



A key Lumina Foundation commitment to increasing adult college completion

POLICY EXCHANGES

Strategies for Success: Promising Ideas in Adult College Completion

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The completion agenda has gained increasing prominence throughout the higher education policy community over the past few years. Whether it is the president, national education leaders, state policymakers, or leaders of diverse nongovernmental organizations, they are all pushing for significant increases in degree attainment. The various reasons cited include meeting future workforce needs; increasing local, state, or national competitiveness; providing economic returns to the individual; or some combination of all three.

Many of the intensive completion efforts are focused on achieving certain attainment goals. For instance, Lumina Foundation established the “big goal” of having 60 percent of the adult population attain a degree or certificate of value by 2025. Similarly, the Obama administration set a target of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. Numerous states have also set goals that will require significant improvement in the number of students entering and succeeding in higher education. While these goals may have slightly different numerical targets, one thing is clear: the “traditional” education pipeline that flows from high

school directly to postsecondary education cannot, by itself, meet these ambitious objectives. To achieve these goals, we will need to engage nontraditional student populations, such as adults.

Data from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) and the Delta Project on College Costs show that even if we can increase the number of students moving through the traditional education pipeline – as measured by high school graduation rates, college-going rates, and college completion rates – so that the national average matches the average of the three highest-performing states (an unlikely scenario), the country

will still fall more than 3 million degrees and certificates short of reaching Lumina’s 60 percent goal.¹

Thus, helping adults, particularly those with

prior postsecondary credits, complete degrees and certificates must be a component of any strategy seeking to boost overall education attainment.

Targeting this subset of potential adult students is a logical step, as many have already proven that they can succeed in college-level coursework. With credits already earned, they will be able to complete

For more information on the Adult College Completion Network, please see www.adultcollegecompletion.org.

degrees and certificates more quickly than those who are starting from scratch. Removing the policy and practice barriers that prevent adults with prior postsecondary credit from returning to complete their degrees or certificates is becoming a key strategy in the broader “completion agenda.” While some of the barriers, and potential policy solutions, are specific to this population, much of this work will benefit all adult learners seeking to earn a college degree or certificate.

On their own, many states, cities, postsecondary institutions, and nonprofit and other organizations have developed initiatives focusing on ways to reengage adults with prior college credit. These projects take differing approaches, depending on the populations they’re trying to reach. Lumina Foundation is supporting the Adult College Completion (ACC) Network, a collaborative learning network facilitated by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). This network focuses on sharing new ideas, overcoming common challenges, and pooling resources to help projects better serve this population.

This brief is the first of a series that WICHE will publish focusing on promising new ideas and innovative practices developed through the ACC Network, as well as the common policy and practice challenges that those working on these issues face. The brief captures common themes raised during a meeting of more than 35 organizations, state agencies, postsecondary institutions, and others spearheading adult completion projects, as well as other important topics raised during the first year of the ACC Network.² It highlights effective new strategies that are being employed by ACC Network members as well as other work being undertaken around the country to increase degree and certificate completion by adults with prior college credit. The brief addresses five topics of importance to those working to improve adult college completion.

- ▲ Data availability particular to the returning adult population.
- ▲ Partnerships between employers and higher education institutions.
- ▲ Communications and marketing campaigns to reach and reengage adults with prior college credit.
- ▲ Transfer credits.
- ▲ Prior learning assessment.

In the coming months, the ACC Network will address other issues and share promising new ideas and strategies to reengage adults with prior college credit and help them complete their degrees.

Higher education data on adults with prior college credits leave an incomplete picture, although more data sources are becoming available.

Data on adults with prior postsecondary credit are incomplete at best. There are not commonly accepted figures on the number of former students who reached certain credit benchmarks (25 percent, 50 percent, or 75 percent of the credits necessary for a degree) before leaving higher education. We do know that more than 36 million Americans have some postsecondary credit but no degree, but data on whether they earned three credits or 115 credits are limited.³ For that matter we don’t know whether many of them have already secured a high-value certificate because many databases identify only completed degrees and ignore certificates. Developing more exact data on this population is a crucial task for cities, states, institutions, organizations, and the federal government. Several projects have worked to develop a clearer picture of what a target population of “adults with prior college credit” actually looks like, but significant work remains to be done.

