

## **Prior Learning Credit Via Portfolio: A Case Study of Central Michigan University's Prior Learning Assessment Program**

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### **Abstract**

The current case study describes the portfolio assessment program for prior learning credit at Central Michigan University. The program includes a rigorous process that ensures credit is awarded for learning that has taken place in prior employment, training or life experiences. The portfolio process includes three phases: preparation, development and evaluation. Each phase is carefully managed to assist the adult learner in earning credit toward his or her undergraduate or graduate degree.

### **Introduction**

The importance of obtaining a college degree cannot be overstated. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) noted that unemployment rates drop with increased education: In 2015, for those with less than a high school diploma, unemployment rates were 8.0 percent, but only 2.8 percent for those with a bachelor's degree. According to the Lumina Foundation, though lifetime earnings are significantly higher as education increases, there are additional benefits such as job safety, retirement plans, better health and increased longevity (Trostel, 2015). By 2018, our economy will have jobs for an additional 22 million people with college degrees, but a shortage of nearly three million people holding those degrees; indeed, 63 percent of jobs will require postsecondary training (Carnevale & Smith, 2010). Thus, it has become increasingly clear that higher education prepares individuals for the more advanced jobs in our society.

Though there are several noteworthy solutions for recruitment and attrition, most do not address the student who obtains education outside of a traditional classroom. Such instruction could come from employment, training programs, military service or a variety of other life experiences. Though some might question the idea of granting a student credit for what is considered "nontraditional" education, there appears to be a great benefit in doing this. A comprehensive study conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) noted that students who earned credit for prior learning were 2 1/2 times more likely to complete their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010). In today's uncertain job market, this is clearly impressive. One method of rewarding credit for prior learning is to have students submit a portfolio, describing experiences potentially worthy of credit. Portfolio assessment is in line with the nine principles of CAEL's (2012) Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) and recognizes that adult learners differ from traditional college student learners in several ways.

### **Alignment of Central Michigan University (CMU) Process and Adult Learning Principles**

Knowles' (1977) adult learning principles are evident in CMU's prior learning model, which is based on competencies rather than on course equivalents. That is, portfolios of prior learning allow adult learners to be self-directed, bring life experiences and knowledge to learning, and allow education to be relevancy-oriented and practical. Credit awarded through the portfolio assessment may be applied to the student's degree

program, usually in the form of elective credits. Thus, CMU's competency model allows the student to have college-level learning recognized, regardless of whether CMU offers specific courses pertaining to what the student has learned. Several features are in place that are intended to maximize the benefit and/or applicability of prior learning credit, and occur within the three phases of the portfolio process: preparation, development and evaluation.

### **Preparation**

In the preparation phase, students participate in a briefing with CMU faculty in which candidates explore their own learning experiences and determine the value of completing a portfolio (e.g., their goals, motivation, experiences). Additionally, students meet with their academic advisor, who may be able to help identify the experiences that would be most applicable to the student's degree program if prior learning credit is awarded. Prior learning credits may be used for required courses in the major or minor, or as elective credits, as determined by the academic advisor; however, prior learning credits may *not* be used for any general education requirements. Students are encouraged to submit a portfolio *early* in the academic program, before taking courses that may duplicate prior learning experiences. Students who are awarded prior learning credit early in their academic careers have a much more accurate timeline for planning and meeting degree requirements.

### **Development**

Developing a prior learning portfolio requires both organizing and collecting documents as well as writing the portfolio. A key component of the portfolio is the "self-assessment," which explains the learning that occurred through the experiences (job, training or community). In addition to a description of the relevant experience, the self-assessment of each potential competency includes an analysis of what the student learned as a result of the experience and how that learning might result in awarding credit for a particular competency. The time involved in developing a portfolio depends on work responsibilities, family obligations, volunteer activities, community involvement and the number of courses a student is taking during the time the portfolio is being prepared. Other factors include the number of years to be covered, the number of competencies sought, and the availability of verification documents that students are expected to gather and submit. Occasionally, a student will prepare a portfolio in as little as three months, but most take six months or longer.

### **Evaluation**

Once the student has completed the portfolio, it is evaluated to determine whether credit can be awarded for undergraduate or graduate-level competencies. This process allows candidates to get the most from the portfolio development process, ensures rigor in the evaluation process, and allows candidates an option for additional revisions to their portfolio if they are motivated to engage in that process. Three graduate faculty at CMU (members of the prior learning assessment team) independently evaluate the portfolios based on the content and quality of learning described, not on its applicability to a specific degree program. Team members commit to a 12- to 18-month training period in which they learn to evaluate portfolios regardless of content area, though attempts are made to match team members with portfolios in their areas of expertise. Credit is awarded if the evaluators decide that the self-assessment(s) for each experience demonstrates *college-level* learning and responds to the particular competency in which credit is sought.

The maximum number of credits students can apply to an undergraduate degree is 60. The maximum number for graduate students is 10 credits. However, the number of credits actually awarded depends on a number of factors: the length and duration of the experiences submitted for consideration; the quality of the student's self-assessment of learning; whether the learning is college-level (undergraduate or graduate); and, whether sufficient and appropriate documentation has been provided in support of the student's claims.

After the student receives notification of the number of credits awarded, the student meets again with the academic advisor to determine whether and how the awarded credits may be used in the degree program. Students are only charged for the credits actually included on the transcript (at a cost of approximately one-fourth of that of traditional credits). Thus, the process of portfolio submission for the receipt of college-level credit allows a student to complete a college degree in a reduced amount of time, at a reduced cost.

### Note

Additional materials and information related to this manuscript can be located at <https://www.cmich.edu/Global/Prior-Learning/Pages/default.aspx>.

### References

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