



# Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments

## Tools to Help 21st Century Students Achieve Their Postsecondary Education Goals and Keep America Competitive

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### Introduction and summary

There is widespread agreement among employers, workers, and policymakers that America's economic competitiveness in the 21st century will very much depend on increasing our workforce's education and skill levels. We can greatly improve our chances of achieving this goal if we work on making it easier for today's increasingly diverse learners to earn and transfer college credits across institutions.

The American labor market is projected to grow by 14.4 million jobs between 2008 and 2018, according to a study by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce. More importantly, the number of jobs requiring some postsecondary education will grow by 13.9 million during that time span—which means that 97 percent of job growth will occur in positions requiring education or skills beyond a high school diploma. But the same study estimates that our current education and workforce training system will fail to produce those skilled workers, falling short by 3 million associate's or bachelor's degrees and almost 5 million postsecondary credentials.<sup>2</sup>

Given this looming shortage of skilled workers we might expect our policymakers and educators to be working together to encourage students and workers to earn a postsecondary degree or credential. And yet many of our current policies do the exact opposite.

Put simply, too many colleges put up barriers to earning postsecondary credits by refusing to recognize any knowledge or learning acquired outside of their institutional system. The result is wasted time, effort, and money, along with lost productivity over the long term.

Encouragingly, however, some schools are moving forward with policies that remove barriers to college completion. This issue brief will discuss the need for reform and then highlight two of the policies currently being used to help students complete their degrees:

- **Articulation agreements** ensure that students do not lose postsecondary credits simply because they attend more than one school during their education experience.
- **Prior learning assessments** allow students to save valuable time and money by earning college credit for subject matter they've already learned.

These policies are leading the way toward a new type of consumer-driven education system, along with other important innovations in postsecondary education. This new system focuses on student outcomes, as opposed to institutional exclusivity, and promotes better collaboration with students to achieve their educational aspirations.

Articulation agreements and prior learning assessments, if implemented more broadly, will lead to more students earning postsecondary degrees—in less time and at a lower cost to students and taxpayers—which will help meet our growing need for high-skilled workers in the knowledge-based economy.

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## The problems with credit exclusivity

Colleges and other postsecondary education programs spend significant time and effort each year trying to help more Americans complete degrees and credentials. Unfortunately some of this time and effort is counterproductive since it's done in support of policies that promote redundancy and delay a student's progress toward completing school.

The average community college student, for example, is forced to amass 140 credits while pursuing a bachelor's degree even though only 120 credits are typically necessary. Those 20 extra credits represent individual time, effort, and money. But they also represent public investment in the form of federal aid to these students and state subsidies to public colleges.

Many people would argue that an additional 20 credits per student is money well spent. In this case, however, it is not necessarily true. For many students those credits are redundant of credits they earned at a previous school or else reflect knowledge they acquired outside the classroom. So the additional credits do not add to the student's overall knowledge and skills.

In addition, the thousands of dollars in taxpayer subsidies spent to earn those additional credits are no longer available for other important programs or deficit reduction.

The problem is that too many mainstream postsecondary institutions employ credit policies that require most or all learning relevant to a degree to take place at their institution. It makes it extremely difficult for students to transfer learning across institutions by viewing the transfer of credit or the recognition of learning outside the college classroom as a fringe activity. Such deterrent policies are often a mistake, and they fail to serve the interests of our students or our economic competitiveness.

Some waste is understandable when students are changing institutions and even areas of study. But if we want more of our workers to earn degrees and credentials—particularly students coming from lower-income groups and whose parents did not go to college—then we need to minimize this waste as much as possible.

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### Today's learner

Our current system of institutional exclusivity was designed for traditional 18- to 22-year-old full-time college students that attended a single school for four years. But those students no longer dominate college classrooms.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2002 that as many as three-quarters of college students no longer fit the “traditional” classification.<sup>3</sup> For instance, many of today’s students are older than “traditional” college students, work full time, or support dependents of their own. They are more mobile than previous generations, and they frequently attend multiple institutions over the course of their college careers. These students are often ill served by the traditional model of college education where students attend the same school from 18 to 22 years old full time.

