



Degree Completion Beyond Institutional Borders

Responding to the New Reality of Mobile and Nontraditional Learners

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Introduction and summary

Governments, nonprofits, and colleges spend significant time and effort each year trying to help more Americans complete college degrees. But as they work to make President Barack Obama's goal of more college completions by 2020 a reality, a less obvious group of barriers often deters them: institutional policies for academic credit. Many students enter college with learning they gained at other postsecondary institutions, in military training, or in the workplace. But too often institutions do not recognize this learning. The result is wasted time, effort, and money.

The magnitude of this waste is apparent both in terms of individual endeavor and government spending. The average community college student earns 140 credits in the course of pursuing a bachelor's degree, even though typically only 120 credits are necessary.¹ Those 20 extra credits represent individual time, effort, and money, but they also represent public investment in the form of federal Pell grants and state subsidies to public colleges. All of this adds up to billions of dollars annually once all of the costs of wasted credit are factored in—student-paid tuition dollars, state subsidies to public institutions, student financial aid, and delayed tax revenue when students take longer to access higher-paying jobs that require college degrees.²

The problem is that mainstream postsecondary institutions' credit policies assume that most or all learning relevant to a degree takes place at one postsecondary institution. Colleges and universities make it extremely difficult to transfer learning across institutions by viewing the transfer of credit or the recognition of learning outside the college arena as a fringe activity.

A student, for example, may begin her studies at a community college hoping to transfer to a four-year state university only to find that some courses do not transfer at all or transfer only as electives that do not count toward a major in that same field. That same student may also have received training in computer systems

development in the army, but she would have to take a redundant course covering material she already knows at the four-year school because the college does not have a system for assessing and awarding credit for prior learning.

These problems are becoming more common: More than 60 percent of college students transfer at least once in their undergraduate programs,³ and an increasing number of students possess college-level knowledge and skills from their work and life experience. The thousands of military personnel needing to make the transition to civilian jobs after service in Iraq and Afghanistan may also have college-level skills and knowledge that they have acquired during their time in service.

Low-skilled work opportunities are disappearing, and our economy is shifting to a knowledge-based one that requires more American workers with postsecondary credentials. We therefore should be looking for the most expedient and cost-effective ways not only to teach people, but also to recognize the learning they already have.

Many institutions and state systems have taken steps in this direction by creating articulation agreements that govern the transfer of credits among institutions and by designing formal procedures to assess prior learning and assign credit to it. But articulation agreements vary significantly from state to state and from institution to institution. Clearly some kind of articulation and transfer system needs to be available and transparent to the student, but little data is available to know for sure what transfer and articulation policies are the most effective at helping students complete degrees and avoid wasted credit while also ensuring that quality standards are in effect.

Similarly, most institutions have methods to assess prior learning for credit, but these offerings may be limited and not publicized well. Further, institutions often only permit credit students earn through a prior learning assessment, or PLA, to be applied to general education or elective credits—not to requirements for their major—and if the student transfers to yet another institution those PLA credits may not transfer.

This report describes the avenues that colleges, states, and other organizations take to recognize prior learning and transfer credit, and it points out the flaws in these policies that block students from efficiently garnering credit as they move through and among institutions. It also uses case studies to explore emerging and established examples of colleges and systems that make the most of the learning

that students acquire without sacrificing academic integrity or quality. And it suggests best practices and new ways to think about the construction of a college degree by focusing on competencies and other learning outcomes instead of merely credit hours.

We describe four types of mechanisms that allow students to convert or exchange—like a type of currency—their college credits and prior learning assessment for academic credit. Many of these mechanisms are not new. But they are claiming new ground in the postsecondary universe as students become more mobile and nontraditional in their pursuit of degrees.

- **Articulation agreements** between institutions and postsecondary systems that allow a college to treat another college credit as equal to its own.
- **Prior learning assessment** methods, which help students document the college-level knowledge and skills they gain from experiences outside of a classroom so that colleges can award credit for that learning. This includes efforts to award credit for noncredit occupational training.
- **Institutions and services that support credit transfer and recognition of prior learning**—this includes web-based information services as well as advising and navigation services that help make options more transparent to students.
- **Competency-based programs** and institutions that specify the skills, abilities, and knowledge students need to demonstrate to earn degrees. Such programs offer a variety of ways for students to acquire these competencies as well as ways to assess competencies developed outside of the classroom in order to count those toward a degree.

Finally, we offer recommendations for policymakers, who must play a role in promoting learning across institutional boundaries. Policy leaders must recognize that opportunities for credit and learning portability need to be universally available, accessible, and understandable to the student if our nation's educational attainment goals are to be met. They can help make it easier for states to provide more of these opportunities through policies and incentives that support a better system of credit hour and learning currency.

- Create a national commission to study student mobility and implement incentive programs for states to improve articulation agreements and expand the availability of prior learning assessments

- Measure the effectiveness of programs serving transfer students and mobile learners by improving data collection on student transfers
- Create a national database for students to access information about the transferability of credits and provide a national hotline for students to receive advice about credit transfer and prior learning assessment
- Ensure equitable funding for nontraditional learners and programs

We begin by looking at the increasing student mobility in this country, and why more and more students aren't what we typically think of as "traditional" college attendees who remain at one institution to complete their degrees. These mobile learners run into problems when they try to transfer their prior learning into institutions.

Terms used in this paper

Articulation agreements are formal policies between two or more educational institutions specifying how credits earned at one institution will be accepted by another toward its degree programs.

Prior learning assessment is a term for the various assessment methods used by postsecondary institutions to award college credit for what people learn outside the classroom (for example, through corporate training, work experience, civic activity, and independent study).

Competencies are measurable or observable skills, knowledge, abilities, or behavior.

Mobile learners are students who take courses from more than one source, including but not limited to credit-granting institutions.

Nontraditional learners are students who have one or more of the following characteristics: has delayed postsecondary enrollment, attends college part-time, works full time while in school, is financially independent, has dependents, is a single parent, and/or has no high school diploma or GED.

Noncredit education is coursework that is offered through accredited postsecondary institutions but is not part of a degree program and does not result in college credit for the student. Often these are vocational training programs that are required for specific jobs or industries.

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