



Alternative Credentials

Prior Learning 2.0

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In today's higher education environment, the path to degree attainment frequently involves a myriad of credit alternatives, including MOOCs, micro-credentialing (badges), non-credit bearing certificate programs, and various other opportunities. As these alternatives evolve from their experiential learning predecessors, institutions are faced with the challenge of how to treat them as credit-bearing learning experiences. Options include prior learning assessment such as CAEL's LearningCounts, institution-specific credit evaluation services and credit recommendation services such as those of the American Council on Education (ACE) or the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), as well as micro-credentialing such as MOOCs and badges. Also relevant is how distance education is increasingly utilized as a primary vehicle for engaging in credit-bearing learning experiences. Along with enhanced access to learning opportunities, alternative credential opportunities offer convenience, flexibility and affordability – features that are valued by adult learners and that may propel them toward degree attainment. However, while these alternatives are believed to expand learning opportunities, several critical questions remain unanswered. Beyond the province of anecdotal accounts of student experiences, little is known about how institutions accept and document these learning opportunities and whether the opportunities result in meaningful progress toward degree completion.

The objective of this study is to provide a better understanding of how adult learning institutions address students who possess alternative credentials and seek to apply these experiences to a degree. The findings of this study will not only allow for a better understanding of how alternative credentials are defined and used at adult learning institutions but will also serve as a useful tool for education planners, policy makers, administrators, researchers, and government leaders to help shape future ideas about how to serve adult learners in their quest for degree attainment and student success. We are very pleased to introduce this study and would like to thank Dr. Jill Buban, Senior Director of Research & Innovation at the Online Learning Consortium for providing a foundation upon which our organizations can build collaborative ways of assuring quality in these important alternative learning experiences.

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Julie, a thirty-something mother and wife who has held positions requiring training and skills, returns to college after 10 years. During those 10 years, Julie was in the workforce, volunteered at a variety of organizations, completed some work-related trainings, and received badges for conference and professional development workshop participation. Additionally, Julie participated in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), but never completed assessments in the course. Like most adult learners, Julie has acquired her learning in a variety of ways, and re-enters college with transcript credit, as well as prior experiential learning. Julie hopes to use her variety of learning experiences, in addition to her transcribed credits, in a flexible degree plan so that she can earn credit for the knowledge she has acquired and earn her degree more quickly than she would if she only utilized her college credits.

Julie is the typical adult learner: in her thirties with personal and employment obligations. She has some college credit but has been away from formal learning settings for quite some time. Julie has been learning through a variety of informal learning opportunities, but is not certain those will help her complete her degree. Julie could be a student at any of the institutions included in this study.

Background

There is a vast array of formal and informal learning opportunities for which students can attempt to receive credits or credential their learning, including standardized tests, volunteer experience, professional development,

and certifications, to name a few. In 2013, through renewed federal policy, the Obama Administration provided \$260 million “First in World” innovation funding “to test and evaluate promising new models of higher education” (Soares, 2013). The policy agenda, *Making College Affordable: A Better Agenda for the Middle Class*, outlines ways in which colleges might promote innovation and competition, including three-year degree programs, flipped and/or hybrid programs, and MOOCs (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). The agenda included specific ways in which an institution might adopt practices that reduce cost and/or time to degree, such as awarding credit based on learning, not seat time; using technology to redesign courses; using technology for student services; and recognizing prior learning and dual enrollment. (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013).

Earlier in 2013, in cooperation with The Center for Educational Measurement at Excelsior College, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning hosted a summit that focused on assessing outcomes and competencies. The keynote at the summit, John Cavanaugh, president and CEO of the Consortium of Universities of the DC Metropolitan Area and former chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, discussed the role of prior learning assessment (PLA) and MOOCs in contemporary postsecondary education. He discussed three necessary steps to increase completion rates and help achieve attainment goals: (1) defining postsecondary credentials in terms of specific learning outcomes or competencies that are assessed, (2) meeting students at the edge of their learning, and (3) designing personalized



learning pathways to credentials through learning gap analysis (Cavanaugh, 2013). The summit included panel presentations that addressed topics such as mass customization and the role of advising, dependence on the quality of assessment, the role of MOOCs and other low-or-no-cost education options, the role of employers, and accreditation issues (Cavanaugh, 2013). These topics are echoed in many of the case studies presented in this study.

Dating back to the early 1970s, alternative ways of seeking and granting credit for prior learning experiences have been successfully instituted at adult-friendly higher education institutions. Since 2013, accreditors and media have devoted much attention to alternative credentials and how these credentials might be used toward degree completion or credentialed by higher education institutions. The focus of this study is extremely significant to those working in higher education institutions, accrediting bodies, government agencies, or organizations associated with higher education, as well as the media, and, of course, all those individuals who champion alternative ways of learning.

There are many definitions of the non-traditional or adult learner (Cross, P.K, 1974, 1981). Typically categorized as 25 years or older, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) states that adult learners have at least one of the following seven characteristics: (1) have delayed enrollment into postsecondary education, (2) attend part time, (3) are financially independent of parents, (4) work full time while enrolled, (5) have dependents other than a spouse, (6) are a single parent, and/or (7) lack a standard

diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of alternative credentials at adult-friendly higher education institutions in the United States: The study explores the use of alternative credentials and variances of practice at different institutions, how and if they are evaluated for credit, and whether or not they are being accepted for credit in the degree program. In order to do this, the use of alternative credentials at adult friendly higher education institutions in the United States was explored through six case studies of adult learning institutions and an analysis of information provided on these institutions' websites. The study provides information regarding the evolution of prior learning assessment (PLA).

