



Advancing Graduate Education Through Credit for Prior Learning: A Framework for Equity, Access, and Academic Success

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Introduction

Graduate students are coming to University of Phoenix with prior learning and work experience, and the University has a program for them to pursue credit for their relevant experience. However, prospective and matriculating students may be unaware of the existing graduate credit for prior learning offerings. The opportunity also exists to expand the offerings across more Colleges and programs to increase the number of students who can apply relevant work experience towards the completion of their degree. Andrews et al. noted that, “Today, most of the bachelor’s degree programs at the University of Phoenix do not have a minimum credit requirement for admission, but students are still encouraged to explore and leverage credits for prior learning (CPL) opportunities to reduce time and financial cost of their degree” (2023, p. 4). Investigating similar ways to provide graduate students with the same opportunities to save time and money should be pursued.

Preliminary data has shown at University of Phoenix that students who are successful in earning graduate credit for prior learning are more likely to successfully complete their degree. Developing mechanisms through which adult learners can capitalize on learning from their prior professional experiences to earn graduate credit will broaden access to educational opportunities, facilitating enrollment for a larger more diverse cohorts of students.

Background

According to CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), there are ten recommended standards for assessing prior learning (Ten Standards for Assessing Learning, 2024). The ten standards enable institutions to set criteria for reviewing evidence of learning so that students may be assessed for academic credit, and are summarized here:

- Credit is given for learning, not for time spent or experience.
- Assessment helps and enables future learning.
- Assessment uses clear, shared criteria for outcomes.
- Experts decide credit and competence levels.
- Assessment promotes equity and access for all.
- Institutions guide and support learners in assessment.
- Assessment policies are created inclusively and shared widely.
- Assessment fees are based on services, not credit awarded.
- Assessors receive ongoing training and development.
- Assessment programs are regularly reviewed and updated.

Under the guidance provided by CAEL, institutions of higher education possess a distinctive ability to harness prior experiential learning and confer academic credit to students for achievements earned beyond traditional classroom settings. Through the implementation of credit for prior learning (CPL), or prior learning assessment (PLA) methodologies,^[1] students eligible for credit gain various advantages including cost and time savings as well as increased confidence and self-esteem in progressing through their degree program. Universities can realize substantial dividends by embracing these initiatives, as evidenced by increased graduation rates and enhanced student achievement (Rust & Ikard, 2016).

Universities that acknowledge outside certifications and trainings as CPL can speed up the degree completion time for students, with the potential to improve graduation rates. Additionally, for some small sample sizes, graduate level students who complete an assessment portfolio, which could include certifications and trainings, have noted the benefits of increased confidence and self-esteem (Lordly, 2007).

While some universities are providing graduate-level CPL to students through varying methodologies and requirements, the adoption of a comprehensive array of graduate-level CPL remains uncommon in academic practice. In 2007, Eveslage and Taitsman urged that “The time may be right to consider graduate portfolio assessment as a strategy to serve our adult graduate students. Changing student behaviors as well as the possibility of graduate education reform are indicators that implementing programs may be timely and practical” (pg. 48). Yet, over a decade later, opportunities to earn graduate CPL remain relatively limited in higher education.

Learning From Prior Work Experience

Whether completing a degree online or at a traditional ground campus, graduate students generally are entering their programs with years of prior work experience. As such, there is a need to provide more opportunities for these students to utilize this in their graduate degree programs. According to

the 2023 *Financial Times* Global MBA Ranking, the average student in the top 20 full-time MBA programs had just over five years of work experience. LinkedIn research puts the average figure for U.S. schools at 5.2 years, while *U.S. News & World Report* has the figure at four years and two months (Harland, 2023).

The amount of work experience for these students can be even higher depending on the structure of the MBA program. Of the 201 part-time programs in the *U.S. News* ranking, the average work experience of those students was six years and seven months, and for the 28 ranked executive MBA programs the number doubled to 14 years and eight months of work experience (Kowarski, 2022).

Ultimately, the amount of work experience graduate students bring into their programs is contingent upon various elements, such as prior professional background, geographical context, and individual-specific factors; but it is fair to say that these students come with substantial experience – and learning. Given the limited prevalence of graduate CPL, this data exposes a heightened need to provide mechanisms for employed students to leverage their learning from expertise while completing their degree, and thus saving time and money in the process.

Recognizing this need, in 2019, University of Phoenix developed a graduate level PLA package. Since 2020, University of Phoenix has awarded 111 credits to 37 graduate students who have successfully completed CPL utilizing our graduate level PLA package. Of those students, the average grade point average (GPA) was a 3.83 and all have either graduated or are on track to graduate. Students who did not utilize PLA opportunities held an average GPA of 3.13.

