

A Report on Credit for Prior Learning Among Michigan Reconnect Students

The Reconnect CPL Incentive and Results

May 2025



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Introduction

Over the past 20 or so years, colleges around the country have sought to expand their use of “Credit for Prior Learning” or “Prior Learning Assessment,” a set of policies and practices that acknowledges that learning takes place in many places besides the traditional classroom, and honors that learning by articulating it for credit. Awarding CPL for experience in the military, previously earned industry recognized credentials or licenses, or for achieving certain scores on a high school Advanced Placement exam—for example—can help students accelerate their progress toward a college degree. Several studies have demonstrated that students who receive CPL are more likely to graduate, earn their degree faster, and save money.

An amendment to the Reconnect Grant Act (PA 251 of 2022) created an incentive payment for Reconnect-participating colleges in Michigan who award CPL to Reconnect students—adults who are using the Michigan Reconnect scholarship to attend a Pell-eligible program at one of Michigan’s community or tribal colleges. Participating colleges who were awarded CPL would be issued a payment of \$80.00 per credit awarded to Reconnect students. This provision is understood to incentivize the use of CPL, particularly for adults, as research shows that increasing the utilization of CPL increases college momentum and positively impacts persistence and completion rates.

The Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential Office of Higher Education (OHE), which administers the Michigan Reconnect program, developed a process for colleges to report their CPL accurately and request their incentive payment in 2024. This report provides a summary of that process, documents the efforts and progress made by the OHE and its partners in implementing the CPL incentive payment program, and provides data from the first year of issuing these payments.

The report also outlines the collaboration between OHE and three community colleges to improve and enhance processes for awarding CPL to Michigan Reconnect students by participating in a technical assistance workgroup, dubbed Increasing Economic Mobility for Adult Students. OHE is grateful to the community colleges who joined that effort and allowed us to learn alongside them as they sought to increase the utilization of CPL at their institutions. Thank you to Delta College, Grand Rapids Community College, and Macomb Community College.

This report seeks to evaluate how widespread CPL utilization is in Michigan, share practices for increasing CPL utilization, and promote policies that increase CPL as a strategy to reduce educational costs and accelerate degree completion for adult learners, thereby contributing to Michigan’s Sixty by 30 attainment goal.

Background and Purpose

Sec. 5(g) of PA 251 of 2022 stipulates that the department will, “Establish a process to allow eligible institutions to be reimbursed for awarding credit for prior learning at a rate of \$80.00 per credit hour for credit awarded to Michigan reconnect grant students for Advanced Placement, CLEP, DSST, military training, industry credentials, work-based learning, portfolio assessment, and other types of credit for prior learning as determined by the department.” (The definitions of CPL types established by MiLEAP are included as Appendix B.)

CPL is a proven intervention for helping adult learners reduce their educational costs and time to graduation. For instance, a study of 230,000 adult students by CAEL and WICHE found that degree completion rates for students with CPL were 49%—more than 20 percentage points higher than for those students who hadn’t been awarded CPL.¹ This same report found that receiving more than 15 credits significantly increased the likelihood of student graduation. Earning a small number of CPL credits had a positive effect on graduation rates versus comparison groups.

Michigan has made significant financial investments to support adult learners to attend community college. Through the Reconnect Grant Act best practices requirements and CPL incentives, OHE works towards Michigan’s Sixty by 30 attainment goal by addressing specific barriers in the application-to-enrollment pipeline that can be addressed by policy and/or programmatic changes. CPL acknowledges the value of past experiences brought by adult learners to college. Increases in availability and utilization of CPL grow momentum, decrease adult student time to completion, and lower overall student cost.

Credit for Prior Learning is a proven intervention for helping adult learners reduce their educational costs and time to graduation.

While all of Michigan’s community and tribal colleges have a formal process for awarding CPL, conversations with colleges let us know that these processes are sometimes outmoded or unnecessarily complex, that information about the process is not widely understood by all advisors and counselors, that it may not be promoted online in areas where new students are likely to see it, and that there are other process challenges that get in the way of students using CPL. Colleges also shared uncertainty of whether a university will accept credits awarded for CPL to meet bachelor’s degree requirements, for any students who go on to transfer. While the data OHE collected in its first year of the incentive payment is incomplete, it does suggest that there is significant variation in how Michigan’s community colleges are set up to promote, award, and track CPL use.

In 2023, the State joined a capacity building initiative called Improving Economic Mobility for Adult Learners (IEMAL), with a grant and technical assistance from Jobs of the Future and Achieving the Dream. The State participated in the initiative alongside the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) and three community colleges: Delta College, Grant Rapids Community College, and Macomb Community College. Staff from these colleges examined their own CPL processes and deployed strategies for increasing CPL use.

