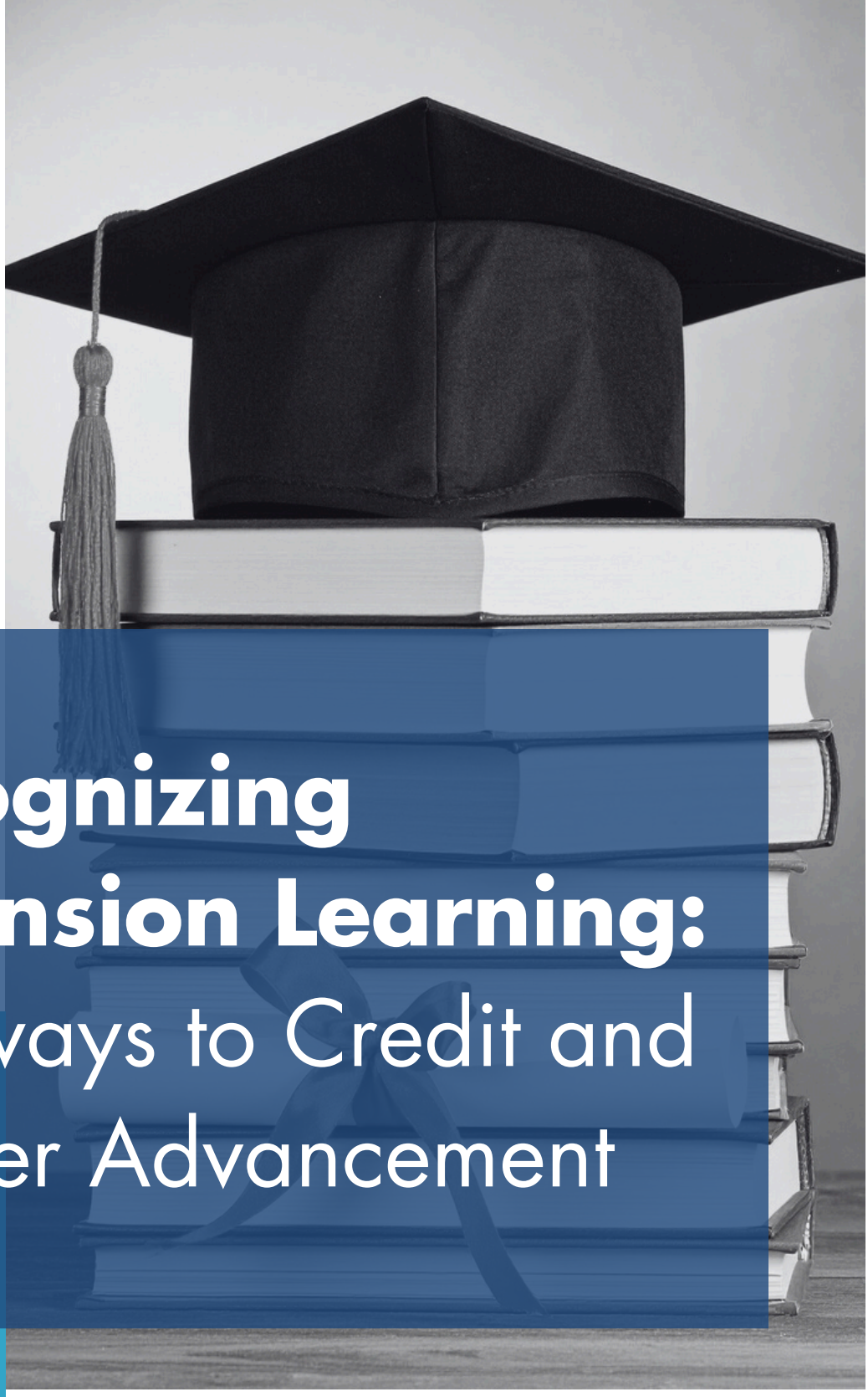
RECOGNIZING EXTENSION LEARNING BRIEF



Recognizing Extension Learning: Pathways to Credit and Career Advancement

By Sarah Torres Lugo

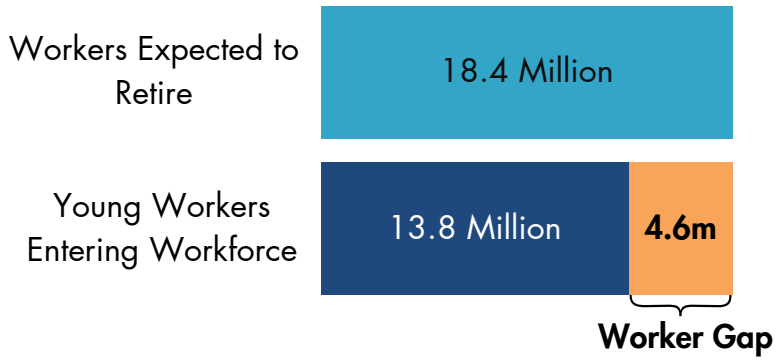
NCHEMS

02

The Opportunity

Between 2024 and 2032, 18.4 million workers with postsecondary education are expected to retire, while only 13.8 million younger workers with postsecondary education will enter the workforce, resulting in a 4.6 million gap in the number of workers with postsecondary education. This gap is expected to worsen as the economy adds 685,000 new jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education and training [1]. At the same time, individuals in the labor force without postsecondary education have already developed knowledge and skills through other learning experiences, including work. These experiences could be made more visible to employers and education providers to advance their educational and professional goals.

Workers with Postsecondary Education 2024-2032



[1] Falling Behind: How Skills Shortages Threaten Future Jobs | Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce

An assortment of strategies, implemented by various organizations, can help meet this challenge. This brief focuses on strategies for recognizing learning by documenting validated knowledge and skills through Cooperative Extension[2].

Extension is a public service mission of land-grant institutions that puts research into practice in the community through contextualized programs and services. Extension has an office in or near every county across the nation and delivers low-cost or free noncredit education. Extension programming spans diverse topics, including agricultural management, forest management, safe food handling, youth leadership development, financial literacy, nutrition education, and many others, through which participants develop valuable, career-relevant skills. In 2018, Extension made nearly 100 million direct education contacts with adults and youth[3], and a more concerted effort to document and validate that learning could help individuals move further along with their educational and professional goals.

In 2018, Extension made nearly 100 million direct education contacts with adults and youth.

Each icon represents approximately five million direct education contacts.

