

Competency-Based Education as a Recovery Strategy

Time and credit hours are used as a proxy for learning and the mastery of skills and competencies. Many structured secondary and postsecondary education courses are measured in terms of credit hours earned. **For over a century, the credit hour has been a unit of measure in U.S. postsecondary education, a recognized “currency” for educational achievement and completion of credentials.**¹ As Scott, Eyster, Collins, et, al., identified, “[i]n decades past, when fewer people went to college, employers routinely used credentials such as college degrees as a proxy for the skills and knowledge they needed in new hires. At the time, workers changed jobs less often, so employers worried less about sunk costs from investing in training.”² **Processes built around credit hours are based on industrial-age, highly structured, time-based educational models, presenting challenges in adapting these processes in an information-age economy that relies on greater flexibility and the ability to apply learning in rapidly changing circumstances.** Recent innovations in competency-based education address 21st-century needs by focusing on mastery of competencies regardless of “seat time,” providing opportunities to reconsider how educational systems can be structured around learning outcomes.

This shift in focus can generate a new “currency” based on the value of competencies among stakeholders in our educational and workforce ecosystems. The “Carnegie Unit” was originally defined in the late 19th century as a way of standardizing students’ high school work to facilitate college admissions. Soon the “Carnegie unit” was adapted to define time-based “credit hour” units for determining faculty teaching load as part of the standardization of educational processes and degrees in an industrial era. **The credit hour was never intended to measure student learning**, but over the years it accrued value as a proxy for student outcomes and as a well-understood, common unit of course and credential time-based processes.³ As Jamie Merisotis keenly observed, “[o]ur current system won’t work in the future. . . **We desperately need a more open and transparent way to navigate learning and careers, and we have the building blocks to create it . . . Competency-based pathways through learning and jobs will become the norm, not the exception.**”⁴

Competency-based education (CBE), broadly defined as a form of higher education in which credit is provided since student learning rather than credit or clock hours, has begun to catch the attention of **federal and state policymakers, foundations, and colleges**. Students can earn credit in CBE programs through two distinct forms: prior learning assessments (PLA), which grant credit for content that a student has previously mastered, and newer competency-based coursework, in which students progress toward a degree as they demonstrate mastery of new academic content.⁵

¹ Deborah Seymour, Deborah Everhart, and Karen Yoshino, “The Currency of Higher Education: Credits *and* Competencies,” the American Council on Education and Blackboard <<https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/currency-of-he.pdf>>.

² Molly M. Scott, Lauren Eyster, Christian Collins, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Yipeng Su, “Better Connecting Students to Jobs: A Guide for Policymakers to Encourage and Support Integrating Competencies in Postsecondary Education and Training,” May 2020 <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/102281/better-connecting-students-to-jobs_1.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Jamie Merisotis, *Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines*, Rosetta Books, New York, 2020, pages 104-5.

⁵ Robert Kelchen, *Competency-Based Education: Enrollments, Demographics, and Affordability*, January 2015 <<https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/competency-based-education-landscape.pdf>>.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a Strada Education Network affiliate, is growing the capacity for CBE by expanding the prevalence and quality of prior learning assessment and access to CBE for adult learners.⁶ **One major barrier to the widespread adoption of CBE is the federal higher education financial aid system.** Pell grants bring \$517 million of revenue to Alabama’s 2 and 4-year colleges and serve as Alabama’s default student aid program. However, the Pell Grant is not available for many competency-based and short-term workforce training programs, since programs must have a minimum number of “clock” and “credit” hours to be eligible for the Pell Grant and other HEA Title IV financial aid programs.

Skills-Based Hiring

Skills-based hiring is an approach to talent management that starts with identifying the skills required in a role and recruiting candidates who have passed competency- or performance-based assessments. **Skills-based hiring promises to empower employers** to align recruitment around business results, rather than around résumés. **Skills-based hiring also empowers students, workers, and schools to establish and follow classroom-to-career pathways.** Thus, skills-based hiring can aid workers with moving out of poverty through entry-level and mid-level roles that prepare them to obtain the transferable skills needed to move laterally between industries.⁷ CBE provides the promise of skills-based job candidate matching and hiring, but few employers have embraced these practices. Education and workforce providers have chased the ephemeral dream of connecting education and workforce training programs directly to employer demand for years.

