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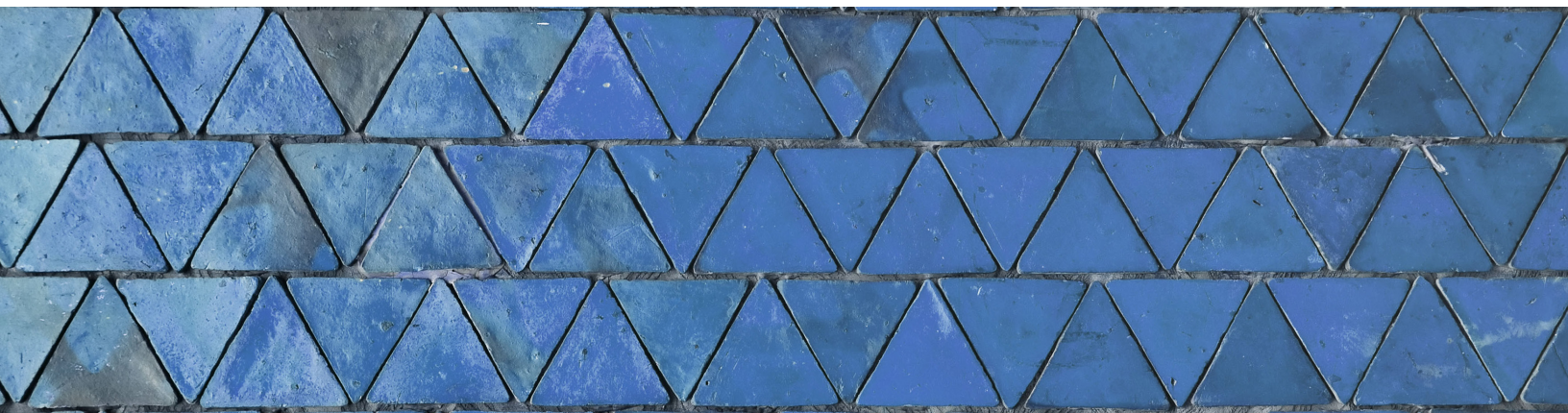Center for Policy Research and Strategy™

Credit for Prior Learning

Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability

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with foreword by Martha J. Kanter

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Foreword

Although U.S. colleges and universities have entered the second decade of the twenty-first century, too many outmoded twentieth-century practices still abound in our institutions, especially when it comes to what students know and are able to do when they first enroll. A research university president has said that at his institution, first-time freshmen can only receive credit for two courses for which they have previously earned top Advanced Placement scores or comparable documentation. When asked why this was so, he gave a plausible answer: "We firmly believe that students need the entire four years of coursework and the residential experience we offer to engage, learn, mature, and deepen their relationships with others before they are ready to graduate."

He makes a good argument, but even so, why should students repeat courses in which they have already succeeded? If traditional and post-traditional students can demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and skills readily expected of them in the freshmen or sophomore year, why not offer them the opportunity for greater challenge? The chance to accelerate? The prospect of entering their major? Why hold them back?

Today, these questions are harder to answer because we are at a turning point in our history, a time when we need more students to complete their undergraduate and graduate programs of study in greater numbers than ever before. Numerous studies have told us that our nation needs more highly educated graduates who are far better prepared than they are right now for their first job or for advancement in their current or next career.

These questions also point to the heart of whether or not higher education leaders will have the interest and flexibility to rethink their revenue streams and take greater advantage of upper-division and graduate offerings in the years ahead. They could leverage more robust partnerships with high schools and community colleges, enabling students to move forward academically, and at the same time, they could reduce the total cost of higher education without compromising academic quality. Frankly, America's social, economic, and civic prosperity is at stake, and we don't have the luxury of time to hold students back or waste their time or ours.
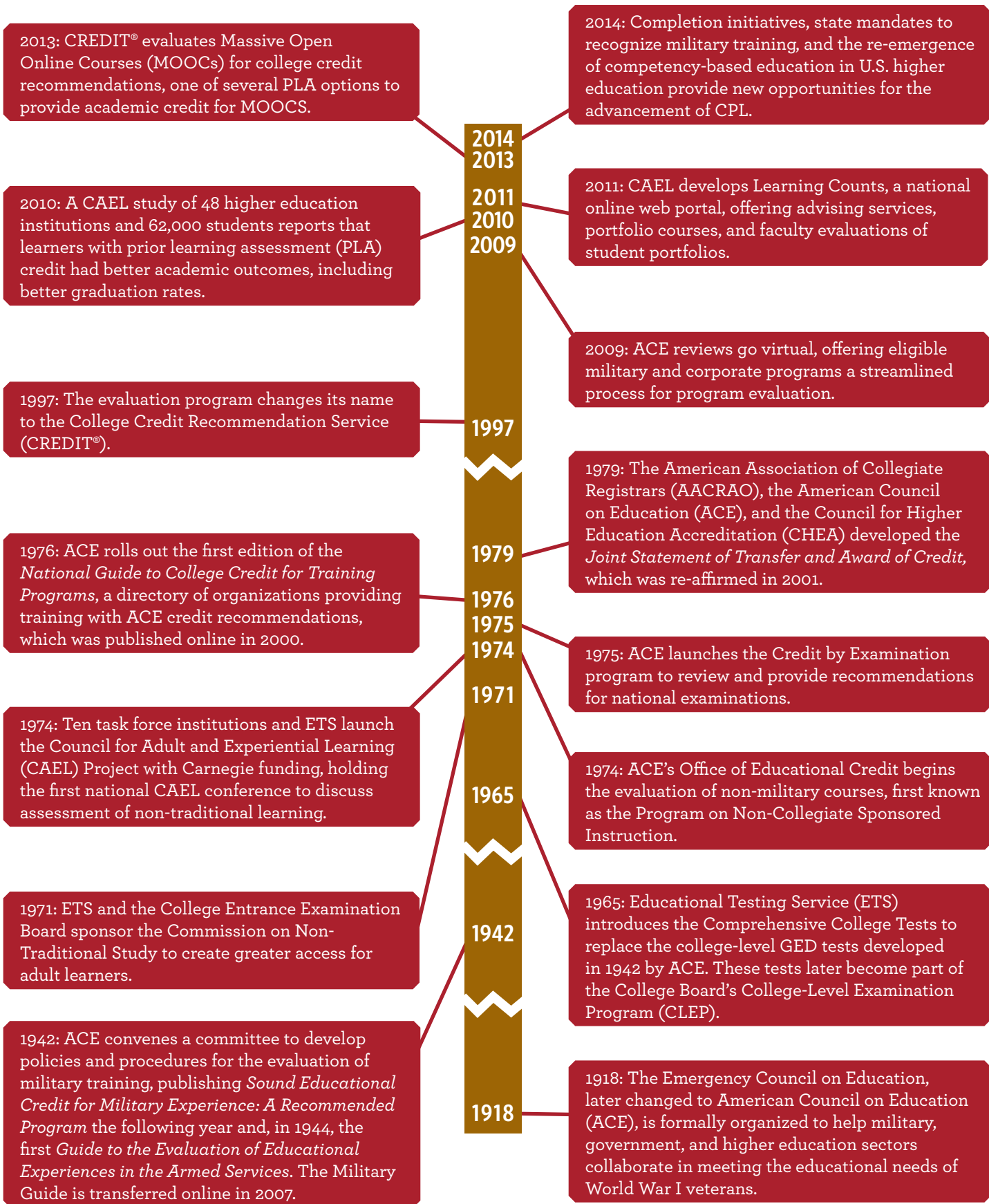
To advance students beyond the courses for which they already have met the requirements challenges the longstanding academic and business models of higher education. Most of us would like to think it's not about the money, but we also know that maintaining the status quo may be more powerful than rethinking and implementing the infrastructure to advance students' academic standing through credit for prior learning. Could this be the case? Maybe so. But hopefully not!

Credit for Prior Learning: Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability introduces higher education leaders to the exciting opportunity to deploy "credit for prior learning" as part of redesigning our colleges and universities for the twenty-first century. The co-authors—Lakin, Nellum, Seymour, and Crandall—give us the theory, strategy, and process for faculty and administrators to undertake some bold, new initiatives for envisioning and creating new pathways for students to progress more quickly through their undergraduate arts, sciences, and occupational programs that take advantage of what they have already learned. As a result, campuses have the opportunity to increase persistence to degree and improve college affordability.

Today, our students are bringing the most diverse set of histories, experiences, and cultures to our classrooms than ever before. We have the opportunity before us to harness their assets and capabilities so they can perform to their highest levels of academic success in the years ahead. A collaborative academic culture is an essential ingredient for realizing the potential of credit for prior learning on our campuses—what better time than now to take up this challenge?

