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RECOGNIZING PRIOR LEARNING FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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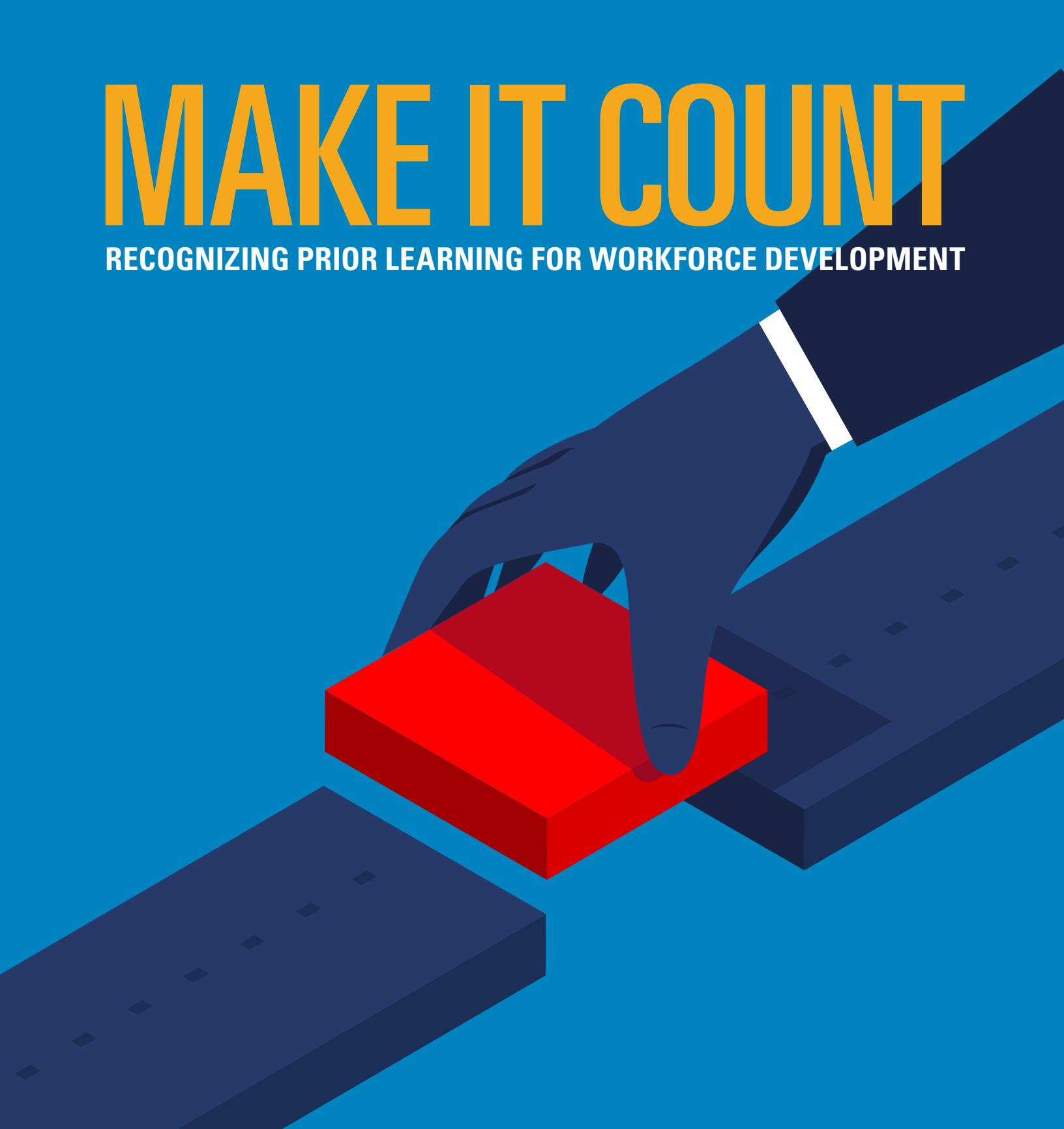
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Community college students often hold knowledge from various professional and academic experiences. A challenge for these students, and for their institutions and employers, is how to formally bridge these competencies to support students' efforts to reach their academic and career goals. This issue brief looks at the practice of awarding credit for prior learning, known as prior learning assessments (PLA), as part of community colleges' workforce development strategies. It is part of a series of ACCT reports focusing on best practices and innovative strategies for workforce development. This brief builds on the previously published reports *Partnerships for a Future-Ready Workforce* (2018) and the *College-Work Balancing Act* (2019).

