Granting Academic Credit for Prior Learning: Strategies for Evaluating Students and Compensating Faculty

Custom Research Brief • March 18, 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Research Parameters & Methodology
II. Executive Overview
III. Methods for Evaluating Credit for Prior Learning
IV. Rewarding and Training Faculty Members
I. RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:

A mid-size public master’s university in the Mid-Atlantic approached the council with the following questions for institutions which offer undergraduate students academic credit for prior learning:

- What are institutions' policies regarding how credits are granted?
- What assessment methodologies do these institutions use to evaluate prior learning (e.g. faculty panels, "challenge exams," etc.)?
- How are faculty trained to conduct these evaluations?
- How are faculty rewarded or compensated for their participation in evaluating prior learning?
- Does any data exist on how students who gain credit via experiential learning evaluation fare in subsequent classes? Are there any promising practices in terms of research and assessment of subsequent student success?
- Are there any strategies that institutions would recommend against when evaluating or offering credit for prior learning?

Sources:

- National Center for Education Statistics http://nces.ed.gov
    http://chronicle.com/article/Watchdogs-Question-an-Online/8777/
- Inside Higher Ed http://insidehighered.com
- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) http://www.cael.org/colleges_universities.htm
    http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Executive-Summary.pdf
- Various university websites
I. RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND METHODOLOGY

Research Parameters:

- As requested, the Council focused its research primarily on universities with policies for evaluating credit for prior learning.
- The majority of contacts interviewed for this brief were directors of undergraduate studies, admissions office staff, and deans of continuing education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate)</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>10,000/9,500</td>
<td>Master’s Colleges and Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>15,000/13,000</td>
<td>Master’s Colleges and Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>30,000/25,000</td>
<td>Research University (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Small town</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>27,000/20,000</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25,000/20,000</td>
<td>Research University (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>20,000/18,000</td>
<td>Research University (very high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics
II. **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Key Observations:

- **Contact institutions most commonly assess prior learning through portfolio evaluations.** Institutions including University B, University D and University B utilize a system of portfolio evaluation for assessing credit for prior learning. Alternative methods include a system of challenge exams utilized by the University C.

- **The majority of contact institutions do not grant letter grades for prior learning credit.** Credit is usually designated as Pass/Fail and appears on student transcripts with notation signifying that credit was awarded on the basis of a portfolio or challenge exam evaluation. Additionally, contacts note that students considering transferring to another institution should be made aware that not all institutions accept prior learning credit.

- **Credit for prior learning is generally limited to electives and major requirements in the liberal arts.** Any program within a specialized college (e.g. business, education) that is subject to professional accreditation generally does not accept credit for prior learning. Contacts said that institutions should pay careful attention to accreditation guidelines before developing any institutional policies on credit for prior learning.

- **Contacts agree that credit for prior learning is most effective when structured as credit for a specific course or as general elective credit.** Few institutions allow students to gain credit for general education courses based on prior learning, as these courses usually count as prerequisites and might affect students’ academic standing in subsequent courses.

- **Contacts recommend that students should be asked to provide non-family references to verify all work experience.** Contacts across institutions said that this is generally a measure taken to ensure that students are not exaggerating accounts of their prior learning.

- **Participation in offering credit for prior learning should be optional to all academic departments.** Contacts across institutions agree that faculty members and department chairs are more amenable to evaluating credit for prior learning if they are able to decide which courses students are able to challenge. Though all institutions have university-wide policies governing the application and award of credit for prior learning, no contact institutions require all departments to accept credit for prior learning.

- **The majority of contact institutions do not provide comprehensive training for faculty members to conduct prior learning assessment.** Most institutions train faculty members on an ad hoc basis. Contacts note that training is generally not necessary for students seeking credit for prior learning for an individual course, as faculty members are capable of negotiating the type of prior learning and evaluative format that would assure students legitimately deserve credit for the course.

- **Most institutions pay faculty members a low stipend ($60-$100 per student or $25 per hour) to evaluate prior learning portfolios.** Faculty compensation is mostly drawn from up-front student portfolio fees.

- **Portfolio evaluation generally counts toward “service” component of faculty tenure and promotion.** Contacts agree that this practice is necessary to gain faculty support and encourage participation in the prior learning evaluation process.
II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Observations (Cont.):

- **No contact institutions track student success rates following gaining prior learning credit.**
  Contacts had not observed that students receiving academic credit for prior learning were any less successful in subsequent coursework than those who had not received such credit, but no contact institutions was tracking such information closely.