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Credit for Prior Learning Timeline

2013: CREDIT® evaluates Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for college credit recommendations, one of several PLA options to provide academic credit for MOOCS.

2014: Completion initiatives, state mandates to recognize military training, and the re-emergence of competency-based education in U.S. higher education provide new opportunities for the advancement of CPL.

2010: A CAEL study of 48 higher education institutions and 62,000 students reports that learners with prior learning assessment (PLA) credit had better academic outcomes, including better graduation rates.

2011: CAEL develops Learning Counts, a national online web portal, offering advising services, portfolio courses, and faculty evaluations of student portfolios.

2009: ACE reviews go virtual, offering eligible military and corporate programs a streamlined process for program evaluation.

1997: The evaluation program changes its name to the College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT®).

1979: The American Association of Collegiate Registrars (AACRAO), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) developed the *Joint Statement of Transfer and Award of Credit,* which was re-affirmed in 2001.

1976: ACE rolls out the first edition of the *National Guide to College Credit for Training Programs*, a directory of organizations providing training with ACE credit recommendations, which was published online in 2000.

1975: ACE launches the Credit by Examination program to review and provide recommendations for national examinations.

1974: Ten task force institutions and ETS launch the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Project with Carnegie funding, holding the first national CAEL conference to discuss assessment of non-traditional learning.

1974: ACE's Office of Educational Credit begins the evaluation of non-military courses, first known as the Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction.

1971: ETS and the College Entrance Examination Board sponsor the Commission on Non-Traditional Study to create greater access for adult learners.

1965: Educational Testing Service (ETS) introduces the Comprehensive College Tests to replace the college-level GED tests developed in 1942 by ACE. These tests later become part of the College Board's College-Level Examination Program (CLEP).

1942: ACE convenes a committee to develop policies and procedures for the evaluation of military training, publishing *Sound Educational Credit for Military Experience: A Recommended Program* the following year and, in 1944, the first *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services.* The Military Guide is transferred online in 2007.

1918: The Emergency Council on Education, later changed to American Council on Education (ACE), is formally organized to help military, government, and higher education sectors collaborate in meeting the educational needs of World War I veterans.

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Introduction

Credit for prior learning, also known as prior learning assessment, has become a closely reviewed topic, more salient in current conversations on postsecondary attainment than ever before. With the national and state focus on postsecondary access, affordability, and acceleration to attainment, it is the attention to the field as one strategy for drawing in adult students, rather than the field itself, that is newfound.

At least some form of credit for prior learning, or CPL, has been in place in United States higher education since World War I, when the higher education community was focused on finding options for returning veterans to demonstrate skills and knowledge in order to transition into the civilian workforce. Those early efforts led to the development of the GED® test, College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), and other methods for verifying college-level equivalencies. The American Council on Education (ACE) College Credit Recommendation Service, with a faculty-driven review, provided veterans after World War II with recognized third-party validation of their formal training.

By the mid-1970s, many institutions put into place individualized assessments, specifically the portfolio, applying the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) standards for prior learning assessment. At the same time, colleges and universities began to standardize the acceptance of CLEP exams to meet general education requirements, while ACE broadened CPL options through the expansion of its 30-year practice to encompass the evaluation of military occupations as well as corporate training.

Fast forward to the current decade and we see numerous state, regional, and national initiatives to bring adults back into education to complete a postsecondary credential. Promising research shows some evidence of prior learning assessment boosting enrollment, persistence, and attainment. A recent Lumina Gallup Poll (2012) reflects growing interest among the general public in returning to postsecondary education if more institutions granted credit for what individuals already know.

While there is an uptick in public support and funded initiatives, there is also a continued lack of CPL awareness and application across a majority of higher education institutions, underscored in ACE's 2013 brief, *Credit for Prior Learning: From the Student, Campus, and Industry Perspectives*. Similarly, in a 2012 survey (NCES), only 27 percent of institutions reported that they grant academic credit to students for what they have learned through prior learning assessment, such as credit by exam, evaluation of military training and industry licenses, and portfolio demonstration. Reports from state initiatives highlight the barriers that often hinder widespread implementation, with more work to be done on the policy side to alleviate financial barriers for both students and institutions.

This research report, *Credit for Prior Learning: Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability*, identifies and addresses some of the cultural barriers and successful strategies to viewing CPL as central to institutional mission and an essential component in the continuum of teaching, learning, and assessment. Interviews with leaders and practitioners from a diverse group of seven institutions located across the United States offer insights into common challenges, successful strategies, and innovative CPL practices. The study was guided by three primary questions:

1. What types of infrastructure contribute to and sustain innovative[1] institutional practices?

2. How do institutions share information with and support students?

3. In what ways do institutions encourage faculty engagement?

We welcome the opportunity to share this report to spark more discussion on advancing greater awareness, acceptance, and application of credit for prior learning options.

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1   Innovation includes both the creation and implementation of ideas that are novel and useful.

Acknowledgments

Background

Post-traditional students, or those who delay entry into postsecondary education past the completion of high school or high school equivalency, can benefit from attending institutions that offer a wide range of CPL options. Participating in postsecondary education at higher rates than ever before (Soares 2013), these students "encompass many life stages and identities" (p. 2) and often bring learning experiences from other settings (see **Figure 1**). Their presence on college and university campuses is likely to continue to grow, given our changing demographics and shift to a knowledge-based economy (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013). As the educational demands of the labor market shift, colleges and universities need to be prepared to accommodate a more diverse student population. Credits earned through college-level knowledge and skills gained through previously completed coursework, exams, or work experience can facilitate student persistence and degree completion

and also result in saving students time and money (Day 2013; Ryu 2013).

CPL Language and Definitions

ACE defines CPL as *academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as portfolios.* Although this is a commonly accepted definition, institutions use different terminology to refer to the practice of validating learning that has taken place outside of a postsecondary institution. Prior learning and prior learning assessment are often used interchangeably with credit for prior learning and will be the terms used throughout this research report as equivalents to CPL.

Prior learning assessment methods fall under four generally accepted approaches: standardized

Figure 1: Percentage of Post-traditional Undergraduates from 2004 to 2012
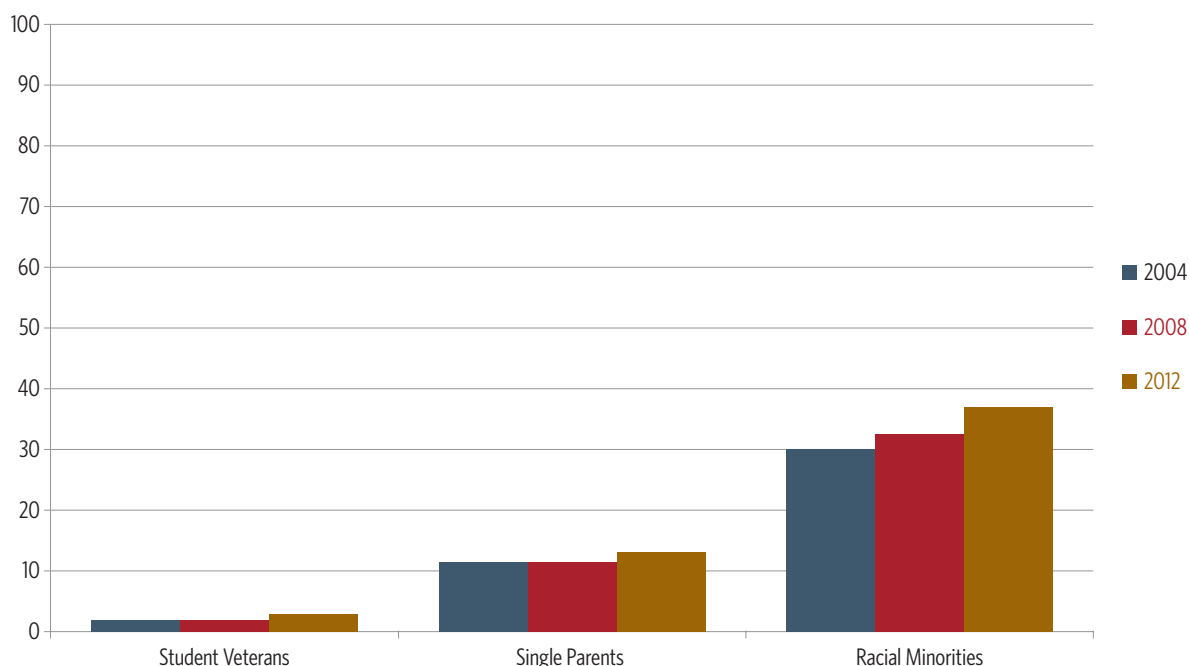
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04, 2007–08, 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Studies (NPSAS: 05, NPSAS: 08, and NPSAS: 12)

exams, third-party evaluations, individualized assessments, and institution-led exams or assessments. See **Figure 2** for a representation of methods used by the institutions participating in this research study.

