Enhancing the CPL Process in Business Education Through Advisor Support

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Abstract: This paper examines the Individualized Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) process in business education. It highlights its role in accrediting students' experiential learning and bridging practical experience with academic credit. This research then recommends solutions that include AI tools, advisor training, and centralized resource hubs. Most promisingly, integrating AI tools helps identify skills, suggests alignment with academic competencies, and provides personalized feedback on students' submissions. It also passes through the ethical dimensions of responsible AI implementation, like data privacy, fairness, and transparency. These findings suggest that advisor support, coupled with AI-enhanced tools, would not only increase the quality of submissions but also make the process more effective and accessible. Integration of this technology into the targeted support strategies will help the iCPL process serve a broader student population and thus foster greater inclusivity and lifelong learning opportunities in higher education.

Keywords: iCPL, Prior Learning Assessment, Business Education, Advisor Support, Experiential Learning.

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Introduction

SUNY Empire State University defines Individualized Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) as the process by which the university evaluates a student's knowledge for possible college-level learning obtained through experiences outside the traditional college classroom, such as workplace training, personal research and special interests (SUNY Empire State University, n.d.). This process is very important for bridging the gap between practical experience and academic achievement through recognition, validation, and awarding credits for real-world learning. It creates a much more flexible, inclusive, and accessible means of completing degrees by helping students turn their professional and personal experiences into recognized academic achievements. The iCPL process also lets students complete their education in a shorter time because they can skip courses they have already mastered through their experiences, allowing them to focus on more advanced topics that align with

their career goals. This enhances student engagement and promotes a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as learners can apply their knowledge in practical settings. In addition, many professionals who have gained knowledge throughout their years of work but without formal credentials find that this approach validates their skills and opens new doors for career advancement. This process lets students customize their learning pathways based on academic requirements, individual experiences, and career goals. This flexibility encourages lifelong learning and empowers individuals to take charge of their education, ultimately leading to a more skilled and adaptable workforce. Incorporating prior learning credits in higher education also lowers tuition costs. Fewer courses lead to reduced expenses and reduced opportunity costs. Instead of learning the knowledge that students already possess, they can use their time of work, leisure, or learning new skills. This, in turn, makes higher education more accessible to a broader range of people, including those who may have previously felt excluded from traditional educational systems, such as non-traditional students, veterans, and often people with disabilities. The CPL can be used not only for the professional learning experience. Students can earn college-level credits for the expertise they gain through hobbies, volunteer work, or community engagement, which promotes a holistic approach to education that values diverse backgrounds and perspectives. This more holistic view of learning recognizes that education does not always happen within formal settings; other environments may enrich one's life and that of their community.

Literature Review

Research on credits for prior learning focuses primarily on its significance in recognizing and accrediting experiential learning, benefiting students, employers, and society. The CPL process allows learners to gain academic credit for knowledge and skills obtained outside traditional educational settings, such as work or military experiences (Lipinski et al., 2023) (Bergman & Favoroso, 2020). Cherrstrom et al. (2023) find that using prior learning assessment primarily benefits non-traditional students, who often show high amounts of analytical thinking and are highly motivated; this aligns well with their drive for achievement and recognition. Another part of the literature focuses on the assessment methods. The CPL process can be conducted through several assessment methods, including portfolio-based evaluations, examinations, and equivalency determination. These methods are critical to ensure that learning recognition is rigorous and valid. (Lipinski et al., 2023; Treis Rusk and Smith, 2022). Algorithmic extraction of skills from learners' artifacts and course syllabi has been explored to improve the accuracy of CPL. However, careful guidance and faculty involvement are required to ensure course-level correspondence. (Welsh & Ruda, 2024). Institutions like Lancang Kuning University have implemented CPL programs to improve educational accessibility and lifelong learning opportunities, recognizing learning from formal, non-formal, and informal education (Junaidi & Irwanda, 2023). Moreover, the research has shown that CPL can also provide positive job market outcomes, including increased employment opportunities, wage levels, and job formality, and it might have more favorable effects for women than men in specific contexts (Nakata et al., 2021). The authors have argued that women reported higher employment opportunities, wages, confidence in their abilities, and job prospects, among other related things, compared to their male counterparts. While this offers many benefits, CPL also presents epistemological

