

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Incorporating Non-Traditional Adult Learner-Centered Strategies into Enrollment Management Planning

By Diane Treis

Adult learner reentry to college and pathways to credentials may be less visible in enrollment management plans that are dependent on conventional, linear, and continuous college pathways. Drawing from learning and findings of six institutions within a large public university system as well as the academic literature, this article will consider post-traditional pipeline opportunities and strategies for faculty and staff engagement in SEM planning for this population.

“I had so many years in the working world, you know, that my academic situation was probably much different [from] a lot of other people’s situation. College was an avenue out of what happened to me. Maybe I should have gone [back] to college sooner [...], life hands you lemons.”

These words were spoken by a recent graduate at a comprehensive university and were representative of many alumni interviewed by Treis Rusk and Smith (2022) and are among the millions of Americans with some college and no degree (National Student Clearinghouse 2019). These individuals put off returning to or completing college for many reasons—work, family, finance, inflexibility of college programming, lack of confidence (Davis, *et al.* 2022; Treis Rusk and Smith 2022). Yet, their reentry to college and pathways to credentials is less visible in the enrollment management literature. Many conventional enrollment management plans assume a

linear and continuous educational pathway. Potential students are recruited as new freshmen directly from a high school program of study, choose an institution of higher education (IHE), enroll in consecutive semesters at one or more IHEs, and complete a credential. Demographic and retention data suggest that the pathway through higher education to credential is not linear for many individuals (National Student Clearinghouse 2019). This article will consider one curricular strategy—credit for prior learning (CPL)—that can be used to reengage an adult learner population who have acquired college-level learning through multiple formal and informal sources. The author considers how this approach can be advanced in the context of enrollment management planning. The findings are drawn from the academic literature as well as learning acquired from six universities in a large public university system. Data were drawn from written reports and focused dis-

cussions with faculty and staff as part of two large CPL initiatives implemented between 2011 and 2021.

For the purposes of this discussion, the adult learner or nontraditional student is any student who does not matriculate and continuously enroll at a college or university directly upon graduation from high school. This is because such enrollment patterns indicate the opportunity for an individual to acquire extra institutional learning prior to (re)entry. The terms adult learner and nontraditional learner are defined differently, in research and practice. In some studies, and institutions of higher education, a nontraditional age adult learner is defined as one who is aged 25 years or older at the time of matriculation (Klein-Collins 2020). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2022) recognized that a multitude of factors may play into the definition of a nontraditional student, student age and enrollment patterns among them. In a summary of reengagement and degree reclamation initiatives studied by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (Adelma 2013; Davis, *et al.* 2022), the adult learner or potential adult completer populations comprised individuals who had some college, were not currently enrolled at a college or university, and who did not complete a credential.

Background

According to a National Student Clearinghouse report (2019), more than 39 million Americans have some college and no degree. According to data assembled by Lumina Foundation for Education (2020), approximately 43.7 percent of U.S. residents aged 25–64 hold an associate's degree or higher, and an additional 12 percent hold a certificate/certification or have completed some college. When the data are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the attainment gap is clear. While 48 percent of U.S. residents who identify as white have earned at least an associate's degree, that figure fell to 32 percent for residents identifying as Black and to 25 percent for residents identifying as Latino/a. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have further impacted demand for higher education, especially enrollments at community colleges according to federal enrollment data (Weissman 2023). These data suggest graduating high school se-

niors may choose to enter the workforce directly out of high school, rather than pursue a degree. These trends are coupled with smaller high school graduate classes projected in some states, particularly the Midwest and Northeast, due to birthrate trends (WICHE 2020).

Yet, the individuals who do not enroll in colleges and universities today may be returning adult learners tomorrow. Acknowledging the realities of the data, potential student pipelines and corresponding enrollment management plans can be reimaged in ways that differently recruit and (re)engage adult nontraditional learners who may have episodic and incremental journeys to credential attainment. Such a pathway model assumes an ecological systems approach to learning. That is—throughout the lifespan—individuals acquire, apply, and transfer learning in formal and informal education spaces. Formal pathways may include bridging learning from IHE sponsored credit and non-credit coursework, or industry sponsored professional development that may conclude with a credential. Informal pathways may present themselves via on-the-job training and demonstrations of learning, community organizing, and independent study.

