



# BEST PRACTICES ANALYSIS

## Credit for Prior Learning

July 2021

In the following report, Hanover Research presents the results of a best practices analysis, highlighting innovative trends and industry standards regarding credit for prior learning initiatives in the United States.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Based on a best practices analysis of credit for prior learning programs at higher education institutions across the United States, Hanover recommends:*

### **INVEST IN CPL STUDENT OUTREACH EFFORTS THROUGH A CENTRALIZED WEBSITE, TARGETED EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS, AND ORIENTATION MATERIALS.**

Secondary literature cites a variety of strategies for maximizing CPL engagement through student outreach. Institutions should maintain a dedicated CPL website with comprehensive and dynamic pages that include information about all CPL opportunities in the system. In addition, institutions should create targeted email and social media campaigns to inform eligible current students about available options for CPL, including underrepresented minority student populations that may require more effort to engage. Finally, institutions should include information about CPL policies in orientation materials to flag potential opportunities to new students.

### **GARNER FACULTY AND STAFF BUY-IN BY BUILDING A KNOWLEDGE BASE AND INVESTING IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AS WELL AS PROVIDING INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES.**

Institutions should engage in an internal marketing campaign targeting faculty and staff by articulating benefits of CPL, updating stakeholders with annual reviews, and offering a variety of training options to educate faculty on policies. Institutions should also provide incentives for faculty, such as covering training expenses, offering compensation for portfolio assessments, and incorporating CPL duties into the promotion and tenure process.

### **FOSTER STUDENT SUPPORT BY REQUIRING CPL MENTORING THROUGHOUT THE LEARNER LIFECYCLE, CENTRALIZING ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES, MINIMIZING COST TO STUDENTS, AND OFFERING ONLINE PORTFOLIO PREPARATION.**

Once institutional stakeholders have gone through training, institutions should organize a mentorship program whereby faculty and staff offer advising services to students about suitable CPL opportunities. In this program, staff should help students understand CPL policies and procedures, and faculty should help students understand how their past experiences outside of the classroom might align to college-level learning. To facilitate the student support process, institutions should centralize administrative services for CPL, preferably within one dedicated institutional unit. Additionally, institutions should investigate the business case for providing some CPL opportunities at low or no-cost to students. Finally, institutions should consider offering an online portfolio preparation program to facilitate the portfolio assessment process for its students.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## KEY FINDINGS

Two-year institutions commonly offer CLEP exams, ACE guides, challenge exams, and portfolio-based assessments for CPL. Most two-year institutions offer credit CLEP exams. Other common types of CPL assessments include ACE guides (including credit for military service), challenge exams, and portfolio-based assessments. CPL is usually not factored into a student's GPA, it typically does not count as a residential credit, and it rarely is eligible for financial aid.

Portfolio assessments and standardized exams are the most effective CPL methods tied to adult learner degree completion. CPL methods that are correlated with the strongest persistence rates among adult students who have completed their degree programs include portfolio assessments and standardized exams. These methods are correlated with academic success as they require students to re-engage with prior learning.

Best practices associated with scaling CPL initiatives focus on establishing policies and practices to create partnerships and build support across the institution. Many best practices (see right) ensure the success of scaling CPL initiatives. Notably, institutions should work to structure CPL initiatives throughout the student lifecycle. It is advantageous to adopt consistent CPL policies across all institutions to ensure no CPL is lost if students transfer among institutions.

Most innovative approaches to CPL scaling involve formalizing requirements and promoting policies to students through effective messaging. For instance, institutions establish formal CPL policies through apprenticeship crosswalks, degree completion programs, military training, and partnerships with local workforce-aligned organizations. Many initiatives also incorporate focused marketing campaigns.