Participating Institutions

The study was conducted at six higher education institutions in the United States that have been serving adult learners for decades, representing the grandfathers of adult learning institutions: American Public University System (APUS), Charter Oak State College, Excelsior College, Rio Salado Community College, SUNY Empire State College, and Thomas Edison State University. As adult friendly institutions, they have offered distance learning for decades and have established prior learning assessment (PLA) programs. PLA allows for the evaluation of formal training, such as military training, corporate training, American Council on Education (ACE) credit, and transcript review, as well as informal learning such as on-the-job learning, volunteerism,



self-interest activities (e.g., reading, art), and, for some institutions, alternative credentialing opportunities such as MOOCs and coding camps. All of these types of learning are potential sources of college-level learning through the PLA process (Buban, 2013).

The institutions were chosen using a convenient, yet representative, sample of institutions that have been classified as adult-friendly institutions for decades. The sample includes two-year and four-year institutions that serve learners in face-to-face and online modalities. Interview participants were provided through their institutional representative to the Presidents' Forum.

How are alternative credentials defined and used at adult learning institutions in the United States?

The main research question was: How are alternative credentials defined and used at adult learning institutions in the United States? While the main goal of this study was to better understand the use of alternative credentials at adult-serving higher education institutions, answers to questions about current prior learning models and student-institution communication prompted discussion about models that best serve adult learners and more specifically, adult learners in online environments.

Introduction to Case Studies

The multiple case study approach was chosen to obtain in-depth information about the state of alternative credentials at six institutions in the United States.

The multiple case study approach allows for within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007). In other words, it allows both a focus on the individual institution and a broader analysis of qualitative data across institutions.

Interviews were conducted over a one-month period both in person and via telephone. Semi-structured interviews included the same five questions on alternative credentialing in higher education, with a variety of sub-questions, depending on the interviewee's responses. The five questions were:

- (a) How are alternative credentials reviewed and processed at this institution?
- (b) If applied to the degree, are they being evaluated for lower- and/or upper-level credit?
- (c) Are alternative credentials speeding the time to degree completion?
- (d) What types of alternative credentials are seen most often?
- (e) What are the predictions for the future inclusion of alternative credentials in the degree?

The interviews were analyzed in two steps. First, the individual interviews were analyzed for themes related to alternative credentialing, and second, the interviews were compared and contrasted regarding the respondents' understanding of alternative credentials and their use in higher education and at their specific institutions. From the original 19 themes, five overarching themes emerged from the analysis: data, non-traditional v. traditional, prior learning assessment (PLA), competency-based education (CBE), and alternative



credentials. The five themes are explored in each institutional case study, as they relate to each institution and holistically in the findings.

Definition of Terms

Adult-Friendly Institutions

Institutions founded to serve adult learners, often with non-traditional programs that focus on the self-directed, over-25-year-old learner, such as the evaluation of experiential learning. Many of these institutions were founded in the 1970s.

Alternative Credentials

For the purpose of this study, the definition of alternative credentials includes those personal and professional development experiences defined as MOOCs, badges, and coding or boot camps.

Competency-Based Education

Demonstration of the mastery of concepts and skills rather than performance measurements in classroom and online settings during fixed calendar times. While varying in design, successful programs include the following: explicit articulation of what students need to know and do upon graduation; robust and valid competencies; varied pace of learning; valid, reliable assessments; strong advising/mentoring; personal education plans; effective learning resources that are available any time; and



SUNY Empire State College

SUNY Empire State College has served adult learners since 1971. The average age of an Empire State College student is 35 at the undergraduate level and 40 at the graduate level. The institution has 35 locations across the state of New York, as well international and online programs. Empire State College began offering distance learning courses nearly 30 years ago via correspondence courses, so not only is it one of the grandfathers of adult learning institutions, it is also a founding institution of distance learning delivery.

Dr. Nan Travers, Director of the Center for leadership in Credentialing Learning at Empire State, explained that all types of college-level experiential learning are evaluated, verified, and transcribed through the college’s prior learning assessment process. Themes that emerged during this interview included data, prior learning assessment (PLA), competency-based education, and alternative credentials.

Data. As with many institutions, data collection and dissemination is a challenge for the college. One challenge identified by the Executive Director for Institutional Research and Effectiveness was the fact that the college uses many systems to identify, track, and validate prior learning. These multiple systems, combined with the number of functional offices that interact with student records during the degree program planning process, make it difficult to analyze prior learning sources on a consistent basis. Additionally, alternative credentials, such as MOOCs, are not always tagged as such; therefore, the college cannot

accurately capture data on specific credentials or types of prior learning.

Prior Learning Assessment. Since its founding, the college has offered students prior learning assessment (PLA) options, which have evolved and become more robust over the past 46 years. The college’s website describes the ways in which a student can gain credit for “verifiable learning, but not the experience itself” (SUNY Empire State College, 2017). Students can elect to have their knowledge of a subject area evaluated through the individualized prior learning assessment process, but they are not awarded credit simply by providing evidence of an experience; they must demonstrate that there is college-level learning contained within the experience. The college provides information to students on the process through the Individualized Prior Learning Assessment (iPLA) guide. The guide provides information on the process, including sources of college-level learning, how to identify college-level learning, and how to describe and document knowledge, as well as information about working with an evaluator.

For the purpose of this study, the college’s list of sources of prior college-level learning was of interest:

- Work experience;
- Licenses, certifications and other credentials;
- Continuing professional education, including some continuing education units (CEUs);
- Noncredit courses;
- Seminars and in-service training programs;

- Learning acquired through Open Educational Resources (e.g. MOOCs);
- Volunteer work in the community;
- Hobbies and recreational activities;
- Independent reading and research;
- Military training that has not been evaluated by ACE;
- Study at postsecondary/proprietary schools that may be licensed but not accredited;
- Other

These sources clearly identify alternative credentials, including certifications, other credentials, and MOOCs.