¹ The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes. CAEL and WICHE, December 2020.
<https://www.cael.org/hubfs/PLA%20Boost%20Report%20CAEL%20WICHE%20-%20October%202020.pdf>

Data from 2023-2024 CPL Incentive Payment

Providing data and requesting the CPL incentive payment is entirely optional for Reconnect-participating colleges and the incentive payment process is currently the only source of data on CPL use in Michigan. In its first year, 13 of 31 eligible colleges requested payment for AY2023-2024 and submitted the required data. Therefore, while OHE is sharing data from this process, it is important to note that these data are only clues and may not represent the entirety of CPL at even the colleges that participated. It is unknown whether the colleges that did not participate do not award a significant amount of CPL, do not track it in a way that is easy to export, or simply chose not to participate. OHE is sharing this report because of the scarcity of data available on this topic, to help broadcast the opportunity to receive the incentive payment, and to support our colleges in additional reflection if growing CPL uptake is a goal.

To receive the incentive payment, colleges were required to submit the total number of credits that were awarded to Reconnect students, the number per student, and the student unique identification codes (UICs) so that OHE could verify that the students were enrolled in Reconnect during the academic year CPL was awarded. Additionally, colleges were asked to voluntarily provide information about the types of credits that were awarded but were not required to provide that detail at this time. 12 colleges provided the types for all credits; one college reported type for approximately half of its credits. (This detail will be required in future cycles.)

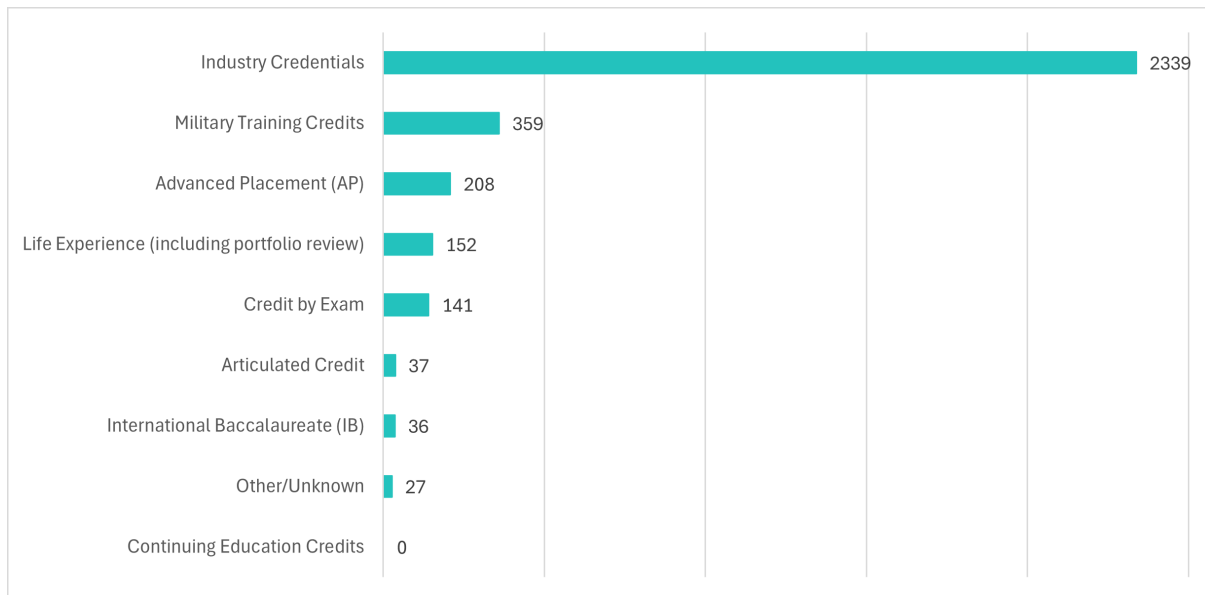
During the first year of this incentive payment during the 2023-2024 academic year, MiLEAP was pleased with college participation.

- 13 participating community colleges
- \$266,222 in payments
- 3,299 credits earned by Reconnect students (for a list of participating colleges, see Appendix A).
- awarded to individual colleges ranged from \$80 to \$143,640. The average awarded to colleges was just over \$19,000.

Trends by Type of CPL

Colleges provided CPL type for 99% of the credits that were reported to OHE. Definitions for the types of CPL are included as Appendix B in this report.

Figure 1 - Reconnect CPL Credits by Known Types, Awarded in 2023-2024



While these data do not represent a complete picture of CPL in Michigan, the clear prevalence of awarding CPL for industry credentials, military training credits, credit by exam, and AP suggest that in these areas, participating colleges had stronger policies or processes in place to help students request or receive CPL.

