



RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Recent Developments in Prior Learning



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This brief is part of a broad landscape analysis focused on policy and practice issues related to the recognition of prior learning and is published by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, with funding from [Lumina Foundation](#) and [Strada Education Network](#). The landscape analysis focuses on issues arising in the practice of the recognition of prior learning, policies that encourage or limit its adoption, and key research needs and future directions for the field. To see the full series of briefs, as well as original research completed by the [Council for Adult and Experiential Learning](#) on the outcomes of PLA recipients, please visit wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning/.

Introduction

Prior Learning and Workforce Development

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) in postsecondary education is experiencing a renaissance, catalyzed by several forces both internal and external to higher education. Unfortunately, the depth and breadth of RPL is difficult to measure due to the lack of consistent and readily available data surrounding nuanced practices at postsecondary institutions in the United States. Even without a comprehensive data set, most would agree that RPL practices can be found at most institutions, often nested in the activities of academic departments administering credit by examination, portfolio-based assessment, apprenticeships, internships, competency-based education, awarding credit for learner licensures,

Key Highlights of this Brief

- ▶ As higher education costs soar and employers clamor for skilled workers, recognizing and articulating college-level learning achieved outside the traditional education system is a critical component of educational change policy narratives.
- ▶ The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is experiencing a renaissance as many employers, employees, alternative providers, and institutions of higher education work together to document and assess non-classroom learning.
- ▶ Workers who potentially have the most to gain by achieving a college-level credential are disproportionately non-white and are also potentially the least likely to benefit from RPL. This raises troubling questions about equity of RPL, and whether expansion of RPL strategies may only serve to further existing inequities.

and the evaluation of employer and third-party training. This brief explores the relationship between RPL and employers as more employers look for ways to reskill existing employees in a rapidly changing labor market. Because such relationships are still fairly new and vary considerably, case studies are used to highlight both promising practices in RPL associated with employers as well as challenges to such relationships.



As higher education costs soar and employers clamor for skilled workers, recognizing and articulating college-level learning achieved outside an educational institution is a critical component of educational change policy narratives with prior learning assessment (PLA) champions often characterized as heroes.¹ In the last 10 years, several multisite research studies on PLA suggest that students who earn PLA credits are more likely to earn a postsecondary credential and spend less money and time in earning that degree.² A forthcoming report by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) adds to the available data and large-scale research on PLA outcomes,³ but continued and consistent large-scale research is still a necessity. Yet understanding and documenting the true impact of RPL across tertiary education is difficult.

Other briefs in this landscape analysis use micro-level data to focus on the ways RPL has been operationalized at select institutions, the retelling of anecdotal stories of RPL's impact on individual students, and promoting RPL as a means to address equity gaps and post-traditional student needs. This brief seeks to expand our understanding of RPL by re-evaluating the micro-level data through the lens of professional, continuing, and online (PCO) education; employer partnerships; and workforce development. Traditionally focused on the creation and transmission of knowledge, higher education is beginning to shift its focus to the evaluation of knowledge, abilities, and skills. As a result, RPL is experiencing a renaissance as many employers, employees, alternative providers, and institutions of higher education work together to document and assess non-classroom learning.

Both the University Professional Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and WCET – the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies — have significant interest in how RPL can be leveraged to improve educational access and success for learners. As the leading association for professional and continuing education, UPCEA has a strong interest in the ways that RPL can be used to further educational access for learners, especially adult learners. Further, UPCEA's experience working with professional and continuing education professionals provides the organization with a unique lens for understanding the nuances of employer and university partnerships. As a leader in the field of distance education and with a mission

Recognition of Prior Learning is a term used for various methods of valuing college-level learning that has taken place outside of formal educational institutions, but that can be assessed so that it can count toward degrees or credentials. There are several ways students can demonstrate this learning and earn credit for it in college. The various partners involved in creating this series of briefs are examining different aspects of prior learning and using the following general descriptions of the different methods.

Methods to value this learning so that it can count toward degrees or credentials include:

- ▶ **Standardized examination:** Students can earn credit by successfully completing exams such as Advanced Placement (AP), College Level Examination Program (CLEP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Excelsior exams (UExcel), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), and others.
- ▶ **Faculty-developed challenge exam:** Students can earn credit for a specific course by taking a comprehensive examination developed by campus faculty.
- ▶ **Portfolio-based and other individualized assessment:** Students can earn credit by preparing a portfolio or demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and non-credit activities. Faculty evaluate the student's portfolio and award credit as appropriate.
- ▶ **Evaluation of non-college programs:** Students can earn credit based on recommendations provided by the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) that conduct evaluations of training offered by employers or the military. Institutions also conduct their own review of programs, including coordinating with workforce development agencies and other training providers to develop crosswalks that map between external training/credentials and existing degree programs.

of advocating for effective policy and practice in technology-enhanced learning in postsecondary education, WCET's interest in RPL stems from both a desire to see improved educational access for all learners as well as the recognition that some of the most promising RPL partnerships are leveraging technology to offer instruction and student support services.

