



*Brief #1 in a series on strategies for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) grantees and other educators.*

## PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT PRACTICE BRIEF

The Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College Career Training (TAACCCT) program is providing nearly \$2 billion in funds to build the capacity of the nation's community colleges. Grantees are using the funds to expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career training programs that can be completed in two years or less, are suited for workers who are eligible for training under the Trade Adjustment Assistance for Workers program as well as other adults, and prepare program participants for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations. This practice brief explores TAACCCT grantees' use of Prior Learning Assessment to accelerate credential attainment for adult students who have considerable work experience.

## OVERVIEW

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), or Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), is one of the key acceleration strategies for TAACCCT at community colleges across the nation—out of 256 grantees, 181 (70 percent) included CPL strategies in their proposals. PLA enables incumbent workers and unemployed adults to earn a credential quickly, in some cases in a few months, meeting both their need to get into the workforce quickly and employers' need for skilled workers.

A recent webinar hosted by the TAACCCT Learning Network highlighted the work of three grantees that have made significant efforts to advance PLA: Northeast Mississippi Community College (NMCC), Southwest Wisconsin Technical College (SWTC) and the Gulf Coast IT Consortium; and subject matter experts from the National College Transition Network (NCTN). (View the webinar at [“Implementing Effective Acceleration Strategies: Prior Learning Assessments—A Critical Strategy for Adult Learners.”](#))<sup>1</sup> Vice President of Instruction at NMCC Rilla Jones and NCTN Career Pathways Director Sandy Goodman shared best practices for implementing PLA, such as awarding credit for college-level knowledge and skills gained from experience, rather than the experience itself, and described various ways to award CPL, such as standardized and challenge exams, evaluation of military training, and portfolios. They also highlighted key things to consider when getting a PLA program off the ground, such as policies and procedures, marketing of PLA, involvement of faculty in assessments, and data collection. All speakers stressed the importance of having clear policies in place and engaging faculty early in the process of developing CPL assessment procedures. According to Louise Bradley, Credit for Prior Learning coordinator at SWTC, “Getting the faculty buy-in . . . was a big key for us. And we had some good discussions around how to do that. For us it was getting them involved in the planning process early.”<sup>2</sup> Many also emphasized the role of navigators, coaches, advisors, and faculty in helping to promote PLA more broadly and in engaging noncredit workforce and adult education students in the process to validate their knowledge and skills.

*“In the past four years, we have seen a boom in PLA being offered and advertised at two-year colleges across the nation as a direct result of the mission and funding from the TAACCCT grant.”*

— Donna Younger, associate vice president for higher learning at the Council for Adults and Experiential Learning (CAEL)<sup>3</sup>



## COLORADO HELPS ADVANCED MANUFACTURING PROGRAM (CHAMP)

Colorado is using Round 3 TAACCCT funding to support a statewide approach to developing PLA for its 13 community colleges. After significant research into best practices, collection of local baseline data, and a statewide survey of existing PLA practices, a committee was formed to redesign and reinvigorate PLA credit offerings across the state. The committee produced Colorado's new state policy, which is based on Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) principles. Colorado's statewide implementation plan formalizes procedures and increases faculty engagement and training. The development of a state system for PLA reduces costs and duplication of efforts across Colorado's community colleges. The system office established course "crosswalks" and created an online system to make PLA policies and processes simpler and transparent for students and faculty. A website created with TAACCCT funds by the Colorado community college system (CCCS), PLACredit.com, will be launched in February 2016 to be used by students to determine what prior learning they could be eligible to receive credit for. The website is designed to help recruit adult students and ease their introduction to campus while giving advisors up-to-date PLA information.

Bitsy Cohn, Colorado's director of Credit for Prior Learning, stated that they are working toward "a significant increase in the number of students receiving PLA credit each year across CCCS. We believe that the focus on making the system accessible to students and staff will encourage the shift in culture we seek to make PLA credit a premier strategy for recruitment, retention and completion for our adult students."<sup>4</sup>



*SAMI Welding Program—New England Institute of Technology graduate Rebecca Lee as a student in the welding lab. She now works at Electric Boat in Quonset, RI.*

## PLA SUPPORTS RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND COMPLETION

Until recently many leaders in education were hesitant to use PLA, fearing that it would mean a lot of empty classroom seats and possible damage to the reputation of regional accreditation. Advancements in PLA at educational institutions, combined with research from CAEL, suggest that the opposite is true. CAEL's 2010 study, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*, found that adults who receive college credit for what they know are two and a half times more likely to attain their degree than those who do not. This statistic jumps to eight times more likely for minorities.<sup>5</sup> A 2013 Gallup Poll commissioned by the Lumina Foundation showed 75 percent of Americans said they would be more likely to return to school if they received college credit for what they already know.<sup>6</sup> These findings demonstrate that PLA aids in retention and recruitment efforts.