State legislatures and higher education accreditors and boards often leave colleges and universities the task of establishing their own specific CPL policies (Sherman, Klein-Collins, and Palmer 2012). This can contribute to differences across institutions in methods they accept and their application of credit for prior learning. Credits awarded for prior learning are most often applied toward prerequisites, general education, electives, and major requirements. Seldom, if ever, can credit for prior learning fulfill residency requirements. Institutions limit the number of prior learning credits that can be applied to a certificate or degree. For accredited colleges and universities, this percentage is typically predetermined by a regional accrediting body or state system.

Figure 2: Prior Learning Assessment Methods

<u>**METHODS FOR EARNING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING**</u>

Standardized exams are established subject area proficiency tests.

Examples include Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Test (DSST), Excelsior College Exams, International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, New York University School of Professional Studies Foreign Language Proficiency Exams, and the Thomas Edison State College (NJ) Examination Program (TECEP).

Third-party evaluation providers are widely recognized for evaluations of employer- and military-based training sessions and industry certifications. Evaluations result in credit recommendations for individuals who successfully complete the training or certification. Institutions decide whether or not to award such credit.

Examples include ACE College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT®) and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). Some institutions and consortia provide their own third-party or "locally based" evaluations of employers and other organizations.

Individualized assessments are demonstrations of college-level learning obtained from work or other experiential learning such as volunteer service.

Examples include portfolios, demonstrations, oral interviews, or a combination of methods.

Institution-led exams or assessments, also called Challenge Exams, are typically created by faculty and allow students to earn course credit for which they are able to demonstrate knowledge.

What the Research Tells Us

Due in part to the large number of post-traditional students in higher education and the propensity of these students to bring learning experiences from various sources, many colleges and universities offer alternative approaches to validating and credentialing college-level knowledge. Research results are promising, showing that adult students who earn credit for prior learning have better academic outcomes compared with their peers who do not earn such credit (Hayward and Williams 2014; Klein-Collins 2010).

CAEL's 2010 examination of over 62,000 adult student records across 48 colleges and universities found that 56 percent of students 25 and older who earned prior learning assessment (PLA) credit graduated from a degree program compared with 21 percent of their peers without PLA credit. Not surprisingly, students with PLA credit shortened the time required to complete a four-year or two-year degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. Findings cut across ethnicity, gender, age, and socio-economic status (Klein-Collins 2010). Similarly, early research found that higher retention and completion rates for adults in Central Michigan University's Individualized Degree Program could be attributed to the number of credit hours transferred in or awarded through experiential learning (Billingham and Travaglini 1981).
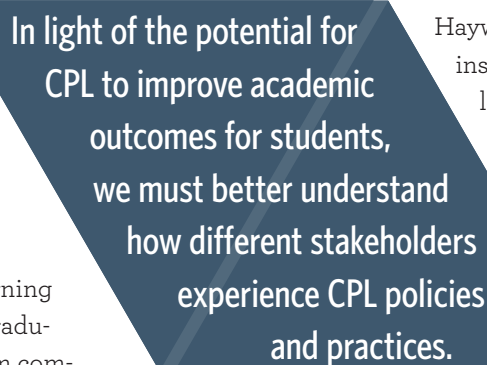
CPL may be particularly relevant for two-year colleges whose student bodies tend to enter with college-level competencies acquired through work experience (Brigham and Klein-Collins 2010). A 2014 *50 Second Survey* from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) asking institutions to identify their current credit for prior learning practices found two-year, lower-division-only institutions more likely to award CPL credit than other institutional types, with CLEP the top type of CPL credit awarded by all types of institutions. According to one study, adult students with PLA credit at two-year institutions were "four times more likely to complete degrees than non-PLA students," while their counterparts at "4-year institutions were twice as likely to earn degrees" (p. 38) compared with their non-PLA peers (Klein-Collins 2010).

> In light of the potential for CPL to improve academic outcomes for students, we must better understand how different stakeholders experience CPL policies and practices.

Hayward and Williams (2014) extend institutional-level research on prior learning by examining graduation rates for adults across four two-year institutions disaggregated by prior learning assessment type. Of the three assessments under investigation—ACE credit recommendations, CLEP, and portfolios—graduation rates were higher for students who earned credit through CLEP or a combination of CPL methods. Other research studies on successful CLEP test-takers find those students maintaining significantly higher GPA than non-CLEP test-taking students (Berry 2013). Although Hayward and Williams' study of four community colleges suggests standardized tests facilitate degree completion more than other forms of CPL, collectively emerging research suggests the benefits of diverse CPL options for diverse groups of students—and the need for further study on outcomes by CPL methods.

In light of the potential for CPL to improve academic outcomes for students, we must better understand how different stakeholders experience CPL policies and practices. In a recent survey of campus administrators, students,[2] and employers, Ryu (2013) found that over 90 percent of the

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2   Student respondents in Ryu (2013) were ACE transcript users for (corporate) CREDIT and responded only on the use of ACE transcripts, not on other options or in general.

414 participating institutions award some form of credit for prior learning and 82 percent of student respondents were successful in their attempt to earn such credit. Saving money and decreasing time to degree were the primary motivations behind seeking credit for prior learning for almost half of the 1,348 student respondents. Despite the apparent success of many students in applying CPL, prior learning acceptance rates, campus policies and practices, and types of earned credits varied greatly across campuses and assessment methods (p.2). Along with that success, students often expressed frustration with the lack of clear information on process, one area that institutions must address in order for CPL to not only gain momentum, but also to make it a well-understood and deeply ingrained practice on campuses and within industry (Ryu 2013). AACRAO's 2014 study underscores this need with its findings regarding the wide range and complexity of CPL practices, coupled with the lack of financial support and institutional tracking.

About This Study

The purpose of this study was to understand institutional perspectives on comprehensive credit for prior learning policy and practice. Through interviews with staff, administrators, and faculty on seven campuses, we wanted to broaden the field's knowledge base on how institutions assess and award academic credit, and to fill in some of the gaps in areas with little previous research. The interviews would illuminate the paths institutions take toward establishing and sustaining comprehensive policy and implementation. To fill in the gaps, we identified and answered the following questions about CPL implementation:

1. What types of infrastructure contribute to and sustain innovative institutional practices?
2. How do institutions share information with and support students?
3. In what ways do institutions encourage faculty engagement?

Participating Institutions

To carry out these goals, we sought to identify colleges and universities that offer a variety of views of the CPL landscape. The research team conducted an environmental scan and reflected on ACE's long-standing experience with credit for prior learning, including two years of focus groups and field experiences with a variety of colleges and universities to develop a CPL implementation matrix (see **Table 1**). We used those experiences to help us identify, create, and describe stages along a spectrum of CPL implementation areas, including student outreach and support, faculty engagement, and campus infrastructure. Using the matrix helped us to identify institutions at different points along the spectrum.[3]

We invited 10 colleges and universities to participate and held screening calls to determine where on the implementation spectrum each of the key activities the institutions were situated. Each institution was asked to identify a liaison who could serve as a conduit for information and invite other administrators and faculty with knowledge of CPL practices and policies to participate in the screening process. We ultimately selected seven institutions that met the criteria for the study and developed institutional profiles for each (**Table 2**). The seven participating institutions included the American Public University System, Bellevue University (NE), Fayetteville Technical Community College (NC), Graceland University (IA), Ivy Tech Community College (IN), State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College, and the University of Memphis (TN).

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3   We used the matrix as an analytic tool, but refrain from identifying where on the spectrum we placed the participating institutions.

ACE AND CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Since its founding in 1918, ACE has had a commitment to helping institutions serve nontraditional learners. ACE is a national leader in the evaluation of education and training obtained outside the classroom. With thousands of training courses, reviewed over more than six decades, ACE has been recognized for its focus on student learning outcomes as a cornerstone of its review process. Currently ACE's Center for Education Attainment and Innovation provides the following programs in the service of higher education institutions and the students they serve:

- Since 1945, Military Programs has provided evaluations of military training, and since the 1970s, of occupations, to help students with military backgrounds receive equivalent college credit. In collaboration with the Department of Defense and the service branches, it provides formal verification of learning experiences that warrant academic credit, increasing access to postsecondary education and offering avenues to civilian careers and professional credentials.

- Beginning in 1974, ACE CREDIT® has helped adults gain academic credit for formal courses and examinations taken outside of traditional degree programs, including Fortune 500 companies, professional and volunteer associations, schools, training suppliers, labor unions, and government agencies. Through the ACE review process, employers and training providers can validate the quality of their programs and support employees and other learners by helping them translate their learning experiences into academic credit.