## CPL STRATEGIES SUMMARY

- Establish clear institutional policies and procedures
- Commit resources and services

### ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE



- Use technology as a tool
- Pursue community-based outreach
- Initiate early student engagement

### STUDENT OUTREACH



- Require early and ongoing mentoring
- Explore curricular adaptation
- Centralize CPL-specific offices

### STUDENT SUPPORT



- Build a knowledge base
- Provide institutional incentives
- Develop faculty training

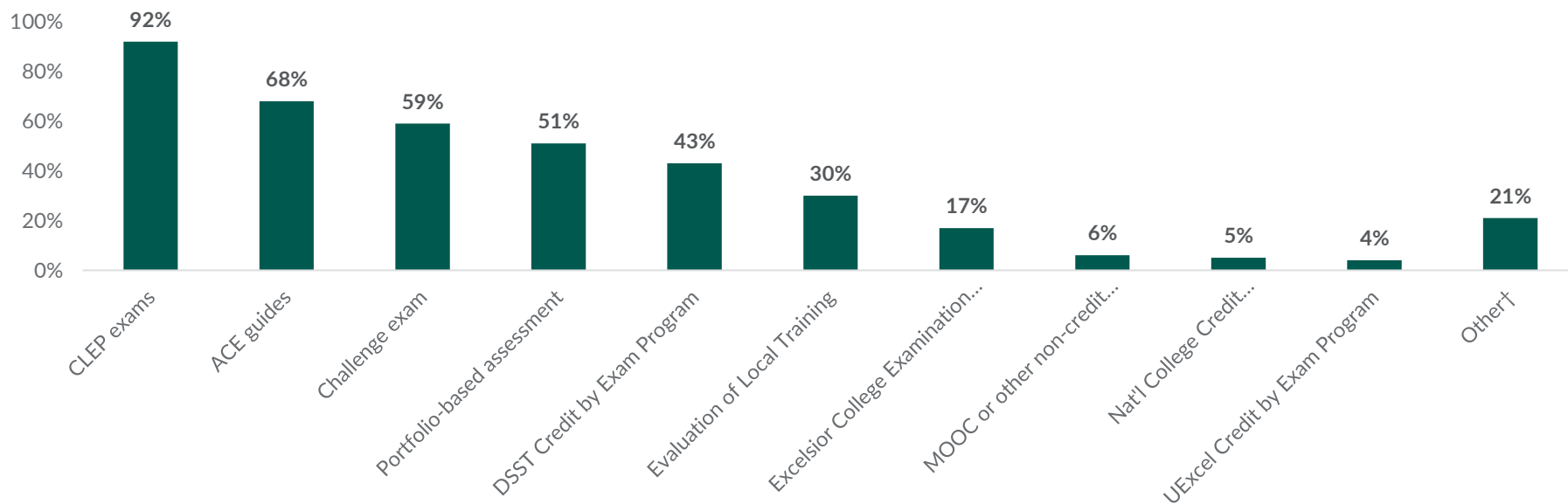
### FACULTY ENGAGEMENT



Source: [American Council on Education](#)

Most U.S. two-year institutions award credit for CLEP exams, though many also do so for ACE guides, challenge exams, and portfolio assessments. According to a [survey](#) conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, most representatives (92 percent) from two-year institutions offer credit for College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams. Other common types of CPL assessments include American Council on Education (ACE) guides (including credit for military service), challenge exams, and portfolio-based assessments. Across all institutions surveyed, CPL is usually not factored into a student's GPA, it typically does not count as a residential credit, and it rarely is eligible for financial aid\*. [New America](#) reports that prior learning assessments have been correlated with stronger persistence and completion rates for students, though this correlation may be due to other factors as well. For instance, a [study](#) by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education reports that 49 percent of adult students complete their credential program with CPL, while only 27 percent did so without it.

## CPL ASSESSMENT TYPE POPULARITY AMONG TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS



Source: [American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers](#)

Note: Based on 2014 survey results of AACRAO members from 179 lower-division two-year institutions.

\*The study does not address the financial aid implications for CPL earned from a portfolio review course a student may enroll in.

