

## Driving Enrollments and Completion: The Value of Accepting PLA for Colleges



Acceptance of prior learning may mean institutions make less money per student, but it will drastically increase the number of students coming in the door.

*Enrollment numbers are falling and institutions are scrambling to serve the massive market of non-traditional students, but have not been overwhelmingly successful. The biggest roadblock for these students is the cost of a postsecondary education and the time to completion. But what if there was a way to minimize these concerns? Acceptance of Prior Learning Assessments (PLA) along with recognition of other forms of non-academic learning is the answer. In this interview, Ed Klonoski shares his insights on the value of improving recognition of prior learning, not just for students, but for the institution as well.*

[Click here to read key takeaways.](#)

**The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why is it so important for colleges and universities to do more to accept and award credit for non-collegiate learning?**

**Ed Klonoski (EK):** The reason for awarding college credit for non-collegiate learning is to accelerate degree attainment and reduce the total cost of college. And make no mistake. Non-collegiate learning represents one of the most dramatic ways to accomplish both increased degree attainment and lower costs.

Over 40 percent of higher education students are over the age of 24 and attend college part time. That is twice the number of traditional-age students attending full time and living on campus. In other words, the traditional myth about who is attending college is upside down. And all of those adult students come to college having had learning experiences—both formal and informal—associated with their employment and their hobbies. The degree completion

colleges—Charter Oak State College, Thomas Edison College, Excelsior College, Granite State College, Empire State College, and others—have been using assessment to uncover prior learning that is equivalent to college coursework and giving those students college credit for what they learned outside of a college classroom (PLA). And we have been doing this for over 40 years. This learning is generally referred to as non-collegiate learning, although the name is unfortunate because the learning is very much college level. It just didn't happen in a college classroom.

For students, the costs for portfolios and tests—the two dominant methods for converting non-collegiate learning to college credit—are respectively one half and one quarter of the cost of a course at Charter Oak State College. This impressive ratio will hold up anywhere that you compare course cost to PLA costs. And the third method for gaining college credit for non-collegiate learning—credential assessment—is even less expensive. The American Council on Education (and most of the degree completion colleges) assesses credentials to discover if they are equivalent to college credit. For example, in Connecticut, we put together a team of faculty to assess our state police training course, a six-month, full-time training program, and established that it is the equivalent of over 30 specific undergraduate credits. When a student transfers in an assessed credential, there is only a small credit banking fee to add those credits to their transcript. This is the most dramatic and least expensive way to build a transcript. And the number of assessed (and not yet assessed) credentials from the marketplace is enormous.

Finally, here is the rough math: For every 10 courses an adult student gains credit for through PLA, they save enough money to pay for more than five traditional courses.

### **Evo: How do institutions benefit from improving acceptance of non-collegiate, experiential learning?**

**EK:** First, when institutions validate the learning that students bring with them, they send those students the message that the college is focused on learning not revenue. On the other hand, adult students who are required to take courses that focus on materials they have already mastered cannot help but take a cynical view of the institution. When institutions help students discover what they already know, and then show them how to avoid the costs and the time associated with re-learning that material, they brand themselves as learning institutions.

Second, a [large study by CAEL](#) discovered that students with PLA credits on their transcripts persist and graduate at higher rates than those without PLA credits. So institutions can increase their retention and graduation rates for adult students if they encourage the use of non-collegiate learning for credit.

The downside, of course, is that institutions make less money from PLA than from coursework, but that should be offset by the higher rate of retention and graduation. PLA is sort of like a loss leader product at a grocery store.

### **Evo: What are the most significant roadblocks to the wider acceptance of non-collegiate learning?**

**EK:** In a word, it is the difficulty of getting institutions to acknowledge that learning which occurs elsewhere (and this includes transfer credits) can and should be “counted” at their institution. By the way, this is not a problem of institutions not understanding what non-collegiate learning is. Many academic programs publicize the rates at which their graduates pass non-collegiate licensure exams, and these exams are an external assessment of collegiate learning. So operationalizing the reverse—assessing and counting collegiate learning from non-collegiate sources—is not intellectually difficult. But it does cut against the dominant cultural expectation that students will take classes from professors at the institution in question. Reducing the dominance of that myth is the challenge that must be overcome before PLA will expand.

### **Evo: What will it take for acceptance and recognition of non-collegiate learning to become widespread across higher education?**

**EK:** There are two ways this could happen. The first is why I am writing this article and sharing my thoughts on the matter. If more institutions come to understand adult students and the value to them of having their non-collegiate learning assessed and accepted for credit, the sooner the necessary changes can happen.

But the more likely driver for change is the ability of the degree completion colleges to dramatically increase their adult enrollments at time when most schools are fighting an enrollment decline. For example, in this academic year, Charter Oak increased its enrollment 38 percent in no small part because of our ability to empower adult students to use all their prior learning—including transfer credits—toward a Charter Oak degree. I believe that higher education, like most long-established industries, is vastly better at imitation than innovation, and so when non-collegiate learning begins to drive financial success for a set of institutions, the rest will seek to imitate that process in order to gain the same success.

*This interview has been edited for length.*

-----

### *Key Takeaways*

- Recognizing and accepting prior, non-academic learning has massive cost and time-to-completion implications for students.
- Students with PLA credits on their transcripts persist and graduate at a higher rate than those without, suggesting that institutions can improve their performance outcomes by more widely recognizing non-academic learning.
- Allowing adults to use all their prior learning toward a credential can have a significantly positive impact on enrollments.