Partnerships between employers and higher education are crucial for increasing degree and certificate production.

A recent report suggests that many employers believe there is a significant skills gap among potential employees and the jobs that are available

now or will be available in the future.⁴ In the manufacturing industry, for example, jobs that once required only a high school diploma increasingly demand advanced training and education, and the industry needs to ensure that there are enough educated people to fill these positions.⁵ In other sectors, such as medicine and business, occupations that previously did not require postsecondary education also now require advanced skills and training only available through postsecondary certificates and degrees.⁶ Increasingly, private-sector businesses are seeking partners in higher education to help them develop programs that can build a more highly educated workforce. Institutions of higher education, state agencies, and education-focused nonprofit organizations can become key partners with the private sector. ACC Network projects, such as those led by Greater Louisville, Inc. and The Manufacturing Institute seek to provide a clear pathway from completing a degree to workforce success and have demonstrated promising strategies for fostering effective partnerships that benefit students, the business community, and institutions.

Reaching and reengaging adults with prior college credits requires careful planning and market research, but these efforts are still difficult to evaluate.

Projects working to reengage adults with prior college credit are utilizing a variety of outreach and marketing techniques. While social media efforts, data mining, direct targeting, and traditional marketing campaigns may be effective in bringing these potential students back to complete their degrees, evaluating these efforts is a particularly challenging task. Potential students may not mention an advertisement when they reenroll. Alternatively, they may hear or see an advertisement urging them to return but seek out a different institution or organization. Where immediate evaluation is not possible, projects such as the one at Ivy Tech Community College, have developed ways to gather data on which types of communication and outreach are most effective to lay the groundwork for useful evaluation of their efforts.

Programs that fairly evaluate a potential student's transfer credit are crucial for serving adults with prior college credit.

A report by the Government Accountability Office concludes that transfer students end up taking 10 more credits than students who don't transfer to complete their degrees.⁷ Although this seems like a relatively small number, it can pose a barrier for adults returning to postsecondary education with significant credits as it adds time to their degree pursuit. The report is inconclusive on the causes but suggests one possible reason could be that institutions are reluctant to accept all valid credit earned at previous institutions.⁸

While common course numbering systems can help alleviate this concern when a student transfers within a state system, there is still potential for the loss of credits in other transfer situations. For adult students, many of whom have moved from one area of the country to another, this presents a significant problem. Colleges that provide fair and transparent evaluations of credits earned (and indicate which will be accepted) can save students time, give them clearer expectations about completing their degree, and help them make choices between institutions.

Providing credit for prior learning and work experience is a fair and academically rigorous strategy to increase adult college completion.

Not surprisingly, studies show that receiving credit for prior learning is correlated with increased chances that a student will receive a degree.⁹ Adults may have work or life experience that has led them to develop the same skills and knowledge that are taught in college courses. Members of the military and veterans, for example, have specific knowledge, skills, and competencies similar to what would be learned in college courses. Institutions can rigorously evaluate this experience and grant credit without sacrificing academic quality. Efforts to increase completion by returning adults must consider these findings and provide transparent policies for granting credit for prior learning.

The Need for Better Data

While the availability of data and how policymakers and educational leaders use data have improved significantly over the last 10 years, there are still significant gaps that affect our ability to know whether programs, policies, and practices are achieving their intended goals. For example, graduation rates reported through the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) do not account for adults returning to higher education or transfer students. Given that limitation, there is inadequate information on what programs and policies are most effective at reengaging adult learners who have significant prior college credit and helping them complete degrees.