- **A study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) suggests that prior learning assessment (PLA) students have better graduation rates than non-PLA students.**
  The study also finds that graduation rates are better among PLA students when compared with non-PLA students, regardless of institutional size or student grade point average.
II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction: Granting Students Academic Credit for Prior Learning

As rising numbers of adult learners return to school to earn undergraduate degrees, institutions across the nation are increasingly offering credit for prior learning assessment in order to accelerate adult learners’ progress toward degree at a lower cost to students. Institutions that award academic credit for prior learning use a range of methods to evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom. Such methods include:

- Individualized student portfolios or Portfolio Assessments
- Evaluation of corporate and military training by the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, or the ACE Guides
- Program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies, or the Evaluation of Local Training
- Customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement; these may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill, or Challenge Exams
- Standardized exams such as:
  - Advanced Placement Examination Program, or AP Exams, offered by the College Board
  - College Level Examination Program, or CLEP Exams, also offered by the College Board
  - Excelsior College Exams (formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams)
  - The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams, conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric

Offering credit for prior learning is a practice often met with contention by university faculty members. Anecdotal evidence from institutions contacted for this report suggests that many departments refuse to offer credit for prior learning, viewing the practice as devaluing the educational value of the institution’s academic courses. Additionally, credit for prior learning comes under scrutiny as a means of providing students with an easier path to graduation. Many online education providers have begun profiting by granting retroactive credit for “life experience,” leading educators and faculty members to view the practice of prior learning assessment with suspicion (Carr 2000.)

However, a study published by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in February 2010 indicates that students who receive credit for prior learning have consistently higher graduation rates, greater persistence, a shorter average time to degree, and higher numbers of credit hours earned at the institution in comparison with non-prior learning students. In addition to benefiting students, the study also finds that prior learning assessment benefits institutions by drawing in many adult learners who would not otherwise return to pursue a degree, as well as builds loyalty of students and alumni to the institution (Collins 2010.)

The following research brief profiles the practices and experiences relating to prior learning assessment at six research institutions, highlighting key strategies utilized by institutions to promote a uniform, egalitarian, and effective system for evaluating credit for prior learning.

---

Using Portfolio Evaluation to Assess Prior Learning

The majority of contact institutions—including University B, University C, and University F—utilize a system of portfolio assessment for granting credit for prior learning.

**Portfolio Evaluation Policies and Practices across Contact Institutions:**

- **Students must be enrolled at the university to apply for portfolio credit.** Most institutions require students to have completed one semester of coursework or a minimum of five to twelve credits before submitting a prior learning portfolio.

- **For students challenging an individual course, portfolio content is generally determined by the faculty member in the academic department delivering the course.** Students work with a faculty member at the beginning of the semester to determine what materials are necessary to receive credit in the course. Students also discuss the timeframe for portfolio completion in these meetings, usually not to exceed two semesters.

- **For students submitting portfolios for general university course credit, portfolio content is determined by a central committee and is designed to test various areas of university competency.** Institutions generally award credit on the basis of demonstrated skills acquired through prior learning and follow a specific institutional guideline for portfolio evaluation.

- **Students pay a portfolio evaluation fee.** Fees range from $75 to $100 across contact institutions and cover faculty stipends for evaluating portfolios.

- **Students pay for additional credits received upon portfolio evaluation.** Most institutions mandate a set rate of between one-third and two-thirds of the tuition for a traditional academic course. Students pay this rate for all credits awarded through portfolio evaluations.

- **Institutions place limits on how many credits students can receive through portfolio evaluation.** Credit ceilings range from 32 to 60 credits for bachelor’s seeking students across contact institutions. Students are usually granted anywhere from three to twelve credits from portfolio evaluation.

- **For students challenging an individual course, credit is usually designated as Pass/Fail.** Institutions also indicate on students’ academic transcripts that course credit was granted through a portfolio evaluation.

- **For students submitting portfolios for general university credit, specific application of credits to university courses is done in student consultations with academic advisors.** Students meet with advisors after receiving credits to apply them to specific courses. Credits can be assigned to any course to which university department chairs agree to accept portfolio evaluation credit.

