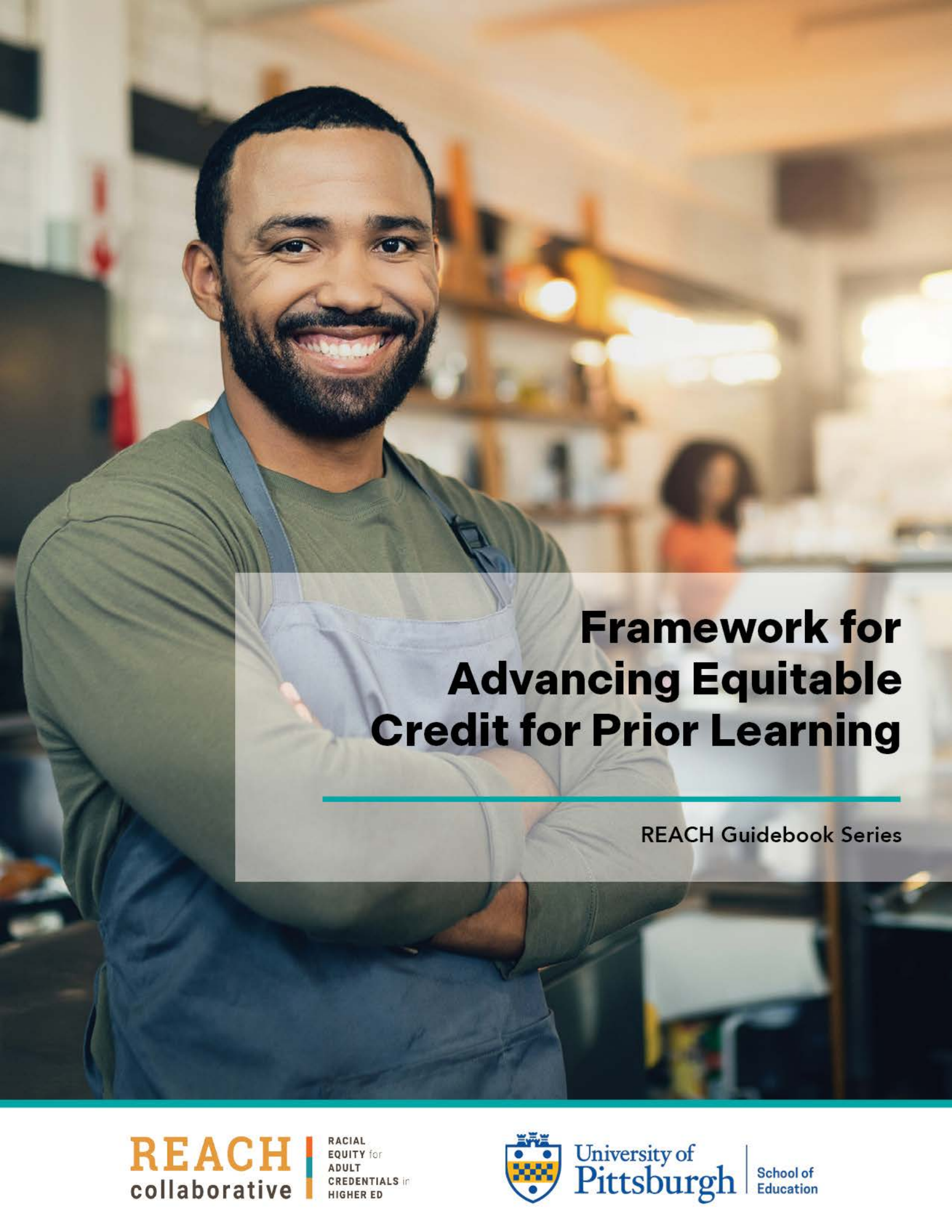




Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning

REACH Guidebook Series

About the REACH Guidebook Series

The REACH Guidebook Series builds upon insights from Lumina Foundation's Racial Equity in Adult Credentialing in Higher Education (REACH) initiative, a multi-year effort involving six states – California, Colorado, North Carolina, New York, Texas, and Virginia – to strengthen credential attainment for adult learners of color in community colleges.



This three-part series was developed to offer practical insights into how faculty, staff, and administrators at the community college can leverage resources to design and implement innovative strategies to positively affect academic and workforce-related outcomes for racially minoritized adult students. Each guidebook focuses on a key area of practice relevant for advancing equitable outcomes among adult learners of color:

- **Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning**
- **Culturally Sustaining Professional Development for Community College Faculty and Staff**
- **Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College**

Grounded in current research, practitioner experience, and insights gathered from interviews and cohort meetings with REACH and REACH Deeper colleges, the series offers practical guidance, actionable tools, and real-world examples to help institutions strengthen their efforts to better serve adult learners of color.

This material is based upon work supported by the Lumina Foundation under grant number 2304-1116173. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lumina Foundation.

Acknowledgements to the following individuals for their contributions to this guidebook series:

- Yiwen Ai
- Thea A. Brown
- Raina Dyer-Barr
- Kailee Karr
- Jason A. Keist
- Brett A. Visger
- Wes White
- Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher

Suggested Citation

Community College Research, Praxis, and Leadership. (2025). *Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning* (REACH Guidebook Series). University of Pittsburgh School of Education.

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Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning Guidebook



Introduction

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) allows students to earn credit for knowledge and skills gained outside the traditional classroom. Yet research has shown that institutions often demonstrate gaps in populations who access and earn credits through CPL, frequently resulting in fewer adults of color receiving credit through these approaches^[i]. These gaps create an imperative to develop strategies to ensure CPL that reach ALL students. These equitable approaches to CPL ensure that these opportunities are transparent and accessible for all students by systematically embedding CPL into institutional policies and practices.

CPL offers a proven strategy to accelerate time to degree, reduce costs, and recognize the skills that students bring to the classroom^[ii]. CPL has been demonstrated to be an especially effective strategy to support the academic success of adult learners of color. In CAEL & WICHE's brief on Equity Paradoxes in the PLA Boost, Black adults

who earned credit through CPL saw a 23% increase in degree completion over Black adults who did not receive credit through CPL; this represented the most significant gain among any demographic population. Yet the same study found that Black adults were the least likely to receive credit through CPL, with only 6% of Black adults earning CPL credits versus 11% for all students. It is clear that CPL can be a powerful tool to help adults of color succeed in postsecondary, but it is not yet being equitably implemented.

Beyond the benefits of shortening the path to a degree, one of the most important aspects of CPL is the boost to adult learners' confidence^[iii]. Validating Credit for Prior Learning signals to adults that they belong in higher education and affirms belonging, which is especially important for adult learners of color. Employers increasingly value skills-based education^[iv], and institutions that effectively implement CPL will be better positioned to align with evolving labor market needs.

