

Credit for Prior Learning: Transfer Models across the Nation

By Mary Beth Lakin

Credit for Prior Learning is gaining traction as one strategy for advancing postsecondary degree attainment. While much progress has been made in institutions across the U.S., challenges remain in the widespread acceptance and application of prior learning to provide transfer pathways. State and regional collaborations offer promising models.

Transferring academic credit across higher education institutions within and throughout state systems has a history of challenges and successes, beginning with the transfer of associate degrees articulated to four-year degree programs. The higher education system has made great strides in advancing academic mobility and the currency of academic credits through a variety of models. Such models have been built upon common course numbering, agreed upon core courses for general education, streamlined program reviews among institutions and implementing automated degree audits. Subsequently these efforts have expanded two plus two articulations within and across institutions and state systems, and produced dual-enrollment and reverse transfer agreements.

The higher education community is focused on the challenges of access, affordability and attainment. Most recently, higher education systems in Colorado, Ohio and Florida have found greater transfer rates, completion and tuition savings with transfer and articulation agreements in place.¹ A 2014 study of community college transfers reported that students who get the majority of their credits to transfer are 2.5 times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than those who transferred less than 50 percent of their courses.²

Into the mix of state and national discussions on credit transfer, student mobility and completion rates has come a more robust discussion about credit for prior learning. That is in line with a recent Lumina Foundation/Gallup Poll survey on higher education (February 5, 2013) that found the general public is more aware of options for assessing prior learning from the workplace or military service, thinks that such recognition is warranted and would be more likely to return to college to complete a credential with those options in place.³

Meanwhile, recent research (CAEL, 2010; College Board, 2013) offers evidence of prior learning assessment boosting enrollment, persistence and attainment. That research has shown that adult

students who earn credit for prior learning have better academic outcomes compared to their peers who do not earn credit for prior learning.⁴ These findings held for ethnicity, gender, age and socioeconomic status.⁵

In spite of these trends, multiple challenges remain before credit for prior learning gains widespread acceptance. Those challenges are similar to issues that have been associated with articulation of two-year associate degrees to bachelor's programs, which primarily concern the quality and fit of programs external to the home institution. Principles and rubrics for evaluating extra-institutional learning have been provided for more than four decades through the American Council on Education's (ACE) programs evaluating workplace and military training; the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning for individualized assessment, in particular portfolio development and evaluation; and the College Board, in the production of national standardized subject examinations. A lack of awareness about these principles of practice has resulted in misperceptions about and mistrust in prior learning evaluation processes. Unfortunately, concerns about the quality of the evaluation process increase when "bad actors" exploit students and "sell" credit for experience in order to profit from that lack of knowledge.

What is Credit for Prior Learning?

The American Council on Education, also known as ACE, uses the term credit for prior learning and defines it "as academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the college classroom".⁶ Credit for prior learning encompasses several well-established methods for reviewing and evaluating extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training—for example, the ACE evaluation of military and workplace training—national or departmental exams and individualized assessment. Institutions use a

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broad range of terms and options—prior learning assessment, testing out, experiential learning and alternative credit, to name a few. With multiple terms and options in play, therein lies the confusion among stakeholders.

Credit for prior learning has been in place in U.S. higher education at least since World War I, as returning veterans looked for opportunities to earn high school and college credentials. The American Council on Education was organized as part of those early efforts, and the General Education Development (GED) tests, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), and other methods for verifying college-level equivalencies were developed. After World War II, ACE's Military Evaluation Programs, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Defense and the service branches, began providing evaluations and academic credit recommendations through a faculty-driven review process.

By the mid-1970s, some institutions were offering individualized assessments, specifically the portfolio, and applied the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning standards. At the same time, a growing number of colleges began to standardize the acceptance of CLEP exams to meet general education requirements, while ACE broadened its third party validation process with the addition of military occupation reviews and the launching of ACE's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT®). ACE CREDIT provides the same faculty-driven review process in the civilian workplace for formal training courses, certifications, and examinations offered through Fortune 500 companies, professional associations, labor unions, government agencies and online education vendors.