Skills-based job descriptions that allow employers to screen job applicants for the specific skills and competencies needed to do a job is needed now more than ever; nevertheless, **in practice, skills-based hiring remains elusive for most employers.** For many companies that have not yet shifted to skills- and competency-based hiring practices, they have shared **four leading challenges:** (1) Shifting to a skills-based talent model requires a **top-to-bottom retooling of organizational-leadership models and culture, as well as talent acquisition and development models.** This presents complex change management issues and requires continuous improvement; (2) in a rapidly evolving economy, even before COVID-19, **businesses have difficulty anticipating skill needs.** Many business leaders admit they lack the tools and insights to effectively anticipate trending skills in their company and their sector; (3) **businesses do not know what skills their employees possess.** Many companies do not routinely assess their employees’ skills and voluntary reporting from employees has proven ineffective; (4) businesses are **unsure how to implement skills-based hiring and fear that poor implementation will exacerbate hiring challenges.**⁸

In the COVID-19 environment, over three-quarters of employers will reevaluate their hiring requirements to fill open positions, and employers will likely use skills-based assessments to evaluate competence for those positions.⁹ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, some major companies have

⁶ The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), accessed on 7 September 2020 <<https://www.cael.org/about/us>>.

⁷ Southern New Hampshire University, College for America, “The Coming Paradigm Shift in Competency-Based Hiring,” 12 April 2017, accessed on 3 September 2020 <<https://collegeforamerica.org/competency-based-hiring/>>.

⁸ Brian K. Fitzgerald and Jennifer Thornton, “Skills-Based Hiring: Opportunity or Illusion?” 6 August 2020 <<https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/skills-based-hiring-opportunity-or-illusion>>.

⁹ Brian K. Fitzgerald and Jennifer Thornton, “Skills-Based Hiring: Opportunity or Illusion?” 6 August 2020 <<https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/skills-based-hiring-opportunity-or-illusion>>.

started to adjust their hiring requirements. **The Rework America Business Network, an initiative of the Markle Foundation, has pledged to adopt skills-based hiring for many jobs.** Companies in the group include Aon, Boeing, McKinsey, Microsoft, and Walmart. OneTen, a nonprofit, has gathered commitments from dozens of companies to pursue the goal of hiring or promoting one million Black workers without college degrees to jobs with family-sustaining incomes over the next decade. The companies include Accenture, AT&T, Bank of America, Caterpillar, Delta Air Lines, IBM, JPMorgan Chase, Merck, Target, and Wells Fargo. Screening by college degree hits minorities particularly hard, eliminating 76 percent of Black adults and 83 percent of Latino adults. **There is recent evidence that the pandemic shortage of workers may be prompting companies to loosen degree requirements.** A study published by Keith Wardrip, a researcher at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, compared online job listings in the five quarters before COVID-19 hit and the five quarters after. In the pandemic period, there were 2.3 million more postings for what he classified as opportunity employment jobs — those that pay more than the median national wage of \$36,660 and are accessible to workers without a four-year college degree.¹⁰

Skills are the smallest unit of measurement in the labor market, and skills are what people receive when learning through education or training. Skills are demonstrated or performed to signal competence. Credentials validate the mastery of skills and competencies. The competencies that are required to perform an occupation can, therefore, be thought of as the “DNA” of an occupation. Correspondingly, the skills and competencies, and accompanying credentials denoting mastery of those skills and competencies, can be thought of as an individual skill profile that can be matched against myriad skills-based job descriptions to determine the percentage of requisite competencies and levels of proficiency a job seeker has mastered.¹¹ **Employer-based credentials, online platforms, and technology are making it easier to implement skills-based hiring.**¹² As the middle-skills pathways become increasingly prominent for individuals, particularly in the post-COVID-19 workforce, Alabama is creating stackable pathways that allow the credentials earned in the middle-skills pathway to transfer into an associate or bachelor’s degree.