The demographic profile of traditional college students is changing, with a growing number of learners over 25^[iv], many balancing work, family, and education. Strategies to expand credit for prior learning serve to validate adult learners and shorten their path to earning a postsecondary credential by recognizing skills and learning developed elsewhere.

To equitably scale CPL, colleges must embed it within institutional culture—integrating it into core systems, advising practices, and professional development—to ensure that students, especially those historically underserved, have equitable access to receive credit for their prior learning.

Expanding and institutionalizing CPL can improve retention and completion rates, reduce the overall cost of education for learners, close equity gaps—especially for adult learners of color^[vi]—and position institutions to address enrollment and labor market challenges by supporting reskilling and credential attainment among working adults.

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Framework for Advancing Equitable CPL

Advancing equitable approaches to CPL is essential to expanding access for all learners, particularly those historically underrepresented in higher education. Despite its proven benefits, CPL remains underutilized. Students of color, adult learners, and first-generation students often encounter barriers to participation stemming from unclear policies, inconsistent implementation, and limited outreach.

This framework is designed for institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and policymakers committed to advancing equity and student outcomes through CPL. It serves as a resource to support self-assessment, inform strategic planning, and guide the development of systems that promote sustainable institutional transformation for adult learners of color. This framework outlines six key elements to guide institutions in building CPL systems that are transparent, consistently applied, and centered on equity:

- ✓ **Leveraging Existing Evidence-Based Practices in CPL**
- ✓ **Embracing Systemic Approaches to CPL**
- ✓ **Enhancing Faculty Engagement**
- ✓ **Centering CPL in Orientation and Advising Process**
- ✓ **Building a Data-Driven Culture on CPL**
- ✓ **Developing Targeted Communication Strategies for CPL**

Using the Equitable CPL Guidebook

While many of these elements may already exist in some form across institutions, this framework invites colleges and universities to adopt a comprehensive, integrated approach to CPL. Implementing all six elements requires a thorough assessment of current CPL policies and practices, identifying assets and gaps, and estimating the resources needed for full implementation.

First, institutions should take stock of existing CPL assets to determine what is currently in place. Once an inventory is established, institutions should disaggregate and interrogate existing data to better understand the outcomes of current approaches and systems. Ideally, these analyses will identify populations and strategies that create gaps or uneven outcomes. State policies should also be reviewed and may serve to either accelerate or slow progress toward implementation. Understanding the current outcomes and structures, especially concerning potential equity gaps, is necessary to inform direction moving forward.

Following the assessment, institutions should develop an implementation plan that reflects their unique context. Because institutional missions, state policy environments, and available resources vary, a one-size-fits-all approach is neither feasible nor advisable. In most cases, realizing the full vision of the Framework for Advancing Equitable CPL will require a multi-year commitment, strategic prioritization, and the allocation of personnel and financial resources. Success will depend on cross-functional collaboration among faculty, advisors, enrollment staff, institutional research offices, and senior leaders. Institutions are encouraged to establish cross-campus teams that will lead, champion, and sustain CPL efforts over time.



Framework Elements

1. Leveraging Existing Evidence-Based Practices to Implement Credit for Prior Learning

Given the extensive research and guidance on effective CPL, this element does not seek to duplicate existing recommendations and research. Instead, it highlights key components of effective CPL and directs readers to related resources. While many institutions already have several CPL elements in place, advancing equity in CPL requires a critical review of existing approaches to identify where revisions or enhancements would be warranted.

As institutions look to review and update CPL policies, it's important to center two realities. One, effective CPL should be user-friendly. While the goal is to award credit for demonstrated competencies, institutions must recognize that students may acquire those competencies through diverse life, work, or military experiences. Therefore, CPL systems should be flexible enough to accommodate varied pathways without sacrificing clarity or consistency. Second, because faculty are ultimately responsible for evaluating and awarding CPL credit, their active involvement is essential. Faculty must be well-informed, adequately trained, and consistently engaged in all aspects of CPL development and implementation. In short, CPL systems must strike a balance: they should be accessible and transparent for students while upholding rigorous academic standards and faculty oversight.

General CPL Resources for Success

Institutions should leverage existing resources to improve CPL processes because doing so accelerates implementation, enhances quality, and reduces duplication of effort. National organizations, such as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the American Council on Education (ACE), and initiatives like Credential As You Go, have developed robust frameworks, tools, and best practices that institutions can adopt or adapt to fit their context. Additionally, several states have developed and shared excellent CPL resources.

These resources offer evidence-based guidance on assessment methods, faculty training, equity considerations, and policy design—helping institutions avoid common pitfalls and align with proven models. By using what already exists, colleges can focus their limited time and capacity on strategic customization and stakeholder engagement rather than building systems from scratch. Ultimately, leveraging established resources not only strengthens the rigor and accessibility of CPL processes but also signals institutional commitment to innovation and equity in recognizing diverse learning pathways.

Selected Resources

Organizations

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers

- [Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusion: The 2024 Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning in U.S. and Canadian Higher Education](#)

American Council on Education

- [ACE National Guide](#)
- [ACE Military Guide Help Center](#)
- [Maximizing Credit for Prior Learning in a Data-Informed Ecosystem](#)

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

- [CAEL's Ten Quality Standards for Assessing Prior Learning](#)
- [The Four Stages of Building an Effective and Inclusive CPL Program](#)
- [The PLA Boost \(with WICHE\)](#)
- [Closing Equity Gaps in Credit for Prior Learning \(with WICHE\)](#)
- [Equity Paradoxes in the PLA Boost \(with WICHE\)](#)

Credential as You Go (CAYGO)

- [Tools & Resources](#)
- [Credential As You Go Initiative](#)

Education Strategy Group

- [Adult Ready Playbook](#)
- [A More Unified Community College](#)
- [Stackability Guide: Building Credential Connections Within Institutions](#)

State-Level

California

- [Credit for Prior Learning: A Framework of Policy Components to Consider](#)
- [California Community College Credit for Prior Learning](#)
- [Scaling Credit for Prior Learning in California: Vision 2030 and the MAP Initiative](#)

Colorado

- [Credit for Prior Learning in the Community College: A Case from Colorado](#)
- [Template for PLA Policy](#)

Minnesota

- [Minnesota State Credit for Prior Learning Assessment Network \(C-PLAN\)](#)

New York

- [Award of Academic Credit by Evaluation](#)
- [Elements of a Campus CPL/PLA Policy](#)