“It depends on the kind of prior learning you’re trying to implement; for challenging individual courses, you can use a more ad hoc system. If you’re trying to mandate it for an academic program, you generally need to standardize the requirements and evaluation system so that students are being treated fairly and the program can maintain its standards.”

- Chair of the Department of Educational Policy and Communication Studies
  University C
### III. METHODS FOR EVALUATING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

#### Granting Credit through Portfolio Evaluation:
**Policies across Contact Institutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
<th>University F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Prerequisites for Submitting a Portfolio for Evaluation** | • Students must be enrolled  
  • Students must either:  
    - Complete a two-credit prior learning development course (PRL)  
    - Consult with the director of prior learning and a faculty member in the credit-granting department and develop a portfolio plan | • Students must be enrolled  
  • Students must complete a minimum of five credits before submitting a prior learning portfolio | • Students must be enrolled  
  • Students must complete a minimum of fourteen credits before submitting a prior learning portfolio |
| **Materials Required for Portfolio Assessment** | • Portfolio format and content determined on a case-by-case basis and through negotiations between the student and faculty member representative of the department | • Portfolio format is based on identifying competency in several general areas  
  • Two letters of recommendation from non-family members | • Portfolio format and content determined on a case-by-case basis and through negotiations between the student and faculty member representative of the department |
| **Fee for Portfolio Evaluation** | • Students enroll in a two-credit prior learning preparation course | $100 | $75 |
| **Fee for Credits Granted** | • 60% of the cost of credit for the course | $100 / credit hour granted (compared with $325 for traditional course credit) | Rates established by individual departments  
  Rates differ across the institution |
| **Maximum Credit Granted through Portfolio Evaluation** | • 32 credits | • 60 credits | • 32 credits for BA  
  • 16 credits for Associate’s |
| **Average Credits Granted through Portfolio Evaluation** | • 3-12 credits | • 15-35 credits | • 3-12 credits for BA  
  • 3-6 credits for Associates |
### III. METHODS FOR EVALUATING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
<th>University F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Timeframe for Portfolio Completion** | • Deadlines are negotiated on an individual basis between the student, faculty member and director of educational outreach  
• Students generally complete portfolios within one to two semesters | • Portfolios can be submitted at any time during a student’s course of study  
• Students must submit portfolios at least three months before their anticipated graduation date | • Determined individually by students and department chairs |
| **Areas where Credits May be Applied** | • Any course approved by department chairs  
• Introductory-level general education courses | • Degree major  
• Minor and concentration requirements  
• Electives  
• Department chairs must sign off on each student and course selection in order for credit to be granted | • Degree major  
• Minor and concentration requirements  
• Electives  
• General education requirements  
• Department chairs must sign off on each student and course selection in order for credit to be granted |
| **Designation of Credit** | • All credits granted through portfolio submissions are designated as Pass/Fail for the specific course for which the portfolio was completed | • All credits granted through portfolio submissions are designated as “general credit”  
• Students receiving credit consult with academic advisors and department chairs to determine assignment of credits | • All credits granted through portfolio submissions are designated as traditional course-credit |
III. METHODS FOR EVALUATING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Advantages to Evaluating Credit for Prior Learning through Portfolios

Contacts at University B, University D and University F note the following advantages to using a portfolio format for assessing credit for prior learning:

- **Portfolios are effective for granting credit for specific courses.** Portfolios allow students to demonstrate specific knowledge or skills in a particular discipline and apply that learning directly to a university course. Contacts at University F said that English departments in particular find this method effective for granting students credit for introductory-level courses, as students’ writing abilities can be assessed easily through portfolio evaluation.

- **Individual academic departments generally have the option of determining which courses are eligible for portfolio credit, reducing faculty pushback.** Contacts at University F and University B state that portfolios have the advantage of allowing individual faculty members to set their own criteria for how credit may be earned for a specific course. At University B and University F, students must meet individually with faculty members to determine whether they can submit a portfolio for credit in an individual course. Contacts note that faculty members enjoy having control over which courses are open to portfolio evaluation, thus mitigating significant pushback from academic departments.