Within these learning sources, there are both externally evaluated and internally evaluated forms of prior learning. Empire State College students can apply learning that has been evaluated by external sources such as the American Council of Education (ACE) and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). Internally, Empire State College evaluates training and certifications that contain college-level learning so that students do not need to re-demonstrate their knowledge. The college is also a member of the newly formed Consortium for the Assessment of College Equivalencies (CACE), which provides students access to the credits from training, certifications and licenses, granted according to evaluations conducted by the member institutions. Travers stated, “As long as the student can provide the right documentation of

the credential, we will determine how to best evaluate it.”

In many ways, SUNY Empire State College is on the cutting edge in this area as it seeks to stay ahead of the current state of prior learning assessment. This is evident in the institution’s involvement in CACE, as well as its focus on bridging the divide between the workplace and higher education by working with industries that have developed high-level professional competencies and evaluating those competencies for college-level learning.

In addition, the college continues to experiment with applications of its Global Learning Qualifications Framework, a framework for assessing learning acquired outside the learning environment, which was created through funding from the Lumina Foundation. Through this work, the college discovered that there is a disconnect between what students know and how to translate what they know into academia. The college constructed prompts that allowed students to translate their prior learning or experiences into competencies that are aligned to the framework. This helps students take what they know and demonstrate their college-level learning.

While the institution wants to provide a robust array of externally and internally pre-evaluated sources of credit, there continues to be a focus on flexibility and individualization, a hallmark of adult learning institutions, so that students have the opportunity to document their unique learning experiences. One such opportunity is through the portfolio process. The college has 4,000 to 5,000



students working on portfolios at any given time. Travers believes that is the largest number in the United States and one of the largest in the world. However, she stressed that although the portfolio process provides Empire State College with highly individualized and authentic assessments of student learning, the evaluation of student portfolios can be very time intensive.

Granted that the college offers a vast array of possibilities for prior learning, both individualized and pre-evaluated, the question arises: Must the learning be completed prior to attending the college? The answer is no: At Empire State College, learning is viewed as a continuum and, as long as the student has room in her degree plan and it fits academically, the student can continue to include external sources of learning. The combination of flexible and prescribed sources of prior learning assessments is what provides the most opportunities for a diverse student body.

What we’re talking about is being able to recognize, assess, validate and credential learning that’s been acquired outside the traditional classroom” and, in doing so “provide high quality education that’s equitable and holds integrity in such ways that it meets the variety of our student body.

Alternative Credentials. Evidence of the college’s leadership in this area is demonstrated by its participation in the Connecting Credentials Initiative, which includes the *Connecting Credentials Framework*. Travers explained that

Connecting Credentials is seeking to create “a credentialing ecosystem” that shows how all types of credentials— from micro-credentials to industry certifications to digital badges representing the achievement of a skill— are verifiable, valid types of learning and can be compared, stacked, and aligned through the common language of the framework competencies.

According to the Connecting Credentials website, the Connecting Credentials: A Beta Credentials Framework, was created, “to enhance the utility of credentials, reduce costs for individuals and employers, and to create a common language through the use of competencies” (Connecting Credentials, 2017). The Framework was developed through a grant from the Lumina Foundation by experts from the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

In addition to the college’s involvement in national-level work on credentialing, its graduate-level faculty are completing projects with badging, and the institution has offered MOOCs for nearly a decade, most recently in partnership with Coursera.

To summarize SUNY Empire State College’s position regarding alternative credentials and their use at the institution, Dr. Travers said, “What we’re talking about is being able to recognize, assess, validate and credential learning that’s been acquired outside the traditional classroom [and, in doing so, to] provide high-quality education that’s equitable and holds integrity in such ways that it meets the variety of our student body.”



Excelsior College

In 1971, the State of New York sanctioned the Regents External Degree Program to operate as a credit aggregator, “collecting credits students earned at multiple colleges and universities to award a degree” (Riedel, 2014). In the case of Excelsior, credits included prior learning assessments for professional certifications. It continued to operate in this fashion for 17 years. In 1988, Regents College (as it became known in 1986) was granted its own charter to operate as a private, nonprofit institution and was renamed Excelsior College in 2001. Over the course of the past fifteen years, the college started to require a capstone course and, more recently began offering courses. As with many adult learner institutions, the average age of an Excelsior student is in the thirties; in this case, 37 years old. Registrar Lori Morano and Executive Director of the Transcript Evaluation Center Kat McGrath discussed the institution’s focus on the adult learner, alternative credentials, and types of prior learning assessment available at the college. The prevalent themes were non-traditional v. traditional, prior learning assessment, CBE, alternative credentials, and connection to students.

Traditional v. Non-Traditional. The idea of being non-traditional and offering programming that fits the needs of adult learners was very evident in the interviews at Excelsior College. Non-traditional often refers to adult learners because, in the early 1970s when many adult-centric institutions were formed, adults were non-traditional learners. Included in this population are military students. At Excelsior, military students

comprise 34% of the population. This means that the offices of the college must review more than 11,000 military-related documents per year to be reviewed by offices at the college for either direct transfer or prior learning assessment. While the assumption might be that military students are more likely to request course equivalency exams or other forms of prior learning, both representatives from Excelsior said there has been an increase in the number of military students enrolling in online courses.

Prior Learning Assessment. Whether military or civilian, all students at Excelsior are exposed to prior learning assessment opportunities. On its website, Excelsior College provides information regarding its credit by evaluation (CBE) program, UExcel. This program is within the college’s Center for Educational Measurement. It allows students to take competency exams in equivalent subject areas for 34 lower- and upper-level courses.

