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Strategic Planning for Credit for Prior Learning

A practical guide for colleges to develop and enhance methods to grant credit for prior learning

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health
professions
pathways



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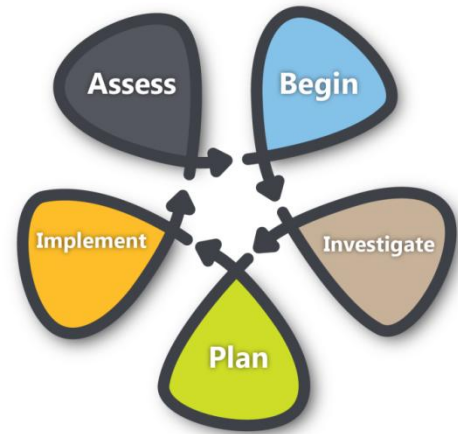
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Strategic Planning for Credit for Prior Learning, Process Graphic



Strategic Planning for Credit for Prior Learning, At a Glance

Use the following outline to conduct a strategic planning process to develop or enhance credit for prior learning (CPL) at your college.



Begin	<p>Establish a CPL planning group. Decide to explore CPL. Invite all stakeholders, and focus on supporters. Recruit champions at the highest levels—president, board of directors, deans—and among faculty. Educate college leaders about CPL, their roles and responsibilities in moving CPL forward, and the importance of CPL for serving students. Early recognition and training of champions will ensure the engagement of other faculty and the students they advise. Demonstrate that CPL contributes to student success and to outreach to underserved populations, including adults and racial minorities.</p>
Investigate	<p>Profile your college. Gather facts about CPL at your own college. How does CPL work now? Start with policies that provide your framework. Describe all procedures. Gather numbers that measure outcomes.</p> <p>Scan your environment. Gather info about CPL nationally. Study the research about benefits of PLA. Get familiar with trends, and with your competitive environment. Look at colleges like yours (serving a similar proportion of adults, other characteristics). Consider moving toward competency-based education.</p> <p>Analyze your situation. How might your college exploit strengths and opportunities around CPL to serve students? Use results of the two steps above—and the college mission, vision, and strategic goals—as input. Consider completing a SWOT analysis. What resources would it take? Where might the resources come from? Gather data on student demand/interest.</p>
Plan	<p>Create an action plan. Allocate resources. Articulate roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Learn about and leverage professional networks. Consider engaging an external consultant, if resources allow. The action plan might have columns to identify Goals, Steps, Measures, Timeline, and Responsible party.</p>
Implement	<p>Implement the plan. Develop new procedures, materials, mechanisms, courses, policies—or adapt other models, or update existing ones. Provide professional development for assessors and all stakeholders. Coordinate efforts. Inform all prospects and students about the program.</p>
Assess	<p>Assess your PLA program. Measure. Monitor. Make sure your CPL offerings remain relevant. Troubleshoot. Revamp.</p> <p>Repeat steps above.</p>

Strategic Planning for Credit for Prior Learning



Step 1: Begin



Establish a CPL planning group. Decide to explore CPL. Invite all stakeholders, and focus on supporters. Recruit champions at the highest levels—president, board of directors, dean. Educate college leaders about CPL, their roles and responsibilities in moving CPL forward, and the importance of CPL for serving students. Early recognition and training of champions will ensure the engagement of other faculty and the students they advise. Demonstrate that CPL contributes to student success and to outreach to underserved populations, including adults and racial minorities.

Since promoting CPL often involves new ways of thinking (like placing a high value on serving adult learners on their terms), plan to provide a lot of training, literature, research, time for discussion, and links to information about national trends and how other colleges are rising to this challenge. It will be difficult to get very far without strong buy-in from college leaders and faculty. Educate college leaders about CPL basics, the importance of CPL for serving students, the contributions CPL makes to improving persistence, retention, and completion (i.e., student success), and the roles and responsibilities carried by college leaders in moving CPL forward. Engaging early with both supporters and detractors could lend long-term strength, since fully engaging with the hard questions will ultimately strengthen your cause. On the other hand, it may be the best choice at your college to focus on rallying supporters because doing something is better than waiting too long for the perfect combination of stakeholders.

Recognize and explain how CPL fits into mission goals such as “outreach to underserved populations” and “student success.” Research has documented that the students most often served by CPL are from minority populations and/or full-time working professionals. Also, since most types of CPL reduce time to completion, student success measures improve.

The initial planning group will focus on short-term goals, such as “Investigate the viability of increasing the use of CPL.” Yet this group and its activities set the stage for what could turn out to be longer-term strategic decisions for your college.