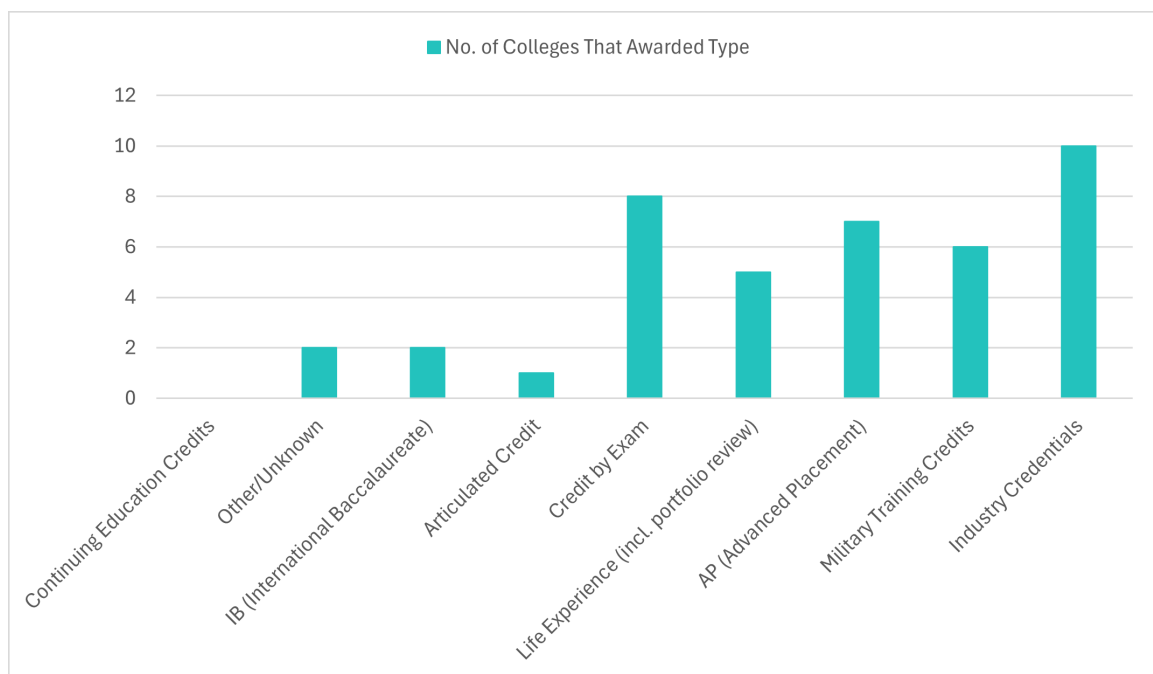
On its own, credit for recognized industry credentials makes up 71% of all of the CPL credits reported. We believe that there are two primary reasons for this. First, Reconnect students are almost exclusively aged 25 or older (although some students participating in the temporary Reconnect Age Expansion could be age 21-24), and more likely to bring work, life, or military experiences than traditional-aged students. Second, the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) led an effort to document how colleges award credit for industry credentials on the Michigan Transfer Network.² MCCA hosted a series of workshops to help colleges expand credit awarded for industry credentials, document CPL credit equivalencies, revise processes to gather industry credential information from students, and design more efficient processes to award credit. While colleges award credit for military training, AP, IB, CLEP and other forms of credit for prior learning, Michigan does not have a centralized database to document credit equivalencies for other types of CPL. Additional information about this project is available from the MCCA.³

²For more information, see: <https://www.mitransfer.org/Earn-Credits-for-Industry-Credentials>

³For more information, see: <https://www.mcca.org/Strengthening-MiWorkforce-Pathways>

