CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Executive Summary

Credit for prior learning or CPL is a term for various methods that colleges, universities, and other education or training providers use to identify, evaluate, and formally recognize prior college-level learning that has occurred outside of the traditional academic environment such as work, life, or military experience. It is used to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training as along as the student can prove competence in a topic or subject (Baker et al., 2021; Delleville, 2019; Palmer et al., 2021; Sherron et al., 2021; Van Os, 2017).

Students are usually but not always older adults with work experience, families, and other responsibilities outside of work (Baker et al., 2021; Snyman & Van den Berg, 2018). In CPL, students must show that college-level learning that has taken place outside post-secondary institutions deserves to be awarded college credit. The focus on competencies rather than seat time means that it demonstrates and measures how well students have mastered the knowledge and skills tied to specific course or program learning outcomes. The point is that what students know and can do is more important than where or how they acquired the knowledge (Baker et al., 2021; Delleville, 2019; Sherron et al., 2021; Van Os, 2017).

By awarding credit for prior learning, CPL saves learners time and money on their way to a college degree because they do not have to retake courses teaching material they already know, thus improving college affordability. On average, adult degree earners with 12 or more CPL credits save 9 to 14 months. Adult students who earned CPL saved $1,500 to $10,200 in tuition dollars (Baker et al., 2021; Delleville, 2019; Palmer et al., 2021; Sherron et al., 2021; Van Os, 2017). The CPL process of reflecting on past learning is often a positive experience that improves adult students' confidence in themselves as learners. They feel more capable and are proud of their accomplishments, further motivating them to persist and complete their courses of study (Baker et al., 2021; Delleville, 2019; Palmer et al., 2021; Sherron et al., 2021; Van Os, 2017).

The process of CPL begins with validation of prior learning. Validation means that institutions examine evidence to see if a student's non-academic learning has met the criteria for college-level learning. PLA is delivered through national standardized exams, institutionally developed assessments, and credit recommended for work experience and training). Working with a college, university, or other training provider, students can earn credit through three broad methods:
- Credit by examination
  - High school and early college
    - AP exams
    - CLEP exams
    - DSST exams
    - NOCTI exams
  - Early and later college
    - Institutional challenge exams
- Credit recommendations
  - ACE credit recommendations
  - NCCRS credit recommendations

The majority of college-level learning assessment methods involve credit by examinations offered in a variety of formats: the AP and CLEP exams offered by The College Board, the DSST exams, and NOCTI exams. In addition, universities often create comprehensive in-house exams called "challenge exams" that take the form of tests developed by college faculty that serve as proof for work or life learning or for training outside of college. In most of these cases, universities have policies that tell students ahead of time which exams will be accepted for how much credit and which courses they replace (Baker et al., 2021; Delleville, 2019; Palmer et al., 2021).

Institutions can also award credit for training and credentials that meet the learning objectives of a degree program based on an institution's evaluations or on recommendations provided by national organizations that evaluate training offered by employers or the military like the American Council of Education's (ACE) evaluation of military and other learning and the National College Credit Recommendation Service's (NCCRS) evaluations of corporate learning. A college credit recommendation is an academic advisement about the comparability of a learning experience to college-level instruction, the amount of credit that may be awarded, and areas where credit could apply. The credit recommendations are intended to guide college officials as they consider awarding credit to persons who have successfully completed learning experiences (Baker et al., 2021).

In portfolio assessment, faculty award credit as appropriate for evaluation of a student's portfolio or a demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and noncredit activities. Portfolios require students to reflect on their learning, assemble evidence of their knowledge and skills, and make the case that this learning is equivalent to college-level content. Portfolios are evaluated by faculty members with appropriate subject matter expertise to determine whether and how much credit is to be awarded (Baker et al., 2021; Palmer et al., 2021; Sherron et al., 2021).

CPL is based on the following three propositions according to Van Os (2017):
1. CPL are evaluated for academic quality by faculty members from the respective discipline and who decide whether or not a student has shown mastery of those competencies listed as course or program outcomes.
2. CPL will be evaluated for academic rigor, meaning that prior learning is evaluated for all competencies listed on established rubric for program outcomes.
3. CPL is evaluated for academic acceleration, that is, whether prior learning experiences can be applied to degree completion requirements at the university.

