



FROM RECOGNITION TO PROGRESS:
Lessons from Institutional Efforts to Advance
Credit for Prior Learning for Military Learners

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American Council on Education
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Credit for Prior Learning for Military Learners

Ji Hye “Jane” Kim, Maria Claudia Soler,
Lindsey Tepe, and Ezequiel Jimenez

1. Introduction

Nearly one million active-duty service members have not yet earned a bachelor's degree, representing a significant opportunity for higher education to recognize the knowledge and skills developed through military service and support continued educational attainment. According to the 2024 Military OneSource Demographics Profile, 23.4 percent of active-duty service members hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while 76.6 percent have not yet completed a bachelor's degree and may pursue postsecondary education during or after their military careers (Military OneSource 2024). The opportunity extends to veterans as well: among the approximately 15.5 million veterans age 25 and older, about two-thirds do not hold a bachelor's degree, including 5.7 million who have some college or an associate degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2024).

Service members and veterans enter postsecondary education with extensive military learning, including technical training, occupational experience, leadership development, formal coursework, and other knowledge or skills acquired during military service. Credit for prior learning (CPL) allows colleges and universities to recognize this learning through academic credit, potentially reducing time to degree, lowering educational costs, and supporting learner mobility (ACE 2025; Higher Learning Advocates 2023; Klein-Collins et al. 2020; Lakin et al. 2015; Soler et al. 2024). While recognizing military learning is an important first step, the value of CPL ultimately depends on how awarded credit is applied within students' academic pathways.

Across the U.S. postsecondary sector, institutions have made substantial progress in recognizing military learning for academic credit, yet institutional leaders consistently described a common challenge: ensuring that awarded credit is integrated into academic pathways and educational goals. As Ellen Gambino, provost fellow overseeing CPL policy implementation across the State University of New York system, reflected, "Awarding veterans a large number of credits has limited value if those credits don't count toward their chosen degree program. What matters is awarding credit that helps them make meaningful progress toward completion." Understanding and addressing this discrepancy between recognizing military learning and ensuring that it supports meaningful academic progress provides the central motivation for this brief. Drawing on perspectives from higher education CPL leaders, the brief identifies key insights and makes recommendations for both institutions and policymakers.

2. Background

CPL refers to the range of strategies and methods used to recognize and award college credit for skills and knowledge that students have acquired outside traditional academic settings, including through formal noncollege learning, military training, work experience, industry credentials, informal learning, volunteer work, and other life experiences (Soler et al. 2024). By recognizing knowledge and skills developed through military service, work, industry credentials, apprenticeships, and other experiences, CPL expands educational access, supports learner mobility, reduces unnecessary repetition of learning, accelerates credential attainment, and strengthens pathways between education and the workforce. These benefits are particularly pronounced when awarded credit fulfills subject-specific or program requirements, allowing learners to make meaningful progress toward their credentials rather than accumulating elective credits that may have limited applicability.

Existing research has linked CPL to improved student outcomes, including higher completion rates and reduced costs and time to degree, particularly for adult learners and historically underserved student populations (ACE 2025; Higher Learning Advocates 2023; Klein-Collins et al. 2020; Lakin et al. 2015; Soler et al. 2024). Beyond improving learner outcomes, CPL has also gained increasing attention as a strategy for advancing institutional goals and public policy priorities, including improving educational attainment, strengthening workforce readiness, supporting learner mobility, and enhancing economic competitiveness.

For military learners, CPL may be especially valuable. Service members and veterans acquire extensive technical training, occupational experience, leadership development, and formal coursework during military service. Recognizing this learning through academic credit can reduce unnecessary course repetition, lower educational costs, support learner mobility, and accelerate progress toward a credential for those who pursue postsecondary education (Jiang et al. 2021; Soler et al. 2024; Spires and Kinch 2025).

The recognition of military learning through CPL is supported by long-standing federal infrastructure that has helped standardize the documentation, evaluation, and recognition of military learning. Federal investment, particularly through the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and military departments, has created a national ecosystem that includes official military learning records such as the Joint Services Transcript (JST), faculty-reviewed credit recommendations, and other resources that enable colleges and universities to evaluate military training and occupational experience at scale. Together, these resources have supported greater consistency in how military learning is documented and reviewed than is often possible in other areas of CPL.

The Joint Services Transcript, commonly referred to as the JST, provides military members with a standard document that translates military schooling, training, and work history into civilian terms (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). Military members may request that their JSTs be sent to institutions of higher education so that academic counselors may use them to advise students and institutions can recognize and award academic credit for prior military experience. A JST can include data as far back as 1976 (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). This information may include personal service member information, college-level test scores such as CLEP and DSST, and military course completions and occupations with corresponding ACE college credit recommendations, among other experiences as applicable (U.S. Coast Guard, n.d.). All enlisted, officers, and warrant officers, both active and veterans, from all Army components, Marine Corps, Navy, and Coast Guard are eligible for a JST.

State and system policy environments have also played an important role in advancing the implementation of military CPL. An ACE and Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) 50-state analysis identified 362 state and system CPL policies, including policies addressing military learning in 46 states, making military CPL one of the most widely supported forms of prior learning recognition in the country (Soler et al. 2024). These policies include legislation, transfer policies, reporting expectations, and implementation guidance that help shape how institutions evaluate military learning, award academic credit, and support credit transfer.

