 indicators) reviewed each term.

Metrics should detect drift early rather than punish later.

A. Completion patterns (by pathway).

Track time-to-completion, withdrawal points, and rework cycles. Spikes often indicate advising confusion or hidden substitution practices (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

B. Assessment validity signals.

Use simple checks: inter-rater consistency on key rubrics, distribution of scores, and whether each key assessment produces evidence for the targeted standards. CAEP resources emphasize using evidence and measures for quality assurance and continuous improvement, which can be adapted to designated subject contexts (CAEP, 2021).

C. Candidate feedback (short, structured).

Administer a brief survey at mid-point and exit: clarity of pathway requirements, advising accuracy, usefulness of supervised feedback, and perceived preparedness. CAEP provides criteria for evaluating educator-preparation-provider surveys, which can help keep feedback instruments defensible and non-leading (CAEP, 2021).

D. Audit readiness (quarterly spot-check).

Randomly sample 5 candidates per pathway and verify: required artifacts exist, are properly tagged, and match the cohort's requirements. Audit readiness is the practical proof that the standards-to-evidence chain is real (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

If leaders complete these steps in 30 - 90 days, they will have moved the program from “trust us” to “here is the evidence architecture”, which is the most reliable way to prevent conflation while still allowing thoughtful collaboration across Adult Education and CTE.

2. Discussion: Leadership Lessons and Policy Implications

CSULB's experience suggests that sustaining distinct designated-subject pathways over time is less about adding units and more about **leadership discipline**: protecting standards integrity while building candidate-centered infrastructure that makes compliance workable. In the CSULB accreditation record, reviewers concluded that **all program standards were met** for both Designated Subjects Vocational Education and Designated Subjects Adult Education, and described the programs as “excellent models” that provide comprehensive preparation (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

That external validation is important because it demonstrates a replicable proposition: a single institution can serve overlapping professional communities while maintaining distinct standards alignment, coherent evidence, and candidate support—if leadership treats “distinct” as the default and documents how the program satisfies each pathway's program standards (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2023a, 2023b).

2.1. What CSULB's Experience Suggests about Sustaining Distinct Pathways over Time

First, **distinctness can be sustained when it is operationalized as an evidence system, not a slogan**. CSULB's documented strengths include robust advisement and candidate support processes that reduce confusion and keep working candidates on track (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

This aligns with standards-based leadership logic: the program remains defensible when leaders can show a consistent chain from standards → curriculum → assessments → evidence. Second, sustained distinctness requires **stakeholder governance that improves both pathways without collapsing them**. CSULB's accreditation narrative highlighted an advisory process that produced documented recommendations and program modifications supporting quality across vocational and adult education credentials (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

In short, CSULB illustrates that shared governance and shared infrastructure are compatible with distinct standards—when leaders keep pathway-specific standards maps and verification practices intact (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

2.2. Risks of “Shortcut” Conflation VS. Benefits of Defensible Alignment

“Shortcut” conflation typically promises efficiency but produces four predictable costs: (1) weakened standards mapping (one map forced onto two outcomes), (2) mixed evidence that cannot substantiate distinct competency claims, (3) advising errors that delay completion, and (4) procedural fragility driven by undocumented substitutions and ad hoc approvals (CTC, 2023a, 2023b). Once conflation takes hold, the program's claims become harder to defend because a standards-based system expects transparent alignment and auditable evidence—not generic pedagogy assertions. In contrast, **defensible alignment** creates practical benefits: clearer advising and faster candidate progress; fewer disputes over “what counts”; stronger assessment validity because rubrics and tasks are designed for pathway-specific competencies; and stronger review readiness because evidence is organized, tagged, and verifiable (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2021). Defensible alignment also supports continuous improvement: when evidence is pathway-specific, leaders can analyze patterns and improve instruction rather than arguing about model legitimacy (CAEP, 2021).

2.3. Recommendations for CSU/CTC-Facing Program Leadership

Three replicable, student-centered, compliance-ready recommendations follow.

1) Institutionalize “two packets, two maps, two evidence sets”. Treat separate Adult Education and CTE compliance packets as a standing requirement, updated annually. The packets should include standards maps, key assessments with decision rules, and evidence checklists that make audits straightforward (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

2) Allow shared “foundations” only via a written crosswalk and pathway-specific evidence. Shared coursework can be appropriate, but leaders should require an explicit crosswalk demonstrating how the shared component satisfies distinct standards and what distinct evidence verifies each competency claim. Without the crosswalk, “sharing” becomes conflation by default (CTC, 2023a, 2023b).

3) Strengthen governance and student protections through documented change-control and transparent advising. Leaders should adopt a lightweight change-control process (rationale, evidence impact, cohort applicability, version control) and publish pathway advising sheets that reduce misassignment and delays (CAEP, 2021; CTC, 2023a, 2023b). CSULB's record underscores that sustained candidate support and documented improvement processes are not optional extras; they are leadership mechanisms that protect candidates and stabilize programs (California State University, Long Beach, 2007).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, CSULB's long-running practice offers a leadership lesson with broad policy relevance: **the path to efficiency is not conflation; it is documented alignment.** When CSU and CTC-facing leaders preserve distinct pathway standards while enabling shared infrastructure and transparent governance, they protect students, strengthen program integrity, and reduce compliance risk—creating a model that is both scalable and defensible (CTC, 2023a, 2023b; CAEP, 2021).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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