



Credit for prior learning

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Background

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), also known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), is a process used by postsecondary institutions to evaluate and grant formal academic credit for college-level skills, knowledge, and experiences that learners have acquired outside of traditional classroom settings. This can include learning from employment, military training, volunteer service, self-study, and standardized examinations.

Key takeaways from the literature

CPL offers advantages for adult learners and colleges.

For Learners:

- **Expedited Degree Completion and Time Savings:** CPL helps adult learners finish their degrees faster, reducing the time required for completion. Students with CPL may shorten their time to a four-year or two-year degree, depending on the number of credits earned (Lakin et al 2015; Tan 2025).
- **Cost Reduction:** CPL reduces the financial burden of a college education by lowering tuition costs, as students need fewer courses to complete their degree (Klein-Collins 2011).
- **Enhanced Academic Outcomes and Persistence:** Students who earn CPL tend to have better academic outcomes, including higher persistence rates and graduation rates. This positive impact holds true regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age, academic ability, GPA, or financial aid status. Some studies show CPL increasing completion rates by 17% overall, and even more for specific groups like Latinx (24%) and African American (14%) students, thereby helping to close equity gaps (Li & McKay 2015; Soler et al. 2024).
- **Increased Self-Confidence and Empowerment:** The CPL assessment process can boost learners' self-confidence, self-efficacy, and emotional well-being by validating their prior experiences and acknowledging their learning. It offers a “second chance” at college access and provides a sense of self-actualization (Tan 2025).
- **Access and Equity:** CPL provides access, equity, and social inclusion for marginalized adults, helping them improve their lives and career prospects. It is



particularly beneficial for underrepresented minority students, lower-income adults, and students of color (Macmillan et al 2023).

- **Credit Mobility:** CPL allows individuals to be acknowledged and valued within higher education for their learning experiences, regardless of when or where they occurred, creating credit mobility (Tan 2025).
- **Enriched Learning:** The CPL assessment process can enrich learners' academic capabilities and deepen their learning by making them reflect on their experiences and assimilate them into higher education (Tan 2025).

For Colleges:

- **Enhanced Enrollment and Retention:** CPL is a tool to recruit, reengage, and retain adult learners, especially those with some college but no credential. Students who receive CPL credits are likely to take more credits at the institution (Leibrandt et al 2020).
- **Improved Academic Outcomes for Students:** Institutions benefit from CPL through increased student persistence and degree completion rates (Lakin et al 2015; McKay & Douglas 2020a).
- **Increased Revenue:** CPL can generate additional revenue for colleges as it helps attract and retain students (Tan 2025).
- **Adaptation to Diverse Student Populations:** CPL allows colleges and universities to accommodate a more diverse student population, including post-traditional students, veterans, and returning adults with workplace learning (Soler et al 2024).
- **Bridge to Labor Market:** CPL helps bridge academics with the labor market, promoting skill acquisition and economic development (Tan 2025).

Despite its advantages, CPL faces multifaceted challenges that hinder its widespread acceptance and effective implementation in higher education.

- **Low Participation Rates and Inconsistent Adoption:** CPL utilization among learners remains low, and there are significant disparities in CPL adoption and availability across states and institutions. Only a small proportion of students, sometimes as low as 2-10%, take advantage of CPL opportunities even when policies are in place (Tan 2025; Lakin et al 2015).
- **Lack of Student Awareness and Information:** A major barrier is the lack of clear, consistent, and readily available information about CPL options for both potential and current students. Students often learn about CPL by accident or word of mouth, rather than through formal channels (Lakin et al. 2015).
- **Institutional Resistance and Doubts about Rigor:** Many institutions exhibit resistance to CPL due to doubts about the academic rigor of learning acquired

outside traditional classroom settings. Some faculty believe that prior learning cannot substitute for their courses and worry about undermining academic standards or the perception of the institution as a “diploma mill” (Palmer & Nguyen 2019).