Step 2: Investigate

Investigating has three components. First, investigate your own college's policies, procedures, and practices. Next, scan the environment to find out what's going on elsewhere. Lastly, analyze your situation to determine which opportunities are most compelling, given your circumstances. These steps happen in a mostly linear fashion, yet as you move along, you are likely to need to revisit prior steps. For example, as you learn more about what other colleges are doing, you may have questions about your own CPL programs that you did not ask or answer.



Profile your college's policies, procedures, and practices. Gather facts about CPL at your own college. How does CPL work now? Start with policies that provide your framework. Describe all procedures. Gather numbers that measure outcomes.

Include the following information in your CPL profile:

- Start by learning about the **policies** that provide your framework, at the state, system/district, and/or college level. A surprising number of institutions have policies in place, and they are simply not implemented.
- Describe **procedures** for all types of assessment of CPL. How does it work to get credit based on a CLEP score, or based on military learning, or based on a portfolio? Describe the process both from the perspective of the student, and of the college. Consider constructing a workflow diagram (or two) to illustrate and communicate each of these processes.
- Tell the story of how CPL is actually **practiced** on campus, by gathering numbers that measure outputs and outcomes. For each of the ways in which your college awards CPL (national testing, local testing, military, workforce learning, portfolio, etc.), how many students apply and earn credits? How many credits are attempted and how many earned? How is CPL indicated on transcripts? When your students try to transfer credits awarded by your institution through PLA to other institutions, how successful are they?

Provide context: What is your enrollment? What proportion of your students attends full-time vs. part-time? How many students are in various age groups? How many students are military service members or veterans? What is your mix of online, seated, and hybrid classes, and is that mix the same for students who pursue CPL?

If your campus does not yet track this data (very few do), consider beginning to track it.



Scan your environment. Gather info about CPL nationally. Study the research about benefits of PLA. Get familiar with trends and with your competitive environment. Look at colleges like yours (serving a similar proportion of adults or other characteristics). Consider moving toward competency-based education.

Scan the professional literature for scholarly articles. Important national organizations associated with CPL include CAEL (www.cael.org), ACE (www.acenet.edu), and LearningCounts (www.learningcounts.org). Those in the H2P Consortium can find a large number of related resources posted on our collaboration website, or contact iSeek Solutions for additional help. Look at websites and publications from colleges that are leaders in the field, to learn what is being done now. A list of CPL resources is provided below.

As you are investigating what other colleges do for CPL, be aware that approaches vary widely, according to the needs, history, and priorities of the institution. Many liberal arts programs and colleges strive to be inclusive and broad-minded, and their degree requirements often allow for a great deal of flexibility. Their approach to CPL can reflect these philosophical and curricular orientations. In contrast, two-year (or shorter) programs, especially technical ones, sometimes have very specific curricular requirements, and approach the topic of CPL in a correspondingly proscribed way. Perhaps a greater challenge in using CPL for technical programs of study is the difficulty of accurately assessing informal or external learning in technical skills areas. Often, hands-on learning—even if it is substantial—may be lack theoretical components that are part of most academic courses and programs. Many CPL programs and colleges, regardless of type of institution, take the approach of assessing a student’s knowledge (or prior training) against the established learning objectives of specific courses that are offered at their institutions. Other programs award credit in a more broad-minded way.

A competency-based education approach meshes very well with assessment of prior learning for purposes of granting academic credit. Competency-based education and CPL are strong, mutually-reinforcing trends.



Analyze your situation. How might your college exploit strengths and opportunities around CPL to serve students? Use results of the two steps above, and the college mission and vision, as input. Consider completing a SWOT analysis. What resources would it take? Where might the resources come from? Gather data on student demand/interest.

Look for opportunities that would be relatively simple to implement yet would provide a lot of value (or some value to a lot of students). There are many types of CPL. A college does not have to move forward with them all at once, or ever. There is a tension between simplicity and flexibility—the simplest forms of CPL are also the least flexible. Conversely, the most flexible forms are most complicated to develop and administer. You have to analyze your situation to find where it makes sense for your college to invest. In increasing order of complexity, types of CPL include these:

- Standardized national exams (CLEP, AP, IB, DSST, NOCTI, etc.) (most simple to administer)
- Local exams, specific to your courses and programs
- ACE recommendations for military service and workforce training

- Local evaluation of training options (e.g. non-accredited training from a popular local provider)
- Portfolio or other demonstration (most complicated, but also most flexible)

Gather data on student demand/interest—what types of CPL would work best for the particular population your college serves (or could serve), given the demographics, the occupation and industry mix in your area, and the strengths of your programs?