Despite growing state and institutional policies supporting military credit recognition, important questions remain about how military CPL functions in practice. Although policies supporting military credit recognition are widespread, Soler et al. (2024) found relatively limited attention to data collection, outcome tracking, and evaluation. Even where policies exist, they do not determine how awarded credit is evaluated, applied within academic programs, communicated to students, or integrated into advising and support systems. As a result, the experiences of military learners can vary considerably across institutions, even within states and systems that have adopted military CPL policies. Understanding how institutions operationalize military CPL and identifying where challenges remain has become increasingly important as policymakers and higher education leaders seek to improve student outcomes and maximize the value of prior learning.

Existing research has highlighted the implications of these implementation challenges for service members and veterans. An American Institutes for Research study found that 64 percent of surveyed student veterans received some academic credit for military learning. However, among those who received credit, 62 percent reported receiving fewer credits than they expected for their military training and experience (Jiang et al. 2021). The study also found that military learning was frequently recognized as elective or general education credit rather than credit that directly applied to students' programs of study, limiting its potential effect on time to degree and credential completion. These findings suggest that the value of military CPL depends not only on whether credit is awarded but also on how that credit is applied within academic pathways.

To better understand how institutions operationalize military CPL, this brief draws on interviews with leaders from four systems and institutions representing diverse organizational contexts: the State University of New York system (SUNY), Old Dominion University (ODU), National University (NU), and Western Technical College (Western). These cases were selected to reflect a range of organizational contexts and include a public higher education system, a public four-year institution, a private nonprofit institution, and a public technical college. The analysis draws on interviews conducted in April 2026 with institutional representatives who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants included leaders and practitioners responsible for

military and veteran services, enrollment operations, and CPL implementation. Together, the cases provide insight into how military CPL is implemented across diverse higher education settings and the lessons these experiences offer for institutional leaders and policymakers.

Institution	State University of New York	Old Dominion University	National University	Western Technical College
Location	NY (System)	Norfolk, VA	San Diego, CA	La Crosse, WI
Type	Public system, 64 campuses	Four-year, public	Four-year, private nonprofit	Two-year, public (member of the Wisconsin Technical College System)
Total student enrollment (Fall 2024)	369,464 in total (324,156 undergraduate and 45,308 graduate)	23,743 in total (17,746 undergraduate and 5,997 graduate)	22,115 in total (11,237 undergraduate and 10,878 graduate)	3,625 in total (undergraduate)
Number of students receiving Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (2023–24)	2,115 in total (1,922 undergraduate and 193 graduate)	1,972 in total (1,691 undergraduate and 281 graduate)	4,397 in total (3,488 undergraduate and 909 graduate)	107 in total (undergraduate)
Number of students receiving DOD Tuition Assistance Program benefits (2023–24)	441 in total (424 undergraduate and 17 graduate)	434 in total (359 undergraduate and 75 graduate)	2,367 in total (2,025 undergraduate and 342 graduate)	4 in total (undergraduate)

Source: IPEDS 2023–2024

Note: *SUNY data include 59 separately reporting SUNY institutions. The five statutory (contract) colleges affiliated with Cornell University and Alfred University are excluded because they do not report separately in IPEDS.*

The interview protocol and thematic analysis were informed by several dimensions of effective CPL implementation identified through prior ACE research, including institutional commitment, pathway alignment, organizational capacity, advising and student support, and the use of evidence and data systems. Drawing on these institutional perspectives, the brief identifies common challenges, promising practices, and lessons that may inform future institutional, state, and federal policy efforts.



3. Institutional Perspectives: Military CPL in Practice

The four institutions and systems in this study represent very different contexts in size, mission, student population, and policy environment. Each has developed approaches shaped by its circumstances, and each offers lessons for institutions and policymakers alike.

State University of New York

SUNY is the largest comprehensive public higher education system in the United States. Comprising 64 campuses across New York state, including research universities, comprehensive colleges, technology colleges, specialized institutions, and community colleges, SUNY serves a diverse student population through institutions that each have distinct missions, academic governance structures, course catalogs, and curricular requirements. As a major engine of educational opportunity and economic mobility, SUNY has also emerged as a national leader in advancing student success initiatives, making it an important case for examining large-scale implementation of CPL.

SUNY's approach to CPL combines formal policy authority with active system-level leadership. The foundation is the SUNY Board of Trustees' CPL policy, originally established in 1976 and **revised in 2023** to explicitly direct campuses to maximize CPL opportunities and recognize military training and occupations as sources of prior learning. Building on this policy, SUNY system administration issued a 2024 Memorandum to Presidents that provided implementation guidance and required all 64 campuses to develop action plans, including strategies for collecting CPL data. In 2025, the system administration further strengthened these efforts through an additional memorandum requiring campuses to configure ACE Military Guide accounts and report CPL participation and credit-award data, reinforcing system-wide support and accountability for CPL implementation.

The [ACE Military Guide](#), through a U.S. DOD contract, is the sole source of information for all military courses and occupations evaluated by ACE from 1954 to present. The Military Guide provides credit recommendations based on evaluations conducted by faculty members who teach the areas they evaluate. In 2021, ACE launched an interactive web application version of the Military Guide, which includes course and occupation summaries, all military courses and occupations evaluated by ACE, multiple ways to search for evaluations conducted by faculty members, and an upload feature for service members and veterans to upload their JSTs. The ACE Military Guide helps many institutions inform policies and practices that award college credit for military learning and experiences.

For SUNY, CPL is closely connected to broader priorities related to student mobility, workforce development, and economic opportunity. Ellen Gambino, provost fellow overseeing CPL efforts across the SUNY system, described CPL as an important mechanism for helping students move more efficiently through educational pathways while recognizing learning acquired outside traditional academic settings. By embedding CPL within Chancellor John B. King Jr.'s 2024 system-wide student success agenda, SUNY positioned CPL not as a standalone initiative but as part of a broader strategy to expand education access, strengthen workforce pathways, and promote upward mobility.