Creating processes to award CPL at the graduate level also do not have to be monolithic. For example, Chatham University (n.d) extends opportunities for earning credit by allowing students to either compile a portfolio showcasing their fulfillment of course-related learning objectives or by successfully completing a challenge examination. Old Dominion University allows graduate students to take an examination, submit a training evaluation or develop a portfolio to earn up to six hours of graduate credit (Old Dominion University Office of Prior Learning Assessment, 2018). Thomas Edison State University follows a similar approach, awarding credit for submission of a portfolio after approval of a completed Graduate PLA Proposal Form (Thomas Edison State University, 2019).

The process at University of Phoenix grants graduate CPL options across multiple subject areas so more of our students can utilize this opportunity. Successful completion of the graduate CPL package enables eligible individuals the ability to save time and money as they progress towards graduation while also leveraging learning from personal experiences that can create an affinity between the student and the institution.

Understanding Undergraduate CPL and Implications for Graduate CPL

As a standard process at University of Phoenix, CPL at the undergraduate level is submitted to the CPL department and evaluated. At University of Phoenix, CPL at the undergraduate level for individualized content and submissions can be earned through several avenues:

Professional Portfolio

Students can submit valid licenses, on-the-job training documents and certifications for review for potential credits.

Life Experience

Individuals can write from first person experience with no research, citations, or references needed. The first-person journal will come with requirements such as word counts, the Kolb's model in which it is written, as well as APA formatting. Multiple journals can be written to cover up to a potential maximum of 30 credits to a bachelor's degree or 15 credits to an associate degree. If a student's journal does not meet the requirements, they can resubmit it one time for an additional evaluation.

PLA Required Course of Study (RCOS) Waivers

Individuals may utilize industry certifications to waive from a required course of study within their program. If a student has completed an industry exam providing them with a valid certification and the University has an aligned course with that industry certification, it may be potentially waived under specific guidelines and transfer activity requirements.

PLA Transcripts

When a student applies to the University, they complete an admissions application listing all schools they have attended. Accredited degree granting institutions are evaluated by the Office of Admissions and Evaluation (OAE). Schools without acceptable accreditation or non-degree granting will be evaluated by Prior Learning Assessment as a PLA Transcript Evaluation to determine if college level learning eligible for credit occurred.

Since 2020, the University of Phoenix has awarded 132,613 undergraduate credits. The credit totals awarded through different PLA opportunities are: 55,887 through PLA Transcripts; 38,377 through PLA waivers; 33,706 through professional licensure; 4,442 through journal or essay topics; and 201 through corporate trainings.

These different approaches recognize the relevance and value of individual experiences and enable students to capitalize on their professional experience within the workforce to earn credits applicable toward their undergraduate degrees. Given the prevalence of workplace experience among graduate students, similar provisions should be extended to this cohort. Graduate Prior Learning Assessment application of credits total 2,713, while 93 of those credits have been applied specifically using our graduate level PLA packages. Expanding the marketing and socialization around opportunities for graduate credit for prior learning will only increase the amount of students that are able to take advantage of these offerings at University of Phoenix.

Diversity and Expanded Access

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, or WICHE, and CAEL (Klein-Collins, et al., 2020) studied data from over 72 postsecondary institutions for the 2011-2012 school year until 2018 and the data confirmed what was widely assumed about the usage of CPL: "Across all major student subgroups analyzed, there were significantly higher rates of completing any credential for adult PLA

students compared with adult non-PLA students. The subgroups studied included gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic performance, and types of institutions.”

The same study found that certain types of CPL could help close equity gaps that currently exist for students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, income levels and educational histories. The key component here is that access to the various types of CPL must also be equitable. To ensure more equitable access to CPL opportunities, colleges and universities need to invest in targeted messaging, better outreach and advising, and more institutional support for diverse student populations (Klein-Collins, et al., 2020).

Further analysis of the 2020 findings evaluated whether CPL could help reduce inequity within higher education for minority and low-income students. Initial results reported in *Equity Paradoxes in The PLA Boost* (Klein-Collins et al., 2021) showed that “PLA/CPL credit boosted credential completed of Black adult students by 23 percentage points, Hispanic adult students by 47 percentage points, and adult Pell Grant recipients (lower income) by 28 percentage points.” With the impact more fully understood, the challenge now is addressing awareness and support for these student populations so that they can utilize CPL at higher rates moving forward.

Approach to Graduate Credit for Prior Learning

At University of Phoenix, the process for earning graduate CPL is distinct from its undergraduate counterpart. Acknowledging the infrequency of graduate-level PLA within the broader landscape of higher education, University of Phoenix has undertaken a deliberate initiative to innovate within the pedagogical realm. This initiative focuses on ensuring that students leverage CPL at the graduate level, and similar to the undergraduate process, adhere to requisite standards and also demonstrate the competencies and skills relevant to the courses they seek to substitute.