Differentiated instruction that empowers students to take ownership of their learning can be an important driver to engage and retain post-traditional students (Macdonald 2018). Recognition and award of credit for prior learning is a leading indicator of enrollment choice (Crounse, Hinkle, and Shatzer 2018) and can be a powerful tool to retain individuals. Despite the proven benefits of CPL, the rate of utilization remains low. This is, in part, due to lack of knowledge about quality CPL practices that, in turn, erodes faculty confidence in the process.

CPL, also referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA), is commonly defined as the practice of recognizing, evaluating, and awarding credit for university-level learning acquired outside the confines of university-sponsored credit instruction (Lakin, Nellum, Seymour and Crandall 2015; Treis Rusk and Smith 2022). A student may access PLA via a variety of formats. There are three broad categories of assessments. This article will primarily focus on internal institutional assessments.

- Internal institutional assessments are conducted by a university faculty member or qualified instructor as defined by a regional accreditor. Formats include portfolio, departmental exams or project-based assessments, university non-credit to credit bridges, and evaluations of industry recognized training and credentials.
- Military credit assessments are third party assessments of curriculum delivered by the U.S. Department of Defense. Administered by the American Council on Education (ACE), evaluations of curriculum, content, learning assessments, and student artifacts are analyzed by qualified by faculty and content experts who teach at accredited IHES. The outcome of the evaluations renders credit recommendations that are maintained by ACE. Credit award for CPL via credit recommendation is mandatory in several states. Because the learning acquired in military training does not always align to cataloged coursework, some institutions may complement these external recommendations with an institutional assessment to clarify credit award.
- Standardized external assessments are developed and administered by a third party. This commonly utilized CPL format includes exams such as Advanced Placement (AP) and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), both administered by the College Board.

In the United States, the impact of CPL on learner success is well documented. Adult students who earned CPL had better retention and completion outcomes than students who did not earn CPL (Klein-Collins 2010; Hayward and Williams 2015; Chappell 2012; Klein-Collins 2017; Klein-Collins, *et al.* 2020). In a 72-institution targeted study of adult student outcomes, students who completed PLA were significantly more likely to complete a degree. This impact was evident regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, academic ability, and financial aid status. For example, adult learners who earned CPL and who enrolled at a community college were 25 percent more likely to complete a credential, and those who were Pell qualified were 33 percent

more likely to complete a credential. The impact held for students identifying across racial and ethnic groups, with students identifying as Latino/a experiencing the greatest impact (Klein-Collins, *et al.* 2020).

CPL by portfolio may be particularly impactful on adult learner persistence and graduation, as well student learning outcomes. Klein-Collins and Hudson (2019) examined the academic records of 26,000 students, 7 percent of whom had engaged in CPL. Students who completed a portfolio-based assessment had higher rates of completion and graduation than for any other PLA format. Almost all (98%) of students who completed portfolio-based CPL graduated or remained enrolled. Similarly, Klein-Collins and Hudson (2017) found students who engaged in the PLA by portfolio class were progressively more likely to complete their degrees. Students who completed the portfolio course were more impacted than those who did not complete the course; students who completed the course and earned CPL via a successful portfolio were more impacted than students who did not earn CPL. Such findings were supported by smaller-scale studies such as Rust and Ikard (2016).

HIPs are educational practices that are positively associated with student learning and retention (Kuh 2007). Portfolio is recognized as the eleventh high impact practice (HIP). CPL by portfolio encompasses several HIP key elements as described by Kuh, O'Donnell, and Reed (2013), suggesting why it may be efficacious to support transformative learning experience and success, as will be described subsequently. The student learning outcomes and performance expectations are clearly established and articulated: students are offered opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world application; students receive frequent feedback and interact with faculty around substantive matters; there are structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning; and the experience culminates with a public demonstration of competence.

Research focused on the outcomes of CPL by portfolio validate the practice as a HIP. Treis Rusk and Smith (2022) found that students aged 25 years and older who participated in CPL portfolio were retained and completed their credentials at higher rates than the gen-

eral adult learner population. Furthermore, students reported increased self-confidence and self-efficacy, improved transfer of learning, increased self-awareness, and improved metacognitive function, and they attributed this growth to the CPL portfolio curriculum and activity. The impact was especially notable for women. In other studies, students attributed to the portfolio activity increased self-confidence in relation to college-level learning (Delleville 2017; Marienau 2014), a shift in self-cognition (Stevens, *et al.* 2010; Brown 2002), metacognitive growth (Delleville 2017), strengthening of writing and meaning-making skills (Marienau 2014, Stevens, *et al.* 2010) and demonstrated improvement in subsequent critical thinking assignments (LeGrow, *et al.* 2002; Rust and Ikard 2016).