Many post-secondary institutions offer a variety of non-credit programs for their students, local business and industry, and community members. These are programs designed to provide enrichment for community members or professional development for business and industry employers. In addition, courses also serve to prepare candidates for professional certification exams or provide initial workplace and occupational training. Community colleges often emphasize career and technical skill development whereas 4-year universities focus more on business, management, and advanced technical skills.

Courses tend to be career advancement courses, customized courses for teams of employees, executive training programs, certification courses, certification exam prep courses, training in high-need areas, workshops that enhance job skills and meet state and national requirements for re-licensure, and anything customized geared toward a specific industry's development goals and objectives. Some of these courses might be open to the adult population at large.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on suggestions from the research literature and from comparisons with selected peer institutions for USM. The selected peer institutions are these:
- University of Alabama at Birmingham
- University of Louisiana at Lafayette
- University of Memphis
- Wichita State University
- Northern Illinois University

List of recommendations:
1. Separate CPL for traditional college programs from the development of executive and professional training programs.
2. Create a website that offers complete information about CPL options, policies, and processes, unites all information in one place, and is easily accessible to students. Create a similar website for executive/professional education.
3. Review policies and procedures for CPL to ensure they are clear, complete, and consistent.
4. Use the CPL Implementation Guide in the appendix to create a comprehensive CPL policy and process.
5. Create a CPL Student Handbook. (See appendix for example).
6. Create a 1cr 8-week online course for all students interested in applying for CPL. In this course, students will learn about different types of CPL and prepare their materials for evaluation.
7. Promote the CPL program and its options (CLEP exams, AP exams, DSST exams, NOCTI exams, institutional challenge exams, credit for professional licenses, ACE recommendations, NCCRS recommendations) to all USM campus units.
8. Include CPL information in the training for advisers, recruiters, admissions officers, and others as deemed necessary. Instruct advisers and recruiters to mention CPL options to potential students.
9. Accept the following CLEP exams that are accepted by at least four of our peer institutions but that USM currently does not accept:
    a. Humanities
    b. Human Growth and Development
    c. Introductory Psychology
    d. Natural Sciences
    e. French I and II
    f. German I and II
    g. Spanish I and II
    h. Any other CLEP exams as deemed appropriate.

10. AP
    a. Do not make any changes to the number of AP courses currently accepted.
    b. Start allowing placement into advanced courses for qualifying AP scores.
11. DSST
    a. Expand the current USM CPL policy to accept DSST exam for CPL credit for all students
    b. Accept the following DSST exams that are accepted by at least 2 of 3 of our peer institutions but that USM currently does not accept:
        i. Art of the Western World
        ii. Astronomy
        iii. Environmental Sciences
        iv. Introduction to Business
        v. Introduction to Geography
        vi. Lifespan Developmental Psychology
        vii. Money & Banking
        viii. Personal Finance
        ix. Principles of Finance
        x. Criminal Justice
        xi. Introduction to World Religions
        xii. Fundamentals of College Algebra
        xiii. Foundations of Education
        xiv. Any other DSST exams as deemed appropriate.
12. NOCTI
    a. Give all colleges, schools, departments, and programs the opportunity to award CPL credit for NOCTI exams at their discretion
    b. All colleges, schools, departments, and programs decide the following individually:
        i. Which NOCTI exam categories to accept.
        ii. Which exams from each subject area and exam category to accept.
        iii. How much credit to award for each individual NOCTI score received. (They may accept the NOCTI recommendation [see example on previous page] or devise their own calculations.)
        iv. How many total credit hours may be replaced with NOCTI exam credit.
13. Challenge Exams
    a. Encourage the use of challenge exams across departments and programs.
    b. Promote the use of challenge exams and encourage each college, school, department, and program to decide if they wish to offer challenge exams and, if yes, for which courses.
    c. Develop a clear, consistent, and comprehensive challenge exam policy and process based on CACE recommendations. This policy must be binding for all campus units.
    d. Uses the CACE standards listed above as a guide to developing the process of evaluating challenge exams.
    e. Decide on a consistent nomenclature (challenge exams, assessment exams, validation tests, advanced credit exams, proficiency exams, etc.) as each peer

institution appears to prefer a different term. Insist that the chosen nomenclature be used consistently.