The results have been substantial. In 2024–25, SUNY awarded approximately 370,000 CPL credits to more than 45,000 students—an increase of 12 percent from the previous year. Military learning represented one of the largest CPL categories across the system. During the 2024–25 academic year, SUNY awarded 17,915 military CPL credits to 1,046 service members and veterans, making military CPL the second-largest source of CPL credits after Advanced Placement. By February 2025, all 64 campuses had configured ACE Military Guide accounts. A multiyear partnership with [CAEL](#) has trained hundreds of faculty, advisors, and staff to support CPL implementation. Together, these efforts reflect SUNY's emphasis on building institutional infrastructure alongside policy adoption.

At the same time, SUNY's experience illustrates both the opportunities and complexities of implementing CPL across a highly decentralized system. Because each campus maintains its own course catalog, academic governance processes, and curricular structures, there is no mechanism for a credit equivalency established at one campus to automatically apply at another. Rather than prescribing a single institutional model, SUNY has focused on creating common expectations while allowing campuses flexibility in how they implement CPL based on local contexts and student populations.

Data and accountability have emerged as central components of SUNY's implementation strategy. The first year of system-wide CPL reporting revealed significant inconsistencies in how campuses tracked and reported participation and credit awards. Some campuses had historically recorded CPL within transfer systems, while others had limited formal tracking processes. Interview participants noted that one campus reported a 600 percent increase in awarded credits while simultaneously reporting fewer students, illustrating the challenges of establishing consistent definitions and reporting practices across a large system. These findings reinforced the importance of data standardization and highlighted the distinction between creating policy expectations and building the infrastructure necessary to support implementation.

SUNY's experience also underscored a theme that emerged across the institutional interviews: awarding credit does not automatically ensure that credit contributes to student progress. While system-level policies can expand opportunities for credit recognition, institutions ultimately determine how awarded credit is evaluated, applied within academic pathways, and aligned with students' educational goals. For SUNY, this realization has reinforced the importance of moving beyond credit recognition to focus on how awarded credit contributes to credential completion and student success.

SUNY's CPL efforts have also benefited from a broader New York policy environment that supports the recognition of learning acquired outside traditional academic settings. ACE and CAEL's CPL policy inventory identified New York as having one of the most developed CPL policy frameworks in the country, with policies spanning assessment, transfer, military learning, data reporting, and implementation support (Soler et al. 2024). In addition to system-level initiatives within SUNY, state guidance from the New York State Education Department encourages institutions to establish clear policies and procedures governing the

award of CPL. Together, these state and system efforts have created a supportive environment for expanding CPL opportunities and strengthening institutional capacity for implementation (CUNY 2022, 2023a, 2023b; New York State Education Department n.d.).

SUNY's experience demonstrates how system-level leadership can strengthen military CPL through coordinated policy, implementation guidance, professional development, and data collection. At the same time, the case highlights the importance of sustained coordination, infrastructure development, and institutional engagement to ensure that CPL contributes to meaningful student outcomes.

Key Takeaways from the State University of New York

- **Institutional Commitment and Leadership.** SUNY demonstrates the value of system-level leadership in advancing CPL across a large and diverse higher education system. By connecting CPL to broader priorities related to student mobility, workforce development, and upward mobility, SUNY positioned CPL as a strategic institutional priority across the system rather than a standalone initiative.
- **Policy and Implementation Support.** Formal policies, implementation guidance, professional development opportunities, and reporting expectations created a foundation for scaling CPL across campuses while allowing individual campuses flexibility in how they implement CPL based on local contexts.
- **Evidence and Data Systems.** As CPL expands across institutions and systems, consistent data collection, reporting, and evaluation become increasingly important for understanding participation, outcomes, and opportunities for continuous improvement.
- **System-Level Stewardship.** Scaling CPL across multiple institutions requires more than policy adoption alone. SUNY's experience illustrates the importance of ongoing coordination, technical assistance, and accountability mechanisms to support implementation across diverse institutional contexts.



Old Dominion University

ODU sits at the center of one of the largest concentrations of military personnel in the United States. Naval Station Norfolk—the world’s largest naval base—is three miles from campus, and the Hampton Roads region is home to approximately 19 military installations and roughly 100,000 active-duty personnel. Military students represent 25 to 30 percent of ODU’s enrollment, with military spouses and family members comprising the largest subgroup. ODU’s online programs through ODUGlobal extend this reach internationally, serving students in Germany, Japan, Korea, Spain, and other locations.

Given this context, military learners are deeply embedded in ODU’s institutional mission. As Dan Whiting, military services coordinator, noted, “prospective military students often arrive with two central questions: ‘How am I going to pay for this, and what kind of credit do I get coming in?’” These questions reflect the importance of both affordability and prior learning recognition in shaping military learners’ educational decisions. ODU’s approach to military CPL seeks to address both concerns by helping students understand not only what credit they may receive but also how that credit applies toward their academic goals.

ODU’s most visible CPL tool is its **Military Pathways** initiative—program-specific plans that translate military experience into academic roadmaps. Each pathway shows students what credits they can bring to ODU through JST evaluations, CLEP and DSST exams,¹ occupational training, and other sources of prior learning as well as what coursework remains to be completed at ODU. By making the relationship between military learning and degree requirements more transparent, the Military Pathways initiative serves students, advisors, and faculty simultaneously. ODU has also used the ACE Military Guide creatively, in some cases combining multiple military learning outcomes to establish course equivalencies that align more directly with academic programs.