Certain data points, however, provide an imperfect proxy about the adult college completion picture when taken together. First, we know there are significant numbers of adults with prior college credit. The Census shows that 22 percent of adults have some college credit but no degree.¹⁰ The limitation is that we do not know how far along these adults are toward completion. Some may have only earned a few credits while many others are likely much farther towards their degree and may only need a few classes to complete a credential. Analysis by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce suggests that just over one-third of this population (12 to 14 million individuals) has earned at least 60 credits.¹¹ Data from multiple states support this finding and conclude that high numbers of students leave state institutions with at least 60 credits.¹² Second, based on existing data it is clear that we will not be able to meet our ambitious national educational attainment goals without increasing degree completion among this population. Whether policymakers focus on Lumina Foundation's "big goal" of having 60 percent of the adult population with a degree or certificate of value by 2025 or another completion goal, most recognize that improvements in the traditional education pipeline are not sufficient. Third, postsecondary credentials, despite the increasing

cost of attendance, are still quite valuable and generally provide a significant (and growing) return to the individual. The education premium in average earnings for individuals as they complete additional years of postsecondary education has increased over time.¹³

Finding data that answer more specific questions about adults with significant college credits is difficult. The "some college, but no degree" category typically used in the Census and other demographic data yields an ambiguous story. State policymakers and institutional leaders would benefit from knowing more about the individuals in this category, with data on how many credits they have, what type of degrees they were pursuing, and what types of courses they need to complete their degrees.

In addition, knowing persistence and completion rates for adults who reenter postsecondary education is critical – but these data are usually only captured (if they're captured at all) at the institutional level. Federal college graduation rates are based on first-time full-time students and do not include adults returning to complete their degrees. While broadening federal data measures is a long-term prospect, states and institutions can develop their own metrics to better capture this population. South Dakota, for example, regularly updates the completion metric that institutions are required to report, and this metric now includes returning adults. The metric is used by the state system as part of its performance-funding regime, which rewards institutions for increasing the number of graduates they produce. The University of New Mexico also tracks returning students: about 73 percent of students who reenroll with 90 credit hours or more complete their degrees.¹⁴ While this figure seems laudable compared with completion rates for first-time students at just over 57 percent, there are few similar benchmarks to use for comparison.¹⁵

As more institutions, states, and other organizations begin focusing on returning adults, it is hoped that better data will become available to determine what practices are most successful, provided

those leading the efforts commit to collection and dissemination. South Dakota, for example, in a statewide effort to increase adult degree completion, conducted a thorough data analysis of students who left postsecondary education. This analysis helped guide policy by showing that students with significant credits tended to leave for non-academic reasons, performed just as well as other students academically, and were more likely to be in professional type degrees such as nursing and teaching than other students.¹⁶ Similarly, in New Jersey, interviews with former stop-out students helped to identify reasons they originally left higher education.¹⁷ With additional outreach efforts currently taking place across the ACC Network, more data may soon be available on how different modes of outreach compare in reaching and reengaging this population.

The effort to improve data surrounding this population may also be bolstered by the recent announcement that NCES will examine ways to broaden its completion metric that would somehow better account for part-time and transfer students and develop more comprehensive measures of student success. While likely not to be a direct metric related to near-completers, a possible change could bring us one step closer to better understanding this group of potential students. Another promising development is that the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, one of the regional accrediting bodies for postsecondary institutions, is developing plans to require institutions to report retention and completion rates for all students, which would include adults and transfer students.¹⁸

With gaps in the data universe, it can be difficult to know whether particular interventions are efficient uses of often limited resources. For example, with numerous state and local marketing and communications efforts targeting adults with significant prior credit, many policymakers focus on conversion rates (or the calculation of the number of students who actually return to college as a result of a particular marketing or communication effort) of their outreach efforts, but currently there are few

data for comparison. While initial response rates below 10 percent to mail that directly targets former students with significant credit may seem low, there are not sufficient comparative data to fully evaluate these results. An institution reaching out to former students with significant credit in Colorado, for example, had a reenrollment rate of about 9 percent of targeted students, but there are few benchmarks to which to compare this response and determine how effective this approach was.¹⁹ Detailed data indicating which support services are most helpful once students are enrolled are also needed.

With greater focus on these potential students, the policymaking community can and should begin to develop robust data about the best ways to reach these students and help them once they're enrolled. As more data become available, the ACC Network will work to collect and disseminate it with a focus on evaluating practices and proving what works.