Moreover, many of today’s learners enter the postsecondary system with college-level knowledge or skills. They may, for example, have several years of work experience during which they learned through on-the-job training, workshops, company-sponsored training, leadership activities, or technical responsibilities. They also may be in the military, where they gain a range of other types of learning through formal training, informal on-the-job learning, and leadership experience.

Further, adults have countless opportunities to learn in their everyday lives through volunteer work, hobbies, and other self-directed activities. Some of this learning is comparable to college-level instruction.

We need education systems that recognize these realities and allow students to earn credits across institutions and for different types of learning.

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## More options for more students

Fortunately, there is reason for cautious optimism. Many states have abandoned outdated institution-based policies and are working toward a more consumer-friendly education system. In addition, innovative institutions are driving an entirely new model of postsecondary education that rewards students for their knowledge, skills, and abilities—as opposed to measuring their time spent in a classroom.

Here we highlight two of the more promising policies: articulation agreements and prior learning assessments.

### Articulation agreements

An articulation agreement is a formal policy between two or more educational institutions specifying how credits earned at one institution will be accepted by another toward its degree programs. The agreement notes which course credits count at the receiving institution and how many credits from one institution can count toward a degree at the other. These agreements are typically in place between institutions that experience many student transfers.

Having an agreement establishes transparency in the credit transfer process, and it eliminates the problem of students not knowing whether or how their credits will transfer from one institution to another while also creating administrative efficiencies for the transfer institution.

The challenge for students, however, is that articulation agreements do not exist between and among all institutions, and sometimes they are not enough to address credit hour waste. Most states have statewide articulation systems, but the specific components vary considerably from state to state, and little research exists on what kinds of agreements are truly effective at helping students to complete postsecondary degrees. Further, articulation and transfer policies are not always well defined, and they are not always a guarantee that the student will be able to use all of their previously earned credits.

#### *Institution-to-institution articulation agreements*

Community colleges are often the starting point for postsecondary pursuits for students young and old. They are inexpensive compared to most four-year institutions, and for some students they may be seen as a less intimidating and more flexible learning environment.

Many students matriculate to community colleges fully expecting to continue on toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution down the road. Other students may start taking classes at a community college with very different aspirations: taking a few courses needed to do their job better; earning a job-related certificate; completing an associate's degree; or learning English.

Regardless of the students' initial goal, however, articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions help many of these students continue with their postsecondary studies since many of them will need to transfer at some point during their educational experience.

Some four-year institutions have such well-defined articulation agreements that the community colleges act as feeder schools for the four-year institutions, and the transfer process is designed to be as easy as possible to encourage more students to go after the four-year degree.

### *Statewide articulation agreements*

Most states have some kind of statewide articulation agreement that provides clear pathways between some or all of the state's public postsecondary institutions. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, or NCHEMS, created an inventory of state accreditation and articulation policies in 2008. NCHEMS researchers found that all but six states have some explicit transfer policies for their public institutions that were established either through legislation or by a state governing or coordinating board.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, or WICHE, and Hezel Associates, LLC—a research, evaluation, and strategy consulting firm—are currently studying the different statewide approaches to articulation and transfer between two- and four-year institutions. They identify several “promising practices” among state systems:

- **A general education common core curriculum** that attempts to assure that the general education portions of a degree—as opposed to major requirements—are easily transferrable from one institution to another (14 states).
- **A common course numbering system** in which course numbers are identical within a state and across all institutions. Sometimes these systems are limited to “common courses” and exclude more specialized courses (seven states, with four states also using common course descriptions).
- **Statewide program major articulations** that allow students to change institutions seamlessly if they maintain their major area of study (22 states).
- **Block credit transfer** practices that allow credits students earn to transfer “en masse.” These are typically applicable to general education or prerequisite courses (20 states).
- **Transfer associate's degrees** in which a student with an associate's degree is assured acceptance to an institution as a junior (30 states).<sup>4</sup>

### *Cross-state articulation*

The articulation agreements between institutions and within statewide systems are no doubt helpful to students moving between institutions in the same state. Students transferring to institutions in other states, however, will not find these agreements very helpful. Efforts to improve and expand upon articulation agreements should thus consider how to make it easier for students to transfer across state lines.