- College and University Partnerships (CUP) collaborates with higher education institutions, employers, and other organizations and stakeholders to boost adult learners' postsecondary attainment by creating pathways to completion. Through webinars, technical services, and special initiatives, CUP advances greater awareness, acceptance, and application of effective credit for prior learning policy and practice.

- Veterans' Programs works with institutions to build effective programs for student veterans. In partnerships with other organizations, Veterans' Programs leads initiatives to help student veterans succeed in educational pursuits and transition to meaningful careers that take advantage of their skills and knowledge.

With its current research and other initiatives on credit for prior learning, alternative credentialing, and competency-based learning, ACE is committed to helping institutions and other organizations chart a course to expand opportunities for postsecondary attainment.

Table 1: CPL Implementation Matrix

INSTITUTIONAL CPL STAGES		New/Emerging Stage	Developing Stage	Effective Practice Stage
		Has general understanding and information on prior learning, with demonstrated institutional interest.	Acknowledges the role of prior learning in postsecondary pathways. Begins to develop standard policies and procedures.	Has broad and deep understanding of credit for prior learning policies and uses that knowledge to integrate, and sustain systematic and accessible CPL practices.
DEFINITIONS AND ACTIVITIES	Faculty engagement and development	Forms advisory group to study and craft policy and practice; goes to conferences to learn more; invites experts to provide overviews.	Creates venues for information sharing across institutional constituencies and committees; involves faculty groups in developing and vetting policies/practices, such as crosswalks, mapping, and articulations.	Provides professional preparation for faculty and staff, including participation in conferences, research, and writing; encourages faculty to include CPL activities in annual reviews, and promotion/tenure evaluations; implements incentives and areas of recognition.
	Student outreach and support	Academic advisors and program coordinators help direct students to current CPL options.	Shares some information on website and uses other venues to communicate with students, such as orientation and advising.	Informs students of CPL options prior to admission as well as when they are admitted; provides expert advising about prior learning assessment; and uses all types of communication tools to share information with students (social media, website, orientation, and more), from outreach with potential students to graduation.
	Infrastructure, policies, and processes	Scans the landscape for current and informal institutional CPL practices; seeks policy and practice models among peer institutions.	Expands current policy and practice; puts people and structures into place to manage programs; begins to coordinate CPL-related programs and services across administrative, student service, and academic spheres.	Selects appropriate CPL tools that match institutional context and curriculum and recognize diversity of learners and their experiences; promotes active use of CPL in all degree areas, including major requirements and general education; well-established policies and practices promote effective CPL program and administrative management. Embeds CPL within other programs, such as competency-based learning.

Table 2. Characteristics of Participating Institutions

Institution	Program Focus	Control	For-profit?	Online?	Region
American Public University System	Comprehensive	Private	Yes	Yes	HLC
Bellevue University (NE)	Four-year	Private	No	No	HLC
Fayetteville Technical Community College (NC)	Two-year	Public	No	No	SACS
Graceland University (IA)	Master's	Private	No	No	NCA
Ivy Tech Community College (IN)	Two-year	Public	No	No	NCA
SUNY Empire State	Master's	Public	No	No	MSACS
University of Memphis (TN)	Four-year	Public	No	No	SACS

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2012-2013

Interview Participants

With the assistance of campus liaisons, the research team conducted phone interviews with three to seven staff, administrators, and faculty members at each of the seven institutions for a total of 37 interviews, each lasting an average of 60 minutes (see **Appendix** for the study's interview questions). The role of administrators interviewed ranged in position from senior leadership (e.g., vice president of enrollment management) to department chairs, and registrars to program directors and managers. Interviewees shared insights about the nature of CPL initiatives at the institution and the ways in which students can apply credits earned for prior learning. We also asked specific questions about whether and how the institution makes students aware of CPL opportunities, supports students who might benefit from earning credit for prior learning, and encourages faculty to engage in the process of assessing students' prior learning. Finally, participants discussed the status of infrastructure to sustain long-term CPL implementation.

Organization of Research Report

The remaining sections of this research report are organized primarily around the research questions that guided the study:

1. What types of infrastructure contribute to and sustain innovative institutional practices?
2. How do institutions share information with and support students?
3. In what ways do institutions encourage faculty engagement?

In each section we share what we learned about institutional infrastructure, student outreach and support, and faculty engagement; we first describe challenges institutions faced and then strategies used across the institutions to address these challenges. At the end of each section a spotlight of an innovative practice is used to showcase the efforts of one of the participating institutions. We believe these "policies in practice" can aid other institutions as they grapple with similar challenges in their journey to advance along the CPL implementation matrix.

A fourth set of findings about organizational culture emerged as the staff, administrators, and faculty we interviewed highlighted the unique importance of institutional culture and context for understanding their ability to implement and sustain CPL practice and policy. We share these findings briefly before unpacking what we found regarding the research questions.

Lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings for institutions at various stages of the CPL process and make specific recommendations for a shared CPL lexicon, organizational culture, elements of campus infrastructure, student outreach and support, and faculty engagement.

What We Learned

Organizational Culture

For many institutions, credit for prior learning initiatives represent a significant departure in terms of how institutions have historically awarded credit. Embracing CPL means first acknowledging that college-level learning can occur outside the traditional classroom setting. Such a cultural shift can challenge, and ultimately alter, the way in which colleges and universities engage in assessing and awarding students credit for their learning. Organizational culture, defined as shared values, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, and norms, plays an important role in the provision of credit for prior learning activities, a reality borne out in our study.

> Embracing CPL means first acknowledging that college-level learning can occur outside the traditional classroom setting.

Across the seven institutions, we found that the presence of institutional practice and policy that guide credit for prior learning activities are necessary, though not alone sufficient, conditions that enable administrators and faculty to implement and sustain such initiatives. Participants consistently highlighted the relevance of cultural influences that shaped the context in which credit for prior learning initiatives exist at their institutions. Efforts to provide credit for prior learning are more likely to be successful if such practices and policies are congruent with institutional mission and the strategic goals of those in leadership positions, two basic components of organizational culture. Specifically, participants often tied mission and leadership to their ability to establish and build necessary infrastructure, outreach, and support for students who might benefit by earning credit for prior learning, and engage faculty members in the process of assessing prior learning.

Infrastructure

In this study, we define infrastructure as organizational structures, dedicated resources, and services required for the development, implementation, and sustainable operation of credit for prior learning efforts. These interconnected elements provide a framework that supports the effective and efficient functioning of CPL initiatives. An institution is more likely to build a strong infrastructure if, as previously mentioned, it views credit for prior learning as integral to an institution's mission; identifies it in its strategic goals; and supports it through transparent policies and procedures, organizational structures, robust leadership, and continued data analysis on enrollment, persistence, and completion. CPL programs are vulnerable when processes are segmented, services are fragmented, and leadership is lacking. Our findings also indicate that dedicated resources such as staffing and financial support contribute to fostering and sustaining credit for prior learning from outreach to graduation.

Challenges Institutions Faced

To varying degrees, all institutions faced a disconnect between institutional policy and practice, along with challenges in collecting data and providing sufficient financial and human capital.

Ill-defined institutional mission, policies, and procedures. Separate processes or lack of clear and recognized policies and procedures can create ambiguity about an institution's commitment to CPL. When asked about the sustainability of CPL at an institution, one CPL coordinator was unsure of the institution's commitment: "I *think* the institution recognizes the value and importance [of CPL] . . . I hope we can move forward with these discussions and have a better plan (emphasis added)." Another staff member reinforced this uncertainty by simply expressing, "I'm not sure how we're going to [sustain CPL over time]."

Inadequate data collection. Five of the institutions recognized that they should increase tracking and

dissemination of outcomes for persistence by CPL method. This was evident in the divergent range of responses received from the majority of the institutions on their capacity to collect and analyze data. When asked about evidence, responses ranged from "I don't know" or "I don't think so," to "not greatly" or "not in a formal way," to "I'm positive it exists" or "we keep our data very well here." Only one institution indicated that it does track data on persistence related to the use of CPL. Another institution suggested that although it has the capability to do so, it does not track students' use of CPL primarily because "nobody thought that is important enough" or "[CPL] is just not something we award a lot of credit for."

Weak leadership. Another concern in sustaining CPL is having leadership in place capable of driving change. One senior administrator, whose institution is in the process of strategizing how best to implement CPL, touched on the importance of having leaders who are advocates of credit for prior learning. After recommendations are made, "what's going to be required here is better and consistent designation of . . . leadership around this issue if it is to be sustained. We have [dedicated staff] . . . but given where they fall within the structure and the other responsibilities they may have, they probably are not going to be super effective in driving improvement and change." Participants recognized that in addition to having dedicated personnel who engage with CPL procedures and processes, institutions need to do more in terms of identifying who the institutional or regional leaders are if CPL is to take on a greater role for students. Leaders, several participants noted, need vision and the ability to procure the resources to advance and sustain CPL.

