

# MAKING THE CASE FOR CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING (CPL)

The face of the “average” college student is changing. New demands placed on students and working adults can make higher education seem unattainable, inflexible, and unrealistic. For too many people today, time is the barrier to college completion. Family responsibilities, financial obligations, and work are all major obstacles that stand in the way of intelligent, informed people and a college degree. But for many, college level learning has taken place outside the classroom and via non-traditional avenues. Should that knowledge be ignored because it doesn’t come with a credit hour attachment, and because it didn’t happen within the confines of a classroom?

This document will make the case for Credit for Prior Learning, demonstrating the benefits for students, colleges, and employers.



## WHAT IS CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING?

Prior learning is a term educators use to describe learning that a student acquires outside of a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been attained through work experience, professional development courses, military training or experience, independent study, noncredit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars, many of which are offered on-line, such as massive open online courses, or MOOCs (many offered in partnership with institutions such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford).

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is the process by which an individual's experiential and other extra-institutional learning is assessed and evaluated for the purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.

There are four generally accepted approaches to PLAs:

1. Standardized Exams. These include:
  - a. Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams)
  - b. College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams)
  - c. Excelsior College Exams (UExcel)
  - d. The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams
2. Evaluated Non-College Programs. The National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) conduct evaluations, for a fee, of training that is offered by employers or the military. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate their companies' training. The result of these evaluations is credit recommendations for anyone successfully completing that training.
3. Faculty-developed Exams. Also called "challenge exams," these allow students to earn credit by taking final examinations for courses offered at a given institution.
4. Individualized Assessments. In one method, students prepare a portfolio of their learning from a variety of experiences, including both credit and noncredit learning. Faculty who have been deemed subject matter experts evaluate the student's portfolio to determine a credit award.

**Credit for Prior Learning** (CPL) is a practice used by institutions at or close to the time of a student's admission to award institutional credit for demonstrated competency mastery earned in other settings.

At least some form of credit for prior learning has been in place since after World War I, when veterans first gained the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge through competency-based exams for high school equivalency. By the mid-1970s many institutions had implemented transfer policy and practice for military training, national examinations, and individualized assessments, such as the portfolio, with nationally recognized standards to guide the range of assessment options.

When applied as part of a well-designed degree plan, CPL increases student retention, encourages persistence, shortens time to completion, and translates valuable learning experiences into tangible progress towards education and career goals.

## THE “NEW NORMAL”

Most Americans do not transition from high school to college and leave four years later with a degree. The new reality looks dramatically different. Today, students over the age of 25 are the new norm; at last count, nontraditional students accounted for nearly more than 40 percent of all US undergraduate enrollments.<sup>1</sup> Some start college but never finish; others simply can't financially afford to even begin, or aren't willing to go into debt to do so. Still others join the military, or make alternative choices to formal education. Years later, these working learners may have a tremendous amount of experience (and some level of debt), but no degree to document what they know to potential employers.

The lack of flexibility in higher education results in adult learners having to spend longer than ever in pursuit of postsecondary credentials. Extra time means more cost incurred, because when it comes to higher education in its current form, time truly is money.

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## THE COMPLETION CHALLENGE

- One in five Americans of working age has some college credits but no degree.<sup>2</sup>
  - Only 15 percent of those who start at a community college complete their degree within three years, and only 57 percent of those who start at a four-year college finish within six years.<sup>3</sup>
  - Seventy-five percent of today's students (mostly adult learners) are juggling some combination of family commitment, job, and education, while commuting to campus.<sup>4</sup>
  - Less than one quarter of part-time students ever graduate.<sup>5</sup>
  - When students spend longer occupying rationed seats in higher education institutions, fewer new students are served, and the average public cost per graduate increases.
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## HOW COMPLETION IMPACTS EMPLOYMENT AND THE ECONOMY

- The 2009 unemployment rate of high school graduates 25 and older was 9.7 percent, compared with 4.6 percent for college graduates.<sup>6</sup>
- By 2020, approximately 65 percent of jobs will require some college education or a degree, increasing the number of jobs requiring post-secondary education by 14.4 million.<sup>7</sup>