The website also provides information on OneTranscript, a documenting system that allows students to combine transcribed credit from a variety of sources. Excelsior College offers credit for a variety of other exams including professional certification exams such as Microsoft Oracle or Cisco. In addition, the website explains that the college offers the student the option of completing portfolios for their learning. As with other institutions, Excelsior offers students opportunities for both external and internal evaluation of credits.

According to McGrath, the college has more than 70 policies pertaining to what



it accepts for prior learning credit. While the college accepts a wide variety of pre-evaluated credit, such as CLEP and DANTES, it uses the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) LearningCounts program for portfolio evaluation. LearningCounts is a portfolio assessment program that allows institutions to outsource their portfolio process. It provides subject matter experts to work with students to create their portfolios and then provides the portfolio evaluation and credit recommendation to the student's home institution (LearningCounts.org). The college transitioned to LearningCounts a few years ago as the portfolio process was very time intensive for the college.

Although MOOCs are discussed in the alternative credentials section of this case study, it is important to note that, while they are not formally accepted by the college, MOOCs could be included in a student portfolio through the LearningCounts program. The institution would then receive the credit recommendation, but not what was specifically included in the portfolio. Therefore, the institution is currently unable to track what types of alternative credentials or other types of learning (if any) are included in the portfolio. A student who uses LearningCounts at Excelsior is typically nonmilitary, driven, and highly trained, but without a formal degree. The students who enroll in LearningCounts are successful. Most instances of use of the LearningCounts program are in the Bachelor of Science programs.

In addition to portfolios, a form of internally evaluated prior learning, Excelsior has a database of non-accredited programs that have been

internally reviewed and approved for credit. In the same vein, there are a few instances where faculty teams evaluate prior learning. Additionally, through the Center for Post-Traditional Instruction, Training, and Learning (CAPITAL) program, Excelsior reviews workforce training programs, such as Pizza Hut's, for credit equivalencies. As an evaluation service to employers and training institutions, CAPITAL provides an alternative to the one offered by the American Council on Education's (ACE) credit recommendation service.

The ACE service recommends credit equivalencies for workforce training programs and provides transcript credit to students who have taken these programs. A list of these of evaluated programs is available in the online registry for institutions (Excelsior College, 2017).

Respected institutions in the area of prior learning have the ability to perform these types of workplace training evaluations as they have teams of knowledgeable people well versed in credit equivalencies and credit recommendations.

Competency-Based Education. While well versed in a variety of evaluations, McGrath discussed the difficulties that can ensue when the college receives a transcript from a competency-based education (CBE) program. She likened the process to having “to untie it (the transcript) to get the two things to work together.” In this discussion, she referred to the college's history as a non-traditional institution with a deep understanding of how evaluation processes work and she expressed concern about how a traditional

institution would likely have further struggles with trying to work out equivalencies with a CBE transcript.

Alternative Credentials. Excelsior does not directly transfer MOOCs, boot camps, or badges. However, the college evaluates *more traditional credentials* like Microsoft and Cisco. According to college policy, Excelsior does not award credit for MOOCs; however, as mentioned previously, if a student were to include a MOOC in a LearningCounts portfolio, credit could be awarded. Additionally, if a student successfully completed an ACE-evaluated MOOC that included evidence of formative and summative assessments, the student would be awarded credit.

Neither of the interviewees recalled documented instances where boot camps or badges have been evaluated for credit. However, Excelsior has explored the use of badges as a credential and found a lack of general understanding of these credentials, and often the students appeared to be confused. McGrath had questions regarding the meaning behind the words and, in turn, student understanding of these credentials; whether they understand that they might be able to have them evaluated as sources of credit: “It’s like trophies or certificates – what am I (the student) supposed to do with them?” (K. McGrath, Interview 2016). There are concerns about who validates these forms of learning. In this regard, there is the same connection, almost a vigilance support for the non-traditional, adult learner.

In summary, Excelsior College has evolved from a credit aggregator to a college offering an array of prior

learning evaluations, including the evaluation of alternative credentials. Excelsior continues to explore new sources of prior learning, although skepticism remains about alternative credentials.

Charter Oak State College

Charter Oak State College was founded in 1973 to serve the state of Connecticut as a credit aggregator to advise students how to use a combination of prior learning, assessment, portfolios, and reviews to obtain their degrees. In 2016, the college added its first master's-level degree program, further solidifying its stature as a course-bearing institution. The average student is 39 years old. The college's website clearly states its strategic initiatives, including the goal of expanding degree completion programs in order to meet workforce needs. Charter Oak Director of Prior Learning Assessment Laura Wilder was interviewed for this research study. Themes that emerged included data, non-traditional v. traditional, prior learning assessment, and credentialing.

Data. Charter Oak has a grasp of the data it needs and what it might want with regard to student learning. The college tracks all types of prior learning credit equivalencies, including alternative credentials, with reports that detail the types of credit students receive based on a variety of factors. In addition, its database matches many of these (credentials) to the specific training program.

Non-traditional v. Traditional. In discussing the continued use of the terms traditional and non-traditional and the coinciding controversy regarding the use of these words, Wilder mentioned that the determining factor is age. However, as she considered this, she said traditional-aged students can also go through the PLA process at Charter Oak. This brought up the notion that the lines have blurred between traditional and

non-traditional, so new labels might be needed. Charter Oak, she said, has more flexibility.

Prior Learning Assessment. An alternative credential is different from a professional license or credential for which people must sit for an exam, such as the EMT license. Students would have some documentation of receiving the credential, and the registrar would document that.

Alternative ways to gain credit are clearly labeled on the website. Categories include credit for prior learning and credit for testing/exams. CPL includes credit for training, which refers to the Consortium for the Assessment of College Equivalency (CACE).