What types of students are you serving now? What types of students are you trying to serve better? Could some form(s) of CPL help you serve those students better? CPL is often an important part of a package of changes that help a college to better meet the needs of adult learners.



Step 3: Plan



Create an action plan. Allocate resources. Articulate roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders. Learn about and leverage professional networks. Consider engaging an external consultant, if resources allow. The action plan might have columns to identify Goals, Steps, Measures, Timeline, and Responsible party

Many colleges have done very interesting, powerful, and creative work already: learn from them.

One important piece of background to incorporate into your planning is a set of standards of quality, originally developed in 1989, that have been widely accepted and promoted ever since by most CPL practitioners and accrediting bodies. See “Ten Standards for Assessing Learning” at <http://www.cael.org/pla.htm>.)

You might create a project charter to lay out a vision for the group and forge a shared understanding of the group’s commitment and goals.

When you create a plan, strive for transparency and accessibility. The plan might identify specific goals, along with a timeline, steps, measures of success, and responsible parties.

As you decide on the plan and allocate resources, make sure to engage with all the relevant stakeholders, early and often. Stakeholders include:

- College leaders such as deans and chief academic officers
- Faculty and staff who will implement CPL, on both the academic and student services sides of the college, including advisors
- Other key departments—registrars, continuing education and customized training (CE/CT), public affairs and outreach, and institutional research
- External partners such as accreditors, agencies that provide key licenses and certifications to your graduates, and employers

A more complete discussion of CPL stakeholders and their potential interests and roles appears in a subsequent section of this document.



Step 4: Implement



Implement the plan. Develop new procedures, materials, mechanisms, courses, policies—or adapt other models, or update existing ones. Provide professional development for assessors and all stakeholders. Coordinate efforts. Inform all prospects and students about the program.

Establish an official policy document if you are able. Make use of the opportunity to get buy-in at the highest levels.

You will also want to establish an official procedure document if you are able. This is likely to include workflow diagrams—one that describes the process from the vantage point of a student, another from the institution’s point of view. Many steps will be different for each different type of CPL (national tests, local tests, ACE recommendations, portfolio, other). Be sure to describe them all, from start to finish. Identify actors (who are the responsible party), timelines, deadlines, and sources of further information.

Develop and maintain a CPL Handbook for Students. The handbook would explain the who, what, where, why, and how of CPL. Who is eligible? What is CPL? Where does a student go to learn about and apply for CPL? Why would a student pursue CPL? How does a student proceed?

Develop and maintain a CPL Manual for Faculty Evaluators. This manual might simply be a supplement to the handbook for students, with additional information that is needed by evaluators. Why would the college promote CPL? How does offering CPL serve the mission of the college? What are the benefits to faculty members of CPL?

Write content that explains the CPL options, and publish that information in print, on the web, and in social media. Maintain it. Make sure people can find it by navigating and by searching, using language that is in common usage (i.e., avoid jargon and highly specialized language). Promote these options in your outreach at employer sites, information sessions and open-houses, and orientation sessions for new students.



Step 5: Assess



Assess your PLA program. Measure. Monitor. Make sure your CPL offerings remain relevant. Troubleshoot. Revamp. Repeat steps 1-4 above.

At a minimum, collect the basic numeric results. For each type of CPL (methods of assessment), count how many students attempt to earn credit, how many students successfully earn credits, and also how many credits are attempted and earned. This will probably involve collecting disparate data from multiple sources, since standardized testing likely happens in an entirely different way than portfolio assessment, and assessment of military and workforce credits is likely a whole other area.

Some of the questions you may want to ask yourselves include these.

- Are your choices for types of PLA meeting the needs of your particular situation (community, student body, and both certificate and degree programs)?
- Is the process smooth, clear, successful, satisfying? For students? For staff? For faculty? For employer partners, if any? Different stakeholders may have very different perspectives and experiences.
- Can you connect CPL-related efforts with any efforts at your college to move toward competency-based assessment?
- As you have advanced CPL, have you preserved the value of your degrees (or other awards)? How do you measure this?
- Do you have the right level of staff and other resources?
- Are you meeting your goals? If you initially set goals or documented purposes for offering or enhancing CPL, compare the actual results, both quantitative and qualitative, with those goals and/or purposes. For example, does earning CPL have any impact on recruitment/enrollment, retention, persistence, or completion?

Repeat steps 1-4 above. Once you have a report on this program assessment, gather a group of key stakeholders to begin a process of revisiting and potentially revising your CPL offerings. Build a regular assessment of your CPL programs into the calendar, so that you simply do it perhaps every two to three years.