North Carolina

- [Credit for Prior Learning - Resources for Colleges NCCCS](#)

Ohio

- [PLA with a Purpose](#)
- [Industry Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guidees \(ITAGs\)](#)

Articulation Agreements

Articulation agreements can be critical in strengthening CPL by establishing clear, structured pathways for translating prior learning—such as military training, industry certifications, or on-credit coursework—into academic credit across institutions^[vii]. These agreements establish mutual recognition of learning outcomes, reducing ambiguity for students and limiting the need for repeated assessment or course duplication. When CPL is integrated into articulation agreements, it helps standardize credit practices and promotes equitable access, regardless of where or how students begin their educational journey. This approach enhances transparency, improves credit transferability, accelerates time to degree, and lowers educational costs. Equally important, it fosters institutional trust in the rigor and value of experiential learning. By formalizing these pathways, institutions commit to honoring diverse learning experiences and supporting seamless student mobility across educational systems.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system has [statewide articulation policies](#) that allow CPL credits earned at a community college to transfer seamlessly to four-year institutions.

American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) has developed a [Guide to Best Practices: Articulation Agreements](#).

Standardized Exams

Establishing policies to award credit by standardized examination strengthens CPL by providing students with a clear, efficient, and academically rigorous pathway to demonstrate college-level mastery acquired through nontraditional means—such as independent study, work experience, or military service^[viii]. Exams such as the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) serve as nationally recognized benchmarks for assessing prior knowledge and are widely accepted across institutions. Credit earned through standardized exams enables students to bypass introductory coursework, reduce time to degree, lower tuition costs, and accelerate academic progress. This approach is particularly valuable for adult learners, working professionals, and first-generation college students who possess substantial knowledge but lack formal credentials.

However, while standardized exams promise to expand CPL access, equity implications require further examination. Preliminary research indicates that racially minoritized populations may experience gains through assessments such as CLEP, yet disparities in access to these exams persist. More comprehensive research is needed to fully understand these dynamics.^[ix] As institutions review the use of standardized exams in CPL policy, they should consider where these tools might offer widely available, low-barrier entry points into CPL pathways—particularly for adult learners of color—while remaining attentive to potential access inequities.

Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina's [Credit for Prior Learning website](#) includes a section on standardized exams that identifies the exam, the necessary score to earn credit, the number of credits, and the course for which the exam has equivalency.

Southwest Virginia Community College's [Credit for Prior Learning website](#) identifies examinations, required scores, and aligned courses for CPL.

Challenge Exams

Credit by challenge examination improves CPL by allowing students to earn academic credit through institution-developed assessments that evaluate mastery of specific course content^[x]. Unlike standardized national exams, challenge exams are designed to reflect a college's curriculum and are typically evaluated by faculty, ensuring alignment with course-level learning outcomes and academic standards. This method is particularly valuable for students with substantial professional, military, or self-directed learning in specialized fields not addressed by broader standardized exams.

By demonstrating competency through direct, performance-based assessments, students can bypass redundant coursework, reduce educational costs, and accelerate degree completion—while maintaining engagement and motivation. Challenge exams also allow institutions to recognize a broader range of learning experiences, thereby expanding access to credit for adult learners, returning students, and individuals from historically underrepresented groups. As a customizable and faculty-driven method, credit by challenge examination supports academic integrity and equity in awarding credit for diverse learning pathways.

Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) has a clear policy for [Assessment by Local Exam \(ABLE\)](#). ABLE exams have been developed in HLT 141 Introduction to Medical Terminology courses. Students with relevant experience can take a faculty-developed challenge exam to earn credit for foundational courses.



Military Experience



Credit for military training and experience reinforces CPL by formally acknowledging the rigorous, competency-based instruction that service members receive throughout their military careers. Using frameworks such as the American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations and the Joint Services Transcript (JST), institutions can systematically evaluate military training and award academic credit in leadership, logistics, cybersecurity, healthcare, and technical operations.

This process validates the advanced, real-world skills veterans bring to the classroom and reduces the time and financial burden of earning a degree. Moreover, it advances equity by creating transparent, structured pathways for military-affiliated students—many adult learners, students of color, or first-generation college students—to enter higher education with recognized academic progress. By honoring military learning, institutions demonstrate a commitment to student success and public service, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for those who have served.

The University of North Carolina has developed a [Military Prior Learning How To Implementation Guide](#) to create a statewide uniform system for awarding course credit to students with relevant military experience and training.

Thomas Edison State University has developed [policies and practices](#) to enable military-affiliated students to pursue degrees. This effort includes clear [support for CPL](#) for military training and experience.

Tidewater Community College in Virginia has developed [policies that include military roadmaps](#) that enable military-affiliated students to see how their training aligns with their degree path.

Portfolio Assessment

Effective portfolio assessment processes significantly enhance CPL by offering students with a flexible, individualized pathway to demonstrate college-level learning acquired through work, volunteer service, independent study, or other life experiences^[xii]. A well-structured portfolio assessment process allows students to document their knowledge, reflect on their learning, and align their experiences with specific course outcomes—typically under faculty guidance.

When supported by clear evaluation rubrics, faculty training, and transparent procedures, portfolio assessment upholds academic rigor while expanding equitable access to credit. This method is especially beneficial for adult learners and students from nontraditional backgrounds whose rich experiences may not be easily captured through standardized exams. By validating experiential learning through structured, faculty-reviewed assessment, institutions empower students to advance more efficiently toward degree completion, reduce educational costs, and build confidence in the academic value of their prior accomplishments.



[Ohio Portfolio Training Materials](#) - The Ohio Department of Higher Education worked with the state's colleges and universities to develop a statewide rubric for portfolio review and training resources for reviewers. All are open source.

SUNY Empire State University has developed a good overview of the portfolio process at the University that highlights steps in the portfolio process. The **[Individualized Credit for Prior Learning \(ICPL\)](#)** webpage spells out the steps students need to undertake, with links to additional resources and details different phases with respective responsibilities of students, faculty, and evaluators

2. Embracing Systemic Approaches to CPL

Research by the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) found disparities in participation among adult learners of color in taking advantage of credit for prior learning^[xii]. Individuals who benefited from CPL usually had an advisor or faculty member who understood the potential of CPL, or they were informed by a family member or friend about it. The result is the uneven and inequitable distribution of CPL among students. To address this, colleges should look to implement systems that ensure all students learn about CPL and have the opportunity to explore if they are eligible for credit for prior learning.