Resurgence of Prior Learning

Traditionally, U.S. higher education policy has focused on the goals, aspirations, and perceived needs of 18-24 year old learners often referred to as 'traditional' students.⁴ As early as the aftermath of World War I and certainly after World War II, adult learners began returning to college campuses, often with previous experiences, industry certifications, and/or military training that they sought to translate into academic credit.⁵ Champions of these learners and their unique needs advocated for the adoption of formal prior learning assessment policies as a means of combating the biases of an educational system that privileged youth over experience. As Price observed, "analysis of the [policy] narratives reveal that the hero PLA champion is protecting the student (particularly adult and veteran) victims from the villain that is traditional higher education bureaucracy."⁶

This turn toward addressing the needs of adult learners was an expansion of existing programs focusing on translating the knowledge and skills of veterans and incumbent workers into academic credit but it was also, no doubt, driven by the expansion of student-centered pedagogical practices, including Malcolm Knowles' development of andragogy theory.⁷ More recent expansions of RPL have been driven less by pedagogical approaches and more by economic and workforce shifts. Whereas the completion of a baccalaureate degree was once seen as the end of college for most students, policymakers, educators, and learners now frequently refer to the rise of a 60-year curriculum—the idea that learners will need to return for formal postsecondary education on multiple occasions throughout their work lives.⁸ As a result, RPL is shifting from a focus on academic learning to workforce learning with new options such as bootcamps, MOOCs, employer training programs, and white-collar apprenticeships gaining purchase.

Because of the growing necessity to find ways to develop a skilled workforce in a rapidly changing

and volatile economy, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress have shown heightened interest in adult learners and RPL. From a state and federal policy perspective, expansion of RPL is seen as a way to fast-track adults through credential programs, especially those closely tied to workforce needs, as well as a way of combating the exploding cost of higher education and possibly reducing state-level subsidies of student aid. As one RPL researcher points out:

It has been described as an economic tool,⁹ a social practice,¹⁰ a vehicle for personal transformation or empowerment,¹¹ a means of credentialing alternative knowledge¹² and as specialized pedagogy.¹³ It is also increasingly understood as an ontological engagement.¹⁴

In short, in 2020, RPL has evolved from focusing primarily on the needs of veterans to an expression of student-centered pedagogy to an economic necessity in an expensive higher education system tasked with preparing learners for a rapidly changing labor market throughout their lifetimes.

Research Question and Methodology

This brief answers two research questions: (1) What are the current policies and practices related to RPL in alternative/employer credential spaces (such as bootcamps, MOOCs, and employer training programs)? (2) How might RPL perpetuate or remediate educational inequity?

Due to the limited number of varied and wildly disparate examples of emerging practices in prior learning, we chose the case study method to address our research questions. In the following sections, we illustrate three cases in order to highlight promising practices in RPL, especially in the development and expansion of employer-based credential programs related to a specific industry, employer-higher education partnerships that leverage existing work experience, and "white collar" apprenticeships embedded in higher education programs. Because there is no one size fits all model of RPL, the authors tried to include examples of both larger and smaller programs.¹⁵ For the purposes of this research, each case study is drawn, when possible, from interviews with executive representatives of the programs as well as publicly available data.

Each case study includes a description of the program, its stakeholders, success to date, promising practices, and lessons learned from the program implementation. The authors of this brief chose not to endorse or quantifiably validate the efforts highlighted in this brief, but rather to shine a light on promising practices. This method supports an in-depth analysis of select cases that could lead to hypotheses for future study.¹⁶

Case Studies

1. **Employer-higher education partnerships that leverage existing work experience.** For example, Guild Education, described as a “next-generation tuition benefit company,” provides employers with strategic program design and consultation services regarding employee tuition benefit programs, including connecting employers with educational providers as well as providing employers with an administrative platform for those benefits and analytics and reporting information regarding employee use of the benefits.
2. **Employer-based credential programs related to a specific industry like Bootcamps.** For example, Trilogy, self-described as a “workforce accelerator,” attempts to connect universities, companies, and working adults through running boot camps in collaboration with the continuing education offices of 49 universities.
3. **White collar apprenticeships.** These apprenticeships have been developed in the last several years to address the growing cost of higher education and to fill difficult-to-fill middle skill jobs in fields such as cybersecurity, insurance, financial services, and information technology. For example, William Rainey Harper College, a Chicago area community college, has partnered with Zurich North American, an international insurance company, to train white collar apprentices in general insurance or cybersecurity.

Case Study 1: Guild Education

Founded in 2015, Guild Education is, as Ryan Craig describes it in a 2019 opinion piece for *Inside Higher Education*, a “next-generation tuition benefit company.”¹⁷ Guild provides employers with strategic program design and consultation services regarding employee tuition benefit programs, including connecting employers with educational providers as well as providing employers with an administrative platform for benefits, analytics, and reporting information regarding employee use of the benefits. Additionally, Guild provides employees with personal coaching to assist them in both utilizing the tuition benefits as well as successfully completing an academic credential. Finally, Guild provides its educational partners with direct access to major national employers and tens of thousands of possible students. Guild reports it is working with 90 educational providers offering a wide variety of credentials including GEDs, certificates, associate degrees, baccalaureates, and master’s degrees including University of Denver, Southern New Hampshire University, University of Florida Online, Bellevue University, Brandman University, University of Central Florida, and University of Wilmington.¹⁸ Guild business clients include its first large client, Chipotle, as well as Walmart, Taco Bell, Lowe’s, Discover, Lyft, and Disney.¹⁹

Although Guild identifies learners and employees as critical stakeholders, its business model is based on providing services directly to its corporate partners and, secondarily, connecting postsecondary education with corporate partners. Touting that it provides “a path for every student,” Guild co-founder and CEO Rachel Carlson describes Guild as “both the partner to the company, designing the benefit and handling the administration, but more importantly ... a partner to the student having built a marketplace of academic universities and learning providers ... helping students understand how awesome it is to get their education paid for.”²⁰ Guild’s business model, however, focuses on its two primary stakeholders — employers and educational providers. Although Guild generates some revenue from administering the tuition benefit plans of employers, Edsurge reports that it primarily generates revenue through its educational provider partners which pay Guild for “what is essentially a student recruitment service.”²¹

