

## **Credit for Prior Learning (CPL): A Practical Guide for Community Colleges** Marsha Danielson, South Central College, Minnesota, USA

### **Introduction**

With technological advancements, more of today's jobs require a postsecondary education. As a result, higher education is experiencing pressure for improved rates of degree completion from policymakers, accreditors, contributors and businesses. To meet future labor market needs, community colleges (institutions in the U.S. that award two-year college degrees) are focusing on strategies to increase the educational attainment level of adults through the recognition of prior college-level learning.

### **Development of the CPL (Credit for Prior Learning) Program**

In January 2012, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system adopted a strategic plan that included advancing the capacity for competency certification and credit for prior learning (CCCPL) at all colleges and universities. As vice president of economic development at South Central College (SCC), I was responsible for working with faculty and staff at our college to implement strategies developed by the statewide CCCPL team. We were one of the first colleges in the state to do so.

Implementing an effective CPL program at SCC began with research. The first step was to identify current and past practices, both formal and informal, to assess learning that occurs outside of the traditional classroom that might result in college credit. Another important activity was to utilize the Five Critical Factors of PLA Programs inventory (Travers, 2015, p. 9) and the American Council on Education's (2018) Credit for Prior Learning Implementation Matrix to determine the institution's level of readiness. Investigating CPL practices at peer institutions and referencing the Ten Standards for Assessing Learning (Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, n.d.) helped provide guidance for establishing and refining CPL policies, procedures and processes.

Strong, supportive institutional leadership helped us define CPL organizational strategies, recruit program leadership, and dedicate resources for CPL infrastructure and services. The college's CPL Advisory Group – made up of faculty, administrators, students and academic affairs employees – developed the business model, which outlined the academic, fiscal, support services and evaluation components of the program.

Faculty champions and peer-to-peer communications encouraged faculty and staff involvement while promoting the benefits of CPL as a student success strategy, which helped garner support from all levels of the institution. Faculty-led professional development opportunities helped bring everyone to a similar understanding of what CPL is and how it may benefit both students and the institution.

As the guide describes, "Marketing and public relations efforts will help to identify and connect students who may benefit from earning CPL credit" (Danielson, 2019, p. 30). The SCC CPL marketing and communications plan included the use of community outreach, business partnerships, social media and web-based technology. Throughout the guide, we wanted to show that "[c]ontinuous communication, evaluation, and improvement is necessary for program sustainability and growth" (p. 29).

After implementing and maintaining a successful CPL program at SCC, I decided to share lessons learned, advice garnered, and best practices identified by creating a "practical guide" for community colleges.

### **Goals of the Guide**

My intent was to create a guide that would assist community college faculty, staff and administrators in

building a successful infrastructure for implementing a formal CPL program at the campus level. The guide is designed as a practitioner’s roadmap for community college employees who have some familiarity with CPL, but want to learn detailed implementation strategies. The guide’s “how-to” implementation strategies gathered from current literature, as well as insights from existing institutional approaches and best practices, are provided to help streamline the implementation process. Until now, this information has been provided broadly in a variety of sites. This manual seeks to bring all of this together, along with detailed advice so that others who do this work can benefit.

## Guide Structure

The structure and design of the guide provide a systematic approach that follows the logical steps a community college could take when considering implementation or expansion of a formal CPL program. The guide includes the critical elements to consider from the research and planning stage, through marketing and public relations. The practical suggestions are *not* intended to be comprehensive, but to provide guidance and an implementation framework based on research, best practices and advice learned through our experiences at South Central College.

### *Credit for Prior Learning (CPL): A Practical Guide for Community Colleges That Want to Build a Successful Infrastructure for Implementing a formal CPL Program (Danielson, 2019)*

The guide is divided into six major sections:

*Section 1: Research and Planning* includes recommendations for institutions to identify their current state and to evaluate their readiness for CPL program implementation, by providing two approaches to conducting an institutional assessment, as well as key CPL resources and information sites.

*Section 2: Administrative Support* outlines the essential role of institutional administration, summarizing several key factors for administrative consideration in addressing faculty compensation and contract negotiations, as well as identifying resources and services that administrators will need to provide throughout various stages of CPL implementation.

*Section 3: Developing a Business Model* provides a framework for establishing boundaries and guidelines around academic, fiscal, support services, evaluation and other business practices, including the following resources:

- The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning’s (n.d.) Ten Standards for Assessing Learning for use in creating, implementing and evaluating assessment strategies.
- Guiding principles for consideration.
- A resource for CPL data tracking of academic records, transcripts and research.

*Section 4: Faculty and Staff Engagement* discusses strategies to achieve faculty and staff buy-in, an “inclusive faculty and staff engagement framework” (Danielson, 2019, p. 19), including clarifying the role of faculty, defining strategies for faculty decision-making, and outlining the most pertinent information to provide faculty and staff including:

- Five strategies for faculty engagement.
- Three major roles of faculty including advocate, advisor and evaluator.
- An example of how to incentivize faculty to develop CPL assessment instruments.
- A sample framework with examples to aid faculty in CPL policy and procedure decision-making.

*Section 5: Infrastructure* presents considerations for the organizational structure around human and fiscal resources and services and includes:

- Recommendations on seven topical areas for employee professional development.
- A sample counselor and advisory training tool.
- Sample forms for a CPL Assessment Request, a CPL Assessment Confirmation Agreement, and an Evaluator Response/Rating Rubric.

*Section 6: Marketing and Public Relations* explains how to identify and connect students, who may benefit from earning CPL credit, with sample strategies.

## Conclusion

With solid support, human and financial resources, and a CPL professional development program in place, community colleges that use the guide will be well-equipped to offer successful CPL programs, ensuring the pipeline of college graduates that is needed to meet future workforce skills demands.

## References

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