“CACE facilitates degree completion of adult learners by developing new pathways of cooperation among adult-centered colleges and universities regarding reviews of college-equivalent learning from organized, structured learning experiences not sponsored by an accredited college or university, including the promotion of rigorous common standards” (Charter Oak College, 2017).

The consortium of CACE institutions includes Charter Oak College, SUNY Empire State College, Thomas Edison University, Community College of Vermont, Granite State College, and Excelsior College. The mission of CACE is to “create a mechanism for the partner institutions to share information from credit recommendations they have developed for such Non-Collegiate Instruction in order to allow all partners to award the recommended credit



directly based on official documentation of successful completion, without the need to transfer the credits from the reviewing institution” (Charter Oak State College, 2017).

In addition to the innovative addition of CACE, the college offers, credit for testing/exams, the Connecticut Credit Assessment Program (CCAP), credential evaluation, and a portfolio program.

The portfolio is an intensive process in which the student needs to be able to be able “to envision the benefit in order to get through the process.”

As for internal evaluation of credit, Charter Oak continues to provide in-house faculty reviews, even though they are time consuming. Likewise, the college continues to conduct portfolio reviews even though it has few requests for them. Wilder explained that the portfolio is an intensive process in which the student needs to be able “to envision the benefit in order to get through the process.”

The discussion with Wilder included the datedness of the term prior learning. She explained that, while outdated, it’s a buzz word that, after years, the public understands what it means. Despite the term, Charter Oak views this type of learning as continual in that it is prior to when it is documented at the institution and, as Ms. Wilder states, “that’s the beauty of Charter Oak.”

We would have a pathway for which the student could apply the

alternative credential towards to traditional credential.

Alternative Credentials. Alternative credentialing is usually discussed in terms of assessment of prior learning. The process for determining equivalent student learning acquired through alternative credentials would mirror Charter Oak’s internal assessment process: “We would have a pathway for which the student could apply the alternative credential towards to traditional credential,” Wilder said. She explained the process in detail, including how the credential would be deemed equivalent to credit in certain areas, and course numbers would be designated. This means students have alternative credentials represented on their degrees.

Charter Oak has a policy regarding MOOCs in its course catalog. How the credit is evaluated depends on the MOOC. The college has reviewed some of EdX’s MOOCs and prescribed credit recommendations, just as it would do with tests and evaluations. In these pre-approved MOOCs, if the student completes the EdX MOOC successfully, after indicating the proper pathway with EdX, she would receive credit because EdX would verify completion of the MOOC. Students can also submit ACE credit recommendations for those MOOCs pre-evaluated by ACE. Also, students could choose the portfolio approach if the MOOC were neither internally evaluated nor externally evaluated by ACE.

It’s not new at all. The terminology is new but I don’t think it’s new. They are



alternative ways of getting credit for what they know.”

In sum, at Charter Oak, there is nothing different or new about alternative credentialing as it is another form of prior learning that’s “not seen as different or new. It’s not new at all,” Wilder said. “The terminology is new but I don’t think it’s new. They are alternative ways of getting credit for what they know.”

Rio Salado Community College

Established in 1978 as one of seven “colleges without walls” in the nation, Rio Salado College is a two-year community college headquartered in Tempe, Arizona. Also in 1978, Rio Salado offered its first adult basic education program and distance education program while, in the following year, the college began serving military students (Rio Salado, 2017). The college was established by and continues to be a member of the Maricopa County Community College District.

The website illuminates two focal areas: (1) providing innovative educational opportunities for today’s students and (2) offering affordable access to higher education through bridge pathways, community-based learning, corporate and government partnerships, early college initiatives, online learning, and university transfer (Rio Salado, 2017). Rio Salado’s Dean of Instruction Rick Kemp was interviewed for this study, and he offered clear evidence of these focal areas. Themes included nontraditional v. traditional, prior learning assessment, competency-based learning, and credentials.

Non-traditional v. traditional. Rio Salado was founded to serve non-traditional students. This is exemplified by the flexible start dates that the college offers students. There are 48 start days per calendar year. The college continually seeks innovative ways to serve those who have traditionally been underserved. Kemp attributes this to the culture of higher education in which institutions either ‘buy-in’ to serving non-traditional learners or focus on traditional learners (for example, flexibility may not be in the culture of traditional institutions). Some of the ways in which Rio Salado services non-traditional learners are through its workforce partnerships and through recognition of prior learning, including quality training programs in the marketplace.

Kemp discussed the many adults who swirl in college, even in the process of obtaining a two-year degree. Student swirl refers to students who go to multiple colleges while seeking a degree, as opposed to taking a straight path toward degree completion, as happened decades ago with more traditional students. (Adelman, 1980). Student swirling isn’t a phenomenon seen in isolation with non-traditional students, Adelman followed a national cohort of students from the time they were in 10th grade in 1980 until most students were 30 years old. At Rio Salado, an institution that serves both traditional- and non-traditional-aged students, Kemp noted that it’s the institution’s responsibility to help the students obtain the degree, as it knows the student may or may not be able to transfer all credits, especially all prior learning credits, if the student swirls to another institution.



Prior Learning Assessment. Kemp believed that prior learning helps speed a student’s time to degree completion, but did not have the internal data to support this assumption. Prior learning assessments are available for both externally and internally reviewed sources of credit.

Rio Salado relies on ACE credit recommendations, national exams, and Straighterline. Straighterline offers online courses and has agreements with multiple institutions for transfer credit, or pre-evaluated transfer credit of their courses (Rio Salado, 2017). Rio has an agreement with Straighterline to accept roughly 30 of their courses for credit. There is a strong call to build relationships and collaborate with the workforce and to find ways to serve the military, including the use of ACE recommendations. Regarding the workforce, Kemp said, “Other models will fill the void if we don’t do it [build these relationships].” Likewise, Kemp did not see how an institution could serve, or have a relationship with military students if they weren’t using ACE recommendations.