Despite the positive benefits of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), the uptake rates of CPL are low. Klein-Collins, Taylor, Bishop, *et al.* (2020), found the average take-up rate for adult learners was 11 percent. When excluding military-based CPL, the rate fell almost three-fold to 4 percent. Furthermore, equity gaps in participation exist (Klein-Collins, *et al.* 2020). A follow-up study (Klein-Collins, *et al.* 2021) took a deeper dive into these equity issues and found that while low-income and Black students experienced a particularly strong boost from CPL engagement, the uptake rate for these populations of learners was particularly low. Among the barriers for some minoritized adult students are a lack of confidence in their own academic skills, lack of institutional flexibility, and knowledge of the process (Klein-Collins, *et al.* 2021; Rogers and Forte 2016). To provide the benefits of CPL to these students, the authors recommended more and better outreach and CPL processes that are woven into programs and curricula. The latter may be particularly important to reduce unconscious bias and improve inclusion.

The Coupling of CPL in SEM: A Theory of Change

Imagine a potential nontraditional adult learner pipeline. What if an institution could increase the retention and completion of Pell eligible students in its general student population by 15 percent? Think about

the equity gaps that exist at colleges and universities. What if CPL could be used to close those gaps for the adult learner populations? What would that mean for recruitment and enrollment to have these successes? What might that mean for workforce development in different regions? Practitioners who are calculating the potential impact of CPL on enrollments may wonder how such practices can be integrated into academic programs and processes as part of a comprehensive SEM plan.

Among the top impediments to implementing or scaling CPL is faculty lack of knowledge—and subsequently—confidence around internally assessed CPL, its principles, and quality practices. Thus, the first step to incorporating CPL as a reengagement strategy is to secure faculty support. In addition to highlighting the learning and success benefits of CPL, as evidenced in the reviewed literature, university faculty and staff emphasized the importance of articulating how quality PLA practices align to those in the classroom (Treis Rusk and Smith 2014) and recognized the connections between disciplines and industry. University administrators and accreditors articulated that providing a framework to assure CPL adheres to assumed practices is equally essential. Table 1 (on page 53) illustrates critical assumed practices developed and integrated into CPL program design that are important to implementing quality internal PLA assessments and to guide program-level review (Smith and Treis Rusk 2021).

Integrating CPL curricular pathways into programming and then a SEM strategy requires broad faculty engagement, as well as cross-functional, cross-institutional, and cross-organizational processes. The eight-step change model created by Kotter (2012) and adopted by Ballie and Gordon (2017) can be further adapted for this purpose. Four steps to broadly engage university leaders, faculty, staff, and stakeholders to incorporate innovative curricular models as part of an SEM strategy are to:

- Examine the right data to uncover the learning ecology and IHE entry points for post-traditional students, creating an actionable imperative that couples a sense of urgency with the perception that a solution is in reach.

TABLE 1 ► Alignment of Quality PLA Practices to Assessment Practices in the Classroom

To assure reliability and validity	Determination of credit award is made by appropriate academic subject matter or credentialing experts
	Evaluators hold an advanced degree in a relevant field or discipline
	Methods are in place to monitor authenticity of materials submitted
	Programs are regularly monitored, review, evaluated, and revised
To assure student learning	Evaluate the same learning outcomes and competencies
	Advise students as to what competencies they must demonstrate, and the level of proficiency required to pass the course
	Inform students of policy and resources available to them
	Provide formative and summative evaluation

Source: Smith and Rusk (2021)

- Plan regionally, execute locally: Form a broad region-based guiding coalition of cross institution and organization faculty, content experts, and stakeholders to create pathways. Form a focused group of faculty and staff at the academic unit of like disciplines to integrate CPL into the curriculum.
- Create a dual-level vision, empowering others to act on the vision in ways large and small, thereby recognizing and consolidating short-term wins to sustain momentum.
- Institutionalize processes and approaches to produce long-term change.

