
2026 CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING AWARENESS WEEK

CPL 101

The Basics of Credit for Prior Learning

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One Take on a Varied Landscape

Your institution may accept or structure CPL differently.

Your state may require specific practices.

Your accreditor(s) may set its own limits and documentation standards.

When in doubt, confirm current practice with your registrar or academic affairs office.

Agenda

01

Explore

What CPL is, and what it is not.

02

Understand

Why institutions are prioritizing prior learning.

03

Learn

Every major type of CPL.

04

Advance

How to build and sustain a CPL program.

What CPL Is — and Isn't

What CPL Is

CPL assesses learning gained outside the classroom and awards college credit, certification, or advanced standing for it. Also called prior learning assessment (PLA) or recognition of prior learning.

What CPL Isn't

Not an easy shortcut. It does not lower academic quality, bypass faculty, or threaten enrollment. It is not the same as transfer credit, and it does not violate accreditation standards.

CPL vs. Transfer Credit

The two are often confused, but they answer different questions.

Transfer Credit

- Coursework completed at another accredited institution
- Evaluated via official transcript and course-to-course equivalency
- Governed by articulation agreements and transfer policy

Credit for Prior Learning

- Learning gained outside a formal accredited course — exams, military training, portfolios, workplace training
- Evaluated via exam scores, third-party reports, or faculty review
- Governed by institutional CPL policy

A common gray area: foreign academic transcripts can usually be evaluated for transfer credit. Foreign work credentials — a license, certification, or training completed abroad — have no transcript to transfer, so they're evaluated as CPL instead.

It Isn't a New Idea

Colonial Era – Post Civil War

Education tied to vocations like clergy and law. Apprenticeships and guilds were the dominant path to a credential.

Post World War I

The credit hour is standardized. The Emergency Council on Education — later ACE — forms in 1918 to link education and wartime experience.

Post World War II

The GED is created. ACE begins evaluating military training, and the GI Bill brings veterans into higher education.

Nontraditional Credit Goes Mainstream

The 1970s

- CAEL forms from a Carnegie/ETS/College Board project
- ACE issues standardized credit recommendations for exams
- Over a dozen institutions form around adult learning and PLA

1980s and Beyond

- By the late 1980s, 2,000+ institutions use alternative credit
- Portfolio review and competency-based programs emerge
- By 2015, most institutions accept some nontraditional credit

By 2015, nontraditional credit had moved from the margins to the mainstream.

What CPL Means for Learners

A 2020 CAEL/WICHE study of 72 institutions found:

\$1,500–\$10,200

saved on average with CPL credit

9–14 months

average time-to-degree savings

+17%

likelier to complete a credential

17.6 credits

more traditional credits earned

The completion boost is greatest for learners who need it most

+19%

Pell recipients

+14%

Black learners

+24%

Hispanic learners

CPL Is Also an Enrollment Strategy

The same study asked prospective learners how CPL affects enrollment:

84%

said credit for life/work experience could influence their choice of institution.

55%+

said knowing about CPL would boost their likelihood of enrolling.

47% / 48%

had already applied for CPL credit, or intended to.

The National Landscape of CPL Adoption

A 2024 AACRAO/CAEL survey of 399 institutions found:

82%

offer at least one CPL pathway

48%

saw CPL evaluation increase in 3 years

90%

evaluate standardized exams

91%

evaluate noncollege training

66%

charge a CPL fee

54%

don't accept CPL earned elsewhere

A Persistent Equity Gap

11%

of eligible post-traditional learners actually received CPL credit.

The gap widens for learners who stand to benefit most:

6%

of Black learners received CPL credit

8%

of Hispanic learners received CPL credit

7%

of Pell recipients received CPL credit

What Institutions Decide Locally

Within accreditor and state boundaries, every institution sets its own CPL policy.

Which methods to accept

Not every institution uses every pathway.

Grading & transcription

Graded, pass/fail, or noted distinctly.

Portfolio & exam standards

The rubric faculty use to evaluate.

Course & credit equivalencies

Mapping prior learning to specific courses.

Timelines for evaluation

How quickly a request is reviewed.

Fees & financial aid

Whether a fee applies, and how.

Individual programs — nursing, education — often apply stricter limits than the general policy.

Accreditation & the Policy Layers Above It

Institutional policy sits inside layers of oversight that vary by accreditor, state, and program.

Institutional Accreditors

e.g., HLC · MSCHE · SACSCOC · WSCUC

- Require a clear, public CPL policy
- Cap CPL to a “reasonable proportion” of a credential
- Since 2020, no longer “regional” — any accreditor can serve any institution nationwide

Programmatic Accreditors

e.g., ABET · CCNE/ACEN · CAEP

- Field-specific, often tied to licensure
- Often set stricter CPL limits than the institution's general policy
- Can override a broader institutional policy

State Policy

Varies by state

- 35 states + D.C. address military credit
- 26 states set minimum AP scores
- 27 states address CPL more broadly

Accreditors set the outer boundary; institutions still make the day-to-day decisions.

North Carolina Spotlight

Regional context for NC Community College System (NCCCS) audiences — adapt or remove for other states.