Given Guild’s relative youth, it is difficult to determine its success; however, the experiences of two of

its highest profile clients — Disney and Walmart — provide insight into Guild’s potential. In 2018, Disney launched its Disney Aspire program, a benefit designed to provide hourly employees with access to higher education by covering 100 percent of their tuition up front with additional reimbursement for books and fees. Through Guild, over 90,000 Disney employees have access to over 510 degree and certificate programs at several schools including University of Arizona, University of Florida, University of Central Florida, University of Denver, and Brandman University.²² Disney reports that after one year, over 8,000 employees were enrolled in programs ranging from English language instruction to a master’s degree in organizational leadership; however, data on the success of the Disney employees are scarce.²³

Although still limited, there is slightly better success data available on Walmart’s tuition benefit program. Guild reports that in its first year, Walmart’s Live Better U has enrolled over 7,500 employees in programs ranging from high school completion, college preparation, associate’s degrees, and baccalaureate degrees. Learners have completed more than 31,000 credit hours valued at over \$317 million and have an 80 percent academic retention rate, an estimated 20 points higher than non-Walmart employees in comparable programs.²⁴ Unfortunately, demographic data such as age, race/ethnicity, and gender are not publicly available for the Guild programs at Disney and Walmart.

Why do learners enrolled in Guild programs seem to have better success than non-Guild learners? While literature on the effectiveness of the Guild model is lacking, Guild suggests that its effectiveness can be traced to two factors-- an enrollment and benefit system easy for employee learners to use, and the personal coaching offered to learners by trained Guild student success coaches.

Bringing this case to RPL, some of the educational institutions that Guild partners with recognize prior learning through assessment (most notably competency-based education programs such as those at Brandman University). However, being a Guild partner does not guarantee that an institution recognizes prior learning. In fact, when asked what is necessary for the scalability of RPL, Randi Cosentino, Guild’s chief academic officer at the time of the interview, responded that the industry needs to find ways to scale the validation of training as a means of making all types of learning transportable

and stackable.²⁵ In essence, Guild Education—and other new platforms working in this area—could encourage and support the recognition of prior learning by driving conversations on RPL with both employers and educators. As other briefs in this series note, intentional efforts by advisors to steer students to RPL opportunities can be an important factor in increasing usage.²⁶ This may be an area for future growth for platforms like Guild in facilitating employer-education partnerships.

Case Study 2: Trilogy

Founded in 2015, Trilogy Education Services is a “workforce accelerator” with a mission “to unite universities, companies, and working adults by powering skills-based training programs that are driven by market needs.”²⁷ Trilogy does this through running boot camps in collaboration with the continuing education offices of 49 universities in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and Australia, such as George Washington University, Rutgers University, University of Central Florida, Rice University, Southern Methodist University, University of Washington, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Vanderbilt University. Typically, these boot camps are marketed under the auspices of the university partner, last 10 to 12 weeks, and cost students around \$10,000. Trilogy develops the curriculum; provides the instructors, teaching assistants, and student support staff; and takes the lead in marketing the program while the institutional partner has oversight of the curriculum and instructor hiring. Like many online program management companies, institutional partners enter into a revenue sharing agreement with Trilogy and, in return, market the program as their own.²⁸ Unlike many other boot camp models, the basis of Trilogy’s work is with university partners, an arrangement which they perceive to be essential. This sentiment is shared by both Trilogy’s founder Dan Sommer and Chip Paucek, CEO of 2U, which bought Trilogy in April 2019. When asked to reflect on Trilogy’s model and acquisition by 2U, Sommer explained, “We both fundamentally believe that universities are the place for lifelong learning,” while Paucek echoed the importance of universities in the Trilogy model noting, “We’re believers in the power of a great university,” and that both Trilogy and 2U share a belief in “the university’s central role in the life of the student.”²⁹

It is difficult to ascertain the success of the Trilogy model since it releases no success data. In response to a 2018 *Inside Higher Ed* article on questions around the success of boot camp models in general and Trilogy in particular, Sommer stated that Trilogy has an over 90 percent graduation rate with over 1,500 employers having hired Trilogy graduates.³⁰ Trilogy's website indicates that it offers "comprehensive student support" but does not elaborate on that support beyond the presence of a Student Success Manager at each physical boot camp site, and student access to a remote Central Student Support Team. The lack of transparency makes it difficult to ascertain the success of the university partnership boot camp model and similarly difficult to determine lessons learned.

For the purposes of this brief, however, there is one significant lesson learned — the challenge of translating knowledge, abilities, and skills learned in boot camps into RPL. All of Trilogy's U.S. programs are run through the continuing studies departments at its university partners. A bootcamp participant's ability to leverage their educational experiences is dependent on the program portfolio of Trilogy's educational partner and its policies relevant to RPL gained in non-credit experiences. Often, learners enrolled in the university sponsored non-credit experiences are not considered students or alumni of the university so the articulation of this learning into a degree program is not guaranteed. Although this may not be significant for the estimated 70 percent of Trilogy students who already have a degree and are using the boot camp to reskill/upskill, it could have a significant negative impact on potential learners who do not already have an academic credential, creating an unintentional glass ceiling in a world where an academic credential is still valued by many employers. The partnerships between Trilogy and their university partners would seem to benefit from strong RPL policies, yet it is unknown if these programs have led to greater (or any) attention to RPL at partnering institutions.