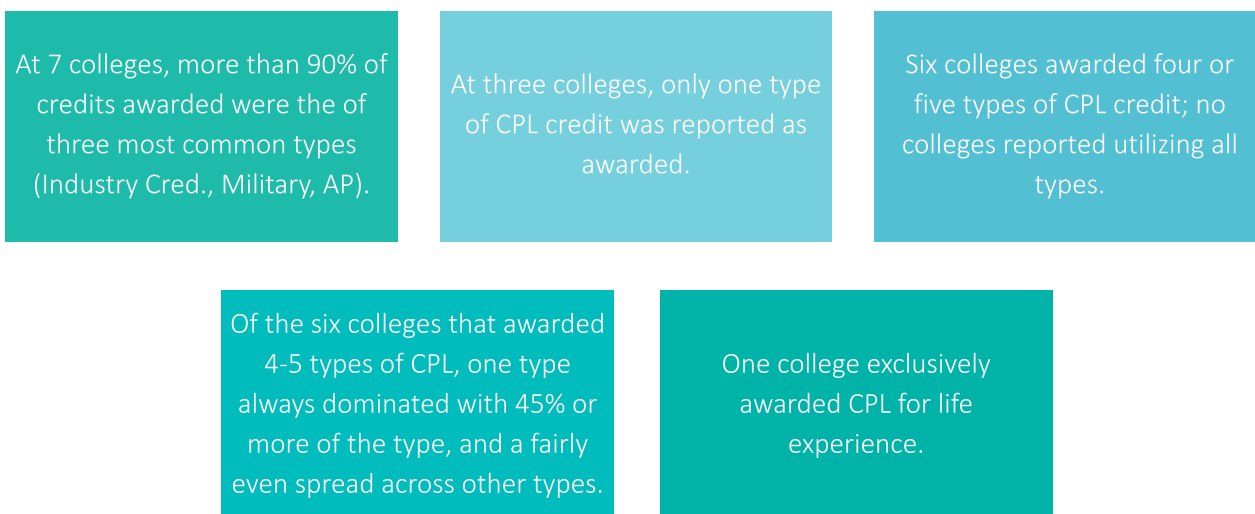
The three most awarded types of CPL have in common the utilization of an external validator, which requires less burden on college faculty and staff to determine the validity of a CPL request. In addition, both military credits and industry credentials are more likely to be held by adults than traditional-aged students, suggesting that there are some processes in place to investigate whether students may bring those more common prior learning experiences. In some cases, it is possible industry credentials are being automatically articulated to credit via well-established processes, meaning that the student may not have to initiate a CPL request.

Figure 2 - Number of participating colleges that reported awarding each CPL type to Reconnect students in 2023-2024



As OHE reviewed the data collected, it noticed a number of other salient data points that help to demonstrate the range of results—and approaches to awarding CPL—at participating colleges. Reviewing these data points may help colleges develop a strategy to grow CPL, whether by improving systems to award more types more efficiently, or by growing student uptake of the types that are already awarded.

Figure 3 - Trends in CPL types based on college reporting from 2023-2024



The data points above suggest that colleges have strengths in particular areas of CPL, whether those strengths are general advisor awareness, an unambiguous and transparent awarding process, and/or proactive, systematic outreach to students.

Trends by Student

There is a wide variety of experiences that colleges have in awarding CPL.⁴ The colleges that awarded the most CPL credits have a few things in common: they had a particular strength in offering one type of CPL credit, awarded that credit type to a significant number of students, and awarded more CPL credits, on average, to participating students.

- At College K, 150 credits were awarded for industry credentials, and 79 for military credit.
- At College M, military credits dominated the award types.
- College L had a clear process for awarding credits for an industry credential, which made up 97% of its CPL credits awarded. Students received more than 25 CPL credits.

At all three of these colleges, not only were many students awarded, but the average number of credits awarded to students was quite high. Across the data set, the average number of CPL credits awarded per student was 11.5. Both College L and College M outperformed that average.

Table 1 also shows that at most institutions, very few students earned 12 or more CPL credits, but at Colleges L and M, over half of the students who were reported as receiving CPL received more than 12 credits—positioning them for higher rates of completion of their associate degree and significant time and financial savings.

Table 1 - Details of amounts of CPL credit awarded to Reconnect students

	<i>Total No. of CPL Credits Awarded</i>	<i>No. of Reconnect Students Awarded CPL Credits</i>	<i>Average CPL Credits Per Student</i>	<i>No. of Students with 12 or More CPL Credits</i>	<i>Max. No. of CPL Credits Awarded to a Single Student</i>
<i>College A</i>	1	1	1.0	0	1
<i>College B</i>	16	1	16.0	1	16
<i>College C</i>	37	11	3.4	0	4
<i>College D</i>	57.3	11	5.2	1	21.3
<i>College E</i>	65	34	1.9	0	11
<i>College F</i>	96	22	4.4	1	12
<i>College G</i>	128	15	8.5	3	54
<i>College H</i>	132	14	9.4	3	28
<i>College I</i>	139	23	6.0	2	26
<i>College J</i>	170	28	6.1	7	14
<i>College K</i>	251	26	9.7	9	30
<i>College L</i>	440	26	16.9	16	41
<i>College M</i>	1795.5	78	23.0	68	40

Via the annual Reconnect Compliance Report, OHE also collects self-assessment data from the colleges on their areas of strength. Of the various student success domains colleges must rank for their strengths and priorities (such as guided pathways, offering holistic student support services, etc.), nine colleges identified CPL as a strength. However, 20 colleges identified CPL as a priority area for improvement.

