



All Learning Counts Institutional Practice Brief

December 2020



1. Introduction

Every year, millions of New Englanders gain college-level knowledge and skills outside of traditional learning environments—while on the job, in the military, or through workforce training programs. Most of that learning goes unrecognized and uncounted toward degrees or credentials of value. We believe colleges and universities should do more to ensure that all learning counts, regardless of where it takes place.

Strada Education Network's Consumer Insights Data indicates that 46% of people in our region with some college but no degree perceive the need for additional education. Moreover, the New England Board of Higher Education's (NEBHE) recent survey of nearly 2,100 adult learners with less than a bachelor's degree in New England revealed that more than half of respondents would be more likely to consider college if more of their existing work experiences and learning could count towards a degree. Institutions, however, are not yet fully equipped to recognize that learning and award course credit for it. By improving policy and practice related to learning recognition, we can create a more inclusive system that helps individuals advance their educational and career goals.

Current practices—including credit for prior learning (CPL) and prior learning assessment (PLA) which traditionally entail assessment of previously earned college-level academic credit—can be expensive and difficult to navigate for students. They are often not well-advertised and many students are not aware of these options. NEBHE is committed to supporting institutions and states as they work to expand and incentivize structures that more inclusively evaluate and confer credit for learning that happens in non-academic settings—resulting in more opportunities for New Englanders to earn college credit for the valuable knowledge and skills they already have.

This work is more urgent than ever. With many workers displaced by the economic fallout resulting from COVID-19, it is imperative that we find new ways to accelerate the education and career goals of many in our community. Equity stands at the center of this initiative, especially considering COVID-19's disproportionate impact on Black and Hispanic New Englanders who have historically been underserved by higher education and, thus, have attained credentials at lower rates than their white counterparts. In some states, like Connecticut and Massachusetts, attainment rates differ as much as 30 percentage points between Hispanic and White residents, as seen in Figure 1. Through broadened learning recognition and validation policies, we may begin to close college opportunity gaps imposed upon Black and Hispanic New Englanders. Conferring credit where it is due not only shortens time-to-degree and reduces the financial burden associated with college, it also places value on an individual's learning, no matter where it occurs. Instead of making the college process more difficult and less attractive to adults who have some or no college experience, recognizing learning beyond traditional academic credit applies individuals' preexisting knowledge to their degree requirements, making the transition smoother and more validating for the student.

The All Learning Counts Institutional Practice Brief serves as an introductory look at the core issue, its impact on prospective adult learners, as well as existing and exemplary practices from both New England states and early adopters across the U.S.

2. Overview

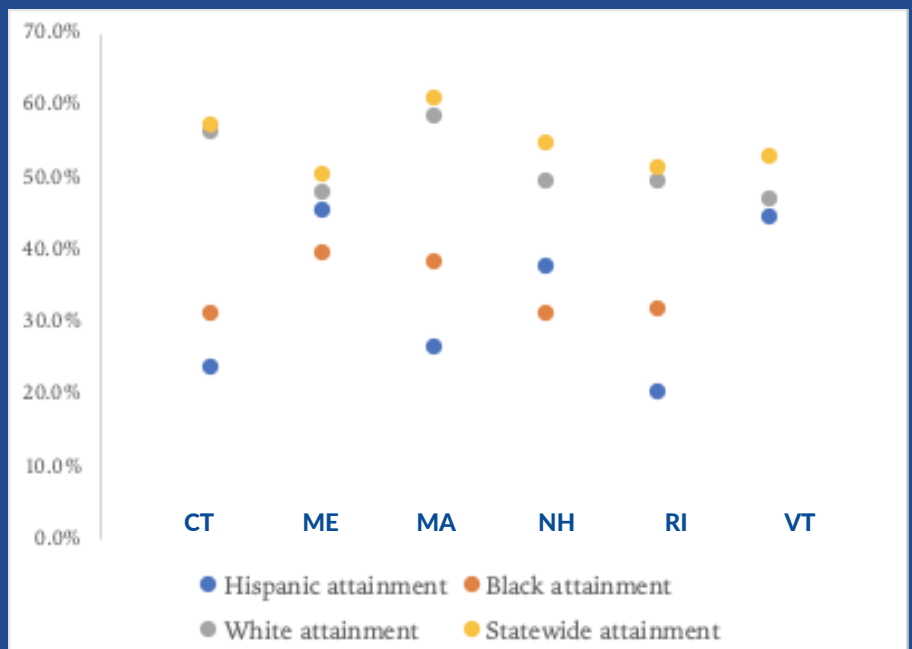
A key factor in increasing attainment rates and closing the significant gaps (see Figure 1) between minoritized communities and their white peers in New England is institutions' commitment to taking a broader and more inclusive approach to the recognition of prior learning. These policies must be dedicated to awarding credit to individuals with validated work, life, military experience or previous academic credit. Recognizing learning wherever it happens is paramount to jump starting individuals' entry or reentry into postsecondary education, accelerating degree completion and/or forming the basis for advancement in the workforce. Currently, most prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL) policies account for previously earned college credit rather than award credit for non-academic experiences, such as those attained in the workplace. Some institutions offer portfolio development courses or assessments that can result in credit awarded for experiential learning and academic experience. However, both of these credit award options are often difficult to navigate and/or cost prohibitive for students, as many institutions charge applicants an assessment fee, a fee for each credit awarded, as well as other fees in certain cases. These structures serve to exacerbate attainment gaps among racial and ethnic groups in New England.