Higher Education – Private Sector Partnerships

Studies suggest that the United States will face a gap in the number of potential workers with postsecondary degrees in the not too distant future.²⁰ With concern growing about this gap, the private sector and higher education are increasingly collaborating. Their efforts not only aim to produce more graduates with high-value certificates, two-year degrees, and four-year degrees but also to produce graduates with the specific types of knowledge, skills, and abilities the private sector most needs.

Not every student needs training for a specific occupation, but programs that give students the knowledge and skills valued by the private sector can fill an important role in the overall effort to increase degree and certificate completion. By looking at two examples of positive collaboration between higher education and the private sector, we can identify several promising strategies.

Greater Louisville, Inc. (GLI). GLI, the metro chamber of commerce for Louisville, KY, operates a Lumina-funded project that works closely with

local businesses and higher education institutions to identify employees who have prior college credit but no degree and provide pathways for them to complete their credential. The project has set up the *Degrees at Work* program (formerly called the *Employee Education Delivery System*), through which employers agree to adopt certain education-friendly policies, including flexible scheduling, education reimbursement programs, and the provision of information about completing degrees. Each employer that agrees to participate identifies a single point of contact, usually in the human resources department, who serves as a liaison between project staff and interested employees. The project has also developed connections with local higher education institutions that participate in a network committed to serving adult learners.

The Manufacturing Institute. A think tank based in Washington, DC and affiliated with the National Association of Manufacturers, The Manufacturing Institute is dedicated to improving and expanding manufacturing in the United States. The institute has developed the Skills Certification System, a program that promotes strong partnerships between employers and institutions of higher education to meet the skills needed in advanced manufacturing by allowing students to earn “stackable” credentials that are recognized and endorsed by industry. Due to the stackable nature of the certifications, students can earn industry-recognized credentials and college credit. Institutions agree to provide coursework leading to these credentials, and the project offers technical assistance to ease implementation, including strategies and lessons learned from other institutions that are already providing these courses. Currently, 30 states are implementing the Skills Certification System.

As manufacturing becomes more complex, industry needs an ever-greater supply of employees with science and math skills. Through this project, The Manufacturing Institute is working with state systems as well as two- and four-year institutions to provide clearer educational pathways to returning adults through industry-recognized credentials. As

part of the project, The Manufacturing Institute pushes employers to define clear strategies for developing their workforce, including providing opportunities and incentives to earn the identified credentials as part of ongoing professional development. In addition, adults with prior college credit, skills, and industry-related training can qualify for credentials or earn credit towards them through assessment of prior learning. Once they earn the credential, they can continue on the educational pathway toward higher certifications or degrees. In outreach to employers, the institute stresses the return to the company for adopting policies that promote credential completion by employees.

Promising strategies from these efforts include:

- ▲ Emphasize the “return on value” to employers who enter partnerships to boost the education of their workforce.
- ▲ Suggest concrete, low-cost actions that businesses can take to increase college completion, such as offering flexible schedules and providing information about returning to complete degrees or certificates of value.
- ▲ Provide high visibility for companies that have education-friendly policies as an example for others and to reward their commitment.
- ▲ Involve business organizations in certification completion efforts.
- ▲ Ensure tuition reimbursement programs cover the expenses associated with evaluation of prior learning.

Additional Resources:

- ▲ GLI’s *Degrees at Work* program: www.55000degrees.org/degreesatwork.
- ▲ Manufacturing Institute Skills Certification Program: www.themanufacturinginstitute.org/Education-Workforce/Skills-Certification-System/Skills-Certification-System.aspx.
- ▲ Maine Development Foundation Employers’ Initiative: www.mdf.org/mei_overview.php.

Communications Strategies to Reach and Reengage Adult Learners

Virtually all efforts to bring adults with prior postsecondary credit back to complete their credentials involve communications and marketing strategies. Whether relatively straightforward advertisements on billboards or complicated efforts involving data mining and targeted outreach, these efforts are the first step in reaching potential students.

