

Credit Where Credit Is Due: Redesigning Prior Learning Assessment Under the Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program

Overview: The Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program (CHAMP) was a four-year, U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Act-funded project under which nine colleges, including seven community colleges, worked with employers to develop a pipeline of qualified advanced manufacturing workers.

The Rutgers University Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) was the third-party evaluator for CHAMP, assessing how the program worked and how successful it was in meeting its goals. As part of its evaluation, EERC looked at efforts by CHAMP and non-CHAMP colleges to rethink the way they credit students for knowledge and skills gained outside the classroom.

Prior Learning Assessment: People enroll in college at various stages in their lives and careers. For more than 40 years, Colorado colleges have awarded credits to students with workplace experience or specialized training, including military training. Until CHAMP, however, there had been no centralized process. Colleges assessed students for prior learning in different ways—some relying on standardized tests, others allowing students to submit portfolios of their work—and charged different fees for assessment (anywhere from \$13 per credit to \$62 per credit). Many failed to clearly inform students of the availability of prior learning assessment.

New Policies and Procedures: Colorado colleges are in the early stages of improving students' experiences with prior learning assessment, following guidance issued by a committee of college representatives, experts in adult learning, and industry leaders. Changes include:

- Providing trainings, webinars, and information sessions on prior learning assessment to faculty, advisors, and staff;
- Developing a plan to market prior learning assessment to students;
- Complying with a state mandate to create “challenge tests” that allow students to earn credit for any general education course without completing the course material;
- Creating “crosswalks”—charts that show the connection between prior learning experiences and their college equivalent—to ensure students, particularly those with military training, receive specific course credit, not just elective credit;
- Accepting portfolios of past work and, in some cases, encouraging students to submit portfolios, rather than take an exam.

Faculty Response: Because committee members lacked the authority to institute changes on their own, it was critical that they get buy-in from college faculty. The willingness of faculty to embrace prior learning assessment varied significantly from college to college and department to department. Some were concerned

it would undermine full-time enrollment and academic standards. Others were open to standardized testing for prior learning but skeptical of portfolios because they considered them time-consuming or less rigorous. Despite these concerns, committee members have seen increasing faculty acceptance of prior learning assessment, which they attribute to their own efforts to raise awareness and the enthusiasm of faculty already "on board." Some schools have hired outside contractors to handle portfolio evaluation, taking the burden off faculty.

Student Response: Some colleges are already seeing a modest uptick in student awareness of, and application for, prior learning assessment. Most, however, are not yet prepared to accommodate a significant rise in interest and are currently training additional advisors and registration staff to field questions from students, particularly those with a military background, and explain their options.

To read EERC's full report on prior learning assessment and find out more about its evaluation of CHAMP, visit <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/content/colorado-helps-advanced-manufacturing-program-champ-evaluation>.