Adopting a systemic approach is crucial to advancing equitable CPL in higher education because it ensures that all students—particularly adult learners, students of color, and those from underserved communities—have consistent and transparent access to opportunities that recognize their prior knowledge and skills. When CPL policies, processes, and outcomes are clearly communicated and readily accessible, students are better equipped to make informed decisions about their education, potentially saving time and money as they work toward a degree^[xiii]. Systemic approaches to CPL require transparency, fostering institutional ownership, purposeful professional development, and a structured approach to implementation.

There are multiple entry points for strengthening systemic CPL efforts. Institutions can begin by identifying cross-cutting opportunities that join departments, roles, and functions to ensure that every student has the chance to explore and pursue CPL.

These elements include

- Embedding CPL within Institutional Processes
- Engaging the Campus Community
- Developing an Inventory of CPL Opportunities
- Increasing Opportunities for Automatic CPL Recognition
- Creating Dedicated Webpages on CPL Policies and Practices for Better Transparency
- Leveraging Technology Solutions to Improve CPL

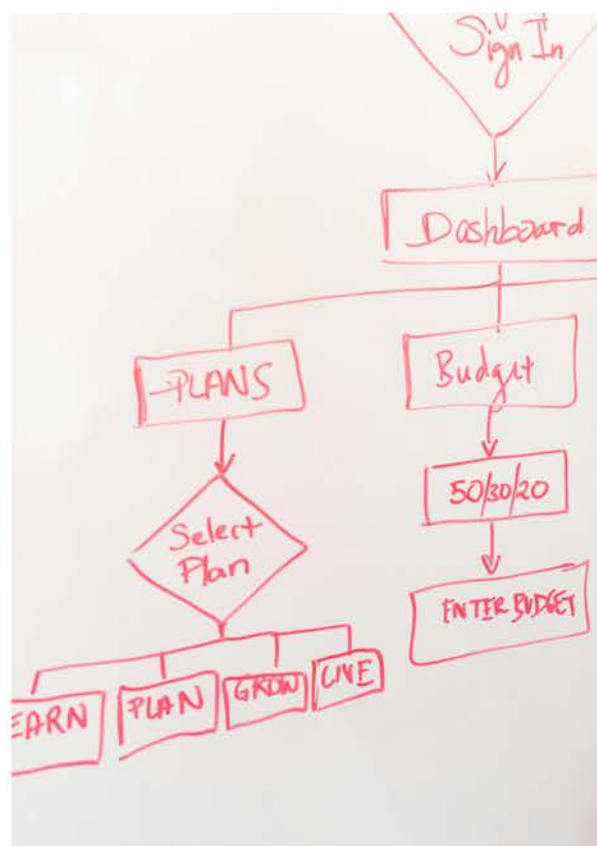
Institutions must recognize that the goal is to implement systems that recognize and award CPL. They need not employ every element to implement systemic approaches, but they should make efforts to implement multiple elements.

Embedding CPL within Institutional Processes

Embedding CPL as a core institutional process is crucial to advancing equity in colleges and universities because it transforms CPL from a niche offering into a standard, systemic component of academic and student support infrastructure. When CPL is embedded into advising, admissions, academic planning, faculty engagement, and program review, it becomes accessible to all students—not just those who know to ask. This institutionalization is essential for scaling CPL equitably and ensuring that historically underserved populations can benefit from it consistently and transparently.

Adopting this approach requires institutions to step back and review how CPL might intersect with each process across the institution. Considerations should be made for both student-facing and administrative functions. When CPL is treated as an optional or peripheral initiative, its reach is limited, and implementation is uneven. Embedding it into institutional processes—such as degree planning, course registration systems, program review cycles, and advising protocols—ensures that all students are routinely evaluated for CPL eligibility, not just those with the knowledge or confidence to advocate for themselves.

When CPL is embedded in policy, staffing, technology, and workflows, it reduces reliance on individuals, specific departments, or discretionary staff decisions. Moreover, integrating CPL into systems such as student information systems, orientation modules, and course catalogs allows it to grow with the institution. CPL remains a stable and reliable student option as staff change or initiatives shift. This minimizes inequities and ensures all eligible students receive equal opportunity and support, regardless of major, campus, or advisor.



The State University of New York (SUNY) System [implemented a policy](#) requiring each campus to develop and implement an action plan to systemically expand opportunities for CPL, including guidance on types, measures, and systems.

At **Pierce College** in Los Angeles, California, CPL offerings are listed directly in the [course catalog](#). Students can register online in the same way they sign up for regular courses. CPL credits also appear on degree audits to satisfy program requirements.

Engaging the Campus Community

Creating equitable CPL systems requires more than policy—it demands a cultural shift that involves the entire campus community^[xiv]. Engaging the campus community creates opportunities to dispel misconceptions about CPL and build broad-based support for its implementation across the institution. Faculty, staff, advisors, administrators, and even students must understand, value, and support CPL as a legitimate, rigorous, student-centered practice.

When faculty are engaged early and consistently—particularly in disciplines closely aligned with prior learning, such as business, healthcare, and trades—they often emerge as champions of CPL^[xv]. Their role in developing challenge exams, evaluating portfolios, and upholding academic integrity is critical. Similarly, when adjunct instructors receive appropriate training and guidance, they can help identify students who may benefit from CPL and reinforce its availability.

Advisors play a frontline role in raising awareness about CPL. Participation increases when they are well-informed and encouraged to proactively discuss CPL options with students. Comprehensive campus-wide training ensures advisors can spot potential opportunities for CPL, guide students through processes, and connect them with CPL specialists as needed.

Administrative leaders—including registrars, enrollment staff, and program chairs—must also support system-wide consistency and integration. Their efforts to align CPL with transfer agreements, credential pathways, and technology systems are essential to institutionalizing CPL.

Most importantly, when students hear about CPL from multiple trusted sources—faculty, advisors, orientation leaders, and peers—they are likelier to engage with it^[xvi]. Broad-based communication demystifies CPL, reduces stigma, and promotes equity by ensuring that awareness and access are not confined to those “in the know.”

Columbia Gorge Community College convened the CPL Task Force; its members included the Registrar, the Director of Curriculum and Academic Assessment, the Grant Accounting Coordinator, the CTE Program Director, the Nursing Program Director, the Dean of Academic Pathways, the Instructional Services Administrative Assistant and the CPL Program Manager (the vice president for instruction and the vice president for student services were ex-officio members). At biweekly meetings, the Task Force reviewed all existing CGCC CPL practices. The Task Force streamlined the process for students seeking credit for AP, CLEP, and IB by eliminating an associated fee and creating tables that showed the CGCC course equivalencies for AP, CLEP, and IB. This made the process more transparent for students and advisors.

