



## OREGON UNIVERSITY SYSTEM & CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

American higher education is confronting significant challenges and opportunities. Rapidly evolving information technologies are changing the ways in which knowledge is created and disseminated, and challenging the paradigm of the instructional credit hour and the concept of the “classroom” itself.<sup>i</sup> Some of the newest developments<sup>ii</sup> have the potential to expand access to knowledge, allow students to reduce their time to degree, or allow students to earn their degrees flexibly, while they work or raise families. Whether learning happens through no-cost MOOCs (massively open online classes), in the workplace or in the military, many students are asking how these educational experiences can contribute toward their academic degrees.

The Oregon University System (OUS) strives to embrace innovative technologies and explore policies that empower its institutions and its students to achieve their goals. One of the most important goals for OUS is contributing to the statewide 40-40-20 goal. Recent trends and research suggest that Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) programs (e.g., through no-cost MOOCs, in the workplace, or in the military), which assess and grant credit for learning that students achieve outside of a traditional classroom, are viable tools for improving college completion rates, especially among adult and returning students. Nontraditional students are essential to reaching the 40-40-20 goal. According to the 2007-2011 American Community Survey, 26.6% of adults ages 25-64 in Oregon have some college but no degree. Without educating adult students, Oregon will likely fall tens of thousands of degrees short of the overall goal.<sup>iii</sup> Awarding credit for student learning in nontraditional settings can “allow students to save valuable time and money by earning college credit for subject matter they’ve already learned.”<sup>iv</sup> The benefits of CPL include decreased time to graduation, increased affordability, and increased likelihood to complete.<sup>v</sup>

Although it is widely assumed that CPL policies target adult students,<sup>vi</sup> CPL programs are being adopted more broadly as students of all ages take advantage of open source, online, community based, or other independent means of accelerating their college-level education or developmental education sequences (Fain, 2012a, 2012b).<sup>vii</sup> Operationalizing these new resources may provide an avenue for OUS students to increase efficiency in terms of time to or cost of degree, and open the door to accessing, at least from a distance, world-class experts as part of their educational journey. In some states, institutions have created campus-level solutions for CPL, or its cousin, “proficiency-based learning.”<sup>viii</sup> Other states have adopted policy at their system office so that these credits are easily transported between their universities and other institutions of higher education. K-12 schools and school systems have also begun to embrace proficiency-based learning, in Oregon and around the nation. Given these movements, now is the time for Oregon to consider a policy on CPL.

OUS is responsible for piloting CPL programs with care, to ensure that students are able to access the most efficient degree pathways, while protecting equitable high quality learning and growth experiences traditionally provided in the classroom. The quality of learning experiences offered by emerging learning environments is not yet fully understood, especially when compared to teaching and learning in physical classrooms. By continuing to monitor research on these different learning environments OUS will garner a greater understanding of their impacts on student learning and achievement, as well as their role in advancing on Oregon’s 40-40-20 goal.

The role of assessment is critical in both traditional classrooms and emerging learning environments, acting as the currency by which faculty make judgments about students' learning. Given this reality, it is important to be mindful about how assessments are designed, implemented and evaluated for effectiveness. In some pathways, feedback and assessment during the learning process comes almost solely from peers and not faculty or other educators.

In many prior learning pathways, students learn in isolated settings, lacking the co-curricular activities that are shown to enrich and contribute to important learning outcomes. In this same vein, one of the challenges for educators and policymakers in Oregon is to find an appropriate balance between noncredit and credit bearing activities. There are many co-curricular, extra-curricular, and noncredit activities that enrich learning for students throughout their educational pathway. Such learning may add value and even prepare students for subsequent credit bearing courses without necessitating the assignment of credit. For instance, it might be duplicative to require a student athlete to also take physical education courses, while a student involved in community service or leadership might benefit just as fully from these activities in addition to their academic work.

The role of OUS in establishing a clear CPL policy is to not only to ensure that quality learning receives credit, but also that a reflective and evaluative system is in place to monitor the rate of student success in earning the CPL he or she applies for, how access to CPL improves completion prospects, and if earning CPL changes a student's success in subsequent courses along their education pathway. Institutions will also need to build capacity among staff and faculty to ensure consistent access to information and student advising regarding CPL, particularly as it relates to credit transfer between institutions, consistent standards for measuring the quality of prior learning experiences, and how to evaluate which students should participate in alternative learning experiences such as MOOCs. This advising element is a cornerstone of successful CPL policy implementation. Any CPL program based on quality learning outcomes will benefit only students who are prepared to successfully earn credit, which requires a high degree of independence and motivation, or students with applicable life experience or some form of informal education. Helping students make wise choices about CPL is key to maximizing benefits institutionally and protecting students for whom this option may be more a hindrance than a help.

Based on the current legislative focus in Oregon on CPL, there is little question that colleges and universities will and must establish more transparent and comprehensive policy for granting CPL. Exploring this and other flexible credit-delivery models represents the innovation-centered mindset essential to serving the students of the 21st century. The role of OUS and its individual institutions is to do so within a set of values that will maintain the integrity of academic credit and safeguard students from practices that could detract from their long-term success.



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- <sup>i</sup> Fain, P. (2012, June). Earning college credit for MOOCs through prior learning assessment. Inside Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/15/earning-college-credit-moocs-through-prior-learning-assessment>
- <sup>ii</sup> Vaidhyanathan, S. (2012, July). What's the matter with MOOCs? The Chronicle of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/whats-the-matter-with-moocs/33289>
- <sup>iii</sup> CAEL, & NCHEMS. (2008). *Adult Learning in Focus: National and State-by-State Data*. The Center for Adult and Experiential Learning in partnership with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Retrieved from [http://www.cael.org/pdfs/State\\_Indicators\\_Monograph](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/State_Indicators_Monograph)
- <sup>iv</sup> Center for American Progress. (2011). *Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments: Tools to Help 21st Century Students Achieve Their Postsecondary Education Goals and Keep America Competitive*. Retrieved from [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/pdf/college\\_credits.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/06/pdf/college_credits.pdf)
- <sup>v</sup> CAEL. (2011). Prior Learning Assessment Services. *The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*. Retrieved August 11, 2012, from [http://www.cael.org/pla.htm#What%20Is%20Prior%20Learning%20Assessment%20\(PLA\)?](http://www.cael.org/pla.htm#What%20Is%20Prior%20Learning%20Assessment%20(PLA)?)
- <sup>vi</sup> PSU Faculty Senate. (2005). *Credit for Prior Learning*. Portland State University. Retrieved from [http://www.oirp.pdx.edu/portfolio/requiredDocs/standard\\_2/credit\\_for\\_prior\\_learning.pdf](http://www.oirp.pdx.edu/portfolio/requiredDocs/standard_2/credit_for_prior_learning.pdf)
- <sup>vii</sup> Fain, P. (2012, June). Earning college credit for MOOCs through prior learning assessment. Inside Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/15/earning-college-credit-moocs-through-prior-learning-assessment>
- <sup>viii</sup> Fain, P. (2012, May.) College credit without college. Inside Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/07/prior-learning-assessment-catches-quietly>

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