- **Faculty Buy-in and Training:** Gaining faculty acceptance and engagement is a persistent challenge. Faculty may be unfamiliar with CPL processes and terminology, or they may question the academic rigor of non-traditional learning. Insufficient professional development opportunities for faculty contribute to their reluctance to evaluate CPL, especially portfolio-based assessments, which they may view as time-consuming or less rigorous (Lakin et al 2015; Palmer & Nguyen 2019).
- **Financial Burden on Students:** Costs associated with CPL, such as portfolio assessments or standardized exams, are often passed on to students through fees. These fees are typically not eligible for federal financial aid, which disproportionately affects low-income students (Soler et al. 2024).
- **Time-Consuming Assessment Process:** The portfolio assessment process, in particular, can be difficult and time-consuming for both students and assessors. This can lead students to prefer taking traditional courses instead (Shelton & Armistead 1989; Palmer & Nguyen 2019).
- **Credit Applicability and Transferability Issues:** Even when CPL is awarded, its utility may be limited. Institutions are more likely to grant elective credit than general education or major core course credit. Additionally, CPL credits earned at one institution are often not recognized or easily transferable to another, complicating students’ academic pathways (Ryu 2013; Soler et al 2024).
- **Defining College-Level Learning:** A significant challenge is students’ (and sometimes advisors’) difficulty in distinguishing between general life or work experience and actual college-level learning. CPL is awarded for demonstrated learning outcomes, not merely for having an experience (Tan 2025).
- **Inconsistent Policies and Procedures:** Policies and practices vary widely from institution to institution, making the process confusing and disjointed for students. Lack of a common lexicon and definitions exacerbates ambiguity among stakeholders (Soler et al. 2024; Brewer & Lakin 2018).
- **Lack of Dedicated Resources and Leadership:** CPL programs are vulnerable without adequate staffing, financial support, and strong, consistent leadership to drive change and secure resources. Many institutions lack specialized advisors or centralized offices for CPL, leading to fragmented support services (Tan 2025; Palmer & Nguyen 2019).
- **Data Tracking Limitations:** Many institutions struggle with or do not adequately track the use of CPL and its impact on student outcomes, making it difficult to

evaluate program effectiveness, access, and equity. This lack of data hinders the ability to understand who is using CPL, how much credit they earn, and its long-term benefits (Tan 2025; Klein-Collins 2011).

- **Subjectivity in Assessment:** Without standardized assessment tools or rubrics, the process of awarding CPL for work-life experiences can be subjective and inconsistent across faculty reviewers. CPL policy needs to include protection against conflict of interest on the part of faculty reviewers (Lewis 2024; Brewer & Lakin 2018).
- **Financial Incentives for Institutions:** Colleges may be wary of awarding CPL due to concerns about lost tuition revenue and state funding tied to full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment (Soler et al 2024; Palmer & Nguyen 2019).

Associated interventions/activities:

To overcome these challenges and ensure CPL's success, the sources highlight several best practices and policy considerations:

- 1) **Establish a Clear Philosophy and Academic Framework:** CPL policy should be grounded in the institution's philosophical and academic framework and consistent with its mission, goals, and approaches to learning. It should have an underlying philosophy and pedagogical framework that is student-centered and acknowledges the continuity of prior learning with current and future learning. Policies should reflect institutional goals and academic priorities and be rooted in the institution's mission and culture, with regular review and refreshment. It is vital that program leads articulate how CPL aligns with the institution's mission and goals, and how it integrates with other institutional policies (Brewer & Lakin 2018; Tan 2025).
- 2) **Ensure Integrity and Quality Assurance:** CPL policy must ensure integrity in the evaluation and documentation of prior learning for all stakeholders. It must adhere to standards from regional, state, and professional accrediting bodies concerning the award of credit for prior learning. Further, policies must ensure fairness, consistency, balance, and flexibility in credit awarding. Colleges should mandate the assurance of college-level learning in all credit awards and acknowledge multiple and diverse sources of student learning, encouraging the use of multiple assessment methods. Policies should also be backed by evidence-based credit recommendations and include a statement of fees or other costs associated with CPL assessment, and assure credit is awarded only once for any individual learning experience. Policies should also assure protection of academic integrity consistent with existing institutional policy, and follow institutional guidelines for academic policy approvals. The confidentiality of



student artifacts and proprietary training materials should also be considered (Brewer & Lakin 2018; Soler et al 2024).

- 3) **Prioritize Faculty Qualifications and Engagement:** CPL policy should assure the involvement of qualified faculty or other subject matter experts. It should include statements on the required qualifications of faculty members who complete credit reviews and make credit recommendations, consistent with other faculty credential guidelines. It should also include protection against conflict of interest for faculty reviewers. This process might begin by building a knowledge base among faculty and staff by articulating the benefits of CPL for both students and the institution (e.g., time and money savings, faster degree completion, improved recruitment). Key faculty and advisors should be involved in planning and program development. The College should also provide institutional incentives for faculty participation, such as covering training expenses or incorporating portfolio evaluations into promotion and tenure processes. It is also important to develop comprehensive faculty training led by internal and external experts, expanding options to include workshops, seminars, one-on-one conversations, and online educational videos (Brewer & Lakin 2018; Tan 2025; Palmer & Nguyen 2019; McKay & Douglas 2020a).
- 4) **Enhance Student Services and Support.** CPL policy should ensure students receive effective services. Eligibility requirements should be clearly articulated. Student advising should be undertaken by qualified and trained personnel, ensuring advisors know what questions to ask and how to follow up with students. Internal processes should also include accurate and timely review of CPL transcripts or other materials and a clearly identified student appeal process. CPL policies should be clear, transparent, widely communicated, and readily available to faculty and students through various tools (e.g., websites, social media, orientation, brochures, posters). Ideally, colleges should employ dedicated personnel, such as prior learning specialists, academic advisors, or veterans' coordinators, who can interact directly with students throughout the CPL process, providing ongoing assistance and mentoring. Colleges should also, where possible, centralize CPL offices or centers to consolidate administrative functions and provide comprehensive support to students. It is also important to alert students to any implications for financial aid as a result of CPL credit awards and to identify any maximum caps on CPL credit awards. Furthermore, it will be necessary to address affordability issues by exploring solutions like reducing CPL fees or providing financial assistance such as CPL scholarships, especially for students dependent on financial aid (Brewer & Lakin 2018; Leibrandt et al 2020; McKay & Douglas 2020a; Klein-Collins 2011).
- 5) **Optimize Credit Management.** CPL policy should clearly identify how credits are organized and applied to student records. Policies should allow credits to be applied to