South Central College in Minnesota has developed an extensive [Credit for Prior Learning Implementation Guide](#) focused on a comprehensive view of all the engagement, policies, and procedures necessary to implement effective CPL on a campus.

Developing an Inventory of CPL Opportunities



A well-maintained CPL inventory demystifies the process and establishes a baseline of access. Creating an inventory requires proactively engaging departments and faculty to identify which courses they consider CPL-eligible and the methodologies they prefer to use for awarding credit. This process encourages faculty to think critically about how CPL aligns with their discipline, fostering deeper engagement with the practice. Developing the inventory also promotes faculty ownership and supports CPL's shared governance.

Once completed, the inventory serves as a centralized, institutionally endorsed resource that communicates which types of learning are eligible for credit, the assessment methods available (e.g., portfolio review, standardized exams, industry certifications, military training), and the departments that participate. Advisors can use the inventory to identify students who may qualify for CPL based on work experience, military service, or community engagement and guide them through the application process early in their academic journey.

Furthermore, institutions that regularly track and update their CPL inventory can identify gaps in offerings—such as disciplines where no CPL options currently exist—and collaborate with faculty to expand equitable access. Ultimately, a transparent, up-to-date CPL inventory signals an institution's commitment to honoring diverse forms of learning, ensuring that no student's experience is undervalued or overlooked.

Imperial Valley College in California maintains a [Credit for Prior Learning Course Crosswalk](#). The Crosswalk identifies the course number and title, transferability, credits available, and assessment methodology for that course.

San Diego Community College District (SDCCD) maintains a [searchable database of CPL-eligible courses](#) that identifies the course, number of credits, and assessment methodology.

Increasing Opportunities for Automatic CPL Recognition

Increasing opportunities for automatic CPL recognition shifts the institution's posture from passive to proactive. Automatic CPL recognition provides individuals with pre-identified credentials—such as certificates, certifications, or licensures—a fast track to earning credit. In these cases, the credential serves as evidence of competency or mastery of knowledge and must be reviewed and approved by faculty^[xvii]. Institutions have often reviewed their non-credit offerings to determine which may be eligible for automatic CPL recognition if the learner elects to continue in stackable, credit-bearing programs.

Expanding automatic CPL recognition for learners with verified credentials accelerates the awarding of credit, reduces reliance on complex student applications, improves equity, and increases the number of students earning credit. For many students, navigating a complicated, opaque CPL process can be a significant barrier. Streamlining these procedures also builds trust: when institutions clearly communicate that prior learning will be recognized without bureaucratic hurdles, they send a strong message that all forms of learning are valued.

Automatic CPL recognition shifts the burden of proof from the student to the institution. By building systems that identify prior learning through verified credentials, training records, or academic transcripts—such as military Joint Services Transcripts (JSTs), industry certifications, or prior standardized exams—institutions can award credit proactively and consistently. For example, a student entering with a Google IT Support certificate or CompTIA Network+ certification should receive clearly articulated credit without needing to submit a separate application or justify the relevance of their learning.

Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke, Virginia identified and pre-approved several programs and credentials for credit, including Certified Administrative Professional, Early Childhood Development, and Siemens Mechatronics Level 1 Certification.

Ivy Tech Community College, a statewide community college system in Indiana with over 40 locations that serve regional workforce needs, has created an automated crosswalk between industry certifications and its academic programs. For example, students holding a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) credential automatically receive credit toward introductory healthcare courses. Advisors are trained to screen for eligible credentials at intake to ensure timely and automatic credit recognition.

Creating Dedicated Webpages on CPL Policies and Practices for Better Transparency

Curating a CPL website that uses plain, accessible, non-academic language—and clearly outlines CPL policies, eligible courses, and related processes—gives all students and staff a reliable source of information to navigate CPL confidently. These public-facing webpages serve as a repository of information, helping eliminate ambiguity around which types of prior learning are eligible for credit, how assessments are conducted, and what criteria are used to award credit. Clear communication in this space builds trust in the system, promotes greater participation, and helps close equity gaps that can arise when access to CPL depends on informal networks or inconsistent advising.



Arapahoe Community College in Littleton, Colorado, maintains a [webpage identifying CPL policies and methodologies](#) that is linked during the admissions process. Potential learners can identify and explore CPL options at ACC.

Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York, offers a [comprehensive webpage on CPL](#) that includes a link to a Credit Predictor Pro survey to help learners identify potential CPL opportunities, outlines available assessment methodologies, and lists credentials pre-approved for CPL.

The Community College of Rhode Island in Warwick, Rhode Island, has a clear, student-facing [webpage on CPL](#) that uses plain language to explain CPL and outlines the steps students can take to earn credit on several approaches.

Leveraging Technology Solutions to Improve CPL

Technology has been successfully used to systematically identify, inform, and support students eligible for CPL—especially those who might otherwise be overlooked. Separate from a well-curated website, these tools help review student credentials, skills, and experiences to begin the process of identifying CPL opportunities available to them. Technology can shift CPL from a reactive process that depends on student initiative to an integrated, automated enrollment, advising, and academic planning function.

Tools like Credit Predictor Pro and AssessED from [CAEL \(Council for Adult and Experiential Learning\)](#) and [AcademyOne](#), respectively, help institutions manage and track the CPL process from application to credit awarding. These tools also provide insights into advisor interactions and faculty evaluations.

Successfully implementing technology solutions requires institutions to develop systemic approaches and internal capacity prior to adoption. Too often, institutions start with technology, assuming that new software will resolve existing gaps in CPL. However, without implementing practices—such as a CPL inventory—technology becomes a hollow tool, lacking the adequate structure for effective, institution-wide use.

When built upon existing systems and strategies, technology can enhance CPL efforts by centralizing CPL resources, automating eligibility identification, embedding CPL into degree planning tools, streamlining the CPL application and documentation process, and supporting ongoing use of data to monitor CPL participation and outcomes across all student populations.

Austin Community College in Austin, Texas, has implemented Credit Predictor Pro as a tool for students, advisors, and faculty to review and determine potential course matches for CPL and relevant assessment steps to verify credit.

Virginia's [Credit2Careers](#) website is a statewide resource for all community colleges in Virginia. It provides a platform for students to begin the CPL process and track elements throughout their experience.

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities has launched [MyCPL](#) at 19 public colleges and universities in Minnesota. MyCPL enables learners to build a profile, learn what credits they might be eligible for, connects them with advisors at target institutions, and helps manage the CPL process.