As Nan Travers, Larry Good, and Holly Zanville identified in “An Rx for an Ailing Postsecondary Education System: Credential as You Go,” “[o]ur four-tiered degree-based system (associate, bachelor’s, master’s, doctorate) is punitive to anyone who does not complete. The belief that a formal degree is the only way to be recognized for postsecondary knowledge and work readiness is ingrained into our culture. This is not helpful to the millions of Americans who have college-level learning but have not completed a degree.”¹³ Career-specific education in shorter-term programs has strong short-term value because it prepares people for immediate employment. At the same time, career-specific programs can be a risky investment, as they convey knowledge and skills

¹⁰ Steve Lohr, “Millions Have Lost a Step Into the Middle Class, Researchers Say,” *New York Times*, 14 January 2022 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/business/middle-class-jobs-study.html?searchResultPosition=1>>.

¹¹ George Lorenzo, “Revealing and Comparing Credential Quality So Learners & Employers Can Make Wise Choices,” *Workforce Monitor*, 20 March 2021, <<https://wfmonitor.com/2021/03/27/revealing-and-comparing-credential-quality-so-learners-employers-can-make-wise-choices/>>.

¹² Sean Gallagher and Holly Zanville, “More Employers Are Awarding Credentials. Is A Parallel Higher Education System Emerging?” *EdSurge*, 25 March 2021 <<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2021-03-25-more-employers-are-awarding-credentials-is-a-parallel-higher-education-system-emerging>>.

¹³ Nan Travers, Larry Good, and Holly Zanville, “An Rx for an Ailing Postsecondary Education System: Credential as You Go,” *Corporation for a Skilled Workforce*, medium.com, 24 November 2020 <<https://corp4skilledwork.medium.com/an-rx-for-an-ailing-postsecondary-education-system-credential-as-you-go-9a98071f440f>>.

that are most useful in specific occupations and industries.¹⁴ **Ultimately, the most valuable education over the long term is the one that provides the most marketable combination of specific and general skills.**¹⁵ **Alabama has begun to develop a competency- and skills-based education and training ecosystem.**

Employing Competencies to Make All Learning Count in Alabama

The postsecondary learning system is segmented in a credit and a non-credit system, and the military, education, and public workforce systems **are not well coordinated**. The loss of credit for learning is an obstacle for changing careers for many people. Many are forced to repeat coursework or training experiences because the transfer systems are loose or non-existent. To overcome these challenges, education providers, workforce leaders, and government leaders must collaborate to provide a system that **validates all forms of learning**. A tangible opportunity for accomplishing this goal is by developing a state non-degree credential articulation index and crosswalk that provides a comprehensive and canonical method for combining learning from multiple experiences to offer credit towards credentials of value and degrees. **Providing credit for prior learning and articulating the credit value of non-degree credentials is a critical component of the strategy for reaching Alabama’s postsecondary education attainment goal of adding 500,000 credentialed workers to the workforce by 2025**, for reaching Alabama’s equity imperative of extending opportunity to populations with barriers to entering education and the workforce, and for modularizing and unbundling degrees to connect non-degree and credit-based programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic recovery priority of providing short-term, non-degree credit programs connected to long-term postsecondary programs that are designed to assist Alabamians who have been displaced by the pandemic with reentering the workforce provides a further incentive for developing a state non-degree credential credit articulation index and crosswalk for prior learning and credentials of value. **The need to rapidly reskill workers also provides an opportunity to transform the delivery of education and workforce training by making the connection between non-credit and credit-bearing programs.** State non-degree credential credit articulation indices and crosswalks allow for the identification and formal recognition of the standardized equivalencies for credits and competencies acquired through prior learning from higher education, the military, and the workforce. Credit articulation indices and crosswalks will provide the foundational system needed for making learning portable and providing learners a guarantee for making all learning count towards relevant degrees and credentials. Crosswalks can be developed for all forms of prior learning, professional experience, workforce certifications, and formal training. Scaling non-credit indices and crosswalks can provide a database regarding the creditworthiness of all forms of learning, which reduces the burden of determining the credit worthiness of each form of learning on institutions and faculty.