Insufficient financial support. Although few participants spoke explicitly of the need for financial capital to invest in CPL, almost all referred to the lack of financial incentives for faculty reviewing portfolios, and several mentioned the need for additional resources. One coordinator shared that in order to build and sustain CPL, the institution needs "increased resources, digital technology, and staffing," all of which require financial support.

While the resources needed to develop and sustain CPL will vary across institutions, finding capital for additional investments could be a challenge.

Successful Strategies Across Institutions

Establish clear institutional policies and procedures

Two institutions that highlighted strategies for developing an infrastructure for CPL used crosswalks and/or consensus-building as transparent, accessible, and consistent tools to facilitate the alignment of policy and practice.

- **Develop crosswalks.** Two institutions explicitly mentioned crosswalks—charts that map prior coursework or training to their college-level equivalent—as a means of communicating approved course equivalents across the institution and/or system. One senior administrator expressed that the institution relies heavily on crosswalks for two reasons. First, to ensure that "faculty are not spending their time looking at things they've already agreed to in curriculum committees that a certain certification, for instance, matches a certain class. And second, so the student has a consistent experience. We don't [want] a student coming in with a certain kind of experience that is well documented [on one campus] and getting a different answer than a student with the same experience [at another campus]."

- **Invest in a high level of collaboration.** Attention to a collaborative process was one institution's strategy for aligning policy and practice. "We put some effort into the codifying process," one PLA coordinator stressed, "so that everybody should have a vote in the process of awarding credits. After a credit evaluation's initial pass, it continues through a series of stages that involve review by requisite faculty and administrators before landing in the registrar's office and getting posted online." Collaboration at this institution goes beyond the realm of academics and includes marketing departments that "help market [approved

credits] to the local and military newspaper." "We want everyone to understand the process," the PLA coordinator said.

Commit resources and services

Organizational structures in place that streamline and develop the credit for prior learning process are inextricably tied to policies and procedures. Such structures include student service enrollment models, programs for tracking student data, dedicated personnel, and financial support.

- **Consider a one-stop model.** One promising strategy is the one-stop enrollment model whereby students are provided services at one location. One institution structures its information sessions as a "one-stop environment . . . where there are different key departments in the same room, bursar's office, financial aid, testing center, admissions, experiential learning credit, [and] advisors" to facilitate student access to information and enrollment. Another institution is transitioning to a similar one-stop enrollment process that will provide trained "student professionals and resources; there will be no need to go to multiple offices. Trained staff will have access to the student information system." This institution is exploring how to integrate CPL into its current model.

- **Invest in an interactive database.** Although the majority of the institutions mentioned the use of a database generally or for advising or tracking student progress, one noted its use of CollegeSource's Transfer Evaluation System (TES) as a means of tracking course and degree articulation agreements. A course description database of course titles, descriptions, and number of credits, TES is designed to automate and streamline analysis of transfer courses and transcripts, the administration and maintenance of course equivalencies, and communication of course data among staff, faculty, and other users.

- **Dedicated personnel.** All institutions have faculty and staff responsible for handling certain components of CPL, but only three of the institutions seem to have individuals—prior learning specialists, academic advisors or mentors, or veterans coordinators—who interact directly with students to provide them assistance throughout the CPL process. Two institutions described a mentoring process for students working on portfolios. One of these institutions advocates a model whereby a faculty member "mentor[s] students in [his or her] classes, guiding them along the way, and advises a select group of students on . . . organizing their prior learning assessments." Several interviewees serve in positions dedicated to advancing CPL for service members and veterans and assisting them as they navigate unchartered territory. "We are available to students on a daily basis," one coordinator explained. "We provide continual assistance all the way through, until they finish. We keep a pretty good database, [and] track them if they don't take classes for some time because of their other obligations."

- **Secure external funding.** Findings indicate that when financial constraints limited or prohibited the development or expansion of CPL programs, institutions procured additional funding to advance CPL work through external grants. Three of the seven institutions received multi-year grants either to expand their CPL program across campus; map military training to curriculum credit; or design, implement, and disseminate a framework for student self-assessment and demonstration of college-level learning acquired outside the college classroom. The grants were through a state board of regents, the Department of Education's Funds for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and Lumina Foundation, respectively.

Student Outreach

Student outreach consists of institutions' strategies to identify and reach students who might benefit from earning prior learning credits and providing them with the necessary information about such opportunities. The broad goal of these efforts should be to connect students with consistent, accurate, and timely information. Common outreach challenges included forms of outreach not initiated by the institution and general lack of awareness about CPL among students. Our findings suggest that a robust CPL outreach strategy utilizes technology, initiates community-based efforts, and touches students early and often with information.

Challenges Institutions Faced

All of the institutions had some difficulty identifying and reaching students with relevant informal learning experiences or training who might benefit from earning credit for prior learning. The challenge is twofold: 1) identifying fruitful avenues for potential students and 2) developing touch points for enrolled students to continue sharing information.

Lack of student awareness. Without a doubt, administrators and faculty at all of the institutions expressed frustration regarding potential and current students' lack of awareness of both the existence of CPL and options for earning credit for prior learning. They explained that if students ever even learn about CPL options, information shared "through formal channels" is done inconsistently only after a student enrolls at the institution. One faculty member shared that "when students do learn of it [CPL], it is by accident or they have to get in front of someone like an advisor or testing center person who happens to know something about it."

Word of mouth as primary outreach. Outside of formal outreach initiatives, administrators believed that the typical marketing for CPL was shared through students' personal email accounts. Likewise, several faculty members indicated that "word of mouth" is crucial for student awareness about opportunities to earn credit for prior learning. One faculty member explained that his institution relied on students' personal accounts as a method for outreach because they "never had a big advertising budget." He and others emphasized that lack of

budget, or working at an institution where prior learning experience is not central to the mission, results in dependence on passive forms of student outreach (i.e., word of mouth) to inform potential and current students about CPL opportunities.

Successful Strategies Across Institutions

Use technology as a tool

Technology can be used as a tool for information dissemination, communication, and to process the awarding and credentialing of academic credits. All seven of the institutions relied heavily on technology to make information about CPL options available to students. The prominence, robustness, and effectiveness of efforts to integrate technological tools (e.g., websites and targeted emails) for outreach varied across the campuses, but many of the study participants believed the attempt was worthwhile given the potential long-term time savings for advising staff.

- **Improve web presence.** Several institutions pride themselves on having "open and transparent" websites that have contributed to student outreach. Institutions with the most developed websites maintained comprehensive and dynamic pages, some with multimedia, which included information about all of the prior learning opportunities (i.e., portfolio assessment and exams) at the institution. Institutions with a less developed web presence for CPL had multiple websites, typically maintained by offices or centers based on a specific function (e.g., career or testing centers) with varying levels of content and consistency.

- **Target email campaigns.** Another approach used by two of the institutions was to implement targeted email campaigns intended to inform eligible current students about the available options for earning credit for prior learning. Institutions and administrators elsewhere echoed sentiments of "desperately [needing] a diagnostic" to aid in the process

of "identify[ing] people that do [qualify]" early enough.

Pursue community-based outreach

Four institutions pursued community-based outreach as a strategy, stressing the importance of forming partnerships to improve recruitment of CPL-eligible candidates.

- **Nurture strategic partnerships with local businesses.** Outreach teams of university staff or professional recruiters at three of the institutions are tasked with working with local establishments and agencies to identify and share information with employees who might have significant experience and could benefit from CPL opportunities. A senior campus administrator explained that her institution "[recruits] from prisons, the youth opportunity center, and the day-care center. Some of the employees there have a lot of experience and maybe some college credit, so we can help recruit them."

- **Collaborate with local military personnel.** A much more common technique for colleges and universities in the vicinity of a military base is to target service members and veterans who often qualify for college-level credit. With either approach, administrators discussed the need to tailor outreach efforts to adult learners who they believe are acutely focused on reducing time-to-degree, a benefit that earning credits for prior learning can provide.

Initiate early student engagement

Five of the campuses found success structuring and facilitating early opportunities for students to interact with staff and faculty advisors to learn how leveraging previous experiences might minimize the time spent pursuing a postsecondary credential.

- **Structure academic planning and advising.** Several administrators suggested that the key to identifying students to earn credit for prior learning is to "infuse" one-on-one conversations between front-line institutional agents

(e.g., admissions counselors, academic advisors, and program chairs) with knowledge of how to efficiently identify students who are good candidates and eligible students.