Prior learning assessments enable colleges to award students with formal credit for their experiences both in and out of the classroom. These experiences frequently include prior work and employer-based training, military experience, and skills-focused courses and bootcamps. Conducting PLA is not a new process for community colleges; however, federal policies such as the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) programs and state-based policies have encouraged colleges to expand the practice for the purpose of workforce development. Community colleges seeking to support adult students have also used the practice in order to support their efforts to bridge competencies, to more quickly earn a relevant credential, and to advance in their respective careers. Furthermore, as the practice of awarding credit for prior learning has expanded, many national employers, such as Facebook and Google, have partnered with community colleges to design training programs that can translate to academic credit through the PLA process.

This issue brief serves as a primer on past and current developments in PLA, including how the strategy can help students bridge workforce and academic competencies, and how it can be incorporated into strategies for workforce development. In the first section, we introduce past and current developments in PLAs. In the second, we describe the various cohorts of students who benefit most from PLA, including veterans and non-traditional students.

In addition, this paper includes two examples of institutions that implement PLA in interesting and valuable ways. First, Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College created a degree specific to students who enter with PLA credits and streamlined statewide policy to increase efficiency. Second, the Dallas County Community College District partnered with StraighterLine, a non-traditional education provider, to create pathways with guaranteed transfer in business and criminal justice.

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AWARDING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

Awarding students credit for prior learning is not a new trend. Throughout the past century, prior learning has transitioned from solely being awarded through College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests and Advanced Placement (AP) tests to a more flexible system that gives students more opportunities to earn PLA credit.[1] The American Council on Education (ACE) helped push forward access to military and occupational PLA, and a wide variety of stakeholders are making advances today.[2]

Recent research on PLA indicates the positive effect the strategy has had on degree completion. The Council for Adult and Experimental Learning (CAEL) conducted a study on PLA and adult student outcomes. The study examined data on 62,475 adult students at 48 colleges and universities across the country. CAEL found that students with PLA credits had higher persistence rates and a faster time to degree completion. Specifically, CAEL found that adult students who received any amount of PLA credit were, on average, two and a half times more likely to complete their degrees than students who did not receive PLA credit.[3]

Additionally, a 2019 paper on the impact of CLEP exams found that students who pass a CLEP exam are 5.5% more likely to complete a degree and see a 1.6% increase in estimated income. Specific to two-year institutions, the results are even more significant. Passing a CLEP exam increased the probability of degree completion by 17%. For students in the military, CLEP exams prove to be a substantial boon in earning college credit. For military students taking CLEP exams, 69% learned the skill they are being tested for while employed by the United States government.[4]

SUPPORT THROUGH FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY

The more widespread use of PLA among community colleges has been spurred by federal and state policies to integrate the process into workforce development efforts and encourage adoption at additional colleges. The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program has been the cornerstone federal initiative to encourage PLA for workforce development. In 2010, Congress created the TAACCCT program in part in response to the Great Recession and to bolster career training programs at community colleges. Integrating PLA was a key focus of the TAACCCT grant because the strategy allowed students to earn a credential faster and to facilitate re-entering the workforce. Colleges that submitted grant applications were encouraged to include PLA as part of their training and workforce development strategy. According to researchers from New America, a public policy think tank, nearly half of the 256 awarded TAACCCT grants included PLA efforts.[5]

A second recent federal initiative that has encouraged the adoption of PLA for workforce development is the Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships (EQUIP) demonstration program. The EQUIP program began in 2016 under the administration of President Barack Obama to encourage colleges to advance students' job readiness by partnering with non-traditional education providers and employers for innovative workforce development programs. Under the demonstration, the U.S. Department of Education allowed for the use of federal aid for students to participate in these non-traditional programs.[6] Awarding PLA credits was a key strategy for several EQUIP demonstration sites in order to translate the completion of non-traditional programs to formal college credits. This brief includes a profile of how the Dallas County Community College District partnered with the non-traditional provider StraighterLine as part of the EQUIP demonstration.