challenges and raises questions of knowledge ownership, which require continuing dialogue and adaptation in educational practices (Abdulrauf, 2022; Apps, 2021). Abdulrauf (2022) asks what is legitimate knowledge and how it is measured. He argues that the traditional assessment of knowledge relies heavily on standardized testing and formal credentials of education, which may not fully capture the experiential learning of the individual. He adds that by bringing their prior learning for assessment, learners dispute the conventional view that knowledge can be gained only through formal education. The author also admits, in the conclusion, that recognizing prior learning offers opportunities for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. Finally, as CPL becomes more standardized, it is expected to play a crucial role in enhancing educational attainment and addressing the evolving needs of the workforce (Bergman & Favoroso, 2020).

The current studies recognize that advisors play an essential role in the CPL process as they help facilitate recognizing and integrating students' previous experiences into their current higher education. The integration of advising with CPL assessment is particularly beneficial for adult learners returning to education, as presented by the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant evaluations. This study highlights the importance of advising in enhancing the effectiveness of PLA strategies (Palmer et al., 2021). As practitioners, advisors often help students apply holistic approaches to assessment processes that are tailored to fit students' needs, ensuring that assessment is not only about metrics but also that students are supported and receive feedback throughout the process (Moss et al., 2016). In Irish higher education, advisors contribute to recognizing prior learning by helping to navigate the policies and practices that support lifelong learning, thereby encouraging re-entry into formal education (Goggin & Sheridan, 2014). Advisors also play a crucial role in shaping the professional development of supervisors in higher education. They make sure that the recognition process aligns with the institution's requirements and each individual's unique learning experiences, therefore transforming professional identities and existing agency (Halttunen & Koivisto, 2013). Another example of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) showed how important the role of advisors is in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in Australia. Knight (2005) finds they not only guide learners through the RPL process but also assist learners with documentation of their knowledge, provide one-on-one sessions to discuss learning experiences, make sure that the assessment standards are maintained, navigate policies and funding issues, and work to increase awareness and encourage participation on RPL process. The literature shows that advisors are pivotal in ensuring that CPL assessment is a transformative experience, enhancing student motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes while also addressing the broader challenges of time-to-graduation and educational costs (Starr-Glass, 2016).

Importance of CPL in Business Education

In today's rapidly changing job market, business education provides individuals with the skills necessary to adapt and thrive. On-the-job experience helps understand business concepts and fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, technology familiarity, and adaptability - skills essential for success in the business world. One of the major advantages of recognizing work experience and prior learning in business education is that it

benefits adult learners and professionals in many ways. This approach validates their existing knowledge, supports lifelong learning, and makes education more inclusive and effective. Looking closer at how real-world experiences are integrated into the curriculum, we would find that such practices may increase student engagement and retention, ultimately preparing a more competent workforce. For example, hands-on management experience gives learners very important leadership skills. Individuals gain practical experience in team leadership, conflict resolution, strategic decision-making, and driving change within an organization by directly applying their knowledge to real-life situations. This form of experiential learning allows individuals to develop skills needed for decision-making under pressure, team building, and adaptability—all those traits that are quite hard to learn from theory. Also, the theoretical framework in finance imparts an applied knowledge of financial markets, investment approaches, risk management, and hands-on real-time data analysis. This prepares students to maneuver through the complex financial landscape with decision-making abilities that could significantly influence their organizations' success.

The CPL Process at SUNY Empire State University

In order to be eligible for the Individualized Credit for Prior Learning Assessment at SUNY Empire State University, students have to fulfill several requirements. First, a student must be actively enrolled in one of the University's degree programs. The prior learning for which the student is applying must align with the degree plan. In particular, it should align with the program's guidelines and learning objectives. The learning assessed would need to be at the college level and represent a new learning. This learning often involves application and requires critical thinking, evidences the ability to analyze, synthesize, and integrate information. Importantly, this prior learning cannot overlap with any credits the student has already received or plans to earn in upcoming courses. These criteria mean that CPL can profoundly affect the student's academic goals.