the full complement of degree requirements: general education, major requirements, major electives, and general electives. CPL credits should be appropriately identified on the student's transcript in accordance with professional association guidelines. CPL policies should be articulated clearly in terms of their relationship to other academic policies, such as transfer of credit. Colleges should consider automating credit granting for certain workforce training or structured work experiences to increase uptake and ensure credits count towards a degree (Brewer & Lakin 2018; Klein-Collins 2011).

- 6) **Focus on Planning, Resources, and Continuous Improvement:** CPL policy must assure current and continuous improvement by providing sufficient infrastructure to support policy implementation. Policies should be regularly reviewed through established institutional processes and revised accordingly. Leadership should encourage structured data collection and analysis, including tracking student benefit and success, and establishing a financial model for cost-benefit analysis. This data should be disaggregated by student demographics to identify and address equity gaps. College must also commit dedicated resources such as staffing and financial support to foster and sustain CPL initiatives from outreach to graduation. These steps will help to build a comprehensive CPL infrastructure that integrates information sharing, services, and faculty engagement (Brewer & Lakin 2018; McKay & Douglas 2020a; Tan 2025).
- 7) **Staged adoption.** In the early stages, it will be important to assess institutional culture to ensure it aligns with and supports CPL initiatives. Strong leadership committed to CPL is crucial for driving change and securing resources. College can then take a “staged” approach to CPL implementation (e.g., emerging, developing, effective stages) to gauge readiness and scaffold professional development. It is also important to create collaborative partnerships with other institutions, industry, and workforce agencies to scale CPL options and capacity. Finally, colleges should review and remove unnecessary policy obstacles or procedures that act as impediments rather than quality assurance controls and work to ensure consistent CPL policy within colleges, across systems, and at the state level regarding credit transfer, fees, and assessment methods (Tan 2025; Leibrandt et al. 2020).

Organizations like the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) have been pivotal in advancing CPL initiatives by developing standards, guidelines, best practices, and resources, as well as advocating for policy changes nationally and internationally. Their work includes evaluating military and corporate training for college credit recommendations, providing technical assistance, and conducting research on CPL's impact (Tan 2025).



Related metrics and indicators:

To assess the success of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) programs, various metrics and outcomes should be considered, focusing on benefits for students, institutions, and broader societal impacts. The key metrics and outcomes for CPL program success are:

- **Student Completion Rates:** This is a frequently cited outcome, with studies showing that students who earn CPL have higher graduation rates compared to those who do not. For instance, a CAEL study of over 62,000 adult students found that 56% of those 25 and older with PLA credit graduated, compared to 21% without it. This benefit is particularly pronounced for lower-income adults, Black adult students, and community college students.
- **Student Persistence/Retention Rates:** CPL motivates students to stay in school and continue working on their degrees, showing higher re-enrollment rates for CPL earners.
- **Time to Degree Completion:** CPL can significantly shorten the time needed for students to earn a degree or certificate. For associate degrees, time saved ranged from about 1 to 7.5 months.
- **Cost Savings for Students:** By reducing the number of courses required, CPL helps lower tuition expenses and overall costs of education.
- **GPA (Grade Point Average):** Studies show CPL earners often maintain higher GPAs than non-CPL students.
- **Student Self-Confidence and Empowerment:** CPL validates students' previous experiences, fosters emotional resilience, and enhances self-confidence, leading to a renewed sense of accomplishment.
- **Enrollment and Recruitment:** CPL can boost enrollment, reengage adult learners, and serve as a recruitment tool, especially as institutions face anticipated declines in traditional-age college students.
- **Equity Gaps Addressed:** Success can be measured by how CPL expands access and reduces equity gaps for underserved populations, including low-income students, students of color, military personnel, and immigrants. This includes tracking CPL usage and outcomes disaggregated by demographics like race/ethnicity, gender, age, disability, veteran status, and income.
- **Institutional Financial Benefits:** Institutions can gain additional tuition revenue from adult students who utilize CPL, as these students are likely to take more credits overall.

Supporting literature

[NOTE: Many of these sources are on file at RPIE as PDFs and can be shared on request]



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