PLA FOR COLLEGE AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

An emerging trend in PLA is expanding the strategy to further connect job-based training to college competencies, in particular by awarding credits for courses offered directly by employers or non-traditional educational providers. According to consumer research from Strada Education Network and Gallup, 33% of American adults without degrees are more likely to seek additional education directly from an employer, rather than from a college or university.[7] Thus, finding ways to offer training in partnership with businesses can allow community colleges to attract adult learners who are seeking additional education. Although private companies often design or influence the content of courses that utilize PLA, community colleges still have an essential role in providing the infrastructure for these programs.

One example is the Google IT Support Professional Certificate launched in early 2018 as part of the company's Grow with Google initiative. As of October 2019, the program is offered at 30 community colleges, with expansion to 70 more planned by the end of 2020.[8] A second example is Facebook's Community Boost partnership, also launched in 2018, which provides employer-specific training focused on digital marketing and social media skills. For this program, Facebook collaborates with community colleges to develop the curriculum. Facebook partners with several community colleges, including Greenville Technical College in South Carolina, which awards up to 12 PLA credits for participating students.[9]

The upward trend of PLA utilization is likely to continue. According to a survey by CAEL researchers, 91% of participating college and university administrators think that students enter their institutions with workplace learning worth college credit, and 72% think the demand for PLA will increase in the future.[10]

In addition to federal policy, states are increasingly encouraging colleges to implement PLA as a strategy to bridge students' academic and work experiences. Researchers from the Education Commission of the States conducted a survey of state policies and found that as of 2017, 24 states have a PLA policy explicitly recommending or allowing institutions to award students credit for non-traditional learning. Beyond the awarding of PLA credits, many state policies provide guidance regarding PLA cost and fees, transferability, support for military-connected students, and workforce alignment.[11]

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM PLA

Many community college students embark on earning their degrees or credentials already having gained knowledge through work and other life experiences. The average community college student is likely to be older than their four-year university counterpart and more likely to work while enrolled. Many have military experiences, are seeking additional education to advance in their careers, or have earned some college credits but not yet earned a degree. This section provides national data on several groups of students who are well poised to benefit from prior learning assessments to earn credits for their various experiences. This section also provides a close look at two student groups of particular importance to community colleges: adult learners and veterans.

STUDENTS WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM PLA

44%
of community college students
are over the age of 25

68%
of community college students
work while enrolled

5%
of community college students
are veterans

46%
of Americans believe they need additional
education to advance in their careers

40,000
adults between 25 and 64 with
some college, no degree

Sources from left to right, top to bottom: 1) Authors' analysis of National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) 2016; 2) Author's analysis of NPSAS 2016; 3) Authors' analysis of NPSAS 2016; 4) Strada Education Network, *Back to School?*; 5) Strada Education Network, *Some College and No Degree.*

Adult Learners

Adult learners are a primary beneficiary of PLA. Adult learners often enter community college with both work and prior academic experience. Through policies such as the TAACCCT program, more colleges have placed a greater emphasis on using PLA to support adult students' efforts to connect their work and educational experiences. However, opportunities remain for colleges to improve their PLA strategies. For example, in their review of PLA use through the TAACCT program, New America researchers found that colleges face challenges to make adult students aware of PLA opportunities and improve student advising for earning PLA credits.[12] Despite these challenges, colleges have an opportunity to improve PLA opportunities for adult learners, especially those with work experience, those looking to advance in their careers, and those with existing college credits.