*By 2020, our economy will have jobs for nearly 165 million jobs—65% of which will require post-secondary training. However, at our current production rate of graduates, the United States will fall short by 5 million workers with the necessary education and training to meet the skill profiles of the jobs likely to be created.*

1 National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2011 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).  
2 Lumina Foundation for Education and Gallup, America's Call for Higher Education Redesign: The 2012 Lumina Foundation Study of the American Public's Opinion on Higher Education (Indianapolis, IN and Washington, D.C.: February 5, 2013).  
3 National Center for Education Statistics. Briefing on the Condition of Education: 2011. (U.S. Department of Education, May 26, 2011).  
4 Complete College America. Time is the Enemy: The Completion Shortfall, 2011 National Report. (September 2011).  
5 Complete College America. Time is the Enemy: The Completion Shortfall, 2011 National Report. (September 2011).  
6 National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics, 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).  
7 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Jeff Strohl. Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020. (www.georgetown.edu, June 2013).

## VETERANS FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

Military veterans often have more skills than the general population but are less likely to earn a college degree and more likely to be unemployed. Often either holding only a high school diploma (or equivalent) and little or no college, veterans are very likely to be skilled in a specific area, with little formal education to show for it. They, perhaps more than other demographics, would benefit from Prior Learning Assessments. Here's what we know about veterans:

- Unemployment rates for veterans have increased from the beginning of the 2007 recession through 2010. During that period, the unemployment rate of veterans rose from 3.8 percent to 8.7 percent.
- The 2013 unemployment rate of veterans 25 and older with a high school diploma was 6.4 percent (6.7% from the Gulf War Era), compared with 6 percent of civilian high school graduates.<sup>8</sup>

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## THE ONE-SIZE-FITS- ALL MODEL DOESN'T FIT TODAY'S STUDENT

The concept of a four-year degree path is based on a previously realistic model of a student spending four years at a single institution. Today's students pause, slow down or alter their degree path for any number of reasons. To assume that students will remain in one place for four years does not lend itself to a 21st-century reality, in which people are more digital, more mobile and are generally working harder and longer hours for less money. Relocation is often a financial necessity, or required to keep a family together (particularly for military families), meaning that a credit system built on the one-campus model leaves many students struggling. Here's what we know about student transfers today:

- Transfer from two-year institutions or across four-year institutions generally has a negative effect on time-to-degree, often through loss of credits that aren't accepted by a receiving institution.
- Two-thirds of students attend more than two institutions to complete their degree.<sup>9</sup>
- Credit transfer between institutions is frequently for students under the stress of a recent move or life change. The lack of a coherent and navigable transfer process increases the cost and time needed to earn a degree, while diminishing likelihood of completion.

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## WHAT MAKES CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING (CPL) A VIABLE SOLUTION?

Awarding institutional credit for prior learning has the potential to accelerate degree completion for students, at a lower cost by providing increased access and flexibility for students who most need it. The increased use of CPL will enable institutions to meet current educational demands, recognizing the rise of the "nontraditional" student and the importance of their role in fueling the economy. Employers will benefit by having a workforce with an educational pathway grounded in real experience, making for better prepared and more productive employees. Here is the supporting evidence:

### For students

- **Motivation to Persist.** Adult students who received Prior Learning Assessments credit were 2.5 times more likely to persist in their education and complete their degrees than students who received no credit for prior learning. More than half of PLA participants earned a degree within seven years, compared to 21 percent of non-PLA students.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Jeff Strohl. Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020. (www.georgetown.edu, June 2013).

9 Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., et al. Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion Signature Report No. 7. (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, July 2014).

10 Klein-Collins, R. Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes. (The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, 2010).

- **Accelerated Pathways:** The acceptance of CPL offers an accelerated path to degrees that are 21st-century relevant, and grounded in real experience, for adult learners. This model offers a proven pathway to raise productivity in higher education and, to enable millions of students, who have stopped short of a degree, to complete their education.
- **Flexibility.** The acceptance of CPL can open up a world of opportunity to students, breaking down traditional barriers to information, and helping them take advantage of free educational resources such as massive open online courses (MOOCs); competency-based degree programs; badging, and other learning opportunities now available in this new world of online and blended learning that is rapidly transforming higher education.