Two relevant and complementary approaches that can support the recognition of Extension learning are Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and skills validation. CPL provides pathways for learners to receive academic credit for past learning. Skills validation is broader than CPL, as it is not just a method for assigning academic credit to noncredit learning experiences. Skills validation occurs when tangible evidence that demonstrates an individual's knowledge, skills, and behaviors is generated and evaluated against established criteria[4]. To be most beneficial for the learner, validated skills must be documented in a clear, consistent way that easily translates into skills frameworks in a variety of contexts for educational and/or professional advancement.

This brief examines how postsecondary institutions and Extension can each contribute to recognition pathways.

[2] For brevity's sake, the system is referred to as Extension going forward.
[3] Summary of direct contacts reported by extension offices in the 2018 annual reports submitted. Reports since do not have this level of detail, as it is no longer required.
[4] Skills Validation Solutions: Observations, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations for Action | C-BEN

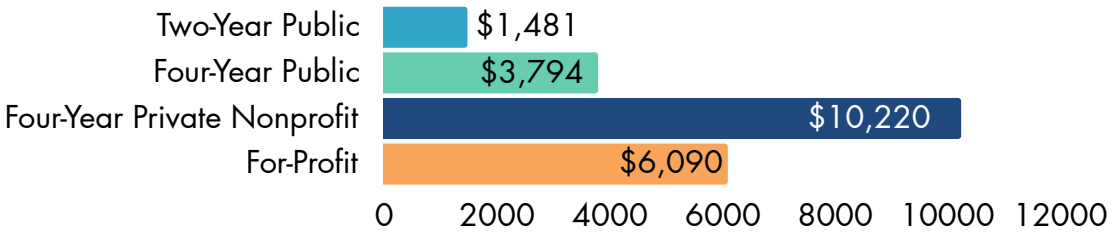
04

Postsecondary Institution's Role

Many postsecondary institutions, including the land-grant institutions that host Extension, lack clear policies and processes to recognize students' prior learning. However, Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) offers pathways for individuals to verify and earn credit for knowledge, skills, and abilities they have gained outside of credit-bearing courses. Specifically, all institutions, but especially the land-grant institutions offering Extension, should build tighter connections between CPL policies and Extension learning.

Not only do students stand to gain from further policy development in this area, but so do the postsecondary institutions that serve them by improving on their student outcome metrics, including higher credential completion, reduced costs, and reduced time to completion. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), in partnership with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), conducted a study examining the use and impact of prior learning assessment (PLA) [5] on adult student outcomes using student record data from 72 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States.[6] The researchers conducted a multivariate analysis using propensity score matching to isolate the impact of PLA on adult student credential completion. They found that PLA increased the likelihood of an adult student's completion by more than 17%. Adult students who earned PLA credit saved, on average, $1,481 at two-year public institutions, $3,794 at four-year public institutions, $10,220 at four-year private nonprofit institutions, and $6,090 at for-profit institutions.