⁴ College names have been anonymized to focus on lessons learned during this first year of implementation. MiLEAP and MCCA are collaborating to expand both the use of CPL and the participation in the Reconnect CPL incentive reporting process. Future reporting will include data by college.

⁵ This threshold was selected for analysis due to research from CAEL showing that students who earned at least 12 credits of CPL saw shortened time to degree between nine and 14 months, and cost savings of \$1,500 to \$10, 200, depending on institution and sector.

Observations on Improving Processes for CPL

Through the IEMAL project, OHE was able to observe three partner colleges who were seeking to increase CPL uptake. These institutions reflected on their own processes and then deployed impressive strategies to overcome barriers and improve processes for awarding CPL.

Delta College

- Created a CPL Guidebook for faculty, staff, and administrators.
- Created a simplified student-centric guide to CPL at Delta College.
- Created an online student-centric tool for CPL, CPL Wizard, that a student or potential student could use to identify ways for them to earn CPL.

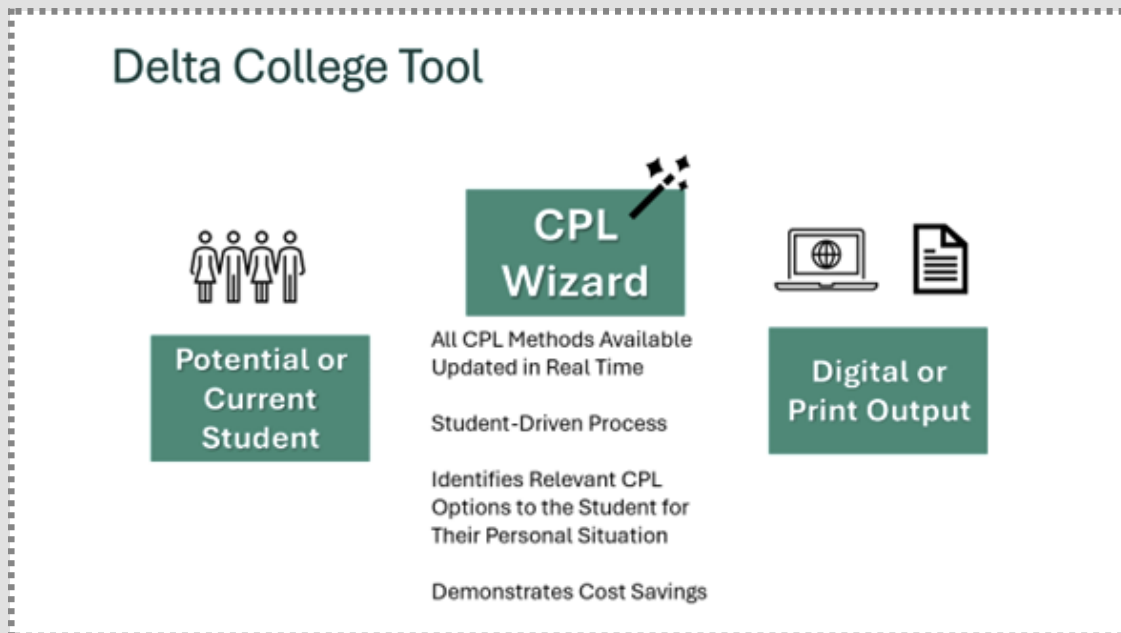
Grand Rapids Community College

- Updated CPL policies to include general education courses, expanding CPL offerings.
- Waived a \$150 fee for each assessment (one class is one assessment), approved January 16, 2024.
- Reviewed and revised Industry Recognized Credentials/Test Credit policy.