Stakeholder Groups

Beginning and maintaining effective offerings in credit for prior learning requires active participation from a broad array of stakeholders, and coordination and evaluation among an even broader array. These people (and units) need to be brought in early to help develop an understanding of CPL along with everyone else, to contribute their perspective as plans develop, and to shape those plans to meet their group's needs.

Articulate roles and responsibilities. Some stakeholders will be involved broadly, while others will be involved in only certain steps or in only certain types of assessments. Stakeholders might include people and units in these categories:

College leaders

Presidents, directors, regents, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, chief student affairs officers, and deans are all key people who decide the strategic direction of the college, lead and manage others. Their support can make or break any effort to enhance CPL.

Faculty and staff who will implement CPL

- Faculty will assess students and perhaps decide which programs/courses are subject to CPL. Engage with faculty leaders and faculty union(s). Pay attention to which disciplines are and are not engaged, and which disciplines may hold the biggest opportunities for the growth of CPL on your campus.
- Staff will guide students in understanding CPL options and requesting CPL.
 - Academic advising staff will need to recognize students who may qualify for CPL, and assist them in understanding and requesting CPL.
 - Admissions staff will field questions from students who may base their enrollment decisions in part on how much CPL the college is likely to award.
 - Financial aid staff need to know the implications of CPL for students. Students need to know what fees their financial aid can be used to pay and which fees do not qualify.
 - Transfer specialists will need to know how CPL is different from and complementary to course transfer, including how CPL can be used to meet various program and college requirements.
- Your unit that serves veterans will be a very important partner, since serving veterans is relatively easy (and powerful), and using CPL for vets has tremendous momentum among the public and policy-makers.
- Students are obviously key stakeholders for CPL efforts. Work with student groups to identify and prioritize what types of assessment would be most helpful to them. Look for opportunities that make the most sense for your college's particular student population, the common working and learning experiences they've had, and how they match up with the most popular programs of study at your college.

Other key departments within your institution

- Registrar's office will record the decisions and credits. They need solid policies, procedures, and practices so that transcripts can be clearly and consistently interpreted—exactly what credits are granted or waived, and how they apply to various program and college requirements. CPL should be transcribed in a way that facilitates transfer of credit from your institution to a student's next institution.

- Continuing Education and Customized Training (CE/CT) partnerships can add strength in both directions:
 - CE/CT has a stake, since CPL can be a way that students may earn credit through learning derived from non-credit courses.
 - The credit side may be able to leverage CE/CT's strong connections with and knowledge of employers. CE/CT staff members often know about tuition reimbursement policies. The college may use these relationships to recruit students for credit classes, especially with the right CPL policies, procedures, and practices in place.
- Public affairs and outreach departments promote CPL to all students, and as an integral part of service to adult students and veterans. Social media, online, and print materials need to all reflect these options. It is KEY that public affairs staff understand the benefits of these opportunities to students, and communicate those benefits clearly, consistently, and frequently. Make sure to involve staff with outreach responsibilities who are located within a Public Affairs department (perhaps college-wide), and also staff within departments who have outreach roles.
- Institutional research will evaluate how CPL is working at the institution. These efforts will be most successful and useful to all if their concerns are addressed very early in planning, and if the most appropriate data are collected.

External partners

Your college exists in a complex ecosystem. If any of these partners has doubts about your CPL program, the value of your degrees and certificates may suffer. External partners like high schools and workforce centers provide you with a pipeline of students. Employers hire your graduates. Other partners license and certify your graduates and completers.

Resources in Credit for Prior Learning

National Groups with CPL/PLA Expertise (not colleges)

- [American Council on Education](#) (ACE) has a great deal of useful information, focusing on [credit for military training](#), as well as [workforce training](#).
- [Council on Adult and Experiential Learning](#) (CAEL) published a paper with samples of state/institutional policies, focusing on a portfolio-based approach. Also their website provides extensive information, and they offer multiple services and products.
- [LearningCounts](#) is an option used by an increasing number of colleges for portfolio-based assessments.
- [Fueling the Race to Post-Secondary Success](#) is a major research study of interest, from CAEL.
- For this analysis, we include well-established national standardized tests as forms of CPL, such as [AP](#), [CLEP](#), [DSST](#), [IB](#), and [NOCTI](#).
- [PLA Inside Out](#) is an international journal on theory, research and practice in prior learning assessment.