Institutional coordination is another defining feature of ODU’s approach. The university operates a Military Advocacy Council, a standing cross-functional group that includes representatives from admissions, the registrar’s office, military benefits, the Military Connection Center, advising, and other units. The council meets regularly to identify barriers, improve processes, and coordinate support for military learners. Between 2021 and 2025, over 1,700 students received military CPL at ODU, totaling more than 10,000 credits awarded.

¹ CLEP refers to the College Level Examination Program administered by the College Board; DSST refers to DAN-TES-funded exams that allow military members to earn college credit for prior knowledge.

ODU has also invested in understanding how students experience CPL. A recent survey of nearly 850 students provided insight into student awareness and use of prior learning opportunities. The findings suggested that many students were unfamiliar with CPL options at the university, highlighting the importance of communication and advising alongside policy and evaluation processes. These findings underscore a broader challenge identified across institutions: the existence of CPL policies and resources does not necessarily ensure student awareness or utilization.

Advising emerged as an important component of ODU's military CPL ecosystem. Interview participants noted that military learners often navigate military benefits, degree requirements, transfer credit, and career goals simultaneously. Experienced advisors frequently help students understand not only what credit they receive but also how that credit can be applied strategically within their academic pathways. At the same time, participants described variation in advisor familiarity with military transcripts and CPL processes, suggesting opportunities for continued professional development and coordination. ODU's experience suggests that student-facing tools such as Military Pathways are most effective when paired with advising structures that help students interpret and act on the information they provide.

At the state level, ODU operates within a policy environment that has long supported the recognition of prior learning and military experience. Virginia statute authorizes public institutions to award academic credit for demonstrated competency and prior learning and directs institutions to develop policies governing the assessment and application of such credit. The governmental coordinating agency State Council of Higher Education for Virginia has further encouraged institutions to expand CPL opportunities through guidance related to transfer, prior learning assessment, and military learners.

ODU's experience demonstrates the value of combining transparent pathway tools, cross-functional coordination, and student support structures. The Military Pathways initiative helps students visualize how prior learning applies toward specific academic programs, while the Military Advocacy Council provides a mechanism for ongoing collaboration across institutional units. Together, these efforts illustrate how institutions can move beyond credit recognition and support the effective application of prior learning toward academic progress.

Key Takeaways from Old Dominion University

- **Pathway Alignment.** ODU's experience highlights the distinction between awarding credit and ensuring that awarded credit contributes to meaningful academic progress. By focusing on pathway alignment and program applicability, ODU has sought to help students translate prior learning into degree progress rather than simply accumulating elective credits.
- **Institutional Coordination.** Effective CPL implementation often requires collaboration across academic, administrative, and student support units. ODU's Military Advocacy Council illustrates how cross-functional structures can support communication, problem-solving, and continuous process improvement for military learners.
- **Transparency and Communication.** ODU demonstrates the value of making CPL visible and understandable through student-facing pathway tools. Resources such as Military Pathways can help students, advisors, and faculty translate military learning into clear degree maps, making CPL more actionable when it comes to specific academic programs and degree requirements.
- **Advising and Student Support.** Institutions should not assume students understand CPL opportunities simply because policies and processes exist. Advising and personalized guidance are necessary to ensure that students not only receive credit for prior learning but are also able to use that credit in ways that support meaningful academic progress. ODU's experience highlights the important role of advising in helping students navigate military benefits, transfer credit, degree requirements, and career goals. Advising can help bridge the gap between the availability of CPL opportunities and students' ability to understand and use them effectively.



National University

NU was founded by a Navy veteran to serve working adults and nontraditional learners. Today, approximately 35 percent of NU's student population is military-affiliated, making military learners a central part of the institution's mission and student population. Until recently, however, NU's CPL infrastructure did not fully reflect the scale of its military community. Most military credits were awarded as open electives; there were no external-facing CPL resources; and no dedicated staff oversaw CPL implementation. That changed in June 2024 when Cindi Robinson joined NU as its first-ever director of credit for prior learning. Within a year, she and her team had built a CPL webpage, manual, training materials, implementation resources, and an external credit equivalency repository designed to improve transparency for students and staff. CPL participation increased by 86 percent during the first year, reflecting both growing awareness and expanded institutional capacity.

A key component of NU's recent efforts has been the development of more intentional pathways for applying military learning toward degree requirements. As Robinson noted, "The goal is to make specific course credit the default and elective credit the alternative." This philosophy represents a significant shift from traditional approaches in which military learning is often recognized primarily through elective credit. Rather than focusing solely on the number of credits awarded, NU has increasingly emphasized how those credits contribute to students' academic pathways and credential completion.

NU's most consequential recent policy change was a reclassification of ACE-evaluated military learning. Recognizing that ACE-recommended courses are reviewed through a third-party quality assurance process and function similarly to transfer credit, NU moved these credits from a 25 percent CPL cap to a 75 percent transfer credit limit. This change significantly expanded students' ability to apply military learning toward their degrees without requiring new evaluation systems or approval processes. NU's experience illustrates how institutional policy decisions can influence access to CPL and create opportunities for military learners by leveraging existing quality assurance frameworks.