State Policy & Resources

- NC Code 1D SBCCC 800 authorizes CPL via apprenticeships, credentials, CE crosswalks, articulation, military training, exams, and portfolios
- NCCCS Credit for Prior Learning webpage: nccommunitycolleges.edu/credit-for-prior-learning
- openNCCC portal for statewide data and resources

What's Next

- A statewide CPL policy project with CAEL and RAND is modernizing NC's CPL infrastructure
- Upcoming: a focused initiative to expand CPL support for military-affiliated learners.
- Data Uniformity and Collection
- College and State Board Policy Updates

Types of Credit for Prior Learning

A roadmap of the major opportunities.

Standardized
Exams

Credit by Exam

Portfolio
Assessment

Military
Training

Apprenticeships

Noncollege
Programs &
Credentials

Foreign Work
Credentials

Articulation &
Noncredit

Standardized Exams

The most common CPL pathway — used by 90% of institutions that offer CPL. Each program sets its own content and scoring; the receiving institution always decides how much credit to award (as of September 2026).

Program	Scope	Cost	Adoption
AP	40 exams; HS course + exam	\$98/exam	~6M exams/yr; most 4-yr colleges
CLEP	34 intro-level subject exams	\$95/exam	2,900+ colleges; 50+ years in use
DSST	30+ exams, intro–mid level	\$100/exam	1,500+ colleges; popular with military
Cambridge Int'l	50+ subjects, A/AS levels	Varies by center	Mainly international students
IB	55+ courses; scored 1–7	Included in Diploma	Preferred by selective STEM programs

Other National Exam & Course Providers

Low-cost, self-paced options evaluated through ACE credit recommendations — a professional judgment, not a guarantee of credit.

Provider	What It Is	Cost Model	Adoption
UExcel	Subject exams via Excelsior University	Varies by exam	Accredited, degree-granting institution; used for nursing
Sophia Learning	Self-paced gen-ed courses (not exams)	Low flat/subscription	ACE-recommended; 1,000+ colleges reviewed
StraighterLine	Self-paced gen-ed & prerequisite courses	Low flat cost	ACE-recommended; 3,000+ colleges accept

An ACE recommendation is advisory — the receiving institution always makes the final call.

Credit by Exam & Challenge Exams

What It Means

- A standardized or institutional exam
- A high score skips the course
- Saves time and tuition

How Institutions Handle It

- Each sets its own policy
- Chooses exams and minimum scores
- Decides which courses it counts toward

Why It Matters

- Recognizes learning from work or self-study
- Supports transfer and adult learners
- Fits competency-based programs

The exam and the underlying course share the same learning outcomes.

Portfolio Assessment

Evaluates experiential learning through a student-submitted portfolio, faculty-reviewed against course outcomes. Systematic but resource-intensive to run well.

Common Institutional Models

Model A

Student compiles the portfolio independently and submits for review.

Model B

Student identifies the course; faculty help develop and review it.

Model C

Student takes a dedicated course to build the portfolio with faculty.

Institutions need a clear, shared rubric for what counts as a strong portfolio.

Military Training & Experience

Training & Occupations

- MOS/ratings combine formal training with on-the-job learning
- Many align to civilian fields — IT, logistics, healthcare, mechanics
- Also called a “school,” “academy,” or “center”

How It's Evaluated

- ACE evaluates training and issues credit recommendations
- Documented on the Joint Services Transcript (JST)
- Searchable via the ACE Military Guide database

Tools & Tips

- COOL programs map MOS to civilian certifications
- Credit isn't automatic — institutions still apply their own equivalencies
- Awarding 1 credit of PE is NOT awarding military credit

Military credit is the most widely mandated form of CPL: 35 states + D.C. require institutions to award it.

Apprenticeships

Registered apprenticeships combine paid on-the-job training — often 2,000+ hours a year — with related classroom instruction, making them a natural fit for degree credit.

How It Works

- ACE evaluates the apprenticeship's on-the-job training and related instruction
- Credit recommendations are published for colleges to adopt as equivalencies
- Colleges build a “program map” showing how the credit applies to a specific degree

What It's Worth

- Registered apprenticeships often include 2,000+ on-the-job hours per year
- ACE recommendations often range 20–45 credits, depending on trade and length
- Many completers finish an associate degree with about one more year of coursework

A National Model: Michigan's MI-CCAP

- The Michigan Community College Association partners with the state labor department and ACE to evaluate 14 registered trades
- Equivalencies are published in a shared statewide transfer network
- Participating colleges may not charge a CPL fee for apprenticeship credit

Apprenticeship credit is often inconsistent across institutions and invisible to completers — a shared evaluation and a clear program map fix both problems.

Noncollege Programs: Licenses, Certifications & Union Training

License

- Required to work in regulated professions
- Issued by state or national agencies
- Examples: RN, Licensed Electrician

Certifications

- Awarded by industry or certifying bodies
- Often require an exam, sometimes experience
- Examples: CompTIA A+, CNA, PMP

Union & Corporate Training

- Employer- or union-run training programs
- Evaluated via ACE or NCCRS recommendations
- Common in manufacturing, logistics, and skilled trades

How institutions evaluate these: ACE reviews workplace training; NCCRS, the National College Credit Recommendation Service, run by the NY State Board of Regents, evaluates corporate and union training and publishes recommendations used by 1,500+ colleges.