3. Enhancing Faculty Engagement and Professional Development

Engaging faculty—both full-time and adjunct—regularly and meaningfully is essential to advancing equitable approaches to CPL in colleges and universities^[xviii]. Faculty are not only gatekeepers of academic quality; they are also essential collaborators in designing and sustaining CPL systems that are fair, credible, and student-centered. When institutions overlook faculty engagement or limit their role to occasional approval or isolated assessment, they risk inconsistent implementation, resistance to change, and missed opportunities to serve students equitably.

Why Enhance Faculty Engagement?

As mentioned previously in the section on systems, enhancing campus-wide engagement is essential to advancing equitable CPL, and faculty are a critical population in any engagement strategy^[xix]. Because faculty care deeply about quality, academic rigor, and curriculum alignment, their understanding of CPL is essential, especially within a shared governance model that emphasizes faculty ownership of the curriculum. Without effective and authentic engagement with faculty, myths and misconceptions about CPL can inhibit systemic implementation.

Faculty are central to equitable CPL. Regular engagement with faculty fosters trust, ensures academic integrity, and helps institutionalize CPL as a respected and accessible pathway for all students. Colleges that invest in sustained faculty collaboration—through training, dialogue, and shared leadership—are best positioned to implement CPL strategies that truly serve a diverse, modern student population. Conversely, some institutions have seen CPL expansion efforts stall due to faculty skepticism. Without fully understanding the level of rigor involved in effective CPL, concerns may arise that it equates to “giving credits away” or undermines entry-level coursework. Engaging faculty helps dispel these myths and clarify what CPL is— and what it is not.

Faculty engagement can occur in multiple ways. First, information sessions covering general CPL methodologies and the rigor of assessment and review processes help build foundational understanding. Engagement should also include proactive outreach at the departmental level to identify courses that may be eligible for CPL. Finally, because of their regular and ongoing contact with students, faculty play a key role in shaping student awareness and trust. They can help identify students in entry-level classes who already possess the knowledge and skills to earn credit, reducing unnecessary duplication of coursework.



Faculty Engagement Examples:

Imperial Valley College in Imperial, California, maintains a [Faculty Resources webpage](#) on CPL. This webpage provides a checklist and resources for faculty to engage with learners about CPL at the college.

The City University of New York (CUNY), a public university system located throughout New York City that includes 25 campuses across the five boroughs, maintains a [faculty-facing webpage of materials and resources on CPL](#). This webpage contains links to research, information, and archived recordings of CUNY's Innovative Teaching Academy's [online professional development modules on CPL](#).

Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, California, maintains a [Faculty FAQ](#) on CPL to help faculty better understand all elements of CPL for themselves and their students.

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, a statewide organization representing the faculty of the California Community Colleges (CCC) system (the largest system of higher education in the United States), conducted a plenary session on [CPL - Moving the Needle](#) to help level-set and frame elements of effective CPL for community college faculty in California.

Faculty Professional Development on CPL

Faculty professional development is essential to advancing equitable CPL in colleges and universities because faculty are central to the design, evaluation, and credibility of CPL pathways. Their understanding, attitudes, and involvement directly shape whether CPL opportunities are widely available, fairly assessed, and consistently valued across disciplines. Without targeted professional development, CPL can be siloed, inconsistently applied, or even resisted—undermining equity goals and limiting access for adult learners, students of color, and others with substantial prior learning.

Faculty professional development on CPL builds the institution's capacity to expand CPL more broadly. Helping faculty understand how to evaluate learning outside of the classroom in ways that align with academic standards strengthens academic integrity and quality. Training on portfolio assessment, rubric design, and the evaluation of military, workplace, or community-based learning helps maintain the rigor and credibility of CPL decisions. It can also include understanding ACE credit recommendations or evaluating learning outcomes of different certifications and licensures.

Moreover, faculty professional development helps establish shared norms and approaches, reducing inconsistencies between individual faculty and departments. Faculty who have participated in CPL training have reported that their approach to assessing learning in their regularly scheduled classes has shifted, incorporating principles of consistency also applied to CPL.

Houston Community College in Houston, Texas, serves the Greater Houston area and provides CPL training as part of onboarding for adjunct and full-time faculty so that instructors across all disciplines are aware of CPL policies and can serve as informed guides for students from day one. HCC includes CPL training in its adjunct faculty onboarding process, ensuring that all instructors—regardless of employment status—are equipped to discuss CPL options with students. This system-wide commitment has improved access to CPL and increased the number of faculty engaged in portfolio review and credit assessment.

Miami Dade College in Miami, Florida, serves the Miami-Dade area as one of the largest and most diverse college systems in the United States. It engages CPL conversations with faculty through department meetings and online professional development modules. Faculty who complete CPL training are added to a roster of potential assessors for challenge exams and portfolios, expanding the college's capacity to award credit across multiple disciplines.

Adjunct Faculty Inclusion in Professional Development

Professional development for adjunct faculty is crucial to advancing equitable CPL in colleges and universities because adjuncts often teach a significant portion of undergraduate courses—especially in community colleges and open-access institutions, where CPL has the greatest potential to support adult learners and historically underserved populations. Since many adjuncts teach gateway and general education courses—the very courses where CPL credit is often awarded through exams, portfolios, or credit transfers—they can identify students who may qualify for CPL and direct them to appropriate resources.



Professional development for adjunct faculty helps expand capacity and consistency in CPL assessment. As institutions build more portfolio assessments or challenge exam pathways, adjunct faculty can play a vital role in evaluating student learning. Professional development equips them with the tools to apply rubrics fairly, assess learning outcomes accurately, and maintain academic standards—extending CPL opportunities without overburdening full-time faculty.

Equitable CPL implementation cannot be achieved without the full inclusion of adjunct faculty. These instructors are essential to day-to-day teaching and often bring real-world experience that aligns with the skills and knowledge CPL seeks to validate. By offering meaningful, compensated professional development opportunities to adjuncts, colleges and universities ensure consistent, informed support for all students and build institutional capacity to recognize learning wherever it occurs.

Examples Include:

Community College of Denver in Denver, Colorado, provides regular professional development workshops on CPL, specifically inviting adjuncts to participate and compensating them for their time. The college recognizes adjuncts as key partners in expanding CPL awareness and strives to create a supportive structure where they feel invested in institutional goals.

Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor Township, Michigan, offers adjunct faculty stipends for completing training on prior learning assessment. This investment has broadened the base of faculty equipped to evaluate experiential learning and increased the number of students receiving CPL—particularly those with professional and technical experience.

4. Ensuring All Students Know About CPL through Effective Orientation and Advising

Integrating CPL into orientation, advising, and outreach functions is essential to advancing equitable access and implementation in colleges and universities^[xx]. Many students who could benefit most from CPL opportunities—including adult learners, first-generation students, students of color, and veterans—are often unaware that their prior learning and life experiences could count toward a college credential. Without proactive and consistent communication about CPL during key early interactions, institutions risk reinforcing inequities for those who benefit from these credit-earning opportunities.