### University F: Decentralized Portfolio Evaluation Leads to Uneven Course Offerings and Assessment Practices

Though several university-wide policies apply to prior learning evaluation, University F utilizes a decentralized model for evaluating credit for prior learning. University-wide governing policies include:

- No more than 32 credits may be granted per student
- Students pay a portfolio evaluation rate of $75

The lack of any formal evaluative processes across the institution allows departments to do the following:

- Set their own portfolio standards
- Evaluate portfolios on individually determined timeframes
- Select specific courses for which credit can be granted
- Assess department-specific fees for any credits granted

Contacts at University F note that though departments appreciate having ownership of portfolio evaluation, the institution recently began examining their portfolio evaluation practices across the institution and found several problems endemic in departments that regularly assess credit through portfolio evaluation:

- Faculty rarely have any formal training on portfolio evaluation
- Depending on the department, faculty may or may not be compensated for their efforts
- Portfolio evaluation counts differently across the institution in tenure and promotion considerations
- Standards for acceptable portfolio submissions are uneven across the institution

The division of continuing education is currently evaluating all portfolio-revision practices across the institution to determine how to centralize and standardize the way that credit for prior learning is evaluated.

“Simply, a decentralized model doesn’t work. It creates uneven offerings across campus and even within departments, and many times you wonder if students are really being evaluated effectively.”

- Registrar
  University F
III. METHODS FOR EVALUATING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Using Credit Exams to Assess Prior Learning

University C offers students the opportunity to acquire credit for prior learning through a series of challenge exams. Credit is only granted for students seeking admission into the baccalaureate degree in community education. Contacts report that the challenge exam is good for the following:

- Effective for individual degree programs
- Delivers lots of credits in an abbreviated timeframe
- Delivers substantial general elective credits

Defining and Testing Students on Multiple Competency Areas

University C uses challenge exams to evaluate the following competency areas to receive credit in the program:

- Local Community Systems
- Resource Development
- Political/Economic Analysis
- Personal Growth Competency
- Philosophies of Change
- Group Process Skills
- Leadership Issues
- Research Skills
- Change Strategies
- Educational Advocacy
- Administrative Skills
- Social Problems Analysis
- Community Perspectives on
- Human Resource Programs
- Conflict Resolution

These competency areas were identified by program faculty members and the department chair as necessary to succeed in the baccalaureate program in community education.

Methodology for Challenge Exams

In order to qualify for credit for prior learning, students at University C must be declared majors in the baccalaureate degree in community education, and must enroll in a 100-level “Credit for Prior Learning” (CPL) course. The CPL course includes the following:

- Each course session consists of a three-hour challenge exam: Subjects for each exam are determined by the department chair and are updated every few years. Subjects generally include community experience, organizational skills, written skills, etc. Exams are three hours long with twelve questions per test, and students are given a prompt for the exam for the following week.

- Students receive three credits for each successful exam (C or better)

- Students can enroll in as many CPL courses as they want: Students are granted three credits per exam and can attend as many as they feel necessary, receiving up to 42 credits total.

- Students only pay for the first three credits granted through CPL courses: Students are only charged for the first three CPL credits they are granted (equivalent to the amount for a traditional three credit course) and any CPL credits earned thereafter are free to the student.
Establishing Criteria for Challenge Exams

Faculty members at University C are trained to evaluate challenge exams based on the following metrics:

- Is the students’ answer:
  - Relevant?
  - Complete?
  - Convey sufficient experience to demonstrate competency?

Two faculty members evaluate each exam to determine if the student deserves credit. If faculty members cannot reach agreement about a students’ exam, a third faculty member is nominated by the department chair to make the final decision.

Contacts note several factors that ensure the effectiveness of this system:

- **Students are not testing out of prerequisite or general education requirements.** The degree program requires 42 general elective credits, which allows credit for prior learning to help students toward their degree without sacrificing any prerequisite or general education coursework. Students only earn credit for general elective courses, reducing the impact on learning outcomes and subsequent coursework.

- **Faculty members within the program are expected to participate in the evaluation process.** Each semester, faculty members rotate serving as portfolio evaluators. Contacts said there is no need to compensate faculty members for their contribution, as portfolio evaluation is included as service to the department in tenure and promotion considerations.

- **Credit only applies to courses for the community education major.** Contacts said this policy is effective for ensuring faculty buy-in and that students are only receiving credit in areas deemed acceptable by the department.

> “These are general distribution credits, and students are not bypassing faculty members’ core courses, nor are they testing out of any prerequisites. Our system isn’t perfect, but it works well for us because the stakes are pretty low.”