Case Study 3: White-collar apprenticeship

Apprenticeships have long been seen as a way for learners to earn money in their chosen field while acquiring the knowledge, abilities, and skills necessary for their success. For at least the last one hundred years in the U.S., the overwhelming majority of apprenticeships revolved around technical

trades such as carpentry and plumbing. In the last several years, a growing number of companies are experimenting with white collar apprenticeships (distinct from internships, which are often unpaid or for credit-only) in fields such as cybersecurity, insurance, financial services, and information technology. Seen as a way of addressing the growing cost of higher education and a way of filling difficult-to-fill middle skill jobs, the *New York Times* notes that over 700 white-collar apprenticeships have been created in the last several years and that this "new breed" of apprenticeships promises an "affordable path to careers that once needed a bachelor's degree or higher."³¹

One of the first higher education institutions to develop white-collar apprenticeships was William Rainey Harper College, a Chicago area community college, in partnerships with Zurich North American, an international insurance company. Begun in 2016, the program grew by 2019 to 62 apprentices in general insurance or cybersecurity. Harper College provides coursework two days a week for a group of interns who work at Zurich North America the other three days a week. During the three days at work in Zurich's Chicago office, apprentices work with a mentor on a closely supervised training plan, are given an hour a day for their studies, and rotate through a series of departments during their two-year apprenticeship.³² Zurich pays for apprentices' salaries and tuition; at the end of two years, successful apprentices earn an associate's degree from Harper College.³³ Harper College has since expanded the program to include a number of other businesses and industries including banking and finance, cybersecurity, marketing and sales management, and supply chain management.

When asked why it has been important for Harper College to take the lead in developing white-collar apprenticeship programs, Harper's then-president Kenneth Ender responded, "The slow, four-year baccalaureate is a privileged way of getting an education. Some will be able to do it; most won't."³⁴ Although Harper College has long offered more traditional apprenticeship programs, the move into white-collar apprenticeships reflects a national movement. Between 2017 and 2019, the U.S. Department of Labor recorded the creation of more than 700 white-collar apprenticeships.³⁵ White-collar apprenticeships allow employers to improve employee diversity as well as develop employee pipelines for otherwise hard-to-fill jobs.³⁶

For Harper College and other institutions — primarily community colleges — involved in developing white-collar apprenticeships, institutions, employers, and students are all stakeholders. As a result, student success and direct student support are likely seen as more critical than in the boot camp model. Still, the relatively new nature of white-collar apprenticeships means that student success data is scarce. For example, Harper College reported in 2018 that of the 48 apprentices at Zurich North America, seven had dropped out of the program. At other institutions, the white-collar apprentice model is still too young to have generated significant data although several promising practices are emerging such as the critical nature of providing apprentices with corporate mentors who oversee their work and on-the-ground experiences, building study time into the corporate work day, and, when possible, integrating practical examples into the academic curriculum. Current white-collar apprenticeships function more as traditional higher education programs in that the learner’s knowledge, ability, and skills gained on the job do not directly translate into academic credit.

The development of white-collar apprenticeships paves the way for the development of other types of RPL. White-collar apprenticeships may very well end up functioning as bridge programs—programs that bridge the divide between more traditional academic programs and programs that historically operated as on-the-job-training. Such bridge programs are often a critical piece in the evolution of programs but may be even more critical as the U.S. experiences the worst economic recession since the Great Depression.

Case study summaries and themes

A review of both the literature and the interviews which the case studies are based on reveal a number of themes and issues that must be addressed if RPL is to be more effectively leveraged for a wider variety of learners. These issues include a better understanding of the conditions necessary for the development and growth of RPL and potential challenges for RPL — issues that impact all forms of RPL.

Conditions for the Development and Growth of Effective RPL Programs

A review of the literature and interviews with both educators and corporate providers makes it clear

that in order for RPL to evolve and scale, a number of factors must be addressed. Perhaps most important is the **need for institutional, nonprofit, and corporate partners to commit to working with higher education to develop, grow, and share alternative pathways for learners**. For institutions, this means first and foremost an administrative leadership that is vocally committed to RPL and the idea that legitimate learning can and does take place in a variety of contexts outside of the traditional classroom. When asked about RPL programs at their school, one interviewee explained that although there were no current RPL programs, they were certain that such programs would be in development in the next twelve months because a new president had made his desire for such programs clear.

In addition to strong institutional leadership, **RPL programs require a flexible structure to administer them**. In many cases, professional and continuing education practitioners and units may be better suited to develop and administer new RPL programs.³⁷ These educational professionals often have relationships with local employers and understand the needs of working adult learners. They are also well-suited to shape a perspective shift within their institutions that assures that “industry is valued as a site of innovation and knowledge production” which allows “the possibility of work and experiential learning being valid sites/sources of knowledge production and specialization.”³⁸

In addition to well-positioned higher education institutions with supportive leadership, **engaged employers are also necessary**. Historically, employers that have offered some form of tuition support have done so through a reimbursement model that requires employees to front the cost of their education. While this may appear to be advantageous for employers who can ensure that their tuition dollars are spent only on employees making progress towards a credential, such reimbursement programs can place a significant burden on the very employees who might benefit the most from a postsecondary credential. It is significant to note that more recent employer benefit programs, especially those administered by Guild, rely on employers to cover the cost of tuition up front so employees incur very limited out-of-pocket expenses. As a result, pursuing a postsecondary education becomes more manageable for lower-wage employees.