Figure 1.

New England states have significant degree attainment gaps. In some states, these gaps are as large as:

- 30 percentage points between Hispanic and white students
- 20 percentage points between Black and white students

Source: Lumina Foundation, *Stronger Nation*, 2018



What do we mean by "All Learning Counts?"

Policies and practices at the state or institutional level that result in the award of academic credit to individuals with validated work, military or life experience or prior academic credit. This goes beyond traditional Prior Learning Assessment or Credit for Prior Learning structures (i.e. examinations, portfolio assessment, military course equivalencies)—which favor learning from traditional academic settings—to ensure individuals receive credit based on what they know and can do, regardless of where their learning occurred.

Key Takeaways

Barriers to receiving credit for existing knowledge and skills significantly reduce the likelihood that a person chooses to re-enter a degree program or seek new credentials. Given the educational and economic realities of many in our region, we cannot afford for these barriers to persist.

Strada Education Network's Consumer Insights Data



46% of New Englanders who have some college experience, but no degree believe they need additional education



41% of Americans believe if they lose their job because of COVID-19, they will need additional education to replace it.*

NEBHE Regional Survey



22% of respondents with prior learning experience identified as Hispanic, Black or Asian.

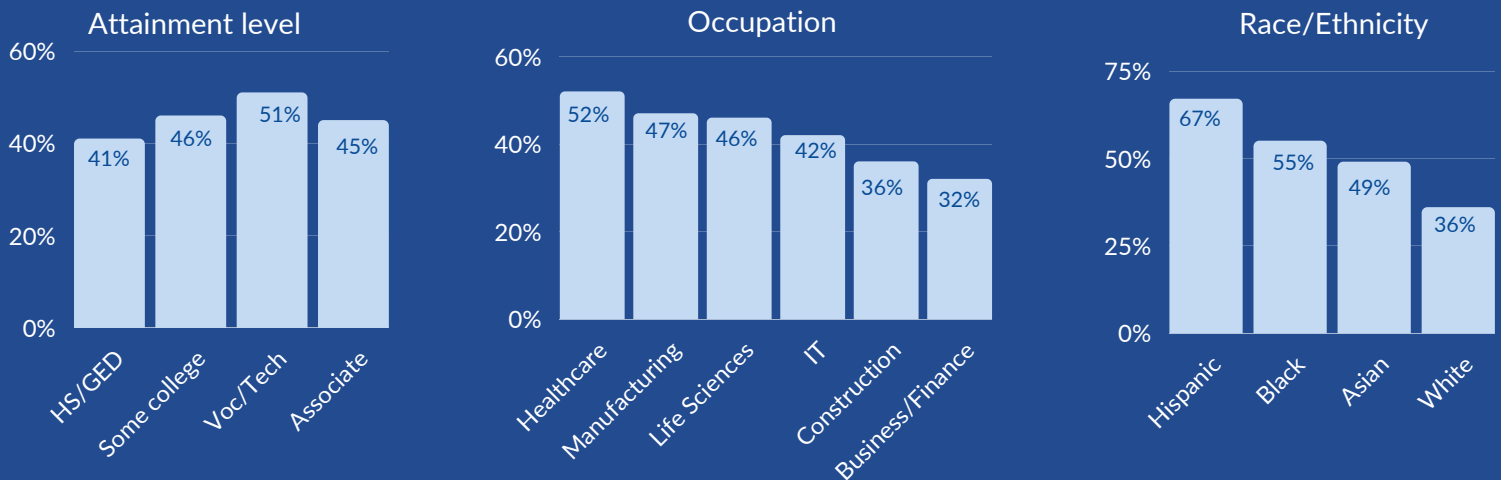


Over half of respondents would be more likely to consider a college/university in their state if it had policies that expanded learning recognition

*Source: Strada Public Viewpoint, October 15, 2020

Figure 2

New Englanders' perceived need for additional education by:



Source: Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey

Validating underemployed or unemployed individuals' learning, especially in the wake of COVID-19, is essential to supporting and rebuilding our workforce.

As shown in Figure 2, nearly half of New Englanders with an Associate degree or less