At the same time, NU has invested in expanding direct course equivalencies and strengthening pathway alignment. Teresa Duncan, director of strategic partnerships for military, veterans, and defense industry, has worked to map military occupational specialties to academic programs and identify opportunities for military learning to satisfy specific program requirements. Between 2024 and 2025, direct course equivalencies increased by 29 percent. NU has also developed micro-pathways within its bachelor of arts in general studies program that allow military learners to apply CPL within designated areas of concentration. In addition, phased degree structures embed bachelor's-level coursework within associate degree pathways, allowing students to earn credentials incrementally while progressing toward longer-term educational goals.

NU's experience also highlights the operational challenges associated with pathway development at scale. Building equivalencies between military specialties and academic programs requires substantial faculty engagement, curriculum review, and ongoing maintenance as military training evolves over time. Interview participants noted that much of this work remains labor-intensive, requiring detailed crosswalk analyses between military occupations and institutional curricula. At the same time, pathway development has enabled NU to increase the share of military learning that applies directly to academic programs rather than being awarded solely as elective credit.

Despite significant progress, NU continues to focus on increasing student awareness of CPL opportunities and expanding pathway development efforts. Interview participants noted that many military students remain unfamiliar with CPL opportunities, and that institutional growth to date has been driven largely through targeted outreach and word-of-mouth communication. These experiences underscore the importance of pairing policy innovation with student-facing communication, pathway design, and ongoing institutional investment.

At the state and system levels, NU operates within a California higher education landscape that has increasingly prioritized CPL as a strategy to support adult learners, veterans, and workforce development. California's CPL regulations require institutions within the state's public higher education systems to establish transparent CPL policies and recognize multiple forms of prior learning, including military training documented through the JST, industry-recognized credentials, portfolios, standardized examinations, and other assessment methods (California Code of Regulations 2022). The state's CPL framework also encourages institutions to apply awarded credit toward degree requirements when appropriate and sets expectations for CPL data collection and reporting.

NU's experience demonstrates how dedicated leadership, strategic policy design, and pathway-focused implementation can transform military CPL from a largely administrative function into a student success strategy. The institution's recent efforts illustrate how colleges and universities can expand access to CPL while also increasing the likelihood that awarded credit contributes meaningfully to students' educational goals.

Key Takeaways from National University

- **Institutional Capacity and Leadership.** NU demonstrates how dedicated leadership and investment in institutional infrastructure can accelerate CPL implementation. Building internal expertise, resources, and processes can strengthen institutional capacity to support military learners and expand access to CPL opportunities.
- **Strategic Policy Design.** Institutional policy decisions can significantly influence students' access to CPL. NU's experience illustrates how revisiting existing policies and credit-recognition frameworks can reduce barriers and create new opportunities for military learners without requiring entirely new evaluation systems.
- **Pathway Alignment and Student Value.** Expanding access to CPL is only one part of effective implementation. Ensuring that awarded credit applies to program requirements and academic pathways can increase its potential to support credential attainment, educational efficiency, and student success.
- **Continuous Improvement and Innovation.** Developing meaningful CPL pathways requires ongoing review, coordination, and investment. NU's efforts to expand direct course equivalencies, build military-specific pathways, and improve transparency illustrate how institutions can continuously strengthen the value of CPL for students.



Western Technical College

Western Technical College, a member of the Wisconsin Technical College System, provides a perspective on military CPL implementation within the public technical college sector. Western serves approximately 3,600 students across six campuses in western Wisconsin—near Camp Douglas and Fort McCoy. The institution also serves approximately 800 military students annually, including dependents, reservists, retirees, and active-duty learners. Western's approach to military CPL is shaped by both a supportive state policy environment and a competency-based academic model. Wisconsin state law mandates that all public institutions evaluate military transcripts and award credit consistent with ACE guidelines. At the same time, Western applies military CPL toward program and general education requirements where appropriate, making pathway alignment a central consideration in its CPL practices.

Consistent with its competency-based model, Western places significant emphasis on ensuring that awarded credit contributes to students' academic progress. Military CPL decisions are made in the context of students' academic plans and program requirements rather than simply maximizing the number of credits awarded. This approach is particularly important given federal financial aid regulations that limit attempted credits relative to program requirements. As Dustin Schultz, veteran specialist, explained, "This ensures credits actually progress students rather than just adding credits that don't apply to their program."

Western's evaluation process combines standardized documentation with structured faculty review. The institution uses the Wisconsin Instructional Design System, a statewide repository of course competencies and learning outcomes, to compare military learning with academic requirements. Military CPL staff review JSTs and compare military Terminal Learning Objectives with Western course outcomes. A 70 percent confidence threshold for matching triggers a faculty review request, and faculty provide a yes-or-no decision with written reasoning if credit is denied. Faculty serve as content experts and retain final authority over credit decisions, while CPL staff prepare supporting documentation, ACE exhibits, and equivalency recommendations for review. Once approved, equivalencies remain in place unless military training requirements or course content change. This process combines ACE documentation, faculty expertise, and standardized competency frameworks to support both consistency and academic quality.

The institution's Military Years of Service Agreement provides an additional mechanism for recognizing military learning. Developed collaboratively by the Veteran and Military Student Center and academic leadership, the agreement awards 10 credits

to veterans who achieve specified military ranks (E6 or above for Army and Marines; E4 or above for Navy and Air Force). These credits satisfy general education requirements in areas such as college success, ethics, diversity, and oral communications. According to Jackie Leon, director of veteran services, the agreement was developed using ACE recommendations and aligned with existing general education competencies. Although not adopted statewide, elements of the model have since influenced practices at other Wisconsin technical colleges.