A recent article from a local online news source in Chippewa Valley describes the impact PLA had on Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) graduate Lisa Keyes: "Through the compilation of a series of professional portfolios, Keyes demonstrated that during her nearly 25 years of employment she has developed the knowledge and skills needed to earn 12 CPL credits in the Business Management program." Because Keyes attended school part-time for many years while working full-time and raising children, the prior learning credits meant that she graduated a year and a half earlier than she had planned. She later said, "Now you see why I'll be doing cartwheels across the [commencement ceremony] stage."<sup>7</sup>

Additional examples of PLA policy and further information can be found at:

- [Council for Adult & Experiential Learning](#)
- The Lumina Foundation "[Strategy Labs](#)"
- [The Prior Learning Assessment Handbook](#), written by Nan L. Travers as part of a project with Achieving the Dream for members of the Northeast Resiliency Consortium, a TAACCCT Round 3 grantee.

*Results of the [TAACCCT-funded] pilot were so positive we decided to expand the service across the college."*

— President Bruce Barker, Chippewa Valley Technical College

## HOW TAACCCT IS ADVANCING THIS STRATEGY

Over the four rounds of TAACCCT, the Department emphasized CPL and PLA as important acceleration strategies, resulting in approximately 70 percent of TAACCCT grantees pursuing them. For many, this focus has resulted in changes at the institutional level, and for others it has resulted in changes across community college systems.

Joel Simon, vice president at CAEL, talks about how PLA has been furthered by TAACCCT nationwide:

*“By emphasizing the assessment of work-based and experiential learning, the TAACCCT program recognizes that short-term upskilling and longer-term credentialing are not mutually exclusive. By building capacity to conduct Prior Learning Assessment, the Department of Labor has enabled community colleges and their partners to address immediate needs and help workers move faster along the path to college degrees that will be increasingly important as our economy evolves.”<sup>8</sup>*

CVTC President Barker reminds us that two-year colleges need to adapt to the ever-faster rate of technological change. Advancements of technical lifecycles combined with the life expectancy of products becoming shorter means that workers' skills need to be constantly updated. Giving adult learners the opportunity to acquire credit for their prior learning helps make returning to school seem possible.



*Hawkeye Community College students building a pneumatic circuit to prepare themselves for real-life experiences they'll face in an industrial automation career.*

## CHIPPEWA VALLEY TECHNICAL COLLEGE MODEL

PLA was a significant strategy for accelerating the pace of completion for adults entering the Bridges2Healthcare program, a Round 1 TAACCCT-funded initiative of Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) in Wisconsin. As part of its TAACCCT efforts, the college took on a complete remodel of the credit for prior learning policy and procedures at CVTC. TAACCCT funds supported a part-time credit for prior learning coordinator and compensated faculty for creating competency/performance-based assessments that would speak directly to adult learners. These changes, combined with the hands-on work of the credit for prior learning coordinator to vet student candidates, contributed to increased rates of retention and completion at CVTC. Cherrie Bergandi, executive dean of general education, shared that prior to the creation of new assessments and a portfolio template, the passing rate for PLA proficiency exams was around 20 percent. As of September 2015, that passing rate was 92 percent.<sup>9</sup>

CVTC President Bruce Barker is an advocate for Prior Learning Assessment and knows that workforce demands create a greater need for adult learners to develop their skills. When asked where CVTC is headed next, Barker observed, “Results of the [TAACCCT-funded] pilot were so positive we decided to expand the service across the college. Each of CVTC’s 63 programs will have an assessment tool specific to that course by the end of the 2015-16 school year. Each program will also have one content expert whose partial load will be dedicated to helping students through the CPL process once the advisors have referred them to the program.”<sup>10</sup> CVTC’s dedication to accelerate PLA has drawn national attention, putting CVTC in the company of a number of institutions taking the lead on this crucial acceleration strategy.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The webinar, “Implementing Effective Acceleration Strategies: Prior Learning Assessments—A Critical Strategy for Adult Learners,” can be found at [www.etagrantees.workforce3one.org](http://www.etagrantees.workforce3one.org).

<sup>2</sup>“Implementing Effective Acceleration Strategies: Prior Learning Assessments—A Critical Strategy for Adult Learners.”

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication with author, December 1, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with author, December 8, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Council of Adults on Experiential Learning, “Fueling the Race to Post-Secondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” 2010, retrieved December 9, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Lumina Foundation, “What America Needs to Know About Higher Education Redesign,” February 25, 2014, retrieved December 9, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Bob, “Well Earned: Program Awards College Credit for Life, Work Experience,” *Chippewa Valley Post*, March 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with author, January 19, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with author, December 6, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with author, December 11, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Council of Adults on Experiential Learning, “Fueling the Race to Post-Secondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” 2010, retrieved December 9, 2015.

*Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor by Jobs for the Future. Primary author Jenna Kulasiewicz.*

**This brief is available at [www.etagrantees.workforce3one.org](http://www.etagrantees.workforce3one.org).**



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