

PLA and Competency Override Need for Traditional Degrees



As prior learning, competency and experiential learning gain more weight, traditional degrees are losing their monopoly as pathways to career success and progress.

The traditional pathway to a degree is quickly becoming untenable. Working adults have neither the time nor the money required to obtain a degree in the traditional way. Yet, the question of how adult students and employees may advance their careers without formal degrees still depends on the corporate culture and the willingness of employers to embrace alternative pathways to learning. If employers begin to recognize badges, or other evidence of knowledge and skill attainment, in lieu of or in tandem with degrees, educational pathways will inevitably change. Until such a transformation college credit and degrees still provide the currency needed for employees and students to advance their careers.

Fortunately, there are many post-traditional pathways for students to explore and a growing indication that employers will support such pathways. A 2011 survey by the Zogby organization of more than 700 chief and senior executive officers and small business owners nationwide indicated strong support for alternative pathways to earning college credit. Greater acceptance of credits transferred from one institution to another (74 percent), recognition of credit earned by examination (69 percent), recognition of credit through evaluated military training programs (65 percent) and recognition of credit through evaluated corporate or industry training programs (63 percent) were seen as ways to help reduce the cost of a college education.

1. College Partnerships

In many cases, the power to help employees advance and obtain degrees lies with the employer and professional credentialing associations. Business and industry leaders need to consider the low cost and high value of having their existing training programs and credentialing exams evaluated for college credit. Institutions dedicated to adult learners, like Excelsior College, will provide an evaluation at low or no cost for direct articulation into a degree

program, as well as offer a discounted enrollment option for employees.

2. Free or Low Cost Courses and Test-Out Options

Students can tap into open, free or low-cost professional development and other college-level courses offered in online platforms. Many sponsors of such learning, like Saylor.org and StraighterLine, have created multiple pathways to credit through college partnerships. Some specific Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can even be used as study resources for college-level credit by examination programs such as UExcel.

3. Prior Learning Assessment Options

One of the challenges facing students who seek credit for their prior learning is that they often must enroll in an institution to find out just how much credit they are due. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's LearningCounts.org offers an alternative online PLA option that enables students to produce a portfolio of their learning which can be translated into credit or competencies for use by employers and colleges.

Conclusion

Students often need a way to capture all of their non-traditional and traditional learning on one document for their employer to use to determine advancement potential or to transfer to a regionally accredited college. Credit bank options, like Excelsior's OneTranscript®, offer students this option and do not require matriculation.

At the end of the work day, what really matters is whether employees have the applicable knowledge and skills needed for success, not where or how they acquired such learning. A combination of open courses, credit for workplace training programs and prior learning assessment options make career advancement and degree completion more accessible than ever before.