Advising sessions and orientation are among the most critical moments for shaping a student's understanding of academic pathways and institutional resources. By embedding CPL conversations into these structured interactions, institutions ensure that students are informed of their options from the outset—not months into their academic journey when it may be too late to benefit. For example, an adult learner entering a community college with years of experience as a medical assistant should be told at orientation that they may be eligible to earn credit for that experience through portfolio assessment or industry certification review rather than discovering this opportunity through informal channels after already completing redundant coursework.

CPL processes can be complex, and students may be discouraged from pursuing CPL without early guidance. When advisors are trained to recognize CPL potential and proactively initiate conversations, they help level the playing field for students who may lack the institutional know-how or confidence to navigate the system on their own. Including CPL in orientation materials, group advising, and new student intake forms sends a clear message: this institution values all types of learning and is committed to helping students maximize their time, effort, and financial investment. Combining these proactive, student-facing strategies with those mentioned in the section on transparency (e.g., dedicated webpage, use of technology platforms) ensures that no student can claim that CPL was not offered as an option.

Orientation

Including information about CPL during orientation is a crucial opportunity to inform incoming students of the possibilities CPL offers. Embedding CPL information into orientation for all students ensures that everyone is made aware of the policies and processes for awarding credit based on previous learning experiences. This requires clear, jargon-free explanations that outline the steps involved and how students can learn more. Ideally, this information should be presented in multiple formats, such as verbal presentations and written materials.



Virginia Western Community College in Roanoke, Virginia, offers an open workshop on CPL every week throughout the year to educate students on CPL processes and to listen to feedback. This ongoing approach ensures that students never have to wait to get information on CPL.

Advising

Advisors are critical in supporting students with CPL because they are often the first point of contact for students navigating academic pathways. Their ability to accurately inform, support, and guide students through CPL opportunities can distinguish between a student receiving credit for prior learning or missing the opportunity altogether. This requires building a simple cadence for adult learners, first-generation students, veterans, and students of color—who may not be familiar with CPL or how to pursue it. Advisors are essential to ensuring access, clarity, and advocacy.



Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has embedded CPL awareness into advising workflows. Advisors are trained to ask key questions during intake to determine if students qualify for CPL and refer them to the CPL coordinator. This systematic approach ensures consistent and equitable access for all students, not just those who inquire.

Professional Development



Ongoing and regular professional development on CPL for academic advisors is crucial to advancing equitable CPL in colleges and universities because advisors are often the first point of contact for students navigating academic pathways. Their ability to accurately inform, support, and guide students through CPL opportunities can be the difference between a student receiving credit for prior learning or missing the opportunity altogether. Given the tendency for higher turnover rates among advising staff and the relative complexity of CPL, including CPL information in onboarding and ongoing professional development is critical to ensuring advisors remain well-informed and prepared to support students effectively.



Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon, offers CPL-specific training for advisors focusing on both policy and practice. Advisors learn how to interpret prior learning experiences, communicate options clearly, and guide students through CPL application steps, ensuring a student-centered approach that reduces barriers.

Dedicated CPL Coordinators



A dedicated CPL contact or office simplifies the process, ensures consistent guidance, and builds a more student-centered, equitable experience^[xxi]. Centralizing CPL support reduces confusion and fragmentation, improves access and responsiveness, and strengthens institutional coordination and accountability. In short, a centralized CPL coordinator or office ensures that student inquiries are not lost in departmental silos or deprioritized among other duties. Dedicated personnel can offer personalized support, streamline documentation, and track student progress through the CPL process—all of which help students, especially those balancing work and family responsibilities, stay on track. By institutionalizing a dedicated CPL coordinator or office, colleges and universities send a clear message: we recognize your learning and are here to help you get credit for it.

Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio, has a dedicated coordinator for CPL. While advisors guide students to make initial CPL inquiries through [FastPath Ohio eligibility wizard](#), the coordinator marshalls students through the CPL process. This centralized support structure makes it easier for adult learners and military-affiliated students to receive personalized help navigating a wide range of CPL options.

Houston Community College in Houston, Texas, includes navigators in its student services model. These staff members are trained to assist students with CPL inquiries and help coordinate between departments to make the process seamless. This has increased awareness and utilization of CPL among nontraditional and returning students.

5. Building a Data-Driven Culture for CPL

Establishing key metrics to track participation and outcomes of CPL is essential to advancing participation and equity within CPL^[xxii]. Without data, institutions are flying blind—unable to assess who benefits from CPL, where gaps exist, or whether policies are being implemented consistently and fairly. By identifying and tracking relevant metrics, colleges can evaluate the effectiveness of CPL programs, make data-informed improvements, and ensure that historically underserved students are not left behind.

Effect tracking of CPL data supports continuous improvement, strengthens accountability and ownership, and promotes transparency and trust. Data collection and meaningful metrics help institutions identify which CPL opportunities are working well and which need further consideration. Demonstrating outcomes from expanded CPL—such as retention, credit accumulation, and graduation—reinforces institutional accountability and the shared responsibility of faculty, staff, and administrators. Disaggregating data is crucial; it allows institutions to determine which student populations participate in CPL and who is being left out. Without this level of detail, equity gaps can go unnoticed and unaddressed.

The level and scale of metrics institutions can collect will vary based on several factors. Institutions must inventory what data they currently collect related to CPL and determine whether it adequately informs their data collection goals.

Some technology platforms—both from CPL-specific and student management systems—include comprehensive CPL reporting features. If existing capacity falls short, institutions should assess the cost of adding data fields and the feasibility and resources required to collect additional metrics.

Building a data-driven culture for CPL requires embedding the systematic collection, analysis, and use of data into everyday decision-making across the institution. This begins with establishing clear metrics and aligning them with institutional goals. Once defined, metrics must be tracked, disaggregated, and reviewed. Leadership should champion transparency and promote data for continuous improvement, encouraging departments to set CPL-related goals, monitor progress, and share insights. To support this culture, institutions should develop user-friendly data tools—such as dashboards—and create regular review cycles that foster shared responsibility and accountability. Ultimately, a data-driven culture around CPL empowers colleges to identify gaps, celebrate progress, and make informed, equity-focused decisions that drive student outcomes.

Examples of Metrics to Track



Below are sample metrics related to CPL. While data capacity may limit which specific metrics are tracked, institutions should strive to collect data in each category: awareness and participation, credits awarded, academic and student success outcomes, and process and efficiency. Institutions should disaggregate by demographic measures for each metric to better understand equity outcomes.

CPL Awareness & Participation

- Percentage of incoming students who were advised about CPL opportunities
- Number/Percentage of students who applied for CPL
- Number/Percentage of students who were awarded CPL credit
- Percentage of students receiving CPL by race/ethnicity, age, gender, income status, military affiliation

CPL Credit Awarded

- Average number of CPL credits awarded per student
- Total CPL credits awarded annually, disaggregated by type (e.g., portfolio, military, exam) and disaggregated by race/ethnicity, age, gender, etc.

Academic & Student Success Outcomes

- Persistence and retention rates for CPL recipients versus non-recipients
- Success rates in subsequent courses for CPL recipients versus non-recipients
- Time-to-degree for students earning CPL versus those who don't earn CPL
- GPA and course completion rates post-CPL award
- Graduation rates for students who received CPL, disaggregated by demographic groups

Process & Efficiency Metrics

- Average time to process a CPL request
- Percent of CPL evaluations completed within established timelines
- Student satisfaction with the CPL process (survey-based)



Each institution must determine what best fits the capacity and resources for data analytics

The State University of New York (SUNY) has developed common system-wide [data definitions for Credit for Prior Learning](#). These definitions clarify the types of CPL and source and methodology but leave flexibility for campus-level implementation decisions.

Georgia State University (GSU) in Atlanta, Georgia, integrates CPL participation data into its broader student success analytics platform. By disaggregating this data, the university can identify where CPL contributes to improved outcomes and where access needs improvement. This data-informed approach has made GSU a national leader in using analytics to close equity gaps.

Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System tracks CPL participation, credit awards, and student outcomes across its institutions. It uses this data to inform policy changes and support equity-centered initiatives expanding access to nontraditional credit.

6. Developing Targeted Communication Strategies for CPL

While CPL has the power to accelerate degree completion, reduce costs, and validate real-world learning, these benefits are only realized when students are aware of the opportunity and understand how to access it^[xxiii]. General outreach alone is not enough. Historically underserved populations—such as adult learners, students of color, and military-connected students—often do not receive or relate to traditional college marketing messages, nor do these messages generally include information about CPL. Targeted communication helps to bridge these gaps, ensuring that those who could benefit the most from CPL are informed, engaged, and empowered

Focused and Accessible CPL Communication

Many potential CPL-eligible students simply don't know that they can receive college credit for prior learning. Tailored messages that speak directly to these groups can cut through confusion and spark interest. These tailored messages reflect the institution's context, target populations, and relevant fields of interest. For example, a community with a large military base nearby might emphasize CPL for the military training and coursework articulated in the Joint Services Transcript. In communities with a high percentage of English-Language Learners, producing CPL materials in multiple languages can help reach broader audiences.

Generic promotional materials often miss this mark, while tailored messages can demonstrate that the institution sees and values each student's unique background. Including tangible examples of students earning CPL helps make the idea more relatable, allowing potential students to imagine how it could apply to their own experiences.



Virginia Western Community College offers an ESL course tailored to students interested in writing a portfolio. VWCC also provides a scholarship opportunity for this course, as it is not eligible for financial aid.

Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, Massachusetts, conducts CPL outreach through partnerships with career centers and employer organizations in the Greater Boston area. Information about CPL is embedded in career coaching sessions and employer-sponsored trainings, connecting CPL to tangible career advancement goals. BHCC has developed CPL materials in multiple languages and distributed them through immigrant-serving nonprofits and ESL programs. This targeted outreach ensures that English language learners and immigrants with international credentials understand how their prior learning may count toward a U.S. degree.

Lone Star College in Houston, Texas, has [comprehensive CPL communications](#) for students, including a [Student Guide to PLA](#), [PLA Application](#), and a [PLA Manual](#).

Miami Dade College in Miami, Florida, has an effective [student-centered video](#) to help students learn about all aspects of the portfolio-based assessment process.

Partnering with Employers



By partnering with employers and workforce agencies, colleges can ensure that CPL pathways align with regional labor market needs and help learners upskill or reskill efficiently.

These partnerships can also help employers see CPL as value-added for employee development and retention. Communication that builds a bridge between CPL and shortening the time to career aspirations is particularly resonant with adult learners.

Examples Include:

CUNY School of Professional Studies works with workforce development boards, labor unions, and adult education providers to share information about CPL. They host info sessions with community partners and use job centers and employer partnerships to promote CPL as a pathway to faster credential completion.

Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona, partners with local employers, military bases, and workforce centers to identify workers who may be eligible for CPL. The college provides on-site presentations and materials that explain how workplace training and military experience can be converted into academic credit.

Communicating with the Community



Students are more likely to respond to CPL opportunities when communication is delivered through trusted channels, such as community organizations, employers, or churches. Moreover, outreach through such trusted organizations ensures that information about CPL reaches students where they live and work, bridging the gap for students who may be disconnected from higher education systems.

Examples Include:

LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, Queens, New York, collaborates with immigrant-serving nonprofits and adult literacy centers to provide workshops and multilingual materials about CPL, particularly for internationally trained professionals. This outreach helps students understand how to receive credit for learning gained outside the U.S. education system.

Northeast Regional Prior Learning Assessment Consortium ([NERPLAC](#)) in Massachusetts is a partnership between Essex and Middlesex County community colleges, state colleges and universities, private colleges, workforce boards, employers, and community-based organizations. It promotes and increases the use of Credit for Prior Learning to boost college completion, strengthen professional skills for higher-paying jobs in regional growth industries, and engender engagement in lifelong learning.



Conclusion

An equitable CPL framework removes barriers for students and ensures that prior learning is recognized in meaningful ways.

By leveraging evidence-based practices, systemic approaches, professional development, data tracking, and targeted communication, institutions can maximize CPL's impact on student success and workforce readiness.

Advancing equitable Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) is not just a technical undertaking, but a commitment to honoring the diverse knowledge, skills, and life experiences students bring to college. By implementing the six core elements outlined in this guide—leveraging evidence-based practices, embracing systemic approaches, enhancing faculty engagement, centering CPL in advising, building a data-driven culture, and developing targeted communication strategies—institutions can transform CPL

from a peripheral offering into a powerful equity strategy. This work requires cross-campus collaboration, sustained leadership, and an intentional focus on reaching adult learners, students of color, veterans, and others historically underserved by traditional postsecondary structures. With intentional design and execution, CPL shortens time to degree, lowers costs, builds confidence, and creates more inclusive pathways to credential attainment. The work is complex, but the payoff—for students, institutions, and communities—is profound.

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