Western has also sought to make military CPL visible and accessible early in the student journey. Students who identify as veterans or service members during the admissions process automatically receive information about military CPL and are connected with the Veteran Center. Through an authorization built into the admissions process, staff can retrieve JSTs and begin evaluations before students enroll, allowing many students to start their programs with military CPL already identified and incorporated into academic planning. This proactive approach reduces barriers for students and helps ensure that CPL opportunities are identified early rather than relying on students to navigate the process independently.

Faculty engagement has been another important component of Western's implementation strategy. Leon described efforts to educate faculty about ACE recommendations and the military CPL process through college-wide training and faculty resources. These efforts have helped build confidence in the evaluation process and increase faculty willingness to establish equivalencies. As Leon explained, "Once faculty understand the process, they become more receptive to creating crosswalks."

Despite these strengths, Western continues to face challenges. Programs leading to professional licensure remain particularly difficult because accreditation and licensing requirements may limit how military learning can be applied, even when faculty identify clear learning equivalencies. Interview participants described situations in which military training aligns closely with course outcomes, yet students are unable to receive equivalent credit because of external requirements. As Schultz observed, students are often "caught between the two"—institutions and licensing boards—when attempting to apply military learning toward licensed professions. Advising coordination reflects a pattern seen across institutions: academic advisors do not evaluate military transcripts directly, and staff turnover creates recurring training needs.

Western's experience demonstrates how military CPL can be embedded into institutional structures, academic pathways, and student support systems. Its competency-based curriculum, faculty-engaged review process, proactive outreach, and emphasis on applying credit toward program requirements provide a compelling example of how institutions can move beyond credit recognition alone and focus on ensuring that awarded credit contributes to meaningful student progress.

Key Takeaways from Western Technical College

- **Policy Foundation and Institutional Practice.** Western demonstrates how state policy can establish a strong foundation for military CPL while still allowing institutions flexibility in implementation. Clear policy expectations can help create consistency while supporting institution-specific approaches that reflect local needs and academic structures.
- **Faculty Engagement and Quality Assurance.** Faculty involvement remains an important component of effective CPL implementation. Structured review processes can help maintain academic quality, build confidence in credit-awarding decisions, and support broader institutional acceptance of military CPL.
- **Pathway Alignment.** Western's experience highlights the importance of aligning awarded credit with program requirements whenever possible. Connecting military learning directly to academic pathways can increase the likelihood that CPL contributes to credential attainment and meaningful student progress.
- **Proactive Student Support.** Early transcript retrieval, proactive evaluation, and targeted outreach can help ensure that military learners understand CPL opportunities and are able to apply awarded credit effectively toward their educational goals.

4. Key Takeaways for Institutional Leaders

State and system policies created favorable conditions for military CPL implementation by establishing expectations, guidance, reporting structures, and recognition of military learning. However, the experiences of SUNY, ODU, NU, and Western demonstrate that effective military CPL implementation depends on how institutions translate these frameworks into practice through pathway design, advising, data systems, faculty engagement, and cross-functional coordination. These four cases show that policy can create opportunities, but institutional action determines how and whether students can take advantage of those opportunities. While institutional contexts vary, the cases point to several common considerations for institutional leaders seeking to strengthen military CPL policies, practices, and student outcomes.

Move Beyond Credit Recognition to Credit Application

Across institutions, a consistent pattern emerged: while policies and systems support the awarding of credit for prior learning, they do not consistently ensure that this credit is applied in ways that advance students' academic progress. Military CPL is widely recognized and increasingly implemented, yet institutions vary significantly in how awarded credit is integrated into degree pathways. Military learners often receive substantial amounts of credit, but the value of CPL is diminished when credits apply primarily as electives rather than toward program requirements.

Institutions are increasingly exploring strategies to align military CPL with majors, certificates, general education requirements, and workforce-relevant pathways. These efforts reflect a broader shift from credit recognition toward credit application as well as a broader limitation in current policy frameworks, which often emphasize credit recognition while providing less guidance or support for how awarded credit is applied within academic programs.

Build Institutional Readiness

Effective implementation of military CPL depends on often complex and evolving coordination across multiple institutional units, including admissions, registrar offices, academic departments, advising, and military and veteran services. While some institutions have established dedicated leadership roles, implementation plans, or cross-functional governance structures to support CPL, others rely on more decentralized or informal approaches.

Institutional experiences suggest that organizational capacity plays a critical role in determining how effectively CPL policies are translated into practice. Leadership support, faculty engagement, professional development, and cross-functional collaboration can help institutions move beyond policy adoption toward sustained implementation.

Support Learner Navigation and Success

Institutional experiences highlight the importance of supporting military-connected learners as they navigate CPL opportunities throughout their educational journeys. While credit may be awarded at the point of entry, students often rely on advisors, veteran-dedicated offices, and other institutional supports to understand how they can use that credit strategically and apply it to their academic goals. Military learners may also face unique navigation challenges due to nonlinear educational pathways, diverse prior learning experiences, complex benefit interactions, and varying levels of prior college experience.

Across the cases, institutions described a range of practices designed to help learners understand and apply their prior learning, including proactive transcript retrieval, transparent transfer pathways, dedicated military and veteran services, Military Guide and pathway tools, clear communication, and advisor training. At the same time, institutions reported internal variation in advising capacity, training, and coordination. In many cases, students remain unaware of CPL opportunities or do not receive consistent guidance on how to use awarded credit effectively. Prior research on student veterans similarly found variation in institutional processes and highlighted the importance of advisors and veteran-serving offices in supporting students through credit recognition processes (Jiang et al. 2021).