More recently Veterans Programs at ACE has created a network of institutions that share tools, training and resources in order to better serve student veteran populations. With the recent national focus on increasing attainment rates, ACE's College and University Partnerships is supporting the efforts of two- and four-year institutions, state higher education systems and multi-state organizations to implement effective credit for prior learning practices and related services. It disseminates institutional models for building infrastructure, engaging faculty, integrating programs, creating information-sharing pipelines and advising students.

The American Council on Education, as the major coordinating body for U.S. higher education, supports institutions in their efforts to identify

and implement best practices in credit for prior learning that align to their mission, address issues of quality and support their student populations. Through this national lens, we are seeing trends on a number of fronts: 1) a move toward more comprehensive, integrated policies and practices in credit for prior learning; 2) an increase in collaborative efforts across states and beyond state borders; 3) a push toward articulation agreements within systems to decrease transfer barriers; 4) a focus on additional resources, including funding, to sustain and expand implementation; 5) a need for data that tracks the impact of credit for prior learning options on enrollment, persistence, and completion rates.

What do we know about trends in credit for prior learning?

A move toward more comprehensive policies through state initiatives recognizes the diversity of student groups and the different sources of learning they bring, in particular from military and workforce training. Institutions and higher education systems determine whether to transfer and award credit from other sources and create various models to reflect their mission, culture and infrastructure. Collaborative efforts at the state and regional levels have begun to produce examples of credit for prior learning implementation that engage campus stakeholders, address standards for quality degree programs, and meet the needs of their students and communities.

Pennsylvania's College Credit Fast Track, funded by a U.S. Department of Labor grant and developed through a collaboration of 14 community colleges, was launched in February 2015. It is one recent example of a state's implementation of comprehensive policies and practices, from third-party validation and national examinations to individualized assessment. These options are on ready display, actively promoting application of appropriate credit for prior learning. Potential and current students can easily access and understand what their CPL options are, how to get started and where to go if they need assistance.

The number of state higher education systems creating more transparent, comprehensive and integrated CPL practices—whether through a foundation grant, a board of regents' initiative, state legislation or a combination—is quickly growing. Tennessee, through its Begin Again Tennessee college completion initiative, provides a website which maintains CPL practices and points

of contact through profiles of colleges and universities across the state.

Colorado's community college system has created a manual that explains standards. "We are taking incremental steps in expanding policy and practice that is built on history, rather than tearing down foundation," said Bitsy Cohn, the system's director of credit for prior learning during an American Council on Education webinar on credit for prior learning⁷).

The University of Wisconsin system applied a Lumina Foundation grant to expand CPL policy and practice and is exploring recognizing two-year institutions' practice as part of the system wide transfer agreements.

In these and other examples across the U.S., faculty have been engaged early and often in policy and practice implementation, with working groups of administrative, academic and student services professionals bringing their perspectives to the process. Stakeholders have provided their input on the policy review process, the roles in which they play and the ways in which information could best be shared. Consideration of strategies for shifting culture and building resources is critical to practice implementation, and subsequently, an increase in articulation and transfer of credit for prior learning.⁸

Many of those efforts began with community interest in supporting student veterans and helping them transition into the civilian workforce. As implementation takes root, more stakeholders are beginning to understand the quality of training that transitioning veterans have received—and the college-level learning that has accompanied much of that training. What helps in making that shift occur is the engagement of campus constituencies, primarily, but not exclusively faculty, in ongoing, experientially-based activity, such as participating in prior learning assessment activities, to better understand CPL evaluation processes.⁹

An increase in collaborative efforts across states and beyond state borders is fostering a wider dissemination of credit for prior learning implementation.

The University System of Georgia's Adult Learning Consortium has grown to 15 institutions, including three regional universities, five state universities and seven state colleges. The presidents signed a memorandum of understanding outlining working principles for providing adult-focused programs and services. The University System of Georgia's Regents Academic Committee on Adult

Learning promotes both statewide and leadership engagement in prior learning policy making and implementation while ALC offers continuous training and information sharing to practitioners in the field. This grassroots effort, funded by a state college completion grant, has garnered statewide and national attention with its developmental approach to implementing credit for prior learning practice. With this approach, the institutions are able to build on informal practices that are already in place. Go Back Move Ahead, initiated by the governor, provides opportunities to expand credit for prior learning options across Georgia institutions.