Nationally, nearly 70% of community college students work while they are enrolled. One challenge that working students face is making meaningful connections between their work experience and their academic coursework. Most students who work while enrolled report that their jobs are not related to their courses of study.[13] Awarding credit for prior learning is one strategy colleges can use to better bridge students' work and academic experiences. By doing so, colleges can help encourage students to pursue work that is related to their respective courses of study and ensure that demonstrated knowledge gained from work will be awarded with academic credits. Furthermore, awarding PLA credits accelerates the time to degree completion for working students who often face the challenge of balancing work, academic, and family responsibilities.[14]

Focusing on PLA for adult learners can support those looking to return to education to advance in their careers. According to a survey conducted by Strada Education Network, 46% of Americans believe they need additional education to advance in their careers. However, Strada's research reveals that adults are more likely to seek additional education and training from their employers, rather than from a college or university.[15] The need for additional education and training is especially important for the 40,000 adults who hold some college credits, but who have not yet earned a degree. If these people were to complete their degrees, they would benefit from improved career opportunities and higher earning potential.[16] To meet the needs of these adult learners, community colleges can partner with businesses and promote the use of PLA to award credits for competencies gained through employer training and support students' efforts to earn a formal degree or credential.

> Most students who work while enrolled report that their jobs are not related to their courses of study.[13] Awarding credit for prior learning is one strategy colleges can use to better bridge students' work and academic experiences.

Veterans

Veterans are one of the groups with the most to gain from PLA. Veterans are 22% more likely to hold non-degree credentials than nonveterans, and all veterans complete multiple training courses as part of their preparation for service. Additionally, 51% of younger veterans between the ages of 18 – 24 do not have a degree or certificate, leaving a majority with the ability to benefit from PLA.[17] Community colleges are well positioned to support veterans. While veterans make up only 5% of the total community college population, nearly 40% of all student veterans attend a community college.[18]

Colleges frequently use the Joint Services Transcript (JST) and complete occupational evaluations in order to award credits for prior learning to student veterans based on their military experiences.[19] Veterans' military experiences can translate directly to academic competencies in areas such as engineering, information technology, and business. According to CAEL researchers, one challenge of evaluating prior learning credit for veterans is that the full breadth of their knowledge may not be captured within their JST. Therefore, CAEL recommends that colleges use portfolio assessments to more effectively award college credits to veterans for the full range of their military competencies.[20] Colleges can further support student veterans by creating dedicated guided pathways and support services on campus, such as with veteran one-stop centers and hiring staff dedicated to working with veteran students.[21]

Ultimately, awarding credits for knowledge gained by veterans through their military experiences can accelerate completion of a credential and can have a significant impact on these veterans' abilities to secure civilian jobs. A survey conducted by Strada Education Network indicates that veterans who hold at least one certification are also 9% more likely to be employed than veterans who do not. Those who hold a certificate or certification earn, on average, $10,000 more per year than those who do not.[22]

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EASTERN WEST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE[23]

Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College (EWVCTC), located in Moorefield, West Virginia, focuses its prior learning efforts primarily on adult completers. PLA policy has made substantial advancements in West Virginia over the past 12 years. The resulting policy creates a streamlined path to completion for students who earn PLA credits through the creation of a new degree, and standardized policy statewide.[24]

Awarding prior learning credits in West Virginia began as a state initiative among individual community colleges. In response to criticism that an institution-specific PLA policy was confusing and inefficient, West Virginia created a degree program that called the Associate of Applied Science Board of Governors Degree. Within the degree, there is a variety of focus areas, including accounting, information technology, business management, and early childhood education. An agricultural business-focused degree will launch soon.

"Not only do [students in the program] get an associate of applied science degree, but they can also gain an emphasis in business management, administrative support technology, or information technology. That's something students can boast on their resume," said Monica Wilson, dean of student access and success at EWVCTC. Wilson emphasized that students who earn PLA credits eventually apply these credits towards a bachelor's degree.

With a solid framework in place, EWVCTC focuses on familiarizing prospective students with the benefits of PLA. Four years ago, the state created a PLA website to introduce students to options that might be available to them. In addition to advertising and outreach on campus, EWVCTC also partners with local employers to reach prospective students at work during their lunch breaks. They discuss what credits students might be able to earn and what college experience they currently have.

Furthermore, EWVCTC is taking steps to improve affordability for students who receive PLA credits. "We used to charge if students brought in certificates for their work training with contact hours, or continuing education hours. If that work was equivalent to a college credit, students would have to pay 10 dollars per college credit; however, in an effort to get more students involved with the Board of Governors Degree, we have waived that fee," said Wilson. Students still have to pay if they want to submit an entire portfolio for analysis, though that method of earning PLA credits is uncommon.