*87% of Americans think that students should be able to receive college credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside of the classroom. Three-quarters of Americans (75%) indicate that they would be more likely to enroll in a higher education program if they could be evaluated and receive credit for what they already know.<sup>11</sup>*

### For Institutions

- **Meeting Demand:** Nontraditional students account for nearly 40 percent of all US undergraduate enrollments. By instituting CPL, institutions are able to meet educational demands of this increasing student population.
- **Accelerating Degree Attainment:** State legislatures have realized the efficacy of this model and have become involved with the implementation of applying CPL, thanks in part to advocacy by organizations such as the Lumina Foundation and Complete College America. The Obama Administration has also helped to encourage PLAs, most notably through a \$2 billion Labor Department grant package aimed at job training for displaced workers.

### For Employers

- **Employability.** Currently, the nation faces the challenge of having a skills and training gap that contributes to lower employment rates. Applying CPL allows colleges and universities to produce more employable graduates with skills that are in demand by today's workforce.
- **Meeting Unfulfilled Workforce Demands.** Our current education and workforce training system will fail to produce those skilled workers, falling short by 3 million associate or bachelor's degrees, and almost 5 million post-secondary credentials. All of this means that important jobs will go unfilled because employers can't find workers with the right skills to fill them. CPL has the potential to produce more graduates.<sup>12</sup>
- **Cost-Effectiveness.** Collectively, the United States spends approximately \$772 billion annually on post-secondary-level education and training, and the bulk of this spending supports education and training occurring outside of formal education institutions.<sup>13</sup> Because Prior Learning Assessments decrease time to graduation, fewer costs are incurred for students. CAEL estimates that students who hold PLA credits can save from \$1,605-\$6,000 over the course of their schooling, depending on the type of institution they attend and how much credit they have earned.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Lumina Foundation for Education and Gallup, America's Call for Higher Education Redesign: The 2012 Lumina Foundation Study of the American Public's Opinion on Higher Education. (Indianapolis, IN and Washington, D.C.: February 5, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Jeff Strohl. Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020. ([www.georgetown.edu](http://www.georgetown.edu), June 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. Help wanted: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2018. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, June 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Klein-Collins, R. Underserved Students Who Earn Credit Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree. Research Brief (The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, April 2011).

## WHAT CAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS DO TO ADVANCE CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING?

1. Scan for current CPL practice.
2. Bring skeptics and champions together.
3. Know your learner populations.
4. Identify sources of learning.
5. Start with achievable goals.
6. Create comprehensive, accessible policies.
7. Build CPL awareness and expertise.
8. Connect and integrate programs and services.

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### APPRENTICESHIP + COLLEGE = BRIGHTER FUTURE

*“The money I saved on those credits totaled well over \$2500, not to mention the money saved in travel, books, and related expenses... [The combined transfer and credits from my five year plumbing and pipe fitting apprenticeship made returning to college] much less intimidating. [And once classes started I] got into the groove, really buckled down and enjoyed it... I think attending college and getting a degree is one of the best things that you can do. It opens up your mind.”*

— Bette F.

46-year-old plumber in New Jersey

Received 25 credits towards her degree for her apprenticeship training

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### VETERAN PURSUES COLLEGE DEGREE TO HELP OTHER VETERANS

*“Once I knew that I was getting credits for my military experience, my confidence level escalated. I knew that I could do this, I felt like people really cared about me and that my experiences as a young Marine and a proud veteran meant more than just a DD214 [certificate of discharge from active duty]... It’s taken me 20 years to make this big step. It’s a whole new chapter in my life and it’s something that I will never regret. It’s something that will make me a better and more successful individual. I’m really looking forward to the day I walk down that aisle and get my diploma from my president.”*

— Chris Hammann

42-year-old Marine Corp veteran

Obtained 26 semester hours of credit for his military work



Learn more about credit for prior learning at  
[www.pearsonhighered.com/credit-for-prior-learning](http://www.pearsonhighered.com/credit-for-prior-learning)  
& [www.acenet.edu/CEAI](http://www.acenet.edu/CEAI)

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