Internally, the college offers a combination of evaluations. At the time of the interview, Rio Salado was piloting the use of the CAEL LearningCounts program, as internal portfolio reviews conducted by faculty are time consuming. Also, the college has reviewed and prescribed credit towards many national certifications and licenses. It continues to review these sources of credits; however, Kemp reiterated that this is a time intensive process, especially for faculty. He saw the role of the faculty crucial in this

process but noted that their time is very valuable. As with workforce partnerships, the researcher sensed that Kemp would like to stay ahead of the curve with internal evaluations as well, but hasn’t found a solution for how the college can do so.

Kemp stressed that prior learning has grown exponentially over the past decade, and it can no longer be contained to one office a college; that it is a collegewide endeavor. This emphasis should be understood throughout higher education: It is not an easy endeavor to begin offering prior learning evaluations. It is part of the college’s culture and needs to be accepted and advocated for through the institution, much like competency-based education.

Competency-Based Education (CBE). Initially, in the early stages of exploration of competency-based learning, there was confusion among faculty and staff at Rio Salado about the difference between PLA and CBE. The college is constructing plans for CBE opportunities in general education areas.

Alternative credentials are part of our niche, part of our mission. It’s always been part of our fabric. It’s either a part of your culture or it’s going to take a long time, because culture doesn’t change easily.

Alternative Credentials. It is clear that, as with other institutions, Rio Salado views alternative credentials as another form of prior learning that can be assessed either externally or internally:



“Alternative credentials are part of our niche, part of our mission. It’s always been part of our fabric,” Kemp said. “It’s either a part of your culture or it’s going to take a long time, because culture doesn’t change easily.” While Rio Salado doesn’t promote the acceptance of alternative credentials, if a student brings evidence of MOOC, boot camp, or badge completion, the college will evaluate it using its current processes and procedures. Kemp sees the ability to do so as an integral piece of speaking the same language as the workplace and bridging the gap between higher education and industry.

In comparison to other institutions included in this study, Rio Salado is in a slightly different category regarding prior learning and alternative credentials as it is a two-year community college with much less time to degree completion for students to integrate these alternative forms of learning.



American Public University System (APUS)

Founded in 1991 as American Military University (AMU), the institution was reorganized into the American Public University System (APUS), and American Public University (APU) was established. AMU and APU are both under the umbrella of APUS. AMU was founded to serve military students, while APU was founded to serve civilian students in the same way, with a focus on quality, affordability, and flexibility (American Public University System, 2017).

Patricia Campbell, who is Vice President and Assistant Provost for Graduate Studies, Research, and Innovation, and Cali Morrison, Director Alternative Learning, were interviewed for this study. Themes covered included non-traditional v. traditional, prior learning assessment, and alternative credentialing.

Non-traditional students are the majority of our students now, so maybe post-traditional is the right terminology now?

Non-traditional v. Traditional. The antiquated use of these terms was a major subject of this interview, as was the discussion about traditional time parameters for a degree and how the time to degree completion has shifted away from the traditional four years. In discussing the outdatedness of these terms, Morrison recommended a new term, post-traditional. “Non-traditional students are the majority of our students now,” she said, “so maybe post-

traditional is the right terminology now?” As with other institutions that participated in this study, APUS is passionate about the need to move away from the traditional concept that higher education’s primary purpose is to serve the traditional 18-year-old student; rather, it is to provide opportunities for lifelong learning. The institution serves “post-traditional learners” in a variety of ways, including giving them opportunities to earn credit for prior learning.

Prior Learning Assessment. APUS uses a combination of external and internal prior learning assessments. External assessments include ACE recommendations, college-level entrance exams, CLEP, and MOOCs that have been pre-evaluated through the ACE recommendation service. Students can submit prior learning experiences for review throughout their time at APUS. In other words, prior learning is seen as a continuum, not as learning that took place prior to enrolling at the institution.

The one caveat is that students must petition to join the APUS prior learning program. APUS initiated this program in order to better ensure that the student is a right fit for the program, as well as to consider the amount of room the student has in her degree program to add prior learning to the degree plan. Upon acceptance, students complete a course that defines prior learning and explains the portfolio process, which is outsourced to CAEL’s LearningCounts for review. Campbell and Morrison emphasized that whatever prior learning experience students include in their degree programs, APUS’s focus is on ensuring students graduate having met all institutional and program-level



outcomes. In all programs, including initiatives for alternative credentials, APUS maintains a strong focus on quality education opportunities.

Alternative Credentials. At the time the interview was conducted, APUS was in the initial stages of investigating badging and credentialing in general.

The institution offered a MOOC in conjunction with the Policy Studies Organization in which students received credit if they completed a summative assessment. APUS has not pre-evaluated any MOOCs for credit; however, if a student were to request an assessment of prior learning that involved MOOC-based learning, a faculty member would have to evaluate the content, determine the course and level of the course that the learning matched, and evaluate the learning through an assessment. A similar process would be used if a student requested an evaluation of knowledge acquired in a boot camp or coding camp. APUS is interested not only in evaluating prior learning that occurred in alternative credentials, but also in determining how to integrate credentials into traditional learning environments.

In 2016, APUS hired Morrison to lead an initiative to determine how new pathways toward high quality credentials could be included in the APUS curriculum. A major focus of this initiative concerns micro-credentials and badges and the inclusion of these credentials in traditional curriculum so that students can demonstrate their attainments to employers during their educational journey, not having to wait until after they have completed their degree. This approach could include

stackable badges, micro-credentials, or badges that show various progressions of knowledge so that students are able to “show as they go” through their degree.