The viability of **statewide non-credit articulation indices and crosswalks will move from an institution-based system that prioritizes the autonomy of each institution in determining the credit worthiness of programs to a student-centered approach that prioritizes consistency across institutions in the state.** The following principles are essential to a student-centered approach: (1) equivalency agreements are made at scale across all institutions in the state; (2) the same credit is awarded to students regardless of

¹⁴ Brian K. Fitzgerald and Jennifer Thorton, “Skills-Based Hiring: Opportunity or Illusion?” 6 August 2020.

¹⁵ Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, *The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate’s Degrees: What Students Need to Know Before They Go to College*, 2020, accessed on 4 April 2020 <<https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/CEW-SubBA.pdf>>.

the institution they attend; (3) credits awarded to students are guaranteed to transfer in all cases except when accepting credit would cause harm; (4) awarded credits are integrated into academic pathways leading to credential attainment; (5) the review process is consistent across the state and uses national best practices; (6) awarding of credited is automated; and (7) information on equivalencies is available on the internet and is discoverable and searchable by all stakeholders. As of 2020, 30 states have policies requiring a transferable core of lower-division credit and statewide transfer of an associated degree. To ensure that crosswalks address more than merely general and elective credit, a **common framework, and a statewide body to govern the practice of crosswalks must be established**. Institutions must agree to accept the established crosswalks and credits recommended by crosswalks towards degree and credential pathways.

Five primary policy recommendations would drive a postsecondary and workforce system that recognizes all forms of learning: (1) a **statewide database** to register all individual learning; (2) a **statewide non-degree credit articulation index and credit transfer articulation crosswalk and articulation system**; (3) consistent **recognition of all learning towards credits and credentials**; (4) **clear pathways to credentials and careers**; and (5) **policies** that provide support and **remove barriers**. State policies to meet priority three should include standardized requirements for how out-of-classroom learning is translated to college credits through statewide crosswalks of competencies, credits, and credentials, uniformly applying credit recognition across all institutions, and uniformly applying a process for assessing quality to prior learning.

Background on Prior Learning Assessment

Credit for prior learning, or prior learning assessment, has been in existence since at least World War One. The American Council on Education (ACE) began providing third-party validation for veterans' learning experiences after World War Two. By the 1970s, postsecondary institutions established portfolio-based assessments pioneered by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). In the past decade, prior learning assessment has proliferated as research shows evidence that PLA leads to a boost in enrollment, persistence, and attainment.¹⁶ The ACE definition of credit for prior learning is academic credit for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside the college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as portfolios. Prior learning and prior learning assessment are used interchangeably with credit for prior learning.¹⁷ Successful credit for prior learning policies require faculty engagement and support, student outreach and support, and infrastructure policies and processes. Credit for prior learning requires an organizational culture, infrastructure, well-defined policies and procedures, adequate data collection, strong leadership, financial support, prior learning crosswalks, strong collaboration. To implement PLA, institutions need a one-stop model with a PLA coordinator, adequate training, and student outreach activities.¹⁸

Awarding Credit for Prior Learning

There are four types of prior learning assessments:

1. Standardized examinations: relies on third-party assessment providers. Common examples are Advanced Placement and College Level Examination Program.

¹⁶ American Council on Education. 2015. Prior learning assessment. Charting institutional practice for sustainability.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

2. Faculty-developed challenge exams relies on the expertise of faculty, who create their own exams to award credit for prior learning.
3. Portfolio-based and other individualized assessments permit learners to demonstrate competency through a work portfolio or other demonstration.
4. Evaluation of non-college programs depends on recommendations of third-party organizations that have validated non-credit training options, such as the American Council on Education (ACE) guide for awarding credit based on the completion of courses or exams.
5. Institutional review of external training, licenses, or certifications.
6. Credit for military or corporate training.¹⁹

Florida’s Gold Standard Articulation Agreements, Ohio’s One-Year Option, the Ivy Tech College Certification and Training Crosswalk, and Louisiana’s Credential and Military Experience Crosswalk are all examples of systemic articulation frameworks that ensure consistency in implementation. Standards must be adopted, which are driven by subject-matter experts, to validate competency-based experiences against academic credit. The level of credit, number of credit hours, and appropriate subject area where credit may be assigned. Policies must be established to ensure that non-credit education and training experiences are rigorous enough for the award of postsecondary credit. The following guidelines, set by NCCRS, set a baseline for programs, and learning experiences to be evaluated for credit:

1. Must offer formalized learning experiences;
2. Must maintain records of course participants;
3. Learning must be postsecondary;
4. Must include at least 15 contact hours;
5. Must be taught by qualified instructors;
6. Must include a method for testing content mastery; and
7. Course content must be document.²⁰

Benefits of Prior Learning Assessment

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) conducted a study from 2018-2022 of 72 postsecondary education institutions on the efficacy of prior learning assessment for increasing credential attainment among adult students. Approximately 11 percent of students in the sample received PLA, and they earned an average of 14.8 PLA credits and 11.7 non-military PLA credits. PLA students were more likely to complete, earn a credential, save money, and save time than non-PLA students. Forty-nine percent of PLA students attained a credential, versus 27 percent for non-PLA students. PLA increased completion rates for adult students of color and low-income adult students. Adult PLA students saved an estimated \$1,500 to \$10,200, and PLA students saved an estimated nine to 14 months in time towards earning a degree. Institutions benefits by adult PLA students taking 17.6 more credits than non-PLA students.²¹

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and PLA

PLA is an WIOA eligible expenditure. PLA is categorized as individualized career services under WIOA. WIOA final rule section 679.130 cites PLA as a best practice for state WIOA boards and governors. Two

¹⁹ Klein-Collins, Rebecca, Jason Taylor, et, al. (December 2020). The PLA boost. Results from a 72-institution targeted study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes.

²⁰ Estes, Austin. June 2021. Articulating credit for non-credit learning experiences. Prepared for the Alabama Community College System. Advance CTE.

²¹ *Ibid.*

additional questions should be included in the public workforce system initial intake and before an individualized career services plan is created that includes additional assessment. The two additional questions are (1) the job seeker feels that specific skills and knowledge have been acquired on the job and (b) the job seeker understands that the skills that have been acquired may offer credits toward college or technical skills. Eligible training providers should be encouraged to pursue aggressive PLA partnerships to reduce the time of completion and cost for WIOA participants. Crosswalks should be employed to tie PLA to sector-specific competencies. PLA should be linked to on-the-job training, apprenticeship, cohort training, and non-credit courses.²²

Critical Elements for PLA Implementation in the Public Workforce System

1. Training institutions must develop internal procedures for recognizing PLA.
2. Front-line workforce partners must develop common intake and assessment processes and must communicate with local community colleges.
3. One Stop Centers must imbed the PLA questions in the intake and assessment processes.
4. Workforce partners must promote PLA. Workforce partners need to link PLA to Rapid Response assessments, on-the-job training, and work-based learning.
5. Workforce system staff must be jointly trained to promote and assess PLA.²³

The Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk

The Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk will: (1) focus on creating a consistent language for translating out-of-classroom learning to college credits through a crosswalk of competencies to credentials and credits to credentials, applying credit for prior learning policies consistently across institutions, and applying a consistent process for assisting the quality of prior learning across institutions; (2) support equitable postsecondary attainment through transparent, consistent, and reliable assessments of prior learning; (3) provide for portability of credit for prior learning across Alabama's public postsecondary institutions; (4) exist as a living document connected to the Alabama Credential Registry and the ATLAS on Career Pathways; (5) provide processes that provide the possibility for seamlessly awarding credit based on the crosswalk and indices. The Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk will be interoperable with the ATLAS on Career Pathways and shall be compatible with the Credential Transparency Description Language (CTDL) used by the Alabama Credential Registry. The learner-level ACCET profiles will record all equivalencies and credits awarded to students through the Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk. The Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk will be constructed to serve as the basis for a common general education core across public postsecondary institutions, common course numbering systems, and statewide articulation agreements. The Statewide Non-Degree Credential Credit Articulation Index and Crosswalk will include equivalencies for transfer credit; credit awarded for prior learning assessment; credit from standardized exams; military or occupational equivalency credit; workforce skills, licensures, and credential equivalency credit; and general education courses equivalency.

²² Lawrence, Michael, Sharon Parry, and Roy Vanderford. August 2018. Examination of prior learning assessment (PLA) as strategy for achieving workforce development system success. National Association of Workforce Boards.

²³ *Ibid.*