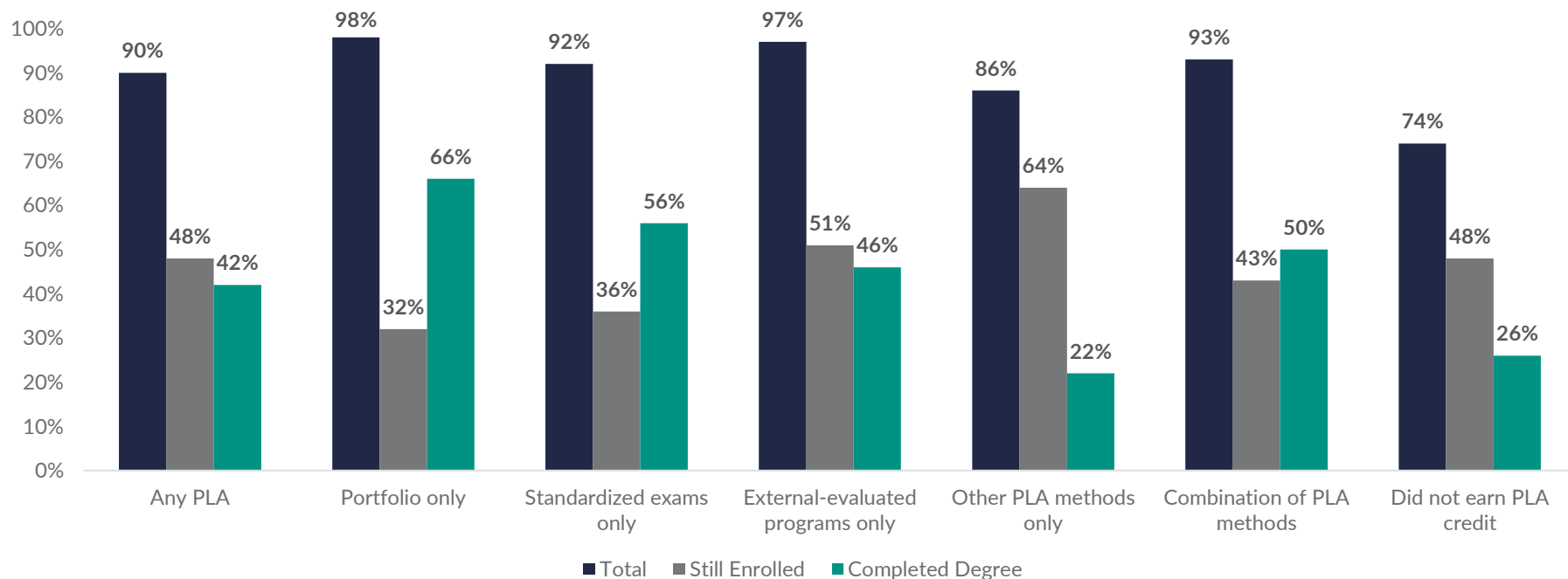
†Representative "Other" survey responses include Cambridge AICE, credit by petition, experiential learning, and work experience.

# CPL TRENDS

The CPL methods linked with the highest rates of adult student degree completion include portfolio assessments and standardized exams, followed by students who earn credit through a combination of methods. According to a [2018 study](#) by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), CPL methods that are correlated with the strongest persistence rates among adult students who have completed their degree programs include portfolio assessments (66 percent) and standardized exams (56 percent). CAEL notes that these may be associated with the highest rates of success as they require students to re-engage with their prior learning: “[Students] may need to review what they know in preparation for the CLEP test, or they spend considerable time reflecting on what they have learned in the portfolio development process. This re-engagement with learning could have residual positive effects on the students’ overall engagement with their educational journey.” As such, institutions scaling CPL assessment types should emphasize their portfolio assessment and standardized exam pathways to credit.

## PERSISTENCE BY PLA CREDIT-EARNING METHOD

Percent of students who completed degree or are still enrolled by CPL method



Source: [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning](#)



# CPL BEST PRACTICES

Institutions must take measures to ensure that their CPL initiatives are reaching students from underrepresented populations. A study by the [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#) cites that Black adult students and adult students from lower-income backgrounds benefit from prior learning assessment-based credit, though take-up rates for these populations were lower than other groups. To compensate, institutions should deploy three strategies to ensure that as many of these students as possible take advantage of CPL initiatives: (1) use institutional data to track outcomes based on different student population segments, (2) focus marketing and outreach efforts on student populations from underrepresented backgrounds, and (3) minimize cost for students pursuing CPL opportunities. Regarding the final strategy, the study notes: “Students receiving Pell Grants were less likely to receive PLA, suggesting that one barrier to PLA usage could be the additional cost to the student.”