The Individualized Credit for Prior Learning program at SUNY Empire State University recognizes that college-level learning can occur in many types of professional and personal experiences, provided they represent substantial development of knowledge and skills. Credits are not granted for the experience but for the learning that has been accomplished through the jobs in which skills have been developed in a field such as business, management, leadership, technology, or creativity. Among many, this can include management positions that require decision-making, team leadership, strategic planning, and entrepreneurial ventures with a business planning and financial management requirement. Also, professional certifications (like PMP or CPA), licenses gained through extensive study, and continuing education via non-credit professional courses are used in the learning assessment.

Moreover, volunteer experiences, especially in leadership or job training positions, military training that covers specialized skills, independent research, and creative accomplishments in fields like the arts or public speaking, can qualify for CPL. Finally, learning from non-accredited programs demonstrating significant, documented learning is another example of how students can gain college-level knowledge without sitting in a traditional

classroom. The steps involved in identifying and documenting college-level learning for CPL at SUNY Empire State University ensure that the knowledge the University evaluates meets academic standards. First, students work with an academic mentor/advisor in exploring experiences and identifying areas of learning that may be eligible for credit toward their degree plan. Through reflection and self-evaluation, students focus on knowledge gained at a college level, focusing on learning that can be verified rather than simply showing student experience.

Students write a detailed description of the learning, backed by relevant evidence such as certificates or work samples, and recommend a title, level of their knowledge, and number of credits for each area of learning. These documents are submitted through the online PLA Planner system and again reviewed by a mentor/advisor, who forwards them to the Office of Prior Learning for evaluation. The Office of Prior Learning assigns a qualified evaluator to interview the student to determine the depth and applicability of the student's learning. After the interview, the evaluator completes a credit recommendation report documenting the knowledge, specific credit distributions, and classifications. Finally, the faculty committee reviews the recommendation, and if it passes, the credits are officially put into the student's degree plan. This ensures the student gets recognition for prior learning experiences and creates a more personalized and effective educational path. During that process, the role of the student's advisor becomes very important as they walk the student through the steps and explain the requirements to prepare them properly for the evaluation.

The Role of Advisors in the CPL Process at SUNY Empire State University

Advisors play an essential role in assisting students in recognizing and expressing the relevant learning outcomes from their work experiences, which can be quite difficult. For example, an advisor, often a faculty member, who can be an expert in economics, mathematics, or humanities, has to read through students' résumés and discuss his or her experiences to determine whether they have the knowledge that can translate into college credits in fields that are entirely different than their educational expertise. This sometimes requires encouraging students to reflect on their leadership roles, project management experiences, or particular skills they have gained in their jobs. To give the best-informed advice, advisors often need to search online catalogs to find college-level studies that match student’s learning. They also need to provide clear, actionable feedback geared toward helping students address weaknesses and improve the clarity of the description of knowledge to meet the assessment standards. This could include suggesting ways to improve writing style or recommending more impactful examples of experiential learning.

To further assist students, advisors create or provide templates and rubrics for Individualized Credit for Prior Learning essays. These resources help students shape their stories about experiences in learning and comprehension, ensuring that they meet the academic standards, learning outcomes, and university policies. Advisors also help students break down the iCPL process into smaller, manageable tasks and establish deadlines

for each phase of the evaluation. Lastly, they guide students through reflective activities that prompt them to examine how their experiences have influenced their learning and academic development.

Challenges and Limitations for Advisors in the CPL Process

Advisors in the individualized credit for prior learning process face several challenges and limitations (Figure 1) that hinder effective implementation. One of the greatest challenges is finding the right balance between guiding students and encouraging independence. Advisors try to inspire students to take ownership of their learning by offering just the right support to deepen their understanding while, at the same time, urging them to be actively involved in the process. Reaching this balance helps students express and reflect on their experiences in a way that will meet academic expectations.

On top of that, the CPL process is quite lengthy and involves a deep commitment by advisors to sufficiently support students. Much of an advisor's time is spent guiding students through learning description writing and reviewing related documentation, not to mention providing numerous rounds of feedback. This ongoing process gives students needed support but causes a substantial time burden for advisors. Also, connecting prior learning to academic requirements can be very complicated. Advisors must ensure the knowledge and skills presented by students align with their degree programs and educational goals. Such alignment is important to ensure that students' prior experiences meet the high academic standards expected in higher education. Another challenge advisors face pertains to the readiness and awareness of students regarding the process. Many students need time and guidance to understand the CPL process and the technology that is used to facilitate the evaluation process. Advisers may play a crucial role in clarifying for students each step of the process: from documentation and evaluation to using specific web-based tools, so that they might feel adequately prepared to meet the demands of the program. Much of the struggle an advisor will encounter is in identifying and then expressing how a student's professional and life experience is comparable to college-level academic credit.