PLA Credit Savings on Average for Adult Students



[5] The term Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) is commonly used interchangeably with Prior Learning Assessment (PLA).
[6] The PLA Boost | CAEL & WICHE

There are a variety of methods for CPL that support the recognition of learning. CPL typically results in credit hours, competencies, exemption, certification, and/or advanced academic standing. A description of CPL methods follows. Among CPL methods, evaluation of noncredit programs, articulation agreements, and portfolio assessment are most aligned with Extension's programming, which emphasizes the practical application of concepts from various disciplines. Standardized exams, while valuable for discrete academic subjects with well-defined content areas, are less suited to evaluating interdisciplinary learning done through Extension.

1) Evaluation of Noncredit Programs

a. Through national frameworks such as the American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations for military coursework.
b. Through credential review by subject matter experts to determine if the learning behind a certification, license, micro-credential/digital badge, completion of a registered apprenticeship, or other credential awarded by organizations outside of higher education is applicable toward a student's degree progress.

2) Articulation Agreements/Crosswalks/Equivalency Matrices

a. Faculty map learning objectives from noncredit programming — such as Extension programming — to credit-bearing courses and create articulation agreements, crosswalks, or equivalency matrices between Extension programs and credit-bearing courses. This can be implemented retroactively — where the learner may complete their experience with Extension and then express interest in articulating to credit-bearing courses — or proactively, where the learner begins work in Extension with the express intent of articulating that learning into a credit-bearing program, and there is an established path for doing so.

3) Portfolio Assessment

a. Faculty evaluate a portfolio of evidence provided by the learner demonstrating how they have achieved the breadth and depth of learning outcomes of the academic course they are seeking credit for.

4) Exams

a. Standardized exams such as those offered by the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), Advanced Placement (AP), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), Excelsior College Examinations (ECEs), and others.
b. Faculty-developed comprehensive exams at the institutional level, such as challenge or departmental exams.

06

Examples of Land-Grant Institution CPL Policies

While many land-grant institutions supporting Extension lack explicit policies for recognizing learning from Extension programming, NCHEMS found several examples of land-grant institutions that offer pathways for recognizing learning from a variety of experiences. These policies demonstrate that there is existing institutional capacity for CPL that could be adapted to explicitly include Extension learning.

University of Alaska – Fairbanks' CPL handbook states that University-level learning may come from a variety of sources, including non-accredited training, in-service workshops, independent research, volunteer activities, employment, and hobbies. The handbook lists the following methods for assessing CPL: portfolio, CLEP tests, Credit by Exam, BYU Foreign Language Testing Service, or evaluation of certificates and licenses through the American Council on Education (ACE).

University of Idaho's academic procedures list the following CPL methods: Advanced Placement Examinations (AP); CLEP; International Baccalaureate (IB); General Certificate of Education Examinations (A-Level); Global Assessment Certificate Examinations (GAC); DSST; credit by examination, portfolio, technical competence, and vertical course credit; and military courses.

University of Maine's undergraduate catalog lists the following CPL methods: AP exams; CLEP; DSST; IB exams taken at the Higher Level; various language proficiency exams; ACE recommendations for military coursework; competency-based challenge exams offered by select departments at UMaine; credential review for certain certifications, licenses, micro-credentials/badges, registered apprenticeships, or other credentials which originate from organizations outside of a higher education setting; and academic portfolio assessment.

For guidance on planning and implemetation of CPL policies, check out the resources we collected in our Appendix.

Extension's Role

As a major provider of noncredit education, Extension has an immense opportunity in structuring programming that best positions the learner to progress toward their educational and/or professional goals.

One approach Extension systems are exploring is offering short-term credentials that provide formal documentation of learning. While a variety of definitions for short-term credentials exist, the Learn & Work Ecosystem describes them in the following way:

> *"Short-term credentials may include licenses issued by state or federal governments, certificates awarded by postsecondary institutions, and certifications awarded by industry organizations. The credentials validate specific occupational skills or competencies. They are often designed to quickly prepare individuals for employment or career advancement and may be credit-bearing or noncredit, stackable toward degrees, or stand-alone." [7]*

The World Economic Forum estimates that between 2025 and 2030, 59% of workers globally will need to pursue training to meet the evolving skill demands. Ongoing skill development is becoming essential, and short-term credentials could help meet the rising demand for it[8]. However, there has been a proliferation of short-term credentials across the U.S., and there is a lack of evidence that these credentials have had clearly positive employment outcomes. There is still more work to do to ensure that these credentials serve learners, and that begins with capturing quality information about the short-term credential, the learner, and short-term and long-term outcomes.