## EQUITY CPL BEST PRACTICES



**ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL DATA SYSTEMS CAN AND DO LINK CPL CREDIT, STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS, AND STUDENT OUTCOMES**

Institutions must establish systems and processes for tracking information on CPL credit-earning, and they must regularly analyze programs to assess the equitability of student access to CPL as well as student outcomes. If key populations, such as Black adult students, are not using CPL, the institution should investigate why and make changes accordingly.



**TARGET CPL MARKETING AND ADVISING EFFORTS TO STUDENT POPULATIONS WITH COMPLETION AND OPPORTUNITY GAPS**

Institutions need to ensure their marketing and outreach strategies are not merely inclusive of all students, but also intentional in their focus on reaching those from underrepresented backgrounds. Institutions need to make CPL a mandatory component of adult student advising, with special strategies for encouraging key populations to pursue CPL options.



**ASSESS THE INSTITUTIONAL BUSINESS CASE FOR SCALED CPL OFFERINGS AT LOW OR NO COST TO THE STUDENT**

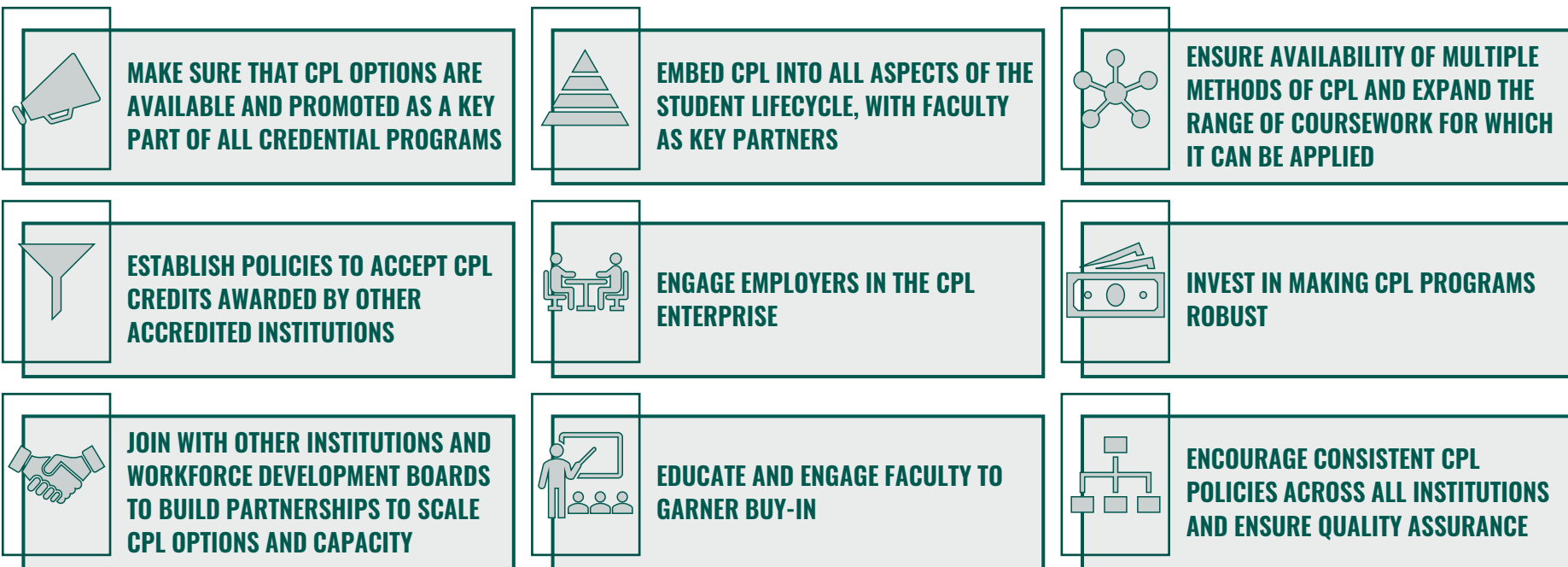
One barrier to CPL usage could be the additional cost to the student from CPL fees. Institutions might consider developing creative funding strategies to provide CPL opportunities to low-income students with an expectation that the institution could recoup costs through better retention and higher completion.