The New Jersey Prior Learning Assessment Network was initiated by Thomas Edison State College, a longstanding leader in programs geared to adult learners. It is another example of a voluntary group of higher education institutions organized to share effective CPL policy and practice. NJ PLAN also aids member institutions in building capacity to implement credit for prior learning options and related services, with a focus on creating statewide practices to expand and streamline articulation agreements. College Credit for Heroes, launched in 2011 by the Texas Workforce Commission through a five-year grant, began with seven institutions and has grown to 20. Central Texas College, a consortium member, created a manual to help institutions identify potential transfer credit for military training with consistent and appropriate guidelines.

On a regional level, the Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit provides its 13 members, primarily Midwestern states, with opportunities to share information and best practices in the articulation of academic credit for military training and occupations. It also has addressed credit for prior learning transfer and satisfactory academic progress, outlining issues, potential solutions and recommendations. College Credit for Heroes and the Multi-State Collaborative provide noteworthy models for identifying, disseminating and advocating for effective credit for prior learning practice implementation and articulation beyond student veteran populations. Their strategies and resources could be adapted to serve other student populations with workforce training and industry certifications that may provide college-level competencies.

At a national level, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education facilitates effective CPL practices through its Adult College Comple-

tion Network. Funded by Lumina Foundation, ACCN encourages institutions, agencies, organizations and other stakeholders to share information about their work. Many of these projects, including 19 initiatives recently funded by Lumina, encompass credit for prior learning programs and services.

With this increased collaboration comes more easily available information for institutions, students and policymakers. What is truly exciting about this trend is that it addresses a major stumbling block for returning students and other stakeholders. A 2012 survey by the American Council on Education found that although most institutions apply at least one form of credit for prior learning, there remains a great deal of confusion about CPL.¹⁰ On many campuses, a lack of awareness about credit for prior learning results in low demand by students, and subsequently, institutions perceive there is little or no need for credit for prior learning options for their students.

Findings in the 2015 American Council on Education brief on credit for prior learning suggest that “if institutions comprehensively and clearly define and manage credit for prior learning options and services, then staff, faculty, and administrators will be better prepared to effectively guide students throughout their academic careers on CPL options and benefits.” Northern Virginia Community College is one institution that has addressed the lack of information sharing among campus groups through its creation of CPL guidebooks for students and advisors. The college’s outreach begins before admissions and continues with orientation and throughout enrollment with CPL specialists.

A push toward articulation agreements within systems to decrease transfer barriers has grown with the development of comprehensive policies and greater collaboration. Much of the current articulation work has focused on the examination of military training and college-level equivalencies at the institutional, system and consortium levels. Many standout examples have existed for decades, including those at SUNY Empire State, Thomas Edison State College, Excelsior College and University Maryland University College, as well as higher education systems such as the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System and Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana’s statewide community college system.

New models continue to develop. The Ohio Values Veterans Initiative has set the stage for implementation of articulated military training.

Recent state legislation passed in 2014 requires the chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents to develop standards and procedures for state institutions in the awarding of academic credit for military training. A process is now in place to articulate ACE credit recommendations to degree program requirements. The development of this process has engaged all of the institutional stakeholders: senior leadership in academic and student services areas, faculty, advisors, registrars, admissions staff and transfer coordinators. Teams of faculty experts representing two- and four-year public institutions are working together to identify potential course equivalencies to be included in transfer articulation databases and degree audit systems. These efforts build on several years of cross-institutional collaboration to study and develop a range of credit for prior learning practices, from national standardized subject examinations to individualized portfolio assessment. Coupled with the activities of the working groups have been early and ongoing information sharing and professional development opportunities through statewide and regional workshops.