Data mining and direct outreach can be effective and efficient ways to reach potential students. A well-planned and executed examination of a state's or institution's data can identify large cohorts of potential students with significant prior college credits. Data mining allows credential completion programs to start a conversation with a potential student, who would likely be familiar with the institution or state system. But more generalized advertising campaigns are also necessary, as data mining can only identify former students of a particular institution or state system. Other potential students may have moved to the state or area from another location after having completed significant credits, or they may have attended private institutions; these students would be impossible to identify through the typical databases. A variety of approaches are necessary to reach and reengage adults with prior credit.

Efforts in two states offer a number of promising practices. In Indiana the two-year sector has created an innovative program to encourage adults with prior college credit to return. Ivy Tech Community College started its effort to increase postsecondary degree attainment among the state's workforce-aged population by mining its own data for students who had previously attended one of the system's institutions and earned at least 39 credits toward an associate's degree. Focusing on former students who left from 2006 through 2009, this effort identified more than 9,000 stop-outs. Ivy Tech directly contacted as many of the former students as possible. The project used a variety of means to

reach out to the students, beginning with a general postcard, which was followed by a letter specific to the targeted student's own credits and describing potential degree pathways. Ivy Tech then used a call center to contact former students via telephone. Any that were interested in returning were referred to reentry coordinators, who contacted them within two days.

Through this project, which began late in 2010, Ivy Tech has attracted almost 600 former students back to school to complete their degree and expects the number to grow in the coming years. A significant number of the former students it contacted had transferred and enrolled elsewhere or faced nonacademic barriers to returning, including taking care of children, serving in the military, working full-time, or having moved out of Indiana. Contacting the students was only the first step. Ivy Tech also set up 14 advisors (one in each of the state regions its campuses service) who work to simplify the reentry process for near-completers interested in reenrolling. This outreach campaign provided clear pathways for students to reenroll.

Another critical lesson is to ensure that programs and services to support returning adults are in place before outreach campaigns urge them to return to complete their degrees. These outreach efforts must also not give potential students unrealistic expectations about their potential degree pathways.

In Georgia, before launching a public outreach campaign targeting adults with prior college credit, the state higher education system hired a consulting firm to conduct detailed market research about the target audience. The firm contacted 171 former students of the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia to understand their attitudes towards degree completion, test potential messages, and understand better what types of messages may resonate with such individuals. Georgia used this research and worked with a public relations company to develop its overall message and branding strategy for the outreach campaign.

Barriers to Completion

Market research in Georgia identified perceived and real barriers that prevent adults from returning to complete their degrees.

- ▲ **Time demands:** Most adults who are considering returning to college have limited time to devote to completing their degrees.
- ▲ **Other responsibilities:** Work and family responsibilities may lead returning adults to believe that they won't be able to complete their degrees.
- ▲ **Financial barriers:** Potential students are concerned about the cost of completing their degree.

WICHE has cataloged additional specific barriers and promising solutions in a recent publication called *Going the Distance in Adult College Completion: Lessons from the Non-traditional No More Project*. The publication is available at www.wiche.edu/pub/15637.

The market research suggested that key messages should include an acknowledgement that returning to complete a degree entails personal sacrifice but is ultimately worthwhile. Outreach efforts should also connect earning a degree with specific examples of college and career success. In addition, messages must address perceived and real financial, academic, and time barriers that can prevent adults with prior college credit from returning to complete their degrees (see box above) and give potential students a sense that the institution cares about their success. Finally, the market research showed that messages should emphasize that completing a degree is a significant accomplishment and that adults would find others like them at college if they returned.

Georgia ultimately created a wide-ranging marketing and outreach campaign with the tagline "A College Degree: What Is It Worth to You?" and a logo based on the market research. The outreach campaign directs adults to a website that provides information

about degree completion programs at institutions in the state that are part of the Adult Learning Consortium (to join the consortium, campuses must agree to implement numerous adult-friendly policies and practices). The outreach program is designed to provide adults with a sense that institutions have programs and services tailored to their needs – they won't be returning to the same types of programs that they originally left.

Promising strategies from these efforts include:

- ▲ Identify specific programs and services for returning students before marketing to them.
- ▲ Identify a single point of contact to reengage students and help guide them through the readmission process.
- ▲ Filter student stop-outs through National Student Clearinghouse to eliminate from outreach efforts those students who transferred to and succeeded at other institutions.