Colleges and Universities Leading in CPL/PLA and CBE

- Among post-secondary institutions in the USA, some of the leaders in CPL are [Empire State College](#) (NY), [Excelsior College](#) (NY), [Ivy Tech Community College](#) (IN), [Thomas Edison State College](#) (NJ), and [University of Maryland University College](#) (MD).
- In Minnesota, CPL leaders include [Metropolitan State University](#) and [Inver Hills Community College](#).
- For competency-based education, look at Capella University's (MN) "[FlexPath](#)" option, Northern Arizona University's "[Personalized Learning](#)" program, Southern New Hampshire University's "[College for America](#)", and University of Wisconsin's "[Flexible Option](#)", and [Western Governors University](#) (UT).

Colleges and Universities with Exemplary CPL Components

- [Anoka-Ramsey Community College](#) (MN) has produced extensive materials to explain their multiple avenues for students to earn CPL.
- [Delaware County Community College](#) (DE) has extensive information on their website.
- [El Centro College](#) (TX) has an online PLA class in Blackboard.
- [Inver Hills Community College](#) (MN) has a course (on D2L).
- [Missouri Community College Association](#) is recently developed a handbook laying out clear policies and procedures.
- [Northern Virginia Community College](#) (VA) has a detailed manual and website, detailed procedures, including course equivalencies for multiple types of CPL.
- [Rochester CTC](#) (MN) has a great video, and great procedures, too.
- Many, many more. This list is a sampling, not meant to be exhaustive.

CPL Resources from Health Professions Pathways (H2P) Consortium

As part of the work of the H2P Consortium funded by a TAACCCT grant from US DOL ETA, iSeek Solutions has created a number of related documents that might be helpful.

- Creating a Profile of CPL at Your College (document, and a recorded webinar www.vimeo.com/68612289)

- [PLA Glossary](#)
- [PLA Self-Assessment](#)
- [PLA Tracks](#)
- [PLA Types](#)

Glossary, Including Acronyms

ACE	American Council on Education. ACE is a national, non-profit organization serving higher education, and is the primary organization providing credit recommendations for military learning, workforce training, and certifications, widely used in colleges and universities throughout the United States. http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Lifelong-Learning-Resource-Center.aspx .
CAEL	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. CAEL is a national leader in PLA, especially portfolio-based PLA. www.cael.org CAEL and ACE are partners in the important project, www.learningcounts.org
CLEP	College Level Examination Program. CLEP is a program of the College Board, providing an array of standardized tests allowing students to demonstrate knowledge for purposes of placement and earning credit. http://clep.collegeboard.org
CPL	Credit for Prior Learning. The term is often equivalent to “Prior Learning Assessment,” or PLA. CPL is the academic credit that may be granted as a result of an assessment process; PLA is the assessment process.
DANTES	Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support is “a [Department of Defense] organization created to help Service members pursue their educational goals and earn the degrees or certification they deserve while continuing to serve their country.” DANTES offers DSST as a way for service members to demonstrate learning for purposes of earning credit. Sometimes when people say “DANTES” in the context of CPL, they are talking about DANTES’ DSST testing in particular. http://www.military.com/education/timesaving-programs/defense-activity-for-non-traditional-education-support-dantes.html
DSST	“An extensive series of examinations in college subjects that are comparable to the final or end-of-course examinations in undergraduate courses. ACE recommends three college credits for each examination.” http://www.military.com/education/timesaving-programs/dantes-dsst-exam-list.html
IB	International Baccalaureate. Many secondary (and some primary) schools use an “IB” certified curriculum. Students generally take an entire high school IB program, but some take just some of the IB courses. These courses conclude with standardized exams that can be assessed for (correlated to) college credits. www.ibo.org
NOCTI	NOCTI is a leading provider of technical competency assessments for secondary and post-secondary educational institutions. (They no longer spell out the name for which “NOCTI” used to be an acronym.) www.nocti.org
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment. The process at a college or university of assessing a person’s learning, to decide whether that learning merits academic credit that can be applied toward a specific program. The term is mostly equivalent to “Credit for Prior Learning,” or CPL. In Canada, the term “Recognition of Prior Learning” (RPL) holds favor. Sometimes (but not usually), people in the U.S. use this term to refer only to portfolio-based PLA, in contrast to test-based CPL. PLA is not about transferring college credits from one institution or program to another—that’s called “ transfer ”. Nor is PLA just about placement .

SWOT

SWOT analysis is a structured planning method used to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats involved in a project or business venture.

VCN

Virtual Career Network. VCN is a USDOL-funded website that offers a CPL tool/interface that students can use to look up ACE credit recommendations for their formal training and certifications. www.vcn.org