These findings suggest that effective military CPL implementation requires more than awarding credit. Clear communication, transparent pathways, advising, and coordinated support systems play important roles in helping learners understand, access, and benefit from CPL opportunities, enabling them to make informed decisions about their educational pathways.

Strengthen Data and Continuous Improvement

Institutions are increasingly tracking participation in CPL, including the number of students receiving credit and the amount of credit awarded. While these metrics provide useful information about implementation, they offer only a partial picture of military CPL's impact. Institutional leaders may also consider how military CPL contributes to learner mobility, credential attainment, time to degree, workforce outcomes, and other indicators of student success. Looking beyond credit awards can also help institutions better understand how military CPL is applied within academic pathways, including whether awarded credit fulfills program requirements, general education requirements, certificates, or other components of students' degree plans.

Measuring these broader outcomes requires stronger institutional data systems and more consistent approaches to tracking CPL participation and outcomes. However, more comprehensive information on persistence, completion, time to degree, workforce outcomes, and other measures remains limited and uneven across institutions. Many institutions are still developing the processes and systems needed to consistently track CPL participation and outcomes, and they vary in how these measures are defined, collected, and reported.

These limitations constrain efforts to assess implementation, compare approaches across institutions, and better understand how CPL relates to student outcomes. ACE and CAEL's national CPL policy analysis similarly identified data collection and evaluation as important components of effective CPL policy design (Soler et al. 2024). As military CPL continues to expand, stronger data infrastructure, shared definitions, and more consistent evaluation practices may help institutions better understand outcomes, identify implementation challenges, and support continuous improvement efforts.

5. Federal Policy Recommendations

Federal investments have played an important role in supporting military CPL adoption across higher education. Through the Joint Services Transcript, military learning evaluations, and related initiatives, the DOD has helped establish a national infrastructure for documenting and recognizing military learning. Institutional experiences suggest that this infrastructure has contributed significantly to the growth and scalability of military CPL.

At the same time, the findings presented in this brief suggest opportunities to strengthen how military learning is translated into academic pathways and student outcomes. The following recommendations focus on areas where federal policymakers and agencies may help support more effective implementation while building upon existing investments and infrastructure.

Strengthen National Learning Recognition Infrastructure

The implementation of military CPL is supported by a unique level of federal investment and standardization, particularly through infrastructure developed by the DOD. This infrastructure has enabled colleges and universities to evaluate military learning at scale with a level of consistency that is uncommon in other areas of CPL. Continued federal investment from the DOD in military learning evaluations and transcript modernization—coupled with support for data collection and research—could further strengthen this infrastructure and improve long-term effectiveness. Institutional representatives consistently identified these systems as important foundations for military CPL implementation.

At the same time, the military CPL ecosystem offers lessons for broader learning recognition efforts across higher education and the workforce. Outside the military context, many forms of prior learning lack comparable systems for documentation, evaluation, and transferability. Federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), should consider how lessons from military CPL can inform federal efforts to strengthen workforce pipelines, industry training, skills recognition, and the

transferability and interoperability of nondegree learning. Whether expanding existing efforts or developing new ones, federal agencies should coordinate these activities to ensure that learning is portable across education and workforce systems.

Build Institutional Capacity for Military CPL Implementation

Institutional experiences suggest that successful military CPL implementation requires more than policies and evaluation frameworks. Leadership support, dedicated staffing, faculty engagement, professional development, and cross-functional coordination all influence whether military CPL policies are translated into effective practice. Across the institutions included in this study, implementation was often supported by dedicated leadership roles, campus planning efforts, faculty review processes, or cross-functional governance structures. These efforts require institutional capacity that may not be equally available across institutions.

Federal policymakers should consider supporting implementation planning and capacity-building initiatives that help institutions strengthen military CPL practices through federal grant programs or other dedicated funding. Such investments could be particularly valuable for institutions serving large military learner populations or seeking to expand CPL implementation.

Support CPL Application to Degree Pathways

Institutional experiences captured in this study consistently suggest that the value of military CPL depends not only on whether credit is awarded but also on how it is applied within academic programs. While existing federal infrastructure effectively supports the recognition and evaluation of military learning, less attention has been devoted to how best to support institutions in aligning CPL with their programs of study.

Federal policymakers should consider strategies that would help support and scale the application of military CPL within academic pathways. Specifically, demonstration projects and technical assistance initiatives could help to support institutions in aligning CPL with degree requirements, certificates, transfer pathways, and workforce-relevant programs. Such efforts could help move military CPL from a recognition-focused model toward one that more consistently supports meaningful student progress.

Invest in Advising and Student Support Systems

Institutional representatives consistently emphasized that advising and student support play a central role in determining whether military CPL contributes to meaningful student outcomes. Even when credit is awarded, students often require guidance to understand how that credit applies to their academic goals, degree requirements, transfer plans, and career aspirations. Military learners may face additional complexities related to military benefits, prior learning experiences, transfer histories, and nonlinear educational pathways. Institutions also reported that many students remain unaware of available CPL opportunities.

Federal policymakers should explore opportunities to support institutions in developing effective advising models, staff training initiatives, student communication strategies, and coordinated support systems designed to help military learners navigate CPL opportunities and make informed academic decisions. This should be integrated with—and build upon—existing DOD investments in programs such as the Transition Assistance Program and SkillBridge. Further, starting as early as recruitment and enlistment, DOD could help service members understand how CPL opportunities align with their military occupational specialty and different academic and workforce pathways.