APUS has taken a positive step in creating alternative pathways for degree completion with the launch of Momentum™, a direct assessment competency-based education (CBE) program. In Momentum™ the focus is on demonstrated mastery, not on the time or activity taken to achieve mastery. It’s a faculty-guided, personalized learning using an adaptive learning platform.

In sum, whether through prior learning evaluation processes or new curricular advancements, APUS has included credentialing opportunities for students since its inception. Like other institutions in this study, these opportunities are a part of the institutional culture.



Thomas Edison State University

Founded in 1972 by the State of New Jersey, Thomas Edison State University's mission is to "provide flexible, high-quality, collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults" (Thomas Edison State University, 2017). The institution's website states seven purposes that focus on quality learning opportunities, such as "learning opportunities that serve as alternatives to college classroom study," including collegiate and non-collegiate college-level learning, as well as ways to assess these types of learning opportunities.

Marc Singer, Vice Provost, Center for the Assessment of Learning, spoke about the mission of the institution in that it is an adult-focused, outcomes-focused institution that, like many of its peers, was founded in the early 1970s when there was a call to "change the influence of the ivory tower." Reverberating in current conversations about alternative credentials are some of the same questions that were asked 50 years ago: Why can knowledge only come from a university? Why is a university the only source of deciding what counts as knowledge? Themes discussed included prior learning assessment and alternative credentials.

Prior Learning Assessment. Thomas Edison conducts both internal and external assessments of prior learning. As with other institutions in the study, Thomas Edison conducts its own internal portfolio evaluations and also uses CAEL's LearningCounts for portfolio assessments, especially if a student has only one or two evaluations to complete, as it can be less expensive

for the student to take advantage of that program.

Externally, the university accepts most ACE college credit recommendations, NCCRS recommendations, and agreements through the CACE group. The CACE group reviews training programs, licenses, certifications, etc., in terms of learning outcomes, instructor credentials, and whether or not the training is the same every time it is taught or different based on the location and teacher. In other words, just as with a college course, the university is ensuring the quality of the training as it relates to specified outcomes. Also, like SUNY Empire State College, Thomas Edison is involved in the Connecting Credentials program in order to try to determine equivalent learning obtained through alternative credentials on the path to a degree.

Data. Thomas Edison has a very thorough process for tracking the various types of learning that a student includes in prior learning assessments at the university, including alternative credentials. If a student receives credit for the knowledge, the university tracks the exact type, including MOOCs, badges, and boot camps. This allows the university to have a better understanding of whether or not PLA contributes towards a student completing her degree more quickly. Singer mentioned that, typically, PLA does so; however, he believed that alternative credentials might aid more in retention and persistence because the university is able to validate the learning and/or to allow students to take time to engage in one of those experiences and then continue with their studies.



Why can knowledge only come from a university? Why is a university the only source of deciding what counts as knowledge?

Alternative Credentials. The university evaluates any type of learning, including learning acquired through badges, Open Educational Resources (OER), and boot or coding camps. Specifically, the university has done a lot of work with OER and is envisioning the way badges might play a role in future curriculum design.

Akin to SUNY Empire State College, Thomas Edison categorizes MOOCs as an open educational resource (OER). During the portfolio process, it might be found that a student has two-thirds of the knowledge needed to receive course

credit. The institution can then refer a student to a MOOC for the missing one-third of the knowledge and then the student can be assessed for the full knowledge. This allows institutions and students more flexibility, accountability, and customizability, all within the institution's prior learning assessment procedures.

With regard to micro-credentials, Singer believes that, like badging, there will be more and more stackable or latticed options in the future. He also thinks that pre-evaluation of alternative credentials will expand and will provide the quality stamp of approval that accreditors are asking for.



Findings

Through a cross-study analysis, five themes emerged: data, competency-based education (CBE), prior learning assessment (PLA), alternative credentials, and traditional v. non-traditional. Some were more evident than others, with prior learning assessment and alternative credentials present in all case studies.

More importantly, these institutions understand the need to demonstrate quality measures in their assessment measures.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) was a theme that emerged early on in all interviews. As adult-serving institutions, all have had evaluation systems in place at their respective institutions for decades. In addition to the sample being one of convenience, these institutions were selected for this reason; the assumption was that they would have the systems in place to evaluate alternative credentials. If they aren't doing it, how are others doing it? More importantly, these institutions understand the need to demonstrate quality as a component of their assessment measures.

All institutions included in the study have processes for internal and external evaluations of credit. Internal evaluations of credit are conducted through a portfolio process that involves faculty or subject matter experts. In three interviews, there was direct reference to the great amount of time these evaluations require, as well as to the drain on faculty time and resources. For these reasons, institutions have outsourced the majority of their portfolio

review to CAEL's LearningCounts program, which was launched approximately six years ago. The six institutions in this study are taking advantage of LearningCounts because it reduces the time of the review process, alleviates faculty work load in these areas, and offers a more cost-effective way for students to have their learning evaluated through a reliable program that uses trained subject matter experts.

In addition to LearningCounts, all institutions use ACE credit recommendation services, and four use NCCRS for credit recommendations. A third type of credit recommendation service that is growing is the Consortium for College Equivalency (CACE), which includes six member institutions, three of which were involved in this study. CACE includes an agreement that these institutions accept pre-evaluated credit amongst its members. For example, if Charter Oak pre-evaluated a licensure or workforce training program, the other five institutions would include this pre-evaluated learning on their transcript. This allows a great sharing of resources among institutions and should greatly reduce institutional workload, as well as provide students with a timely review of their prior learning. Other external evaluations include CLEP evaluations, which are accepted by all institutions in this study.