- **Augment orientation activities.** Other institutions included details about CPL opportunities during orientation activities to help new students realize they may have the requisite experiences to earn credit. A handful of administrators and faculty, however, questioned whether the orientation setting was appropriate, as students are often overwhelmed with information and might need one-on-one advising at a later date.

Student Support

Student support is defined in this study as academic and social support systems that enhance students' ability to earn credit for prior learning knowledge and skills. Campus administrators and faculty members committed to supporting CPL students think strategically about the unique needs of these students and enact institutional practice appropriately. Those without concerted CPL support mechanisms maintain confusing or disjointed support services and report that students have little understanding of how to demonstrate college-level learning. Our participants found success implementing ongoing and structured mentoring, modifying the curriculum to provide support for prior learning assessment, and consolidating CPL offices to better support students.

CHALLENGES INSTITUTIONS FACED

Participants discussed a variety of institutional challenges that impact students already aware of and interested in the available CPL options. While the availability and type of academic support for students varied widely across all of the institutions, students seem to face challenges no matter which type of CPL they pursued (e.g., exams versus portfolios). However, as the narrative below details, the administrators and faculty we interviewed overwhelmingly addressed the need to be "extra supportive on creating the portfolio" and admitted that

there are a number of challenges students face in general (e.g., lack of direction, lack of clarity about college-level learning) that might be alleviated with a more robust academic support structure.

Decentralized or confusing support services.
Even after students are aware of the options to earn credit for prior learning, study participants shared that there is still substantial confusion about where to go and from whom to get support with CPL on campus. They explained that much of the confusion arises because institutions often maintain separate offices or centers that handle specific areas of CPL (e.g., exams or portfolios), while others allow colleges and departments to handle requests to earn credit for prior learning. Describing where students on campus can go for support, one administrator explained, "two centers [testing and career centers] have separate processes" based on whether the student is interested in testing, a portfolio, or both. Likewise, the other institutions had some combination of career, testing, veterans, or experiential learning centers and college- or departmental-level units that simultaneously provide advising and support for students interested in earning credit for prior learning.

Unclear understanding of college-level learning.
A major frustration among the administrators and faculty interviewed was that students, especially those who do not receive adequate advising or mentoring, struggle to understand the distinction between long-time experience and credit-worthy learning. According to one of the faculty members, this is a reoccurring challenge because "students feel that if they have done something for a really long time that it is college-level learning"; he went on to say that "we try to explain to them it is not the amount of time, it is the learning that came out of it."

Successful Strategies Across Institutions

Require early and ongoing mentoring
Similar to the early student engagement with regard to student outreach, four of the institutions encourage or require students to meet with a staff or faculty mentor/advisor soon after matriculation to assist with the portfolio preparation and successful submission.

- **Enhance staff and faculty advising.** These mentor-student relationships often become the "principal support" as students attempt to earn credit for prior learning via portfolio assessment. In cases where both staff and faculty provide mentoring, staff are tasked with helping students understand the CPL policies and procedures, while faculty help students understand the meaning of college-level learning. Several participants, however, cautioned that the level of encouragement of CPL depends on the mentor and his or her understanding of CPL. In particular, one administrator said, "some faculty are not as enthusiastic about [CPL] as others. It really depends on the faculty members and how they've taken to the idea of CPL."

Explore curricular adaptation
Three campuses modified the curriculum to include in-person (e.g., educational planning) or online courses (e.g., massive open online courses, or MOOCs) to provide guided direction for students interested in earning credit for prior learning.

- **Develop in-person educational planning courses.** One of the institutions, characterized by its rich tradition of offering prior learning opportunities, requires all students to take an educational planning course that is "formal and there are conversations about what [the student] has done [in the past]. That is when the details [about CPL opportunities] get ironed out." The goal of this course is to help students identify relevant standardized exams and past experiences that might qualify for college-level credit and to identify a mentor to aid in the portfolio development process.

- **Offer online portfolio preparation.** Among study participants, it was more common for institutions to require only students who have expressed specific interest in submitting a portfolio for prior learning credit to take a

preparation course. Although these courses varied across institutions, the general intent was to guide students through the process of identifying past learning experiences, matching that learning to a course or elective at the institution, and writing the necessary content for the portfolio.

Centralize CPL offices or centers

Two of the institutions made the decision to consolidate some or all of the administrative functions related to credit for prior learning opportunities and to create a centralized location on campus.

- **Manage CPL-specific offices.** At one of the institutions, where the testing and career centers continued to manage some of the CPL opportunities, there were also dedicated advisors in those centers to help interested students understand "what to do, how to do it, and when do it," and to help students figure out how their prior learning experience "is related to their degree program because PLA needs to match up with their degree plan."

- **Create a comprehensive CPL center.** The approach at the other of the two institutions was broader in that it consolidated a number of previous units and CPL opportunities "previously buried within a particular college at the institution" and made them available to the entire campus community (see spotlight on page 15 or more information). As a result, the PLA Center has full-time staff and advisors available to assist students with all types of CPL opportunities (e.g., standardized exams, portfolios, military credit) in a centralized location on campus.

Faculty Engagement

Faculty engagement in the development and implementation of credit for prior learning is paramount for institutions considering or engaged in the practice of assessing and granting credit for

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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Bellevue University (NE)
Discover Your Value MOOC Portfolio Prep Course

Bellevue University's **Discover Your Value: Turning Experience into College** course is designed to guide students through the process of self-assessing and documenting learning gained through informal learning. The course is free and offered in a MOOC format that provides students a set of six modules that aid in the preparation and submission of an experiential learning portfolio. Students are required to complete the course prior to submission of a portfolio. The modules can be completed in as few as six weeks, but students are given three months to progress through the curriculum and can rejoin future courses at another time. Since moving to the MOOC format, Bellevue has experienced a 50 percent increase in the number of portfolios submitted; students and faculty also report that the process is more streamlined.

Bellevue has long offered a course to help students learn how to create a portfolio, but moved to the MOOC format in order to increase participation in its Experiential Learning Program as well as to leverage new and emerging technologies to help students succeed. Interestingly, despite the increase of Bellevue student portfolio submissions, the vast majority of the students enrolled in the online course are lifelong learners and individuals from around the globe looking for personal/professional enrichment for its own sake. The course has seen enrollment as high as 750 students per series; it averages 250 students per offering.

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prior learning. Drivers of faculty involvement differ across institutions that accept credit for prior learning and are often a consequence of system- or institution-wide culture. Typically a staff member or designated department coordinates with departments or faculty for assistance with assessment. Across all institutions, faculty are subject matter experts charged with assessing students' prior learning through portfolios or other individualized assessments such as Challenge Exams. At institutions where CPL is core to its mission and culture, faculty engagement extends to student outreach and support activities. They may inform institutional policymaking through committee work; serve as academic advisors, mentors, or advocates; participate in orientation sessions; or develop and teach courses or MOOCs that facilitate an understanding of CPL, particularly portfolio development.

Challenges Institutions Faced

Faculty, as key players in advancing innovative practice, are critical to validating and credentialing learning that has taken place outside of a postsecondary institution. Our findings indicate that rethinking an established practice can be, as one faculty member shared, "complicated." For this reason, faculty buy-in and engagement is perhaps the most persistent challenge for institutions. The most challenging elements of faculty buy-in and engagement for participating institutions fall broadly under faculty acceptance, training, and incentives.

Limited exposure to process and terminology. Not surprisingly, some faculty are slower than others in embracing credit for prior learning. One faculty member, speaking about how perspectives have changed over time, said that before faculty understood adult students and CPL, "they thought CPL would put them out of work." Faculty pushback tends to come not only from unfamiliarity with prior learning assessment itself but also with institution-specific terminology. "Our process," a staff member acknowledged, "is slightly different; the words are different. Until [faculty] can co-relate

it to what they did at another institution, they question what we're doing."

Concerns about academic rigor. Staff and faculty expressed that faculty who question the academic rigor of prior learning experiences and assessment place more value in a traditional classroom experience, believing "there is no way that prior learning could possibly substitute for their course."

"It would be stupid of me to say," one faculty member acknowledged, "there weren't tensions around standards around learning and what students need to know." Skepticism, participants from two institutions pointed out, tends to be higher from faculty in fields such as education and medicine, where licensure or state board exams are required. "There is a little more reluctance to bring in credit from another place when you haven't had your hands on [the students] and taught them the way you think they need to be taught," a senior administrator shared.