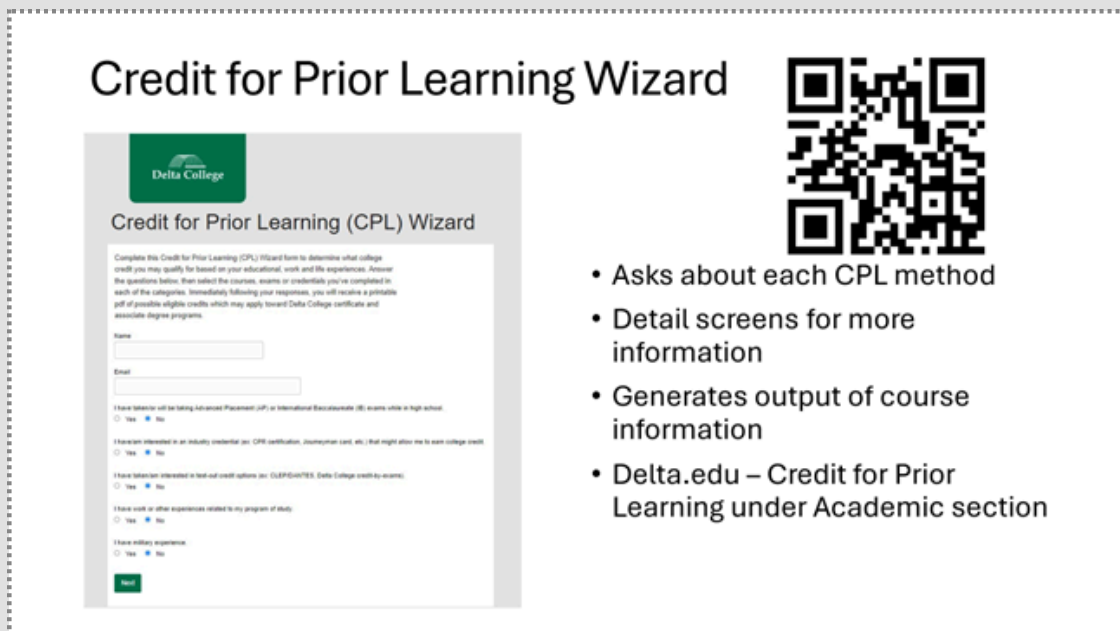
Macomb Community College

- Reviewed CPL Policies to streamline processes & reduce the barriers for students to earn CPL.
- Reduced the fee for portfolio assessment.
- Updated the portfolio process to make it more user friendly and accessible.
- Created a CPL Inquiry Form.
- Educated the college at large about CPL policies and practices including admissions, counselors, academic advisors and instructional faculty.

For Delta College, leadership has declared that growing CPL uptake by 5% is a key part of its strategy to grow student retention and graduation rates by reducing the length of time to degree completion. Delta developed a “CPL Wizard,” which current and prospective students can use to find what types of CPL might be relevant for them—and describe the benefit in a reduced tuition bill.



Delta also created a CPL guidebook to document procedures and improved process flow charts to make understanding CPL easier for students. These improved process flows also ensure that considering CPL is a part of the onboarding experience of every Delta student.



Credit for Prior Learning Wizard

Delta College

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) Wizard

Complete this Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) Wizard form to determine what college credit you may qualify for based on your educational, work and life experiences. Answer the questions below, then select the courses, exams or credentials you've completed in each of the categories. Immediately following your responses, you will receive a printable pdf of possible eligible credits which may apply toward Delta College certificate and associate degree programs.

Name

Email

I have taken or will be taking Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams while in high school.
☐ Yes ☒ No

I have been interested in an industry credential (per CPL certification, journeyman card, etc.) that might allow me to earn college credit.
☐ Yes ☒ No

I have taken or am interested in test-out credit options (per CLEP/CLEPES, Delta College credit-by-exam).
☐ Yes ☒ No

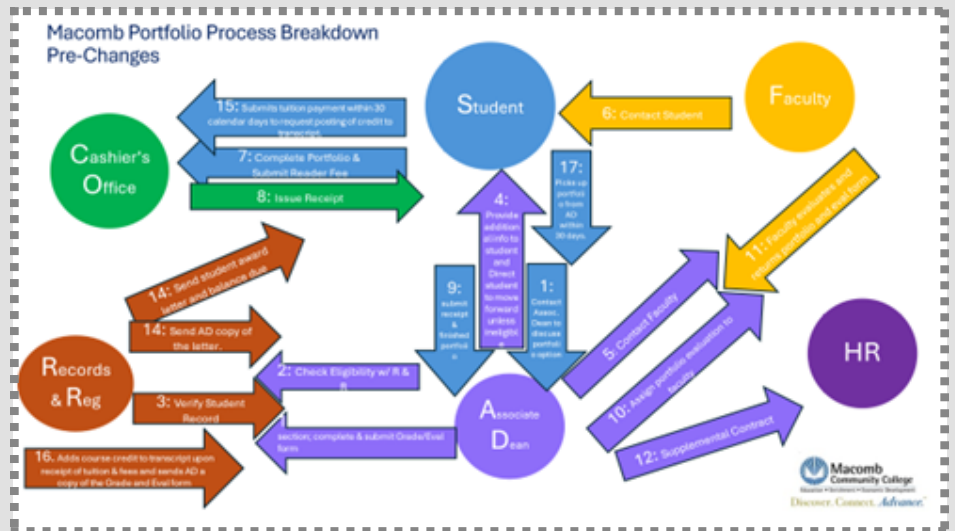
I have work or other experiences related to my program of study.
☐ Yes ☒ No

I have military experience.
☐ Yes ☒ No

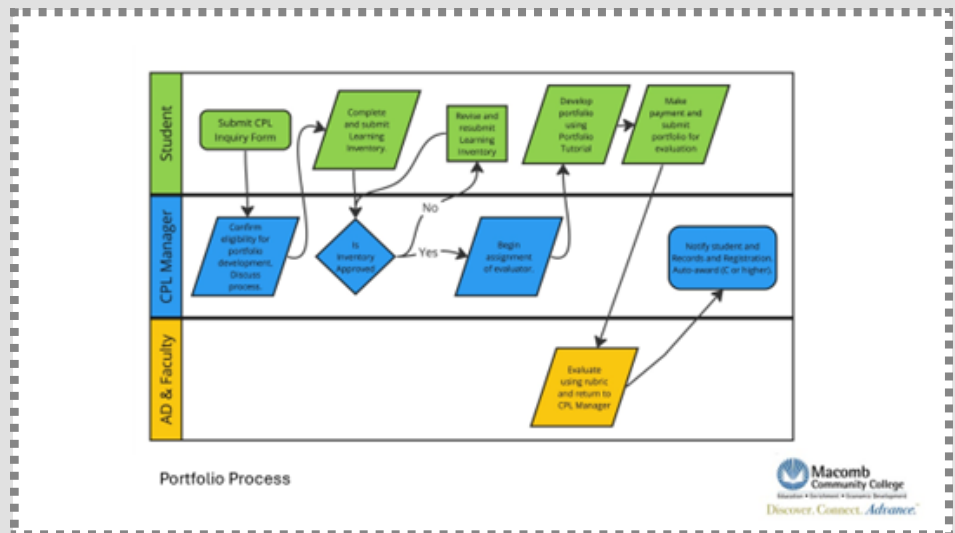
Next

- Asks about each CPL method
- Detail screens for more information
- Generates output of course information
- Delta.edu – Credit for Prior Learning under Academic section

Through participation in the IEMAL project to increase CPL, Macomb Community College first documented the steps that were required for a student to request credit for prior learning experiences. Macomb's project team, including a CPL Manager (a new position at the college) shared this process with other faculty and staff.



The team then worked on developing a new, clearer process for students, represented.



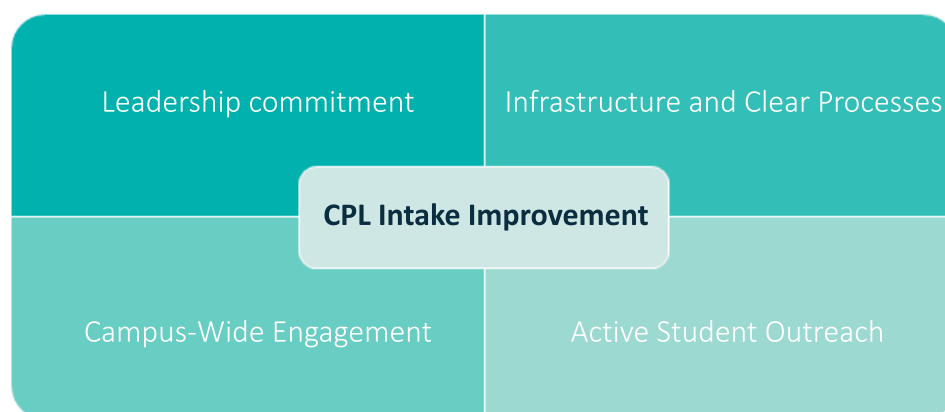
Finally, they created a 10-question student inquiry form that puts different CPL experiences into plain language and connects students with the CPL Manager.



Recommendations for Improving CPL Uptake

Through our partnership with Delta College, Grand Rapids Community College, and Macomb Community College, the State and MCCA observed changes in practices designed to increase awareness and use of credit for prior learning. The practices being developed built strength in one or more of the domains show in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Domains of improvement in increasing CPL uptake



Leadership Commitment: Increasing CPL uptake is a strategic priority, including a particular emphasis on adult students.

1. Campus leadership includes CPL or adult credit mobility in strategic plans, identifying CPL as a strategy.
2. Review history of CPL at institution use at the institution.
3. Make institutional case for increasing use of CPL.

Infrastructure and Clear Processes: The process for awarding CPL is streamlined and clearly communicated. Tools exist to help students understand the opportunities.

1. Identify a CPL Champion to project manage CPL review.
2. Centralize CPL process (through a committee, to an individual, in a procedure manual, etc.).
3. Identify and document all CPL offered on campus, including which office issues/approves/reviews CPL.
4. Document the current steps a student must take to seek each type of CPL offered at the institution.
5. Make adjustments to CPL process to streamline student experience.
6. Update nomenclature to align with State data collection if possible.
7. Embed CPL in curriculum approval process.

Campus-Wide Engagement: Faculty and staff understand both the benefits of CPL for students and the processes and supports that exist for students to receive it.

1. Present the benefits of increasing use of CPL to stakeholders (faculty, academic advising, academic and student affairs leadership).
2. Present current CPL process to stakeholders (faculty, academic advising, academic and student affairs leadership) and identify process improvements.
3. Ensure the benefits of CPL are communicated across campus through research, data and actual student experiences.
4. Embed CPL in academic advising practice.
5. Embed CPL in orientation.
6. Provide opportunities for students to detail their non-traditional learning journey amongst qualified staff/faculty for purposes of assessing CPL opportunities.⁶
7. Remove payment barriers.

Active Student Outreach: The college has a plan to proactively inform all students about CPL opportunities, not relying solely on students to find CPL information on a website. Outreach strategies include particular emphasis on adult students.

1. Provide information on opportunities to learn about/pursue CPL throughout the student's educational journey.
2. Create materials targeted to adult learners on CPL.
3. Provide easy to follow action steps for students who might be interested in pursuing CPL.
4. Ensure the campus community is aware and supportive of CPL inquiries from students.
5. Provide examples to students during advising appointments and orientation of CPL options and highlight success stories.

Conclusion

This report contributes to the State's and sector's understanding of how and when CPL credits are awarded to adult college students and how Michigan's colleges are leveraging the Reconnect CPL incentive. The value in CPL is its proven impact for students: by honoring learning that has taken place outside the classroom, colleges increase momentum, grow graduation rates, and save students time and money.

The Reconnect CPL incentive is an ongoing state investment and colleges can access funding on an annual basis for CPL awarded to Reconnect students. As institutions center student success, CPL is a key strategy that can help individuals graduate faster and the state achieve Sixty by 30.

⁶ Recommendations from Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2023). CAEL Mini Toolkit: CAEL's Ten Quality Standards for Assessing Prior Learning. CAEL. [CAEL Assessing Learning Standards Toolkit Sept 2023 \(1\).pdf](#).

Appendix A – Participating Colleges

The following 13 colleges submitted at least one CPL credit awarded to a Reconnect student in 2023-2024 and received an incentive payment from the Office of Higher Education for \$80.00 per CPL credit awarded.

- Bay College
- Delta College
- Glen Oaks Community College
- Grand Rapids Community College
- Jackson College
- Kellogg Community College
- Macomb Community College
- Mid Michigan College
- Muskegon Community College
- Northwestern Michigan College
- Oakland Community College
- Schoolcraft College
- St. Clair County Community College

Appendix B – Credit for Prior Learning Types

Listed below are the CPL categories included in the 2023-2024 invoice process. The CPL definitions listed below are in alignment with Common Educational Data Standards (CEDS) and were developed for this process with input from our partner colleges and through collaboration with the Center for Educational Performance and Information.

Advanced Placement (AP): credit awarded up on satisfactory completion of the College Board's Advanced Placement Program.

Articulated Credit: a course taken at the postsecondary level or within a workforce or other non-credit program that did not count toward a standard associate degree or higher at the time it was taken, but for which the college is now articulating credit.

Continuing Education Credit: a course taken at the postsecondary level that does not count toward a standard associate degree or higher, or a non-credit program. These credits are taken to supplement a degree or certificate that has already been earned. For example, SCECHs (State Continuing Education Clock Hours) earned through attendance at a conference would count as continuing education credits. To include in this report, the college must have articulated credit for the course.

Credit by Exam: credit awarded as a result of the student passing an exam that covers the material for an entire course (e.g. CLEP, DSST). College policies vary on how the grad is handled.

Industry Credentials: credit awarded as a result of the student providing proof of an industry-recognized license or certification, defined as a certificate or credential that is portable and is sought or accepted by multiple employers within an industry for purposes of recruitment, hiring, or promotion.

International Baccalaureate (IB): credit awarded as a result of passing an examination where the exam is part of the two-year international education International Baccalaureate Diploma program.

Life Experience (including portfolio review): credit awarded based on evaluation of the student's learning outside the traditional academic environment. An IHE's evaluation may consider exams, portfolios, work experience, non-credit programs, etc. Institutional policies regarding this type of credit vary.

Military Training Credits: credit awarded as a result of serve in one of the branches of the U.S. military.

Other/Unknown: any other credit for prior learning type that does not fit into one of the above categories.