One of the significant challenges advisors often face is identifying and conveying how a learner's professional and personal experiences can be converted into college-level academic credits. Many adult learners have years of practical experience that can be hard to match with theoretical concepts or academic learning objectives. Advisors have to bridge the gap by connecting practical knowledge to academic competencies in a way that lays out a clear path toward receiving credits. Moreover, advisors have to be aware of industry trends, certifications, new technologies, and changes in the job market demand to make sure that the credits awarded are valid and useful for learners in their future careers. It also allows advisors to align students' skills and knowledge with relevant academic content and standards. Finally, advisors need to tailor their support strategies to meet the diverse needs of students from various educational, cultural, and professional backgrounds. This requires flexibility and awareness to offer personalized guidance that aligns with each student's circumstances, ensuring that all learners can effectively navigate the CPL process.

As a result, institutions must consider how to make this process seamless yet still ensure that quality learning and support are maintained between students and their advisors.

Figure 1. Challenges and Limitations for Advisors in the CPL Process

Addressing Challenges in the CPL Process

Improving the Credit for Prior Learning process in business education can benefit students by enabling them to gain academic credits for professional and personal experiences. Yet, the process can create some challenges for students and advisors. Addressing these challenges, therefore, requires solutions that can improve communication, technology-enabled tracking, and collaborative practices. Students should be incentivized to reach out for further help, as well as share their experiences. Effective solutions will offer comprehensive support to both advisors and students to streamline the CPL process. The institutions should provide continuous training and professional development for the advisors to help them remain at the forefront of CPL best practices, industry trends, and technological advances. With the rapid evolution of industry standards and academic requirements, structured learning opportunities make it easier for advisors to identify and assess learning from different fields. This informed guidance allows advisors to assess knowledge and skills impartially, making sure that the students receive adequate credit for their experiences (Sava & Shah, 2015; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). Moreover, by training in effective communication and evaluation techniques, advisors are prepared to meet students of diverse backgrounds, which makes the CPL process fair and more consistent. In addition to advisor training, developing online tools and resources specific to the CPL process will be crucial. Online materials such as videos, workshops, or step-by-step instructions about documenting and presenting the knowledge gained from experiences are useful in providing clear guidance and reducing students' confusion and anxiety. When these resources are available to students, they can independently navigate the process, leading to higher-quality submissions and confidence in how they present their learning. Also, accessibility of resources

such as tutorials, FAQs, templates, and guides is crucial for a well-performing CPL program. Having these materials available to students throughout the entire process helps ensure that students have all the support they need at each step, minimizing confusion and improving the accuracy and completeness of their submissions. These resources serve as reference tools, helping students organize their essays and learning descriptions to meet academic standards and institutional requirements. As a result, this support takes the pressure off advisors by preparing students better and leading to fewer rounds of required rewrites. Another way institutions can support advisors is by creating a centralized CPL resource hub that acts as a one-stop shop with the necessary resources, guidelines, sample learning descriptions, and frequently asked questions. This portal should serve as an independent information hub for students, simplifying the process and giving advisors more time on other complex issues. Also, immediate access to in-depth resources helps create a more student-led learning process, which enables the advisors to provide more focused guidance. Also, improving communication between advisors and students can accelerate the CPL process. Providing clarity in communication enables students to better understand what is expected of them and any key deadlines, as well as allows advisors to provide timely and meaningful feedback. Establishing clear communication minimizes miscommunication and helps students feel supported. If students know ahead of time that they may come to their advisor with questions, they are more likely to do so, avoiding difficulties that would otherwise slow the process. Another important strategy involves the use of standardized evaluation rubrics. Rubrics help to evaluate prior learning in a fair, balanced, and objective manner, and institutions can develop and utilize them for this purpose. These standardized rubrics make it easier to grasp how to demonstrate college-level learning, clarifying for both advisors and students what is required to receive credit. These rubrics also present transparency in the evaluation process, increasing the credibility and reliability of the CPL program.