### *Prior learning assessments*

Prior learning assessments, or PLAs, measure what a student has learned outside of the college classroom, evaluate whether that learning is college level, and then determine the equivalent number of college credits. Credits earned through PLA, therefore, are closely tied to learning outcomes rather than measures of seat time.

Students who earn credits through PLA often save time by not having to take courses in subjects they've already mastered. Additionally, PLA assessments are typically carried out at a lower cost compared to tuition charged by the credit hour.

### *Types of PLA*

The amount of credit students can earn for prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. PLA includes methods such as:

- **Individualized student portfolios.** The student typically takes a specifically designed portfolio development course that helps them identify their learning from a variety of experiences, prepares portfolios equating prior learning to college courses, develops educational plans, and integrates prior and new learning to achieve academic goals. Finally, faculty with appropriate subject-matter expertise evaluate the student's portfolio to determine the equivalent level of college credit.
- **Evaluation of corporate and military training for college credit.** The American Council on Education, or ACE, often conducts these evaluations for a fee. ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs noncollegiate agencies offer (particularly military training) in its ACE Guides. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate the company's training for college credit. By awarding credit to workers who have completed such training the institutions can use PLA as a recruitment tool.
- **Evaluation of apprenticeship training for college credit.** Many institutions are also working with trade associations to evaluate prior apprenticeship training for college credit as well as offer part of the training through the community college for credit. This type of agreement could prove particularly valuable for workers who need to make a career transition from declining industries such as manufacturing and automotive.

- **Program evaluations of noncredit instruction.** Some institutions award credit for recognized proficiencies that equate to specific courses offered at their institutions. At some community colleges, for example, police officers can receive some credit for police academy training, and they can apply this credit to degree programs in criminal justice. Similarly, firefighters who receive emergency medical technician training can earn credit that they can then apply toward a fire science degree.
- **Customized and standard exams.** Some colleges offer transfer students the opportunity to verify learning through customized exams, or “challenge exams.” These may be current course final exams or other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill. In addition, many colleges offer course credit for passing scores in established exams such as Advanced Placement, College Level Examination Program, Excelsior College, and the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests.

The challenge for students, however, is that PLA is not universally available, such credits are often accepted in limited ways, and the PLA credits are not often accepted if the student transfers to another institution. Most institutions offer a limited form of prior learning assessment for college credit—if only acceptance of advanced placement or AP credit—but considerable variation exists in terms of which assessment methods are available, how many PLA credits may apply toward a degree, which degree programs will accept those credits, and whether students even receive information from the institutions about PLA options.

### *Systemwide PLA*

One promising approach is to encourage statewide adoption of PLA. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, for example, requires all system colleges and universities to provide students with opportunities to demonstrate prior learning and earn undergraduate credit for that learning. And the Vermont State Colleges administers PLA for its five public colleges through a centralized Office of External Programs. The Office of External Programs oversees portfolio assessment and standardized tests and awards credits that are transferable to any school in the state system.

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## Conclusion

Our current postsecondary education system has too many barriers for turning college-level knowledge into college credit. These barriers are a direct impediment to increasing the number of Americans with college degrees and meeting the education and skill levels of a knowledge-based economy. Fortunately, some institutions are leading the way by adopting consumer-friendly policies, like articulation agreements and prior learning assessments. These policies need to be embraced, improved upon, and implemented on a much wider scale.

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## Endnotes

- 1 This issue brief summarizes a longer report issued by the Center for American Progress and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learners. For the complete version, please see Rebecca Klein-Collins, Amy Sherman, and Louis Soares, "Degree Completion Beyond Institutional Borders" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010), available at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/10/degree\\_completion\\_beyond\\_borders.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/10/degree_completion_beyond_borders.html).
- 2 Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, "Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018" (Washington: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010).
- 3 Susan Choy, "Nontraditional Undergraduates" (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).
- 4 Hezel Associates, Lumina Foundation for Education, and Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, "Promising Practices in Statewide Articulation and Transfer Systems" (2010).