Source: Adapted from [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#)

# CPL BEST PRACTICES

Scaling CPL initiatives requires shifts in policy and practice to create partnerships and build support across the institution. The [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#) (WICHE) recommends institutions integrate CPL initiatives into their strategic plans so that they become “part of the institution’s culture and shared priority.” Many best practices are listed below to ensure the success of scaling CPL initiatives. Notably, institutions should work to structure CPL initiatives throughout the student lifecycle, not just at the time of admission. WICHE explains: “Students should hear about PLA early in their enrollment and multiple times thereafter. Advisors and faculty (who also have an important advisory role) who are aware of PLA and what the options and benefits are can help students take advantage of it.” The study also notes that advisors “should consider helping students use a combination of PLA methods” to encourage increased usage. For multi-campus systems, WICHE recommends the university system adopt consistent CPL policies across all institutions to ensure no CPL is lost for any internal transfers.

## SCALING CPL BEST PRACTICES



Source: Adapted from [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#)



# CPL BEST PRACTICES

## STUDENT OUTREACH STRATEGIES

Institutions should target and reach out to students who are good candidates for CPL, and connect them to consistent, accurate, and timely information.

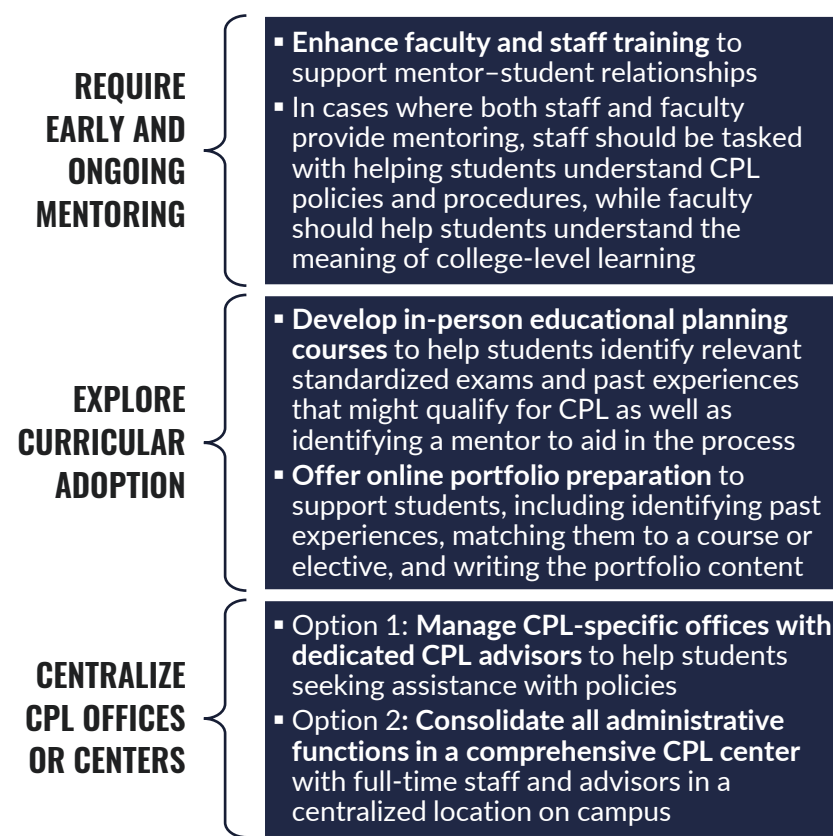
Some institutional outreach strategies include:



## STUDENT SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Institutions must embed student support systems within their CPL initiatives by centralizing support services and deploying mentor services for students to understand credit policies and learning content.

Some institutional support strategies include:



# CPL BEST PRACTICES

Institutions must invest in faculty buy-in and engagement as they scale up CPL indicatives by building a knowledge base, providing incentives, and developing trainings. According to the [American Council on Education](#), institutions must work to maximize CPL exposure and incentives for faculty to garner their buy-in (see below). The study also notes there are external resources available for professional development as well, such as ACE webinars online workshops from DePaul University on portfolio assessment, and CAEL workshops on PLA campus design, implementation, and advancement.