Since degrees continue to have the strongest evidence of positive employment outcomes, noncredit to credit pathways continue to be important. NCHEMS found one example of a land-grant institution with established noncredit to credit articulation specifically for Extension learners. University of Missouri Extension offers five noncredit certificate programs that, if a learner chooses, can be converted for credit[9]. Currently, these include:

- Noncredit certificate in Supply Chain Analytics.
- Noncredit certificate in Construction Management.
- Noncredit certificate in Clinical Engineering.
- Noncredit certificate in Public Management.
- Noncredit certificate in Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care.

However, this noncredit-to-credit conversion policy is limited to these five certificate programs and applies only at the University of Missouri, illustrating the need for more scalable models.

[7] Learn & Work Ecosystem Library Glossary
[8] Future of Jobs Report 2025 | World Economic Forum
[9] Non-credit to for-credit conversion policy | MU Extension

Developing Extension programming with skills validation as a priority from the outset creates more opportunities for recognition of learning (including CPL) since it frontloads critical steps for establishing pathways — namely, identifying and defining skills learners are intended to gain through the program, determining evidence and evaluation methods, and documenting the outcomes of the evaluation in a clear, consistent way that is trusted and easily translated into a variety of contexts[10].

Scalable approaches to developing crosswalks between Cooperative Extension programming and for-credit academic coursework — particularly in Extension programming where national curriculum frameworks exist — could be aided by a skills-validation approach. Examples of national Extension programming include Master Gardener and 4-H Youth Development. A coordinated national or regional initiative could make learning from these programs more visible, so participants can directly build on them towards their educational and/or professional goals. Applying a skills validation framework to develop crosswalks from Extension programming to for-credit academic coursework would likely be best approached as a pilot initiative and include the following:

- Establish governance, funding streams, and accountability structures for the effort.
- Identify programming that is consistently delivered widely and aligned to skills development, prioritizing programming teaching in-demand skills.
- Identify and define skills learners are intended to gain through the program.
- Develop standardized processes for assessing evidence of skill attainment.
- Collaborate with faculty groups in fields related to the Extension program, representative of a variety of institutional contexts, to create matrices mapping Extension learning objectives to college-level coursework.
- Develop stackable credential documentation (such as badges for individual competencies, certificates for competency collections) that supports pathways to both academic credit and employment, recognizing that learning done through Extension may align with portions of academic courses rather than full course equivalences.
- Evaluate outcomes and refine the approach based on stakeholder feedback.
- Share findings through Extension networks.

Alternatively, Extension could partner with organizations that review noncredit learning experiences to develop pathways for academic credit and career advancement. For example, the American Council on Education (ACE) has evaluated and recommended credit for military service and training since 1954 through a contract with the Department of Defense and for non-military experiences through other partnerships. ACE's evaluations

[10] Skills Validation Guidebook | Education Design Lab

for credit recommendations are conducted by college and university faculty members who are actively teaching in the areas they review[11]. When an individual completes an ACE-evaluated program listed in the ACE National Guide (for non-military experience) or the ACE Military Guide, they get an official transcript. The transcript includes credit recommendations and competencies learned in the ACE-reviewed programs, serving as a validated record of their learning for transfer to college or to seek new employment opportunities. This model serves as an example of a robust system for validating competencies learned and recommending credit for noncredit learning that has been successfully implemented at scale across institution types. ACE evaluation is one pre-existing process Extension could pursue for developing pathways for academic credit and career advancement for Extension's widely delivered programs.

Barriers to Implementation

Despite the clear need and available frameworks, CPL policies and skills validation for Extension learning remain limited in practice. Based on conversations with Extension leaders through NCHEMS' work, several interconnected barriers help explain why recognition pathways have not developed at scale. While this brief does not offer a comprehensive analysis of barriers, this section describes significant challenges warranting attention.

[11] About Evaluations, Credits, and Transcripts | American Council on Education

A major foundational challenge is a misalignment of existing structures and current needs. Postsecondary education systems were largely designed to serve students who enrolled directly from high school and pursued degrees full-time. These legacy structures create friction when serving learners with different life experiences, including adult learners seeking to reskill or upskill while working.