The potential success of RPL also becomes more likely when employers are full partners in programs like the white-collar apprenticeship models at Harper College and Zurich North America. In this case, Zurich does more than pay for the apprentice's tuition; it also provides mentors, makes sure that employee professional development is aligned with the academic curriculum, and provides apprentices with paid time to study in the office.

In order for employers to be effective partners in scaling RPL opportunities, employers need to 1) know about RPL, 2) be aware of RPL programs at nearby institutions, and 3) inform employees about these opportunities.³⁹ However, the active engagement of higher education and employers is not enough to nurture the development and growth of RPL. **Successful RPL programs also require technical and technological assistance.** Organizations like Guild show that it is not enough for a company to have a tuition assistance program in place, or for an institution to have an RPL-friendly program. Many companies are in need of significant technical assistance in administering tuition assistance programs including marketing programs to employees, creating partnerships with academic institutions, disbursing tuition assistance funds, and tracking employee progress. Additionally, technologies are needed to assist both learners and institutions with evaluating, processing, and tracking prior learning. Such technologies could come in the form of blockchain-certified credentials already aligned with institutional curriculum and learning outcomes that make the ingestion of prior learning automated, or learner wallets that improve the portability and articulation of prior learning. It is important to note, however, that developing and implementing such technological solutions will require considerable economic and human resources, and, without significant assistance, be out of the reach of most smaller institutions including community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, and tribal colleges. Although neither of these technologies are widely used, there are pockets of innovation such as CAEL's PLA Accelerator, ACE's credit articulation service, and Credential Engine's work to develop a widely used taxonomy and process for the tracking and curation of credentials that could be leveraged for RPL.

Potential Challenges for Programs and Recommendations

There are a number of challenges that successful RPL programs must overcome, especially to operate at scale. Barriers range from philosophical challenges to organizational challenges to systemic/structural challenges. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge for RPL is convincing faculty to believe that learning can happen outside the traditional academic environment. Successfully incorporating RPL into an institution in a meaningful and significant way requires faculty to not only accept the premise that meaningful learning takes place outside higher education institutions but also requires faculty to shift their focus from the creators and purveyors of knowledge to evaluators of knowledge learned elsewhere. Although this may appear to be an issue of semantics, this shift in focus to evaluation of existing knowledge has some significant repercussions, including the need for faculty to develop a different skill set that focuses less on research, pedagogy, and domain knowledge — and more on evaluation and assessment.

Philosophical challenges around RPL are not unique to higher education institutions. They impact employers as well. For potential learners to best leverage their experience, especially that gained from workplace training, employers must reconsider the types and amount of training provided for their employees. Although some larger employers may utilize instructional designers with expertise in the development and implementation of curriculum, such specialized resources are the exception. As a result, workplace training may suffer from a number of problems including a lack of clearly articulated learning outcomes aligned with higher order thinking, passive learning opportunities with little opportunity for meaningful interaction by employees, a lack of coherency between various professional development segments, little assistance for employees to develop coherent professional development plans with resources for execution, and a lack of transparency or willingness to address these issues, making the award of credit difficult to justify. In addition, required training often focuses on turnkey solutions that suffer from poor curriculum design and passive learner activity. For example, in many instances required annual training tends to be focused on compliance topics such as sexual harassment or ethics training; these trainings require little more than sitting in front of a computer, clicking

through a few screens, and occasionally choosing responses from multiple choice questions. For RPL to be scaled and available to a larger number of potential learners, employers must rethink what, if any, professional development and training is made available to their employees and the ways that learning could be aligned with postsecondary education.

Organizational challenges also affect the ability to scale and expand the impact of RPL. Two organizational challenges are particularly significant: challenges in administering RPL and students' challenges in navigating its administration.

Because of the unique nature of learners and the knowledge, ability, and skills that they bring to an institution, it can be extraordinarily difficult for an institution to efficiently develop, administer, and scale an RPL program. Significant technical challenges associated with RPL can include automating the ingestion of prior learning and crosswalking it to academic credit, tracking student progress in the RPL process, transcribing prior learning, translating prior learning into a credit hour system, and assessing prior learning. Although not all of these processes can be completely automated, technology can significantly streamline the ingestion and transcription of prior learning.

Additional organizational challenges include student navigation of the RPL process, which is especially significant for learners who may be new to higher education. For learners unaccustomed to navigating academic bureaucracies, the challenges range from understanding the academic credit system, determining prior learning policies, and choosing the appropriate type of prior learning assessment in addition to challenges not directly related to prior learning.

Finally, structural challenges can impact an institution's ability to develop and scale effective RPL programs. Chief among these are those associated with the inherent customization associated with RPL. Just as no two students are identical, neither are the knowledge, ability, and skills that they bring to the table. While credit translation services like the American Council on Education's Credit Recommendation Services have crosswalked a number of military and civilian specializations and certificates to academic credit, this level of standardization benefits only those students who possess one of the pre-evaluated credentials. Until there is greater uniformity and agreement

regarding the learning outcomes of various forms of professional development and job descriptions, institutions will continue to struggle with finding effective and affordable ways to evaluate prior learning, and RPL will remain largely ad hoc exercises between institutions and their chosen partners.

Additionally, for public institutions in states that do not have truly meaningful performance-based funding systems (majority of states), institutions may believe there is little incentive to develop and administer expensive and complex RPL programs since formula-funded institutions receive higher education funding for student enrollment in courses. It is possible that this economic disincentive can be alleviated through a variation of performance-based funding.