Uncover the learning story and IHE entry points for post-traditional students

The SEM literature has provided a consistent set of metrics and data that can be used to operationalize an enrollment management plan and projections (Knepfle 2019; Hossler and Kalsbeek 2013). Recruiting and retaining adult learners via CPL pathways may require collection and analysis of additional and/or different data that better address the drivers of post-traditional student enrollment choice (Crounse, Hinkle and Shatzer 2020) and that are inclusive of curricular pathways and learning recognition that is attractive to a post-traditional

student population. Table 2 (on page 54) illustrates adult learner-centered elements that may be incorporated into an SEM plan.

Form a guiding coalition to create pathways and local focus groups to integrate CPL

Collaborative planning at the regional level—engaging partners from other IHES, workforce experts, and industry—will allow for candid analysis of the student credential and curricular pathways (Peterson 2014). When these partnerships include university faculty, universities may be better poised to create intentional pathways from industry-based trainings and credentials or to university programs of study and vice versa. Building such pathways can look and work similarly to university non-credit program pathways. The differences are that in non-credit pathways, the university delivers the coursework, evaluates, and validates student learning and proficiency. In industry-based training, content experts create and deliver the training and assessment may be conducted by a third party. Thus, Industry partnerships that include mapping of external curricula are imperative so that universities have access to course content, learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessments. While outside the scope of this article, rubrics and guides to facilitate curricular and assessment

TABLE 2 ► Post-Traditional Pathway and Pipeline Opportunities

Element	Actionable Items	Additional Stakeholder Engagement ¹	Intermediate Outcome
Pipeline Opportunities			
Delayed yield: Anticipating students who arrive from leading sending community college	► Identify most common curricular program areas of graduates from “sending” institution ► Create dual pathways that include transfer credit and CPL to maximize the application of prior learning and credit to degree program/major	► Faculty, instructional, and advising staff from high demand programs ► Industries employing community college graduates ► Licensure organizations (e.g., childcare and education) ► Assessment director and accreditation liaison officers	► Articulated pathways that increase transparency for potential student populations ► Quantifiable recruitment/enrollment pools ► Bridging and bundling of micro-credentials
Lost enrollment: Those individuals who completed credits but who did not complete a credential	► Create potential completer pool of based on established parameters ► Use CPL to rebundle learning gained across environments	► Staff to locate individuals and conduct initial degree audits ► Faculty and staff to provide discipline-based outreach to potential completer population	► Communicate CPL pathways so that opportunities are transparent ► Quantifiable recruitment/enrollment pools ► Identify policies that may inhibit reenrollment
Alternative Pathways			
Non-credit program enrollments	► Identify high demand non-credit professional development program based on established parameters (no. of Continuing Education Units [CEUs]), CEUs required to maintain licensure	► Faculty and instructional staff for non-credit and credit programming ► Continuing studies staff ► Licensure organizations requiring CEU ► Assessment director and accreditation liaison officers	► Articulated pathways that increase transparency for potential student populations
Cluster enrollment pools within an industry or employer partnering with CE units via contractual training agreements	► Identify high demand non-credit professional development program based on established parameters (no. of programming hours, assessments, etc.) ► Professional development training evaluations	► Industry trainers coupled with faculty and instructional staff for non-credit and credit programming ► Continuing studies staff ► Licensure organizations requiring CEU ► Assessment director and accreditation liaison officers	► Quantifiable recruitment/enrollment pools ► Bridging and bundling of micro-credentials

¹ Stakeholder engagement beyond university leadership and staff within SEM units

mapping are becoming increasingly available. Information on how to access open source resources created as part of the All Learning Counts work at the author's university system is located at the end of this article.

Region-based planning may be helpful to framing and mapping pathways; however, it is the university and its faculty who are responsible for delivering the academic degree programs and accounting for their quality. Universities must provide assurances to their accredi-

tors that students who receive CPL are demonstrating equitable learning as those students who complete the university course. Conversely, perceived quality of the academic degree program may impact student demand. Therefore, university enrollment management executives must have a comprehensive understanding of the university as an organization (Lingrell 2019). Trainer (2018) emphasizes a shared sense of responsibility and establishing local level EM to garner support and estab-

lish creditability in the academic community—including assignment of finances at the level of the academic unit. Such strategies may be best to identify specific CPL discipline-specific pathways, and such a dual-level vision can build and sustain programming momentum.