Additionally, noncredit education, including Extension programming, was developed outside of degree-granting structures. This divide has produced separate curricula, data systems, learner support services, and administrative processes that now complicate efforts to build noncredit-to-credit pathways. Moreover, Extension's decentralized organizational structure, often operating at considerable distance from campus academic units, further reduces the host institution's understanding of Extension's offerings and potential for coordination to build credit pathways.

Recent national research by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) [12], with participation from nearly 400 U.S. and Canadian undergraduate-serving, degree-granting institutions, examined CPL implementation. The study found that institutional leaders report many benefits, such as enhanced degree completion and progression and cost reduction for learners. However, AACRAO also noted several challenges which require cross-functional collaboration to overcome. These CPL-specific challenges also apply more broadly to skills validation efforts that are not limited to academic credit conversions. Challenges include a lack of resources and staffing; inconsistent policies and procedures across departments or colleges; limited awareness and understanding experienced by learners and institutional staff; technology and systems limitations; and transfer and articulation issues.

Based on these initial findings, developing pathways to recognize Extension learning requires strategic investments in staffing, data infrastructure, and cross-unit coordination to document and validate learning outcomes, and to integrate Extension programming into formal academic pathways. Without these investments, Extension's substantial contributions to workforce skill development remain underleveraged, representing a significant missed opportunity for addressing workforce needs.

[12] Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusion: The 2024 Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning in U.S. and Canadian Higher Education | AACRAO

Closing Thoughts

Extension serves learners with diverse goals and intentions and at various points in their lives. Some might have a clear intention of seeking academic credit pathways, while others might be more interested in validated documentation of their learning to secure a job or promotion. Failing to clearly characterize and document participants' engagement with Extension in a way that they can use it with postsecondary institutions and employers does a disservice to Extension participants. The scale of Extension's reach — nearly 100 million direct education contacts with adults and youth in 2018 — underscores the urgency of strengthening recognition pathways.

Making Extension learning visible through trusted documentation could help remove barriers to educational and employment advancement, which is urgent for meeting growing workforce needs. While cultural, structural, technological, and financial barriers limit the development of pathways to recognizing learning done through Extension, these barriers are not insurmountable. Progress requires coordinated action.

Recognition of Extension learning requires shifts in culture and policy. Institutions and employers without a culture that values noncredit learning will make it challenging to develop recognition pathways. Developing a culture willing to recognize noncredit learning requires engagement with a variety of stakeholders, including academic departments, adult learning units, registration, admissions, career services, information technology services, communications, and student services, as well as workforce development boards and industry and employer organizations.

With enabling culture and policies in place, effective documentation and recognition of Extension learning will require technological systems that capture competency data, enable portability of that information across platforms, and facilitate articulation agreements and employer validation. While existing learning management systems, digital badging platforms, and learning and employment record systems provide adaptable foundations, implementation requires careful attention to interoperability standards, data governance, user experience, and training. Incremental progress through pilot programs and partnerships can build toward a future where Extension learners more readily leverage their learning to advance their goals. Better documentation would simultaneously strengthen Extension's role as a bridge connecting community-based learning to formal educational and employment pathways by enhancing its ability to demonstrate measurable outcomes to stakeholders, including those who fund its programs.

14

Appendix - Guidance to Adopt CPL Policies

The following planning and implementation resources offer guidance for institutions, systems, and states seeking to adopt more robust CPL policies.

- Advance CTE and Education Strategy Group convened the Credit for Prior Learning Shared Solutions Workgroup. Their work resulted in the development of a policy benchmark tool for use at the state, system, and institutional level as well as a messaging toolkit for engaging stakeholders. The policy benchmark tool helps users understand and document state, system, and institutional CPL ecosystems; leverage a framework to improve CPL effectiveness; identify strengths and areas for improvement in CPL policy and practice; and create an action plan to improve CPL effectiveness.
- The ACE and CAEL database allows users to search CPL policies for all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, with filters for location, source, and policy themes. The accompanying report presents findings from the state-by-state inventory and provides reflections on how states and systems might engage with CPL at the policy level.
- The American Council on Education (ACE) developed an institutional self-assessment to gauge practice across five functional areas: (1) academic engagement, (2) student support and outreach, (3) institutional supports, (4) technical capacity/data, and (5) ecosystem engagement.
- CAEL's Ten Standards for Assessing Learning.
- CAEL's The Four Stages of Building an Effective and Inclusive CPL Program.
- CAEL'S business model considerations for CPL efforts.