Equity and philosophical perspectives on the recognition of prior learning

RPL is often seen by its champions as a way to provide adult learners with a pathway to better jobs and, subsequently, a better life for them and their families. As a result, RPL is frequently discussed through the lens of equity, whether it be racial equity by increasing access to RPL opportunities for students of color,⁴¹ economic equity by providing pathways to better jobs or lives,⁴² or educational equity through the transformation of higher education systems by expanding access to both more learners and other means of learning.⁴³

This framing of RPL as a radical means of destabilizing academic privilege and elevating informal knowledge is central to the liberation pedagogies of the 1960s and 1970s. Although he does not explicitly label it as RPL, Paulo Freire made the valuation of existing learning a centerpiece of his groundbreaking 1970 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire rejects the traditional "banking model" of education that treats students as empty receptacles meant to be filled with knowledge by an instructor. Instead, Freire insists students, especially adults, are filled with knowledge and that teachers and students co-create knowledge as equals: "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information... The students — no longer docile listeners — are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher."⁴⁴

More recently, David Starr-Glass, a professor in the International Programs at Empire State College, outlines four philosophical perspectives

on prior learning assessment. The critical/radical perspective and the liberal/humanist perspective are the philosophical progeny of Freire's liberationist pedagogy.⁴⁵ Starr-Glass outlines two means of evaluating a learner's knowledge, ability, and skills, developmental models and credit exchange. Developmental models most often manifest as portfolio assessment where "[t]he thrust of the submission is not a demonstration of what has been *done*, but an exploration and explanation of what has been *learned*."⁴⁶ Developmental assessments focus on PLA as a transformational personal experience. As such, they rely heavily on the learner's ability to write well, organize their thoughts and experiences, and link their experience to traditional academic disciplines in a way that is compelling for the evaluators of the portfolio. Learners who lack strong writing and analytical skills are at a disadvantage and likely to become frustrated with the process and earn little academic credit. In contrast, the credit exchange model uses third parties to validate an individual's existing knowledge and skills.⁴⁷

Although Starr-Glass focuses his discussion of the credit exchange model on standardized assessments, this model could also include the acceptance of workforce certifications, military specializations, and credits awarded through programs such as the American Council on Education's credit recommendation service. Both prior learning assessment models potentially provide learners with pathways that can accelerate the acquisition of a credential that will potentially lead to a better job and improve their lives. Not all groups of potential learners, however, will equally benefit from the recognition of prior learning.

Low-wage workers and the potential limitations of RPL

The Brookings Institution reports that 53.3 million Americans, almost half of the workforce, are employed in low-wage jobs. RPL advocates often identify these individuals as potential beneficiaries of RPL. Yet an analysis of the Brookings' data suggests that not all of these individuals are likely to benefit from RPL, or at least not as it is often implemented through the models we see today. Recent research conducted by CAEL and WICHE find that adult students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (in this study, defined as Pell Grant recipients and students living in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of low-income households) are less

likely to have PLA credit than their peers from higher SES backgrounds.

Brookings defines low-wage workers as those who earn less than \$16.03 at the national level and adjusted for cost of living by region, which is two-thirds the national median hourly wage for men working full time and year-round. Racially, 52 percent of these workers are White, 25 percent are Latino/Hispanic, 15 percent are Black, and five percent are Asian American. When compared to the racial composition of the overall workforce, Latino/Hispanic and Black workers are overrepresented and White and Asian American workers are underrepresented. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of the low-wage workers Brookings identified are between the ages of 25 and 54. Furthermore, only 14 percent have a bachelor's degree compared to the 44 percent of mid/high-wage workers with a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, low-wage workers are more likely to live below 150 percent of the federal poverty line (44 percent) than mid/high-range workers (3 percent). Additionally, 24 percent of low-wage workers have limited English proficiency. Nearly half of low-wage workers are concentrated in 10 occupation groups (retail sales workers, information/records clerks, cooks/food preparation workers, building cleaning/pest control workers, material moving workers, food/beverage servers, construction trade workers, material recording/scheduling/dispatching/distributing workers, motor vehicle operators, and other personal care/service workers).

Brookings subdivided low-wage workers into nine clusters based on age, education level, and school enrollment. We have taken those clusters and hypothesized the likely impact of RPL on the basis of educational experience, age, and type of employment. By examining the likely effectiveness of RPL for each of these clusters, we hope to reframe conversations about the use of RPL to promote equity and suggest that several current RPL practices, especially those that leverage prior learning portfolio assessment, may inadvertently promote inequity rather than function as a means of addressing inequity (see Table 1).

By disaggregating the 53.3 million low-wage workers into the Brookings' clusters and examining the likely impact of RPL, either through developmental assessments such as portfolios or credit exchange, it becomes clear that RPL is unlikely to equally impact all low-wage workers. RPL may be a useful tool for low-wage workers with some college or a college

Table 1. Brookings Clusters with Authors' Analysis of Potential Inequity Concerns