Inadequate training. Across the institutions, training for faculty spanned the spectrum of "there is no training" to formalized policies and procedures supporting faculty development. For six of the institutions, training appears to be largely voluntary and piecemeal. As one senior administrator noted, "[CPL training] has received haphazard attention in the past. I think somewhere there is a handbook for faculty." Even for institutions with formal training initiatives, participants indicated that more can be done to promote consistency. Decentralized state systems or institutions with branch campuses may be particularly vulnerable to the need for coherent and cohesive CPL training for faculty. One faculty member raised the concern that "many different [campuses] develop[ing] materials and models of training" has created a situation where "[training] is not done systematically."

"We need to do better," a senior staff member reaffirmed. "The training that is happening today is all individually. We are at a moment where we need to centralize training and include prior learning."

Limited or no institutional incentives. Other

challenges for institutions include faculty remuneration for CPL portfolio assessment. Institutions that advocate credit for prior learning through their mission statement, shared culture, and infrastructure appear to expect faculty to engage broadly with credit for prior learning and do not compensate faculty for their time spent assessing portfolios. "Full-time faculty get no additional stipend; it is part of your job," several participants confirmed. Faculty involvement in prior learning assessment as the norm rather than the exception could account for this. At other institutions, faculty may or may not receive remuneration for portfolio assessments. Of those institutions that do offer compensation, it is a flat-rate fee for each portfolio evaluated. Participants generally expressed, however, that remuneration "is not enough money to account for [faculty] time."

Successful Strategies Across Institutions

Build a knowledge base

Our findings suggest that credit for prior learning gains legitimacy through faculty buy-in and involvement. All institutions stressed promoting faculty understanding of and engagement with CPL policies, procedures, and assessments through explicating its benefits for students and institutions.

- **Articulate benefits of CPL to faculty and staff.** One senior student affairs administrator acknowledged: "We need to market PLA to internal constituencies; explain why it is good for students. It is time and money saving. It leads to faster degree completion. We are all being measured on that." This rationale was consistent across CPL advocates, as a staff member reiterated: "There is so much talk on students spending too much money and [taking on] too much debt. This is like a climate change and everything has to be tried. We have to use it all to the benefit of reducing the problem."

- **Conduct annual transfer credit reviews with relevant faculty** so they are in the loop about

how transfer credit policies apply to their program. This informs program faculty of transfer credit updates and internal recommendations specific to their program. One transfer credit specialist conducts reviews with program directors so "they know what we are doing, how it affects their program, and what internal recommendations are out there specific to their program." This is especially helpful for new program directors who might not be aware of what their predecessor did.

Provide institutional incentives

Several institutions have taken steps to incentivize faculty to participate in CPL training and evaluate portfolios. One institution supports the department covering expenses, and three institutions address portfolio evaluation challenges either through remunerating faculty or integrating portfolio review work into their promotion and tenure process.

- **Cover training expenses.** One dean mentioned that the department would "pay for the training if [faculty] were interested, especially if [PLA] would be part of their role." The rationale is that having faculty trained in CPL "makes them a stronger evaluator and stronger part of the process."

- **Compensate faculty for reviewing portfolios.** Our findings indicate that two of the institutions compensate faculty for conducting portfolio evaluations. "We still compensate the full-time [faculty] even though we didn't need to in the contract," one administrator shared, because "we thought they would be more motivated and get it done and come back again." To further incentivize faculty to review student portfolios, one institution that requires faculty to evaluate portfolios doubles the pay rate for reviewing a portfolio if faculty have completed portfolio assessment training.

- **Incorporate portfolio evaluations or other CPL participation in the promotion and tenure process.** At one institution, "It is part

of their tenure process . . . It's not in the top 10 during a tenure review, but it is still expected." One faculty member clarified that "in the overall process of tenure, you can mention that you are asked to be an evaluator. It's a line that goes into your continued appointment." A senior administrator at another institution expressed that "if there was a discrete part of the promotion process that talked about faculty performance and their role in PLA . . . there [might] be value in that in making [CPL] more meaningful for [faculty]."

Develop faculty training

Half of the institutions provided training sessions led by internal and external experts to increase faculty understanding of CPL policies and practices and CPL's value for students and the institution. The types of training ranged from more traditional expert-led tutorials to off-site visits.

- **Expand training options.** Institutions should not only utilize technology as a professional development medium but also incorporate workshops, seminars, one-on-one conversations (see next bullet), conferences, and committees in the menu of options available for faculty to understand and engage with credit for prior learning. One institution houses on its intranet educational videos that address the details of how the CPL process works and answers all the frequently asked questions the CPL program coordinator receives on the program and process. Another institution brought external expertise to the campus. In doing so, one dean commented: "[T]hat [workshop] helped the faculty understand the structure, rigor, and their role as an evaluator. After the training, [attitudes] became more positive."

- **Lean on CPL specialists for faculty professional development.** Several coordinators talked at length about conducting training sessions on the nuts and bolts and implications of prior learning assessment. This opened channels of communication, where faculty "got opened to asking questions . . . and contacting [the coordinator] if they were confused."

- **Tour training or educational facilities.** Arrange for faculty to tour military or corporate training and education facilities to increase their understanding of the academic rigor behind certain prior or experiential learning taking place outside the classroom. An institution with close connections to a local military base took a group of faculty to tour the training and education facility, and according to the senior administrator overseeing this exercise, "you could see their jaws drop. They didn't know how advanced it really was. [Students] really earn this; it is not given to them."

The institutions under study indicated utilizing the following external resources for professional development opportunities:

- ACE webinars explore core considerations for credit for prior learning, including outreach and advising, applicability of ACE credit recommendations for employers, and regional accreditation standards.

- DePaul University (IL) offers a series of four online workshops targeted at individuals and institutions looking to develop or improve an institution's portfolio assessment. Successful completion of the first two workshops leads to a certificate of professional achievement as a prior learning assessor, and successful completion of all four workshops leads to a certificate of mastery in prior learning assessment.

- CAEL offers workshops on designing, implementing, and advancing PLA on campuses.

An important lesson we learned from this study is that an institution may face challenges in one of the implementation areas we studied—campus infrastructure, student outreach and support, or faculty engagement—and provide evidence of innovative practice in another area. The implementation matrix (see **Table 1**) developed by the co-authors of this research report was used to evaluate levels of implementation for the three areas of practice under study rather than to label or categorize the institution as a whole. In applying this matrix, we offer to the field a framework that can be used to identify and describe levels of understanding and application of credit for prior learning at other institutions. We will continue to shape the matrix levels of "beginning," "emerging," and "effective," define the significant components of CPL programs and practice, and link to strategies to advance sustainable implementation.

Implications

In the early twenty-first century, there is greater awareness of a new set of student demographics that encompasses working learners with no postsecondary credentials. The new normal, at least currently, is that working learners often bring learning experiences from multiple settings with the traditional "student role" as one of many. These students have many sources for learning, from the military to MOOCs, challenging all types of institutions to devise reliable and manageable methods for verifying college-level learning and mastery.

Our study addresses the dearth of readily accessible information on how colleges and universities, to meet growing demand, implement effective CPL practices, expand programs and services, and continue to thrive. We present three areas in which there has been up to now little qualitative research to guide institutional development and implementation of CPL policy and practice: 1) requisite infrastructure for sustainability; 2) student outreach and support; and 3) faculty engagement. Our findings suggest a number of implications and recommendations.

> Embracing CPL means first acknowledging that college-level learning can occur outside the traditional classroom setting.

Develop a shared lexicon across internal and external constituencies.

Although the study captured those practices of only a small number of institutions, our findings underscore the lack of a common understanding of CPL terms and definitions within and outside of higher education. This absence has perpetuated misperceptions about prior learning and related assessment options for the review, recognition, and award of institutional credit. In turn, compartmentalized views of credit options have led to fragmented management of those options, from standardized exams and third-party validation to individualized assessments, reflected in the
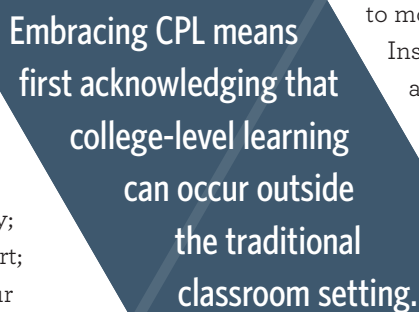
infrastructure and culture surrounding institutional acceptance of CPL.

Confusing language and disjointed operations have contributed to CPL's marginalized status throughout higher education, and made internal marketing of CPL's benefits for institutions and their students all the more challenging. Our findings 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.

Assess institutional culture.

Understanding institutional culture is instructive when considering readiness and the capacity to move from policy to implementation. Institutional culture frames mission and affects strategies and resources to meet the defined mission. A view through that lens can help define strategic steps and achievable goals, offering accessible paths for moving marginalized programs to the center of institutional life.