Prior learning assessments are integrated into all facets of these institutions; they are in the fabric of their existence and deeply rooted in their culture. For this reason, it was nearly inconceivable, or a foreign notion, for these institutions not to evaluate alternative credentials such as MOOCs, badges, and/or coding or boot camps. The six institutions



included in this study have various levels and ways of evaluating MOOCs. Two institutions, Charter Oak and Thomas Edison State College, have instances of pre-evaluating MOOCs for college credit. Surprisingly, this is not clearly evident or featured on their websites or in marketing materials. For this reason, students can't easily identify these institutions as possibly accepting MOOCs as credit. All the other institutions evaluate knowledge gained from MOOC experience and do so through an assessment process that includes some type of summative assessment linked to the learning outcomes in the given MOOC. Some will accept verified assessments from MOOC providers as evidence of learning and equate it to credit. Others, such as Thomas Edison, will conduct their own assessment in addition to the verified assessment. This is direct evidence of ongoing concern for quality on the part of these institutions.

APUS and Thomas Edison are strategically planning how to incorporate badges into their curriculum so that students can provide direct evidence of knowledge to employers.

While all six institutions might evaluate badges or coding camps should a student present them as a portion of their knowledge on a topic, APUS and Thomas Edison are strategically planning how to incorporate badges into their curriculum so that students can provide direct evidence of knowledge to employers. This direct connection to the workforce exemplifies the innovative practices the Obama Administration called for in the 2013 policy, Making

College Affordable: A Better Agenda for the Middle Class (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). While all institutions are striving to reduce the time to degree completion through the use of prior learning assessment, those that are integrating the use of alternative credentials, such as APUS and Thomas Edison, and those involved in CACE, such as Thomas Edison, Charter Oak, and SUNY Empire State College, are truly making strides towards doing so.

With new focus on innovative practices in prior learning assessment comes the issue of data and availability of data. Rio Salado, APUS, Charter Oak, and Thomas Edison had access to data; so much so that there seemed to be data overload. The questions turned to how to use the data to make decisions and what data to request in order to make those decisions, as well as who will evaluate all the data. Often, as with SUNY Empire State College, the data is housed in a variety of departments. With regard to alternative credentials, Thomas Edison and Charter Oak are able to track the exact source of credit, including badges, MOOCs, and alternative credentials. Singer at Thomas Edison was explicit in saying that the university can only track the source if the student receives the credit, not if the learning is not equated to credit. With other institutions, such as SUNY Empire State College, documentation of credentials can be lost in reporting processes and only discovered through personal discussions with students. For example, a student might mention this type of learning (e.g., MOOCs) and include it in a portfolio, but the documentation of the credential is logged within the portfolio, or the LearningCounts process, so it is not easily reportable.



Rio Salado has found that, in prior years, it did not communicate enough with students about prior learning. The college is now focusing on how to effectively communicate these opportunities to students and then track them.

This availability, or lack of availability, of reliable data leads to suppositions about time to degree completion. We know that prior learning evaluation processes reduce time to degree completion and can save money for students; however, without accurate data there are no identifiable percentages for how much specific types of credentials reduce the time to degree completion. At this point, within the context of this study, the assumption is that, because prior learning assessment processes have reduced time to degree completion in the past, then the alternative credentials that are currently being evaluated through a prior learning assessment process will also reduce time to degree completion at these institutions.

Challenges remain for students who seek to bring alternative forms of learning to their higher education experience. In constructing a degree with a combination of transfer credit, prior learning, and other types of courses, as Julie is trying to do, the degree is something of a puzzle; all the elements need to align with the prescribed outcomes of the given degree or program. In other words, to ensure a quality degree, all the pieces must fit nicely in the plan in order to use them all. Julie might have the equivalent of 30 credits in prior learning experiences but might only be able to use 15 because she has learning in areas that don't fulfill

degree requirements. This is true whether it is a First Aid/CPR certification, Series 7 licensure, creative writing MOOC, or volunteer experience.

It was clear that, whatever the respondent's role at the given institution, they were passionate about serving adult learners and about their current role in the higher education landscape as contemporary learners.



Recommendations

This study is the mere beginning in better understanding institutional practices in the evaluation and acceptance of alternative credentials at higher education institutions. It provides the foundation for knowledge about how institutions can qualify alternative credentials as forms of knowledge and apply them to—or include them in—the curriculum for a quality degree program.

While the study lays the foundation for this work, additional exploration in evaluating alternative credentials and incorporating them in degree programs must be completed at a variety of types of institutions. This study included two-year and four-year institutions that have concrete policies and procedures on prior learning assessment and how to review such credentials for equivalent learning outcomes. Further research would include a wider variety of institutions.

In tandem with expanding this study or a similar study to include a wider variety of institutions, this group of six institutions could serve the entire higher education community by documenting best practices for quality evaluation of alternative credentials. This type of documentation could include a knowledge base of terms, as well as policies and procedures and lessons learned that would be beneficial for other institutions to know prior to engaging in such evaluations. Some of this work has started with the institutions in the Consortium for the Assessment of College Equivalence (CACE, 2015).

As mentioned in the Thomas Edison State University case study, there were similar questions 50 years ago. The answers to those questions and the innovative practices surrounding prior learning assessment serve as models for creating and expanding quality frameworks for the use of alternative credentials in higher education settings.



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**Appendix A: Study Design**

Given a brief timeframe to conduct the study, the six institutions selected for this study were a convenience sample because members of the Presidents' Forum were able to provide the researcher with willing participants from their institutions. Sixty-minute interviews consisting of semi-structured questions were conducted either in person or via telephone in as open and honest an environment as possible. Interviewees approved the recording of the interviews and interviews were recorded using an Apple application that had been tested previously. To analyze the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews and then hand coded the transcriptions by themes. Interviewees were asked to review a summary of the interview analysis. Document analysis was conducted using information on the institutions' websites. All transcripts are kept password-protected on the researcher's computer, and any printed copies are kept in her home office.