Another challenge institutions face with credit for prior learning articulation is transcription. As with CPL policy in U.S. institutions, there is a wide range of transcription practices across institutions. The recent survey (January 2015) from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers underscores the variability in practice and highlights related issues, including Satisfactory Academic Progress, residency requirements and definitions, and financial aid restrictions.¹¹

A focus on additional resources to expand and sustain implementation through private foundations, federal grants and state college completion initiatives, has opened up opportunities for building and disseminating CPL practices, and in turn, expanding articulation. The U.S. departments of Education and Labor continue to fund initiatives to advance CPL implementation. The Experimental Sites Initiative provides grantees with opportunities to develop solutions for the knotty issues surrounding competency-based education, financial aid and transferability. In the second round of the First in the World initiative, institutions can focus on creating completion pathways, with credit for prior learning as a major component where student outcomes can be measured. The new American Apprenticeship Initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, encourages community colleges to expand pathways to education and

employment, join the Registered Apprenticeship College Consortium and articulate apprenticeship training to postsecondary credentials. State college completion initiatives also have provided funding, resources and training to support the building of the necessary infrastructure, from faculty engagement and policy creation to student services and data collection.

More data that tracks and analyzes the impact of credit for prior learning options on enrollment, persistence and completion rates will build CPL sustainability. Institutions have national research findings to make the case for credit for prior learning implementation, but much more specific data is required to demonstrate the impact of CPL options. While adult-focused institutions have created systems to track this information for some time, generally colleges and universities have had neither the infrastructure nor the incentive to collect and share CPL data.

The U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants support community colleges and other eligible organizations in expanding education and career training programs. These initiatives have focused on building credit for prior learning practices within and across states. That has been a massive effort, and now there is the opportunity to shine a light on the results of those efforts. The Colorado Community College System, for example has developed the structure for collecting baseline data. It is also carrying out audits of credit for prior learning usage and course enrollments, while working on standardization of credit for prior learning transcripting and transfer.¹²

More higher education state systems, from Tennessee to Washington state, are developing metrics to understand credit for prior learning usage, student performance and college completion rates. Sharing student outcomes and institutional benefits regularly and at multiple levels advances internal and external support.

What is next?

A variety of credit for prior learning models have emerged that represents the diversity of institutions and the students they serve. Stakeholders—higher education institutions and systems, state and regional consortia, policymakers and accrediting bodies—must continue to work closely together to identify effective CPL practice and remove barriers to implementation and collaboration (ACE, 2015). Continued cross-sector discus-

sions to review policy, receive stakeholder input and collaborate in the creation of quality standards would do much to advance credit for prior learning articulation practices. The result is shared benefits for students, institutions and their communities.

Notes

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²Monaghan, David B. and Attewell, Paul. March 19, 2014. *The Community College Route to the Bachelor's Degree*. Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis.

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⁴Hayward, Milan S. and Williams, Mitchell R. Adult Learner Graduation Rates at Four U.S. Community Colleges by Prior Learning Assessment Status and Method. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(May 23, 2014): 44-54.

⁵Klein-Collins, Rebecca. 2011. *Underserved Students Who Earn Credit Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

⁶Lakin, Mary Beth; Nelligan, Christopher, Crandall, Jennifer; and Seymour, Deborah. *Credit for Prior Learning Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability*. February, 2015. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

⁷American Council on Education. April 7, 2015. *Internal Marketing: Building Credit for Prior Learning Engagement and Commitment across the Institution*. Washington, DC: ACE 2015 Credit for Prior Learning Webinar Series.

⁸ACE, February 2015.

⁹ACE, February 2015.

¹⁰Ryu, Mikung. 2013. *Credit for Prior Learning: From the Student, Campus, and Industry Perspectives*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

¹¹American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. 2014. *Credit for Prior Learning Practices: Results of the AACRAO December 2014 60 Second Survey*. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

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About the Author

Mary Beth Lakin is the Director of College and University Partnerships (CUP) in the Center for Education Attainment and Innovation at the American Council on Education (ACE). CUP capitalizes on statewide, regional, and national initiatives to raise awareness, acceptance and application of credit for prior learning and boost postsecondary credential completion rates, assisting higher education institutions and systems in developing integrated programs and services that support and validate a diverse range of learning experiences. With 10 years at the American Council on Education, Lakin has concentrated on expanding educational pathways for adult learners, including military service members and veterans. Lakin has close to three decades of experience as a faculty member, academic advisor, and program administrator. In her previous position at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, she developed and directed the University's Experiential Learning program and an interdisciplinary degree program geared to adult learners offered in a blended format. Her published articles, presentations, and research center on credit for prior learning policies and practices, adult learning, and trends in postsecondary education.