An organizational mindset can send subtle, but mixed and negative, messages from faculty and staff about credit for prior learning, resulting in students being unable to picture CPL as a viable option. Based on these messages, students may think it's easier to take classes or that they don't have what it takes to obtain credit for prior learning. Hence, it's important to take time with the internal marketing for all affected audiences. How do we change the lens or the way in which we frame it? Colleges and universities have to first see and believe in the possibilities in order to create clear paths. Once reframed, institutions become better equipped at helping students navigate those possibilities.

Here's the policy. Where's the implementation?

CPL policy development has received both a boost and a push through state, federal, and private funding, as well as through mandates by state legislatures and boards of higher education from California and Colorado to Ohio and Tennessee. Implementation is hard work, often taking much longer than projected, and all too often it either doesn't take place at all or doesn't stay in place for any significant period of time. The role of senior university and college leadership is critical, from supporting champions to building infrastructure. Together they are the key to a thriving program, not merely a policy in the catalog. Effective implementation is supported through readiness assessment, strategic information sharing, and planned development of infrastructure.

Take a "staged" approach to CPL implementation.

To gain greater knowledge on the state of current practice, the study used a staged approach to examine each area of practice. We found that the implementation matrix of emerging, developing, and effective stages suggests a framework for gauging institutional readiness, embedding information-sharing approaches, and scaffolding professional development across campus constituencies. Identifying and assessing indicators of institutional readiness could assist in including practices already in place, such as internships and other experiential learning opportunities. Making such strategic connections would lead to increased CPL adoption and implementation.

Are faculty engaged?

"How do we get faculty buy-in?" is a common question in discussions about CPL and faculty engagement. One critical factor for sustaining thriving CPL programs is institutional support for engaged faculty. It is important to hear from faculty, not just about them from others, which is too often the case—especially on their skepticism about alternative assessment methods. Our findings underscore the variety of roles that faculty often play in CPL implementation, from advisor and mentor to evaluator and advocate, and offer three areas for continued exploration: level of engagement, incentives, and professional development.

In defining faculty engagement, our study suggests further examination of how early and often faculty are engaged in CPL policy and practice. At what stage and in what ways are faculty engaged in policy, strategy, and implementation? One intrinsic driver for faculty to engage in CPL is their desire to help students succeed. Colleges and universities certainly could capitalize on that intent, and at the same time move toward institutionalizing incentives that recognize and reward CPL engagement and innovation. All too often, CPL work is addressed as piecemeal, perhaps as a result of its marginalized status and fragmented management.

Our study also suggests that professional development needs to progress from piecemeal offerings to more systematic approaches. While some institutions offer orientations, peer mentoring, and opportunities for training from national organizations, most often institutions do not sustain that training over time. Emerging and promising examples of professional development for faculty are created by faculty and offer experiential, blended, constant approaches.

What does it take to build infrastructure?

Building a sustainable infrastructure involves multiple areas from information sharing, integration of services, and faculty engagement to policy review and data collection.

- **Consider policy to remove obstacles.** One aim should be to create policy and procedures that help students, staff, and faculty more easily navigate CPL. Institutions could regularly examine the rationale for a policy and whether or not it truly contributes to the integrity and value of a degree. Such a review could result in the removal of unnecessary steps or procedures that act less as quality assurance controls and more as impediments for students to take part in and complete CPL options.

Similar constraints have been created by state legislatures, higher education boards, professional associations, and other organizations, as they emphasize goals for greater transparency and transferability. Institutional policy and procedures are guided by state and accrediting body regulations, and by perceptions about those regulations. Cross-sector discussions to review policy, receive institutions' input, and collaborate in creating common standards would go a long way in advancing effective CPL implementation and continued practice.

- **Create an "information-service" pipeline.**
Across institutions, our findings showed a lack of an integrated pipeline or connected knowledge about CPL policy and practice across and among campus constituencies that work with students. This is a gap that we must better understand and work to decrease if we want to institutionalize CPL practice. It begins with building general knowledge about CPL, with the goal that anyone at an institution can direct any student at any point in his or her academic career to potential options. The challenge is in organizing vehicles that keep information current and flowing at the right time. Student, staff, and faculty orientation is one place in the pipeline, but not the only or most effective point in time for sharing information about CPL.

Institutions that have found ways in which to organize CPL infrastructures that embed information, share such information in the everyday life of the institution, and increase the level of general information across constituencies, subsequently become more successful at implementing, guiding, and managing effective CPL practice. With an integrated approach to sharing information must also come

collaborative management of CPL options and services. This integrated strategy directly addresses the advising gaps that students too often encounter even in well-established CPL programs. The institutions in the study were challenged to create and manage early and ongoing support throughout the students' academic programs. As institutions developed a more robust CPL infrastructure, they seemed to get more competent at finding opportunities for reaching out to employers and other organizations to promote CPL programs, services, and benefits.

- **Collect data to articulate success.** From student persistence rates to CPL program evaluation, institutions need to make the commitment and allot the resources, with support at the state, regional, and federal levels, to analyze what is working—and why—in the realm of credit for prior learning options. Additional research on creating systems for tracking success is a critical need. Which CPL options are students using? What are the outcomes in persistence, retention, GPA, and completion? If we are to sustain effective CPL programs, we need to know how they benefit both institutions and the communities they serve. The next step, then, will be articulating those benefits so that both internal and external constituents view CPL as a strategic investment.

Credit for Prior Learning: Charting Institutional Practice for Sustainability offers a snapshot of current CPL policy and practice across a diverse group of colleges and universities. While this snapshot represents a number of examples of effective practice in student outreach, faculty engagement, and development of infrastructure, it also highlights reasons for concern about the long-term sustainability of credit for prior learning policies and practices, even in a changing landscape that makes CPL an imperative. Contemporary learners across

> Growing demands for evaluating, verifying, and credentialing learning will continue to challenge colleges and universities to develop a solid and supportive infrastructure.

generations and backgrounds are bringing learning experiences from new and multiple sources, which could offer solutions to problems of access, affordability, and attainment. Growing demands for evaluating, verifying, and credentialing learning will continue to challenge colleges and universities to develop a solid and supportive infrastructure. *Charting Institutional Practice* underscores the need for additional work on the application of a developmental matrix to guide institutions in building that infrastructure and driving implementation. These efforts are more likely to succeed within an environment where policymakers and practitioners alike recognize alternative learning pathways as a core component of the nation's attainment agenda.

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Appendix

60 minutes

ACE defines credit for prior learning as *academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as portfolios.*

Opening Questions (10 minutes)

1. What types of prior learning credits are accepted at the institution?
   For example: (1) ACE recommendations, (2) portfolios, and (3) standardized tests?

2. Can you tell us a little bit about your role on your campus in relationship to CPL initiatives?

3. What is the general attitude about CPL on campus and have the attitudes people hold about CPL changed over time?

Student Outreach and Support (15 minutes)

4. How do most students on this campus learn about opportunities to earn credit for prior learning?

5. What type of support is available for students once they initiate the CPL process?

6. What kinds of challenges do students face during the credit-granting process for prior learning?

7. In your opinion, what could be done to improve campus outreach efforts that provide students with information about how to initiate CPL opportunities?

8. In your opinion, what could be done to improve support for students once they initiate the process of getting prior learning reviewed?

Faculty and Staff Engagement and Development (10 minutes)

9. How are [faculty/staff] engaged in decisions about the assessment of prior learning experiences?

10. Can you give an example of development (training) opportunities available for [faculty/staff] members interested in supporting CPL initiatives on campus?

Applicability of Prior Learning Credit (5–10 minutes)

ACE's definition of applicability in relationship to CPL refers to *institutional policies and practices that support direct application of credit for prior learning options to courses and degree programs to meet an institution's general education requirements, courses in the major, and other degree requirements.*

CPL options for applicability include the transfer of prior learning through third-party validation, such as ACE credit recommendations, or internal methods developed by institutions, such as departmental exams. Transferability may also encompass procedures that allow for CPL to transfer across institutions within a system or across systems and institutions. Make sure the interviewee understands this definition in the context of their institution and the terminology used to discuss CPL initiatives there.

11. For what purpose(s) can prior learning credit be used at the institution?
    For example: 1) for admission, 2) to obtain advanced standing at the institution, 3) to waive course prerequisites, 4) to meet general education requirements, 5) to meet program/major requirements, 6) to meet elective requirements, and 7) to fulfill residency requirements?

12. What is the number of prior learning credits that can be applied to a certificate or degree at your institution and how was this number determined?

Sustainability (5 minutes)

13. Does your institution track data on persistence related to the use of CPL?

14. What is in place at your institution to sustain CPL over time?

Closing (5 minutes)

15. Is there anything else you would like to add about the CPL initiatives on your campus?

16. Would you be willing to share documents that will help ACE better understand the topics discussed during the interview (e.g., guidelines, policy, handbooks)?