Create a dual-level vision and consolidate short-term wins to sustain momentum

Having a dual-level vision enables a university to advance university mission and large-scale student success goals by aggregating achievements at the departmental level. Many universities have found it useful to develop broad university policies and practices relative to CPL and adult learner reengagement campaigns, while entrusting departments or divisional units to act on strategies. Consider engaging sufficient faculty or academic unit staff and leadership so that action can take ownership at the departmental level to initiate CPL pathways and divisional policies. Establishing routines at the department level may seemingly reach a small number of students, at first. However, this approach is beneficial for two reasons. First, the scope of CPL expansion is achievable and sustainable. Faculty may create a single portfolio process to apply to several majors or select one or two majors to which they map a specific industry or non-credit training. While initial efforts may reach a small number of students, these outcomes may be compounded with other departmental efforts.

Establishing cross-functional relationships between university departments can create efficiency and support sustainability of CPL formats, as well as initiatives to reengage students. For example, when working with a post-traditional student population, it can be advantageous to engage colleagues from units of continuing education and studies. Often these departments are the first stop for returning adult learners because the applied nature of the programming offered provides an immediate opportunity gain for the learner. Thus, these units present not only an enrollment pool, but programming that may be mapped via a CPL process. Furthermore, by creating strong relationships with continuing studies units, academic units can collaboratively work to identify, review, and modify current

non-credit programming that can naturally bridge to credit coursework and these bridges can be built for both undergraduate and graduate level programming. Doing so provides post-traditional learner choice about how to access their professional development and pursue credentials in an incremental way without the need to repeat learning.

Similarly, staff from SEM related units can collaborate with faculty and staff in academic units to share outreach related to “return to learn campaigns,” in which outreach is provided to individuals who completed substantial credit at the university but did not complete a credential. Student report connections with content experts as having an important impact on their enrollment decision (O’Beirne and Treis Rusk 2011). Faculty involved with previous adult learner reengagement initiatives described such interactions with potential students as motivating, and consequently may more fully engage academic units in the SEM imperative.

Institutionalize processes and approaches to produce long-term change

Reviewing and modifying institutional policies, procedures, and practices to ensure they support post-traditional student success and academic growth is imperative to sustaining an SEM strategy that is inclusive of adult learners (Braxton, *et al.* 2014). It is possible that institutional policies intended to support traditional student populations, and even expedite their completion may have unintended negative impacts on post-traditional students. For example, tuition plateaus may offer good value and benefit to traditional students, encouraging them to enroll in more credits per semester; however, such plateaus may serve as a penalty to students who must attend part-time blending school with work and family responsibilities. Similarly, lack of policy or perceived lack of policy creates a silence that can be misinterpreted by faculty and staff as disallowance of a practice. For example, lack of policy regarding the application of CPL may lead some faculty and staff to perceive the practice is not permitted. CPL policy that is not transparent to faculty, staff, and students may result in misinterpretation or inconsistent application

of policies, thus eroding quality or introducing bias in student access. For this reason, institutionalizing policies around CPL and CPL pathways can be guided by the criterial and assumed practices of regional accreditors. This may include noticing accreditors of CPL pathways that include a credit award of more than 25 percent of a degree program's requirements, having clear and transparent information to students about the maximum CPL award, ensuring all faculty and staff are aware and can consistently apply CPL policies, and incorporating program-level assessment into CPL programs. Last, broad collaborations discussed in step two can also play a role in policy development. One example is accepting CPL transfer credit that was internally assessed and transcribed by another regionally accredited IHE and applying that policy to articulated agreements.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

Individuals who do not directly enter the college and university upon graduation from high school or those who matriculate but stop out prior to completion comprise a potential enrollment pool that, unless recognized in enrollment management and planning, may be lost. This article considered how nontraditional adult learner populations may interact with universities, across their lifetime, and operational processes that may be considered introducing new points of reengagement into SEM planning and strategies, those that include guided pathways via non-credit professional development or CPL by portfolio. The generalizability of the information shared in this article is limited in that the findings are representative of six universities within the same university system. Future cross-institutional mix-method research is needed to validate the efficacy of the operational SEM planning strategies that impact a returning adult learner population.

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