	Number of workers	Gender	Racial makeup	Jobs	Impact of RPL
1: 18- 24-year-olds not in school and with no degree	7.1 million	43% female	49 % nonwhite	The majority of workers in this cluster are in jobs with limited room for earning growth such as retail sales, material moving, cooks, and food servers.	RPL is likely to be limited unless workers are able to apply for and join a white-collar apprenticeship program.
2: 18- 24-year-olds in school but with no degree	3.8 million	54% female	42% nonwhite	Almost half of workers in this cluster are in one of five fields — retail, food service, records management, food preparation, or personal care.	RPL could have significant impact on this population depending upon the field in which a learner is employed. Because this population is currently enrolled in college, workers taking advantage of RPL are more likely to possess the skills necessary to successfully navigate institutional policies.
3: 18- 24-year-olds with at least an associate degree	2 million	61% female	33% nonwhite	A large number of these workers are employed in similar occupation groups as the previous two clusters, including retail sales and food service.	RPL could have significant impact on some workers, especially preschool teachers, office support workers, and health technicians where third-party validated certifications exist that can be easily translated into academic credit.
4: 25- 50-year-olds with a high school diploma or less	14.8 million	44% female	60% nonwhite	A large number of these workers are employed in physically demanding jobs such as construction, building cleaning/ pest control, material moving, and cooks/ food preparation.	RPL is likely to have limited impact on this group as several barriers exist. Only 66% of this population has a high school diploma or equivalent and 29% have limited English proficiency. Additionally, 39% live below 150% of the poverty line.
5: 25- 50-year-olds with some postsecondary education but no degree	7.7 million	57.8% female	47% nonwhite	Although some of the highest percentage occupation groups for this cluster (retail sales, food/beverage servers) are less likely to lend themselves to RPL, several occupations are (information/records clerks, nursing/health aids)	RPL has potential to make a significant impact on workers in this cluster. Not only are a large number of workers employed in occupations that more directly lend themselves to RPL, but their exposure to postsecondary education suggests they are more likely to possess the writing and analytical skills necessary to successfully navigate the RPL process, especially portfolio assessments.
6: 25- 50-year-olds with an associate degree or higher	7.6 million	62% female	39% nonwhite	Like other college-educated clusters, workers are more likely to be employed in education, administration, or management occupations where there are strong opportunities for wage improvement.	RPL could have significant impact on this cluster, especially for those employed in more “white collar” operations and may already have some form of workforce credential than can be easily articulated into academic credit through a credit exchange program.
7: 51- 64-year-olds with a high school diploma or less	5.6 million	58% female	46% nonwhite	A large number of workers in this cluster are employed in occupations that rely on manual labor such as building cleaning/ pest control, motor vehicle operation, material moving, and construction, which may not lend themselves to leveraging the recognition of prior learning.	RPL is likely to have limited impact on this group as several barriers exist. Under 70% of this population has a high school diploma or equivalent and 24% have limited English proficiency.
8: 51- 64-year-olds with some postsecondary education but no degree	2.3 million	65% female	34% nonwhite	Workers in this cluster are more likely to be employed in non-manual labor occupations such as information/ records clerks, secretaries/administrative assistants, other office/administrative support, financial clerks, and nursing/ health aids.	RPL could have significant impact on a number of workers in this cluster. Not only are a large number of workers employed in occupations that more directly lend themselves to RPL, but their exposure to postsecondary education suggests they are more likely to possess the writing and analytical skills necessary to successfully navigate the RPL process, especially portfolio assessments.
9: 51- 64-year-olds with an associate degree or higher	2.4 million		32% nonwhite	Workers in this cluster are more likely to be employed in non-manual labor occupations, with a significant number employed as teachers, information/ records clerks, administrative assistants, management occupations, other office support workers, other education occupations, and financial clerks.	RPL could have significant impact on some workers, especially in fields with third-party validated certifications that can be easily translated into academic credit.

credential and more likely to possess the skills necessary to navigate academic bureaucracies and be employed in non-manual labor occupations that are translatable into academic credit through credit exchange programs. However, this only accounts for 25.8 million low-wage workers. For the remaining 27.5 million low-wage workers with only a high school diploma or less, any form of RPL is less likely to be effective as these individuals have less experience navigating academic bureaucracies, may not have the communication skills necessary to successfully complete writing-heavy portfolios, and are less likely to be employed in an occupation whose skills will easily articulate to academic credit. Furthermore, over three quarters (5,940,700) of the more than 7.6 million low-wage workers who speak English “less than very well” are concentrated in clusters one, four, and seven, and have only a high school diploma or less.

Unfortunately, it is this group of low-wage workers with only a high school diploma or less that is at the greatest economic risk and most in need of the potential improved economic position that RPL and a college credential might provide. Almost 61 percent, (9,456,100) of the over 15.56 million low-wage workers earning 150 percent of the federal poverty level possess only a high school diploma or less. Even starker, this population accounts for almost 63 percent (8,603,900) of the over 13.7 million low-wage workers receiving some form of public assistance. Additionally, nonwhite workers are disproportionately represented among low-wage workers with only a high school diploma or less. Nonwhite workers comprise 47.6 percent of all low-wage workers, yet nonwhite workers with a high school diploma or less comprise almost 59 percent of all nonwhite low-wage workers. Thus, those workers who potentially have the most to gain by achieving a college-level credential are disproportionately nonwhite and, also, potentially the least likely to benefit from RPL. This raises troubling questions about the potential equity of RPL. As a result, any expansion of current RPL strategies may only serve to further existing inequities.

One has only to turn to the case studies presented earlier to see how new RPL strategies that center on the learner rather than the educational process can improve educational equity. For example, Guild Education currently offers both college credit and non-college credit, including high school attainment opportunities. By working with learners where they

currently are in their educational journey, these sort of RPL programs provide learners with opportunities to ladder experiences and knowledge together to create new educational pathways. Likewise, coding bootcamps that do not require a college degree or previous credential and are instead solely skills-based may provide some learners with new opportunities for advancement. However, it is critical to note that these programs are not panaceas for the inequity of our current educational system. To the extent to which learners are expected to fit into the more traditional educational structure, RPL continues to run the risk of exacerbating existing educational inequities rather than serving as pathways for greater opportunity.