Additional resources:

- ▲ Georgia Adult Learner website: DiscoverYourGoal.net.
- ▲ Marketing samples from ACCN members: www.adultcollegecompletion.org/mktingCommunications.
- ▲ WICHE Policy brief on using a single point-of-contact to guide returning students through the reentry process: www.wiche.edu/pub/14608.

Fair Evaluation of Transfer Credits

Adults returning to postsecondary education often must transfer credits from institutions they previously attended. As noted earlier, the transfer process can result in a longer degree path, especially for returning adults with older credits.

Providing adults with a clear picture of how their credits may or may not be accepted is crucial, allowing them to make an informed decision about where to pursue a degree. While it may not be possible to perform a fully automated transfer credit evaluation process prior to enrollment, promising strategies have recently been developed in Texas, South Dakota, and Arkansas.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recently launched the GradTx Consortium which supports an online portal that guides returning adults through the reentry process. In addition to providing clear information about the options available at institutions that are members of the consortium, the site also allows adults to enter information from their transcripts and see how many credits are likely to be accepted by the different institutions.

Other institutions and state systems have developed databases for transfer students that show what courses have previously been accepted for credit, but these resources can be difficult for students to access because they are not prominently featured on web portals and may have interfaces that make it difficult to match a student's previous coursework with potential transfer credits.

Returning students benefit from knowing how many of their credits will be accepted by an institution before they enroll. While it is understandable that institutions may not want to undertake credit evaluations for students who are not committed to enrolling, returning students may enroll in an institution with unrealistically high expectations about their transfer credit, only to discover that much of it will not be accepted.

South Dakota recently launched a website (www.selectdakota.org) that provides detailed information for transfer students about the transfer process. The site includes ways for students to examine how their transfer credit might be accepted at some state institutions.

States such as Arkansas, with common course numbering systems and legislation requiring state institutions to accept credit from other state institutions, address the transfer problem for many students. Yet students who transfer from outside of the system may still unnecessarily lose credits as they transfer. Additionally, states and institutions should ensure that credits awarded through the assessment of prior learning (discussed in greater detail in the following section) transfer if a student elects to change institutions.

Promising strategies from these efforts include:

- ▲ Provide as much information about state and institutional policies on acceptance or denial of transfer credit as possible.
- ▲ Provide returning adults with informal credit analyses, whether in person or online, so that they have a realistic understanding of how many credits will be accepted.
- ▲ Give students means to compare how their credits will be treated at different institutions.

Additional resources:

- ▲ Texas adult learner portal: www.GradTx.org.
- ▲ South Dakota adult learner portal: selectDakota.org.
- ▲ Arkansas Legislation on transfer of credits: www.arkleg.state.ar.us/assembly/2009/R/Acts/Act182.pdf.
- ▲ WICHE policy brief on how higher education web portals serve the needs of transfer students: www.wiche.edu/pub/14485.
- ▲ WICHE policy brief on promising practices in statewide transfer and articulation policy: www.wiche.edu/pub/14202.

Prior Learning Assessment

Many adults with prior postsecondary credit who are interested in returning to complete their degrees have spent significant time in the workforce developing college-level skills and knowledge. Some of what they have learned in the workplace through formal training, professional development, military service, self-study, or day-to-day experience is equivalent to college coursework. If a student already possesses the knowledge and skills he or she would learn in a postsecondary course, repeating it serves only to lengthen their time to earn a degree and will likely lead to frustration with their higher education experience. Awarding credit for college-level skills and knowledge may help students complete their credentials. One study found that students who received credits for prior learning had higher rates of degree completion.²¹

Assessing this prior knowledge and giving students credit for what they already know is not a new concept – some institutions have been granting credit for prior learning for decades. Institutions have used standardized exams, student portfolios, and evaluations of corporate and military training to award credit. Much of this prior learning assessment (PLA) has taken place at the institutional level, but projects are now working to provide fair and equitable assessments on a greater scale.