When completing the graduate CPL packages, students are required to not only demonstrate prior professional experience within the domain but also to utilize their acquired knowledge to showcase a comprehensive grasp of course learning objectives. These packages are developed in alignment with the equivalent program curriculum and reviewed by faculty subject matter experts. Through the successful completion of these rigorous requirements the University can ensure the student has enough mastery of the subject matter to earn credit in place of the equivalent course.

An advantage associated with the graduate CPL packages offered at University of Phoenix is the element of faculty support. In this context, faculty members assigned to evaluate the outcomes of prior learning package requirements play a dual role, answering questions related to the requirements and addressing inquiries about writing assignments. The availability of faculty support during the completion of the graduate package stands as a distinctive feature setting it apart from its undergraduate counterpart.

Graduate Level CPL Packages

Due to the absence of general education requirements in graduate programs, CPL is tied to specific content areas needed in the program. It is paramount to emphasize that, even with the introduction of graduate CPL, the outcomes and objectives of the substituted course content must align with the

overarching goals of the graduate program. This alignment is rigorously maintained to safeguard the academic integrity of the curriculum and outcomes for the degree programs.

Currently, students in the traditional MBA program [ij] at University of Phoenix can leverage their professional expertise, thereby earning up to nine PLA credits. Given the concurrent nature of earning CPL alongside MBA coursework, students can shorten their time to graduation by up to 18 weeks. Prospective MBA candidates may possess specialized business experience, such as in accounting, or have prior involvement in the corporate realm, but may wish to engage in a more conventional pedagogical approach to coursework and peer interaction.

By offering CPL at the graduate level, University of Phoenix assists students in the traditional MBA program to save time and money, while setting them up for success in a modality that best fits their preferred learning style.

Conclusion

While the use of graduate CPL has been utilized on a limited basis for years by several institutions, it is still not regularly offered in most graduate programs. University of Phoenix has seen firsthand the success that students can have in their MBA programs after leveraging a graduate CPL package. The data shows that many professionals looking to go back to school who have several years of post-baccalaureate experience related to the graduate degree they are interested in could benefit from the CPL process. Graduate-level CPL also reduces the student's time to degree completion and increases their motivation, which is associated with improved graduation rates at institutions (Hackett, 2017). When students understand how to apply their learning from prior work experience toward earning a graduate degree, University of Phoenix has found that these students are better positioned to graduate on time and with less debt. Assistance from academic counselors and faculty members in helping students determine what, if any, prior work experience could translate into Graduate PLA credit is also important. In the PLA Boost (Klein-Collins, et al., 2020), the authors specifically call out the importance of targeting CPL/PLA marketing and advising efforts to student populations that have completion or opportunity gaps, arguing that "institutions need to make PLA a mandatory component of adult student advising, with special strategies for encouraging key populations to pursue PLA options." University of Phoenix understands the value of leveraging learning from life and work experience and shares that broadly through student messaging and external communications.

Strategic expansion of CPL offerings at the graduate level will increase the number of students eligible to utilize relevant work experience. The PLA equity report, based on the 72-institution study published by CAEL and WICHE, called out the importance of expanding CPL offerings: "PLA/CPL benefits lower-income adults and adult students of color in terms of credential completion, but fewer of the Black and lower-income adult students are receiving that credit" (Klein-Collins et al., 2021). The significance of higher education accessibility for all students, irrespective of their socioeconomic background or societal standing, cannot be overstated. It is vital to conduct more research to better understand how these specific populations can be reached and supported in their utilization of CPL.

Institutional facilitation of CPL access shortens time to graduation and reduces financial burdens associated with tuition costs for repeating content or acquired knowledge. This, in turn, increases

opportunities for prospective students who might have previously encountered barriers hindering their access to or pursuit of higher education goals.

Endnotes

[i] It should be noted that University of Phoenix uses prior learning assessment (PLA) interchangeably with credit for prior learning (CPL). While recent academic trends have moved towards the use of CPL and University of Phoenix has adopted the term, references are still made to PLA to better support how it is visible or referenced for students.

[ii] University of Phoenix offers a traditional 33 credit, 17-month MBA program along with a Competency-based MBA program that students can complete in under 12 months. The MBA-CB program is a fit for students who have previous work experience in the field and prefer a more flexible, independent learning experience than a traditional program.

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Natalie Pratt has served University of Phoenix since 2014, first in curriculum and design as faculty, and most recently, as the Associate Dean of Business Programs in the College of Business and Information Technology. In her current role, Pratt supports the college in curriculum design and development, faculty support, vendor relationships and academic operations. She is a member of Association of International Certified Professional Accountants (AICPA) and SHRM, and has more than 16 years of experience in education, currently holding a secondary education teaching certificate for the State of Arizona. Pratt has a Master of Education in Cultural Studies degree from Ohio University, a Master of Counseling degree from Arizona State University and a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education from Ohio University. She completed her MBA at University of Phoenix.