Recommendations

The brief attempted to explore and enhance the understanding of RPL by re-evaluating the micro-level data through the lens of professional, continuing, and online (PCO) education; employer partnerships; and workforce development. Yet what becomes evident in this research is that examples of such work are nuanced, ad hoc, and present scale limitations due to their reliance on stakeholders rather than the education-workforce ecosystem at large. In essence, any RPL program is designed specifically for a defined educational and workforce partnership, and in some cases for specific students that might benefit from the relationship. That is not to say that RPL could not be included in the case studies highlighted in this brief, but to do so would take time, attention, and in some cases policy changes (at multiple levels) to make RPL work for wide swaths of learners.

The case studies (employer-institution partnerships such as those of Guild Education and Trilogy Education Services or the white-collar internships supported by Aeon) suggest intriguing pathways for RPL and the advancement of American workers but an intentionality by both employers and institutions around RPL is needed. Without a more focused attempt at including RPL in these programs, it remains to be seen if such employer-institution partnerships will continue to grow. With the emergence of employer-offered credentials from the likes of major and often high-profile employers such as Amazon and Google, we could see a larger crevasse between employer credentials and postsecondary credentials without some bridge, such as the widespread adoption of RPL.⁵⁰

Additionally, research is still needed to assess the impact RPL really can have on American workers, especially the 53.3 million low-wage workers identified by the Brookings Institution. The models traditionally associated with RPL, chiefly portfolio assessment, are potentially problematic for the most vulnerable American workers in need of expanded economic and social opportunities. While research indicates that portfolio assessment can be advantageous in helping adult learners secure a credential,⁵¹ these studies only consider students who are enrolled in college and pursuing a credential; they do not take into consideration the impact or likely lack thereof, that traditional forms of RPL have on students less likely or unable to pursue a postsecondary credential.

Large-scale implementation of RPL will continue to be a challenge until structural issues such as alternatives to the credit hour as the learning unit, or the existence of a unified learner record that acknowledges non-institutional learning widely exist. The challenges articulated in this brief make the expansion of RPL, especially as it is associated with workplace learning, highly difficult. However, several items could improve the workplace RPL and lead to the development of more programs:

1. Employers and institutions should work together to develop more validated, third-party assessments aligned to high employment jobs.
2. Third party vendors can work with employers and institutions to design technological tools that can easily ingest validated employee skills and translate those skills into potential academic credit.
3. State governments should provide incentive funding for postsecondary education to develop industry-aligned RPL programs, including the development of credit-bearing apprenticeship programs that allow students to learn while earning a living wage.
4. State and federal governments should offer economic incentives for employers to provide more workers with education benefits, especially for programs that provide learners with a way of translating current skills and knowledge into academic credit.
5. Finally, there is currently little outcomes data available, especially demographic data such as race/ethnicity, gender, age that made it difficult to learn what about RPL programs is working

and for whom. More and better data need to be collected and made transparent. Robust evaluations of current workplace RPL policies and programs need to be conducted and made public.

Conclusion

RPL has tremendous opportunities to provide workers with pathways to credentials, greater economic opportunity, and improved circumstances for themselves and their families. Harkening back to Freire's critique of a banking model of learning, RPL can provide pathways for a reconsideration of the very nature of learning. However, without significant additional research that moves beyond the use of prior learning among those students already enrolled in college or anecdotal evidence, the true impact and possible limitations of RPL will remain unknown.

What remains to be seen is if higher education leaders, employers, and policymakers will look to RPL as a means to address the volatility and changing nature of the U.S. economy and educational ecosystem. What RPL progress has been since the Great Recession and in subsequent years is due to one-off specific partnerships. With an unprecedented number of Americans forced into unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we must question how and if RPL could address the educational needs of individuals; namely, individuals that view a credential earned through an alternative training provider as an affordable step on a new or improved career pathway. Will this learning continue to be sequestered in the "workforce space" or will we see bridges built between higher education and other education and training providers? Will what the pandemic laid bare — the instability of colleges and university budget models that are reliant on traditional-age college students — force postsecondary leaders to consider new student populations, ones that have workplace learning that can and should be credited in degree programs? Will employers further question the curriculum of postsecondary degrees and certificates, leading to an expansion in their own training and education programs? Only time, and further exploration of these concepts, will tell.

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About the Organizations

The University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) is the leading membership organization for professional, continuing, and online education. For more than 100 years, UPCEA has served the leading public and private colleges and universities in North America. UPCEA was founded in 1915 and offers its members innovative conferences and specialty seminars, research and benchmarking information, professional networking opportunities and timely publications. UPCEA advances leadership in professional, continuing, and online education by: enhancing quality and standards, furthering awareness, data collection, sharing scholarship and news, promoting excellence, and collaborating with partners. UPCEA has more than 400 member institutions, corporations, and affiliates. Based in Washington, D.C., UPCEA also builds greater awareness of the vital link between contemporary learners and public policy issues



WCET - the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies is the leader in the practice, policy, and advocacy of technology-enhanced learning in higher education. Its growing membership includes institutions, higher education agencies and systems, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and corporations in all U.S. states and several Canadian provinces. WCET is widely recognized as one of the most informative, reliable, and forward-thinking organizations focused on the role of technology and innovation in higher education.



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