Build Data and Evidence Systems

More consistent and comprehensive data systems are needed to better understand the impact of military CPL on student outcomes. While institutions increasingly track participation and credit awards, information related to persistence, completion,

time to degree, transfer outcomes, and workforce outcomes remains limited and uneven. The ACE and CAEL 50-state analysis also found that relatively few state and system policies focus on outcomes measurement and evaluation compared to policies that authorize CPL opportunities (Soler et al. 2024).

Federal agencies, including the Institute of Education Sciences and other research and data entities, may consider supporting research, outcome tracking, and the development of more consistent metrics related to military CPL implementation and outcomes. Stronger evidence could help institutions identify effective practices, support continuous improvement efforts, and inform future federal and state policy decisions.

6. Conclusion

Military CPL represents one of the most developed and scalable forms of prior learning recognition in higher education. Federal investments and infrastructure, including the JST and ACE Military Guide, have helped create systems that support the documentation, evaluation, and transferability of military learning across institutions. As a result, military CPL provides an important example of how standardized approaches can support learner mobility and recognition of learning acquired outside traditional academic settings.

At the same time, the institutional experiences highlighted in this brief suggest that awarding credit alone does not ensure meaningful student progress. While military CPL is increasingly recognized and implemented, institutions continue to face challenges related to pathway alignment, advising, organizational capacity, and data systems. These factors play an important role in determining whether awarded credit contributes to degree progress, credential attainment, and other student outcomes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the next phase of military CPL development may require greater attention to implementation as well as recognition. Future efforts may benefit from strengthening pathway alignment, advising and student support systems, institutional capacity, and outcome measurement. Doing so may help ensure that military learners not only receive credit for their prior learning but are also able to use that credit in ways that support meaningful educational and workforce success.

More broadly, military CPL offers valuable lessons for higher education and workforce systems seeking to recognize learning acquired through military service, work, training, and other experiences outside traditional academic settings. Decades of federal investment have helped establish military CPL as one of the nation's most mature models for documenting, evaluating, and recognizing prior learning. The institutional experiences presented in this brief suggest that recognition alone, however, is not enough. Meaningful learner outcomes depend on how institutions translate that national foundation into practice through pathway alignment, advising, organizational capacity, and continuous improvement. As policymakers and institutional leaders continue to strengthen learner mobility and skills recognition, military CPL offers an important model from which broader education and workforce systems can learn, while highlighting the continued importance of investing in both national infrastructure and institutional implementation.

Appendix: Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Data for this brief were collected through semi-structured interviews and a follow-up survey conducted with representatives from four institutions and systems recognized for their efforts to support CPL for military learners. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in April 2026, and a follow-up survey was administered in June 2026 to clarify institutional practices, collect additional contextual information, verify selected data points, and gather participant feedback on emerging findings and policy implications.

Institutions were selected to represent diverse sectors, organizational structures, and approaches to military CPL implementation. The sample included a public university system, public and private four-year institutions, and a public technical college. Interview participants included institutional leaders and practitioners responsible for CPL policy, military and veteran services, enrollment operations, advising, and student support.

Institution	State University of New York	Old Dominion University	National University	Western Technical College
Location	NY (System)	Norfolk, VA	San Diego, CA	La Crosse, WI
Type	Public system, 64 campuses	Four-year, public	Four-year, private nonprofit	Two-year, public (member of the Wisconsin Technical College System)
Interview participants	Ellen Gambino, provost fellow (Overseeing CPL policies at the SUNY system)	Dan Whiting, military services coordinator Leslie Terrell-Payne, director of enrollment operations	Cindi Robinson, credit for prior learning director, Workforce Community Education Teresa Duncan, director, strategic partnerships (military, veterans, and defense industry)	Dustin Schultz, veteran specialist (Veterans Advocacy & Outreach Leader - Military CPL) Jackie Leon, director, veteran services

Interview and Analysis Framework

The interviews and subsequent analysis were guided by several dimensions of effective CPL implementation identified through prior ACE research and project development. Drawing on ACE and CAEL's national landscape analysis of CPL policies (Soler et al. 2024), prior research on military learners and credit for prior learning, and project planning discussions, these dimensions served as a framework for both data collection and qualitative analysis. Interview notes and survey responses were also reviewed using these dimensions as an analytic framework. Findings were synthesized across institutions to identify common themes, promising practices, implementation challenges, and policy implications related to military CPL.

Dimension	Definition	Core Question
Institutional commitment to accepting and applying military CPL	The institution formally recognizes military learning as a valid source of credit for prior learning and has established policies or practices for evaluating and awarding credit based on military training, education, or experience.	Does the institution meaningfully accept CPL for military learning?
Integration of CPL into degree pathways	The institution applies CPL in ways that intentionally support credential completion by aligning awarded credit with program-level requirements where possible.	Is CPL applied in ways that reduce time and cost to degree?
Institutional capacity and ownership	The institution has designated responsibility, processes, and reference frameworks for evaluating and awarding CPL in a consistent and sustainable manner.	Is there a clear, sustainable process for evaluating and awarding CPL?
Clarity and transparency of CPL policies	The institution makes CPL policies accessible and understandable to students and external stakeholders, including information on eligibility, evaluation methods, and application of credit.	Can military learners reasonably understand how CPL works at this institution?
Advising and support for military learners using CPL	The institution provides advising or support structures that help military learners understand and strategically apply CPL toward their educational goals.	Are military learners supported in making strategic use of CPL?
Evidence of learning or use of CPL data	The institution engages in some level of tracking, reflection, or review related to CPL participation or outcomes, recognizing that data capacity varies widely.	Does the institution pay attention to CPL usage and outcomes—even informally?

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