Certificates, Badges & Credentialed Degrees

Certificates

- Short-term, focused training
- Offered by colleges, providers, or employers
- Often stackable toward a degree

Badges & Micro-credentials

- Digital proof of a specific skill
- Often earned online (Coursera, LinkedIn Learning)
- Can be stacked into a larger credential

Credentialed Degrees

- Degrees with an industry cert built in
- Examples: nursing with NCLEX prep; cybersecurity with CompTIA

Foreign Work Credentials

Foreign academic transcripts can usually be evaluated for transfer credit. The CPL question is different: a license, certification, or workplace training completed outside the U.S. has no accredited transcript to transfer at all.

NACES

- National Association of Credential Evaluation Services
- A trade association of independent evaluators, founded 1987
- Screens members against a shared code of ethics
- Reports are required by many colleges and employers

What an Evaluation Does

- Verifies a foreign license, certification, or training record
- Confirms the credential's scope, rigor, and issuing authority
- Maps it to a comparable U.S. credential or standard

Articulation & Noncredit-to-Credit Conversion

Articulation Agreements

- Credit for high school courses that meet college-level outcomes, faculty-approved
- Different from dual enrollment, where students take actual college courses
- May exist statewide or be negotiated locally
- Often won't transfer to a 4-year school unless built into a degree pathway

Noncredit-to-Credit Conversion

- Converts completed noncredit training into credit-bearing equivalents
- Requires a faculty-built crosswalk between noncredit and credit curricula
- Common challenges: credentialing, grading, transcription
- Workforce Pell (July 2026) funds short-term workforce programs — raising the stakes for clean CE-to-CU crosswalks

Both depend on faculty-built crosswalks between outside learning and specific courses.

Best Practices: Foundation & Engagement

01

Campus Readiness

Train staff and keep data and support systems equitable and current.

02

Promote CPL Proactively

Advertise CPL during recruitment, admissions, and orientation so eligible students know to apply.

03

Faculty Engagement

Credit is awarded only after qualified faculty confirm college-level outcomes.

04

A Single Intake Point

One centralized, easy-to-use CPL request form for every pathway.

Best Practices: Fair & Consistent Evaluation

01

Evaluate Outcomes, Not Seat Time

Ask what a student knows and can do — not how many hours they sat.

02

Articulation as a Floor

Trust state-approved equivalencies; add local credit where none exists yet.

03

Standardized Rubrics

Document the rationale behind every equivalency decision.

04

Regular Review Cycles

Revisit equivalencies as credentials, exams, and courses change.

Best Practices: Systems & Communication

01

Student-Focused Language

Write policy in plain language, with clear next steps for students.

02

Consistent ERP Data Entry

Code CPL consistently in your student information system so every office sees the same record.

03

Consistent Transcribing & Advising

Post the award clearly on the transcript and reflect it in the student's advising plan.

04

Track CPL Data for Equity

Use consistent records to monitor who receives credit and close equity gaps.

Building a CPL Program

01

A Point Person

One dedicated staff member improves consistency.

02

A Cross-Functional Team

Faculty, admissions, registrar, financial aid, advising.

03

A Written Policy

Clear, transparent, equitable standards.

04

Defined Acceptance Standards

Score thresholds, reviewed regularly.

05

Data on Outcomes

Track applications, awards, and completion.

06

Proactive Outreach

Raise CPL during admissions and advising.

Where to Go Next

Bookmark these — each is a live tool or directory, not just an organization to know about.

Resource	Website	Use it for
CAEL	cael.org	PLA research & LearningCounts portfolios
ACE Military Guide	militaryguide.acenet.edu	Look up credit by MOS; upload a JST
ACE National Guide	acenet.edu	Credit for workplace training
AACRAO	aacrao.org	National CPL benchmarking data
WICHE	wiche.edu	State-by-state CPL policy research
NCCRS	nccrs.org	Directory of noncollege course credit

Resource	Website	Use it for
NACES	naces.org	Directory of foreign credential evaluators
College Board	clep.collegeboard.org	CLEP exam details & registration
DSST (Prometric)	getcollegedcredit.com	DSST exam details & registration
Sophia & StraighterLine	sophia.org · straighterline.com	Course catalogs & ACE recommendations
Excelsior University	excelsior.edu	UExcel exam details & registration
IBO & Cambridge Int'l	ibo.org · cambridgeinternational.org	Diploma & syllabus details

Where CPL Goes From Here

Higher education needs closer alignment between learning and work, a sharper focus on equity, and recognition that is faster, fairer, and technology-enabled.

1

How can institutional culture better support flexible recognition?

2

How can postsecondary and workforce systems align expectations?

3

How can funding models support more flexible recognition?

4

How can workforce and higher-ed data systems integrate?

Thank You

Questions & Discussion