With more emphasis being placed on learning outcomes in higher education, there are greater opportunities to assess outcomes from professional and life experience and grant potential students credit for what they already know and can demonstrate. Making widespread use of PLA can be an effective tool in helping dramatically boost educational attainment as students can progress more quickly to coursework that provides them with new skills and knowledge.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has launched LearningCounts.org, a nationwide prior learning assessment system. Potential students can take an instructor-led online course through the website that guides them

through the process of developing a portfolio that demonstrates the college-level skills and knowledge they have acquired through their work and life experience. Once a potential student has completed his or her portfolio, expert evaluators from higher education institutions, who are hired and trained by CAEL, provide an assessment and credit recommendation. Students receive these credit recommendations on a transcript from the American Council on Education (ACE), similar to those that the organization has provided for years for military and workplace training. LearningCounts.org launched in 2010; more than 130 institutions have become project partners.

Before beginning the portfolio course, which costs \$500, students can speak with an academic advisor at no cost. These advisors can suggest whether the student would be a likely candidate for receiving a credit recommendation through the portfolio course and inform him or her of other options for receiving credit for prior learning.

Prior learning assessment efforts typically must overcome the perception that granting credit for life or work experience diminishes academic rigor because the college-level knowledge and skills gained through these experiences are somehow not equivalent to those learned in the classroom. LearningCounts.org works to ensure the integrity of credit decisions by hiring and training active faculty members from higher education institutions as evaluators.

While there are clearly evident benefits for students, LearningCounts.org can also help institutions that are not able to provide comprehensive prior learning assessments. Institutions can partner with CAEL and use LearningCounts.org as a resource to offer PLA in a variety of subjects, particularly in low-demand areas where it is not efficient for the institution to offer its own program. Institutions must agree to accept credit recommendations provided by LearningCounts.org evaluators, but in return institutions can offer comprehensive prior learning assessments immediately.

The University of Wisconsin System is attempting to boost statewide education levels by significantly increasing the amount of credit granted through prior learning assessments at its institutions. Establishing a goal of doubling the number of students who use prior learning assessment services, the system has provided competitive grants to institutions to expand the scope of their programs. Similarly, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System is working to expand prior learning assessment's acceptance among state institutions for adults with prior credit.

These efforts to scale up the use and acceptance of comprehensive prior learning assessment systems hold promise for reducing the time necessary to earn a degree without sacrificing academic rigor. Those working on the issues stress the importance of involving faculty in the development of prior learning assessment policies and practices. System-level and nationwide approaches such as these can have a

big impact, but these strategies must coincide with efforts at the institutional level to engage faculty and build support, understanding, and acceptance for prior learning assessment.

Conclusion

The need to better serve adults with prior college credit is clear. With ambitious national, state, and even local attainment goals, reaching and reengaging this population will be a key factor in our ability to meet future workforce demands. Data clearly show that these goals will be unmet without significant improvement in both the traditional education pipeline and in the outcomes for adult learners.

With more and more organizations, cities, states, businesses, and others focusing on adults with prior college credit, the promising practices and innovative new strategies will continue to grow in the coming years. As these efforts collect data and evaluate their work, these promising new ideas may evolve into proven effective strategies.

Clearly this is more than just an issue for workforce development agencies or higher education institutions. These varied stakeholders and actors must continue to collaborate and focus on the entire degree completion process – from identifying those adults who have significant prior credit, to easing their path to reentry in meaningful credential programs, to providing clear and efficient pathways to earning a degree or certificate.

WICHE and the ACC Network will continue to disseminate promising ideas and work toward providing better data to help guide policymakers and educational leaders in the efforts to better serve this population.

Promising strategies from these efforts include:

- ▲ Design PLA systems to be fair and transparent for students without sacrificing academic rigor and quality.
- ▲ Get input from faculty on the use and design of PLA systems.
- ▲ Demonstrate the validity of PLA validity for the purposes for which it is used, whether the systems are developed internally or secured externally.
- ▲ Consider using an external PLA system, such as CAEL's LearningCounts.org.

Additional resources:

- ▲ General CAEL Resources on PLA: www.cael.org/pla.htm.
- ▲ *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*. A CAEL report on how PLAs can increase student success: www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.
- ▲ CAEL's LearningCounts.org website: www.LearningCounts.org.

Endnotes

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