Through a concerted effort to identify needs within its community's people and workforce, EWVCTC's program has improved awareness of and access to educational programs. By awarding PLA credits, students with work experience— including armed forces veterans—spend less time and money earning credentials, and upon completion, they earn more money and carry valuable credentials with them throughout their careers. The EWVCTC model is one that can be modified and adapted by most community and technical colleges.

DALLAS COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT[25]

Dallas County Community College District's (DCCCD) partnership with StraighterLine, a national non-traditional education provider, weaves PLA into the college's overall workforce strategy. In response to local workforce needs, DCCCD launched two pathways with StraighterLine as part of the U.S. Department of Education Experimental Site Initiative, Educational Quality through Innovative Partnerships (EQUIP). One pathway is in business, the other in criminal justice and both are high labor market demand programs designed for transfer to bachelor's degree programs. These pathways incorporate StraighterLine courses evaluated by DCCCD Colleges through the American Council on Education Alternative Learning Project for transfer equivalencies and DCCCD college courses. In addition to transferring credits to DCCCD, students who began their studies with StraighterLine can eventually transfer credits to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree.

Numerous major corporations are headquartered in Dallas, a city that continually attracts new businesses from other areas. DCCCD has relationships with over 100 local employers. Organizations familiar with business-to-business sales, such as StraighterLine, are valuable partners for DCCCD because they can help broker connections with the business community. DCCCD found that these organizations are especially effective as intermediaries between the higher education and business communities.

"StraighterLine has a sales team that is well-versed in our credit, non-credit, and apprenticeship programs. We have partnered with them in the past to work with employers and anticipate engaging them and other organizations to dramatically increase our presence in working with the business community. We offer the employer a variety of things that we can do to help customize training to meet their needs," Justin Lonon, executive vice chancellor for DCCCD. While employers are more skill-focused than credit-focused, DCCCD recognizes that students have the desire to earn academic credit and takes that into account.

"We feel that working with subject matter experts helps us to better understand the corporate customer. We run into the situation a lot where we have higher education people trying to deal with businesses on their turf. We found that has its limitations. An organization that understands business-to-business sales can work in partnership with DCCCD, who can then provide the training based on the customer's needs," said Lonon. Currently, DCCCD provides over 30 apprenticeship programs with over 2,000 apprentices, and utilizes a $12 million Department of Labor grant specifically for healthcare apprenticeships.

Texas has set an ambitious attainment goal for 60% of Texans between the ages of 25 and 35 to have a higher education credential by 2030. In the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex, the current attainment rate is 48%. In order to meet the goal, DCCCD is working to ensure that Texans can move through the community college infrastructure as efficiently as possible. Part of this effort includes expanding PLA within a new accreditation structure. The seven colleges of Dallas County Community College District are preparing to seek accreditation as a single, consolidated community college.

In response to Texas's educational attainment goal and in service to its metropolitan community, DCCCD's partnership with StraighterLine has enabled the college district to serve students more efficiently. This is another model that can be modified and adapted by community and technical colleges to improve educational access and outcomes for their students while boosting their local workforces.

CONCLUSION

Bridging academic and work experience is a critical strategy to support today's community college students. It has become common for community college students to simultaneously pursue academic and career goals, especially the 44% of community college students who are over the age of 25 and the 68% who work while enrolled.[26] PLA can be a useful tool for these students, as well as for those who have military experience and other working students who seek new skills to advance in their careers.

Research by CAEL demonstrates that PLA can be an impactful strategy to support students' ambitions to earn their degrees or credentials through community and technical colleges. Furthermore, PLA can support colleges' workforce development efforts by formally recognizing students' competencies to help them earn their degrees more quickly or upskill for career advancement, and to help businesses offer training that can be translated to formal college credits. In this brief, we highlight EWVCTC and DCCCD as two college systems using PLA to support adult learners earn their degrees and better partner with local businesses. Many other community and technical colleges throughout the country help students in similar ways, and many that do not can benefit from becoming familiar with these colleges' initiatives.

Colleges seeking to support adult students and develop stronger partnerships with local business can consider PLA as strategy for their broader workforce development efforts. Making students' academic and work experiences count towards degree completion is an important step towards creating a workforce development strategy that benefits both the students and their employers.

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