14. Credit for Professional Licenses and Certificates
    a. Allow all colleges, schools, departments, and programs the possibility to award college credit for professional certifications and licenses.
    b. Promote awarding credit for professional certifications and licenses to each unit.
    c. Encourage each college, school, department, and program to decide if they wish to award credit for professional certifications and licenses and, if yes, for which courses and for how much credit.

15. ACE Recommendations
    a. Accept ACE credit for workplace training, apprenticeships, certification exams, and other experiential learning outside the military, also referred to as corporate ACE credit recommendations.
    b. Convince industry partners to work with ACE so that they become one of the organizations whose in-house training is reviewable by ACE.
    c. Promote accepting ACE credit to each unit.
    d. Department chairs or deans must approve substituting ACE credit for courses in academic programs.

16. NCCRS Recommendations
    a. USM should not yet begin to accept NCCRS credit.
    b. USM should investigate and learn about the NCCRS process and then decide if recommendations might be accepted.
    c. Convince industry partners to work with NCCRS so that they become one of the organizations whose in-house training is reviewable by NCCRS.
    d. Department chairs or deans must approve of substituting NCCRS credit for courses in academic programs.

17. CAEL
    a. Considering the comparatively low cost of membership at $1,750 annually, have USM become a CAEL member.
    b. Use CAEL's expertise to plan and implement a campuswide program that is clear, consistent, easy to navigate for students, and provides processes for applying for and being granted credit for prior learning.
    c. Have CAEL help USM develop a way to translate stackable micro-credentials into college credit.
    d. Have CAEL help the Executive Education unit on the Gulf Park campus to develop sustainable programming that is responsive to industry needs.
    e. Adhere to CAEL Standards for assessing and recognizing prior learning.

18. Involve each affected campus unit (colleges, schools, departments, programs) in the decision of whether to accept new credit examinations, create new challenge exams, or accept credit recommendations.
    a. Each unit decides which courses may be replaced with credit exams or recommendations and howe much credit may be awarded.
    b. All units have the right to decline to accept additional or new CPL.

19. Executive/Professional Education

a. Decide whether to offer course topics already popular among peer institutions or topics not commonly offered.
b. Inquire with businesses on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to find out about their needs and about whether USM might be able to help them meet those needs.
c. Work with professional organizations like HRCI, SHRM, PMI, and others that offer professional certifications to gauge whether USM can become a provider for certification exam preparation courses. Possible certification exam preparation courses are these:
    i. SHRM
    ii. PMP
    iii. HRCI
    iv. Payroll FPC/CPP
    v. Support Professional Certification
d. Work with the above professional organizations to investigate which programs may be offered for CEUs from these organizations.
e. Investigate other avenues for offering professional CEUs.
f. Decide on the best length of initial programs and courses. Use peer institutions as a guide.
g. Decide on the pricing for initial programs and courses. Use peer institutions as a guide.
h. Create a website that unites all information about executive/professional education in one place. Many universities have their non-credit offerings spread over multiple campus units, and different pages offer inconsistent or even contradictory information on the same subject.
i. Take advantage of CAEL's expertise and work with CAEL specialists in developing a process that does the following:
    i. Determine which type and how many CEUs can be offered for specific programs.
    ii. Provide learners will clear and unambiguous information and language about which CEUs and badges can be converted to college credit: What is the process? How much credit for each CEU and badge? Where will the credit be applied? How will CEUs/badges be documented? How will the credit conversion be documented?
    iii. Ensure that courses offering CEUs conversion to college credit truly teach and assess college-level material.
    iv. Ensure that the conversion of CEUs and badges to college credit does not lead to problems with SACSCOC accreditation and other professional accreditations for programs.