- Chair of Department of Education Policy and Communication Studies
  University C
IV. Rewarding and Training Faculty Members

Compensating Faculty Members Monetarily for Evaluating Credit for Prior Learning

The majority of contact institutions do not offer a significant amount of compensation to faculty members for evaluation of credit for prior learning. Institutions have established the following rates of compensation:

- **University B**: $60 per student
- **University F**: Rates set by departments (between $10 and $100 per credit hour)
- **University D**: $25 per hour (see text box on next page for more detail)

Because the challenge exams are within a single academic program, **University C** offers no compensation to department faculty members for evaluating challenge exams. Instead, faculty members take turns evaluating students every other semester, with exam evaluations factoring into tenure and promotion for the department.

Factoring Prior Learning Evaluations into Tenure and Promotion Considerations

Contacts at **University F**, **University B**, and **University C** said that faculty members are more amenable to evaluating portfolios and challenge exams if they are made aware that the practice factors into tenure and promotion considerations. The aforementioned institutions consider prior learning evaluation faculty service to the university.

“Though we offer our faculty a stipend for evaluating prior learning, we really don’t think they do it for the money. We make it clear to faculty that they have a choice in accepting credit for prior learning for their courses; this is a key reason why we haven’t had any significant pushback.”

- Executive Director of Educational Outreach
  University F
IV. REWARDING AND TRAINING FACULTY MEMBERS

Training Faculty Members to Evaluate Prior Learning

Few contact institutions have a formal training process for faculty members participating in prior credit evaluation. In general, the executive director of continuing education or a representative of the registrar’s office will consult with faculty members willing to accept credit for prior learning for a particular course and offer informal trainings if requested. However, in general, faculty members are able to decide the type of prior learning that will be acceptable in a portfolio to gain credit for a specific course.

University D: Council of Selected Faculty Members Receives Standardized Training on Evaluating Prior Learning

In an effort to centralize the evaluation of credit for prior learning, University D instituted the Prior Learning Council. The Prior Learning Council serves as the primary committee for evaluating prior learning across the institution, and is composed of tenure-track and tenured faculty members and a chairperson serving a five-year term.

Serving on the Prior Learning Council

In order to serve on the council, faculty members must apply and interview for the position. Faculty members who are selected to serve on the council are subject to a year-long probationary period. During that time faculty members are required to do the following:

- Spend six months shadowing standing council members and receiving training on the basic aspects of prior learning evaluation
- Attend bi-weekly meetings of the Prior Learning Council
- Attend bi-weekly meetings with all probationary faculty members and the council chairperson
- Review prior learning portfolios under the supervision of a council mentor (appointed by the council chairperson)

Upon completion of the probationary period, the prior learning chairperson either approves or denies the faculty member for the completion of a full three year or five year term.

Compensation and Council Term Limits

Faculty members who are approved to serve on the prior learning council:

- May serve either as undergraduate or graduate reviewers
- Are compensated at a rate of $25 per hour
- May be appointed to a three-year term (with the opportunity for another term of renewal) or a five-year term (not subject to renewal)
- Review portfolios from a variety of subject areas regardless of their discipline

Contacts at University D said that the system is extremely effective for streamlining faculty training and standardizing credit for prior learning across the institution.

“Faculty love serving on this committee, partly because there’s no other university committee that offers them $25 an hour. Our system is also CAEL-approved, and we are confident that it has helped us standardize all our prior learning evaluations.”

- Director of Undergraduate Education
University D
The Advisory Board has worked to ensure the accuracy of the information it provides to its members. This project relies on data obtained from many sources, however, and The Advisory Board cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information or its analysis in all cases. Further, The Advisory Board is not engaged in rendering clinical, legal, accounting, or other professional services. Its projects should not be construed as professional advice on any particular set of facts or circumstances. Members are advised to consult with their staff and senior management, or other appropriate professionals, prior to implementing any changes based on this project. Neither The Advisory Board Company nor its programs are responsible for any claims or losses that may arise from any errors or omissions in their projects, whether caused by The Advisory Board Company or its sources.

© 2009 The Advisory Board Company, 2445 M Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Any reproduction or retransmission, in whole or in part, is a violation of federal law and is strictly prohibited without the consent of the Advisory Board Company. This prohibition extends to sharing this publication with clients and/or affiliate companies. All rights reserved.