Additionally, institutions should implement customized advising strategies to address the unique needs of diverse student groups. To do so, providing professional development opportunities underlining understanding and supporting non-traditional and adult learners provides advisors with the skills to assist each student in achieving success, regardless of their background or experience level. Very often, adult learners bring valuable professional and life experiences, and personalized advising helps effectively connect these experiences with academic requirements. Advisors should be able to guide students through CPL process in a way that recognizes how each student is different, and thus, each path is different, which in turn sets up the opportunity for success for each student. One of the recent developments that can improve the Credit for Prior Learning process is the use of AI tools (e.g., Chat GPT, Gemini, or Copilot). AI tools can analyze students' resumes and personal backgrounds to identify college-level knowledge. This means that relevant skills and knowledge have a much better chance of being accurately identified, helping advisors focus their work on knowledge with the highest likelihood of earning credits. AI can also be beneficial in matching students' experiences with academic competencies and degree requirements, providing a clearer picture of how their prior learning aligns with their chosen programs. By analyzing the depth and breadth of learning, AI can recommend how many credits should be requested in the evaluation process, the learning level (introductory, intermediate, or advanced), and if this is liberal arts or applied learning. In addition, it can identify any educational gaps a student may have - areas in

which additional coursework or training will be needed to meet degree requirements. Moreover, AI can support advisors and students by providing bespoke recommendations for improving documentation—for instance, by suggesting fuller descriptions of particular learning outcomes or requesting further evidence for validated statements. AI offers a more efficient and individually tailored CPL process by assisting students in mapping their experiential history with their academic goals through the creation of individualized learning plans. This incorporation of AI into the CPL process not only empowers students to better articulate their learning but also increases the accuracy and reliability of credit evaluations. Although AI tools can provide significant benefits to the Prior Learning process, they also present important ethical challenges. One of the issues is ensuring that those evaluations supported by AI are fair and transparent.

It's essential to ensure that AI algorithms are developed to examine previous learning fairly and are monitored and adjusted to prevent unexpected discrimination against age, race, gender, or socioeconomic background. Transparency is also crucial in the process in order to help build trust in the system. Therefore, students should understand how artificial intelligence works and how tools analyze their experiences and generate recommendations. Privacy is another important issue that needs to be considered. Since AI scans personal CVs and backgrounds, institutions need to establish robust data security to protect sensitive student data. Finally, while AI suggestions can assist advisors in their work, the final decisions in assessing each student or learner should come from a qualified advisor and evaluator to strike a balance between technological efficiency and human insight, ensuring each student's unique learning experience is assessed both thoroughly and ethically.

Conclusion

The Credit for Prior Learning process presents a significant opportunity for students as it allows them to turn their past professional and personal experiences into academic credits, creating a more flexible and inclusive experience. However, this process has challenges, particularly for advisors, to balance guiding and fostering independence. They must also handle time-consuming tasks, align prior learning with academic standards, and adjust to varied student needs. Confronting these challenges requires innovative strategies like offering comprehensive training for advisors, creating centralized resource hubs, and incorporating AI tools. In this respect, AI tools could potentially bring tremendous value to the CPL process by helping with the accurate identification of skills and knowledge, recommending mapping to academic competencies, and providing focused feedback on submissions. If thoughtfully implemented - while keeping in mind data privacy, fairness, transparency, and other ethical concerns - AI can assist institutions in supporting both advisors and students. Having a balance between AI and human oversight ensures holistic evaluation of each student's unique learning.

Additionally, universal rubrics and personalized advising strategies are essential to maintain consistency and equity in assessment to be both accessible and equitable. With resources such as tutorials, templates, and a CPL resource hub that exists as centralized resources, students can be effectively guided through the process and document their learning in an independent and effective way. Also, merging technology with more targeted

support methods enhances the quality of the CPL process while supporting lifelong learning and student success. As higher education continues to evolve, refining the CPL process will play a crucial role in acknowledging varied forms of learning, cultivating a flexible workforce, and fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

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