## FACULTY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### BUILD A KNOWLEDGE BASE

- **Articulate benefits of CPL to faculty and staff** and market CPL to internal constituencies by explaining its value for students: it saves time and money, and leads to faster degree completion.
- **Conduct annual transfer credit reviews with relevant faculty**, particularly program directors, so they are in the loop about how transfer credit policies apply to their programs. This informs program faculty of transfer credit updates and internal recommendations specific to their program.

### PROVIDE INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES

- **Cover training expenses**, possibly by the faculty member's department to make stronger evaluators.
- **Compensate faculty for reviewing portfolios** to further incentivize them. One institution that requires faculty to review portfolios doubles the pay rate if they have completed assessment training.
- **Incorporate evaluations or other CPL participation in the promotion and tenure process** to make CPL advising duties more meaningful.

### DEVELOP FACULTY TRAINING

- **Expand training options**, such as through workshops, seminars, one-on-one conversations, conferences, and committees.
- **Lean on CPL specialists for faculty professional development** to open channels of communication between faculty and administration.
- **Tour training and educational facilities**, such as having faculty tour military or corporate training sites to increase understanding of the academic rigor involved in these learning experiences outside of the classroom.

Source: Adapted from [American Council on Education](#)

# CPL IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES

## INNOVATIVE CASE STUDIES OF CPL IMPLEMENTATION



### CROSSWALK REGISTERED APPRENTICESHIPS WITH ACADEMIC CREDIT

- The VCCS is creating an initiative to coordinate how registered apprenticeships can be translated into CPL. The state's labor department has created a consortium to recommend policies, as it would otherwise be a labor-intensive process for faculty.



### INCORPORATE CPL IN TRANSFER AGREEMENTS

- Colorado education representatives recently integrated CPL into the statewide Guaranteed Transfer Pathways policy. Now any general education requirements fulfilled through CPL remain valid at the transfer public 2- or 4-year institution.
- In Virginia, a partnership between Tidewater Community College and Old Dominion University creates pathways for adult and non-traditional learners to use non-academic, real-world experiences in attaining a degree, with an emphasis on military service.



### ALIGN INDUSTRY-RECOGNIZED CREDENTIALS WITH ACADEMIC CREDIT

- Virginia's [FastForward](#) program offers short training courses in all 23 of Virginia's community colleges that align with high-demand occupations and result in a credential. The CPL coordinator for Virginia is working to crosswalk initiatives around industry-recognized credentials to academic credit throughout the state's postsecondary system.



### BRING AWARENESS TO CPL OPPORTUNITIES

- Tennessee has a robust communications effort involving a media campaign and an in-person outreach plan that includes a regional team and college advisers to share and guide learners through CPL opportunities, including a dedicated website.

Source: Adapted from [Association of Community College Trustees](#) and [Advance CTE](#)

# CPL IMPLEMENTATION EXAMPLES

## INNOVATIVE CASE STUDIES OF CPL IMPLEMENTATION



### FORMALIZE CPL IN A DEGREE PROGRAM PATHWAY

- Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College created an [AAS Board of Governors Degree Completion Program](#) with multiple concentrations specifically for students seeking CPL. The institution utilized a standardized statewide CPL policy, created a website to educate students on CPL options, engaged in advertising and outreach on campus, and partnered with local employers to target prospective students on lunchbreaks.



### PARTNER WITH A LOCAL WORKFORCE-ALIGNED ORGANIZATION

- Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) formed a partnership with [StraighterLine](#) to offer two pathways for fields with a strong local labor market demand. Students may begin the program with StraighterLine, an online course provider, and can earn credits for courses at DCCCD through ACE guides. Students are also able to transfer credits to a bachelor's degree program.



### ALIGN MILITARY SERVICE TO ACADEMIC CREDIT

- The Kansas Board of Regents developed a policy on the awarding of credit for AP and CLEP exams, as well as policy on CPL in general. State faculty collaborate with a Military Credit Advisory council to evaluate military training for credit.
- The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) uses an online portal to guide learners through CPL process, allowing service members to upload military transcripts and view academic credit recommendations across all 1,700 VCCS programs.

Source: Adapted from [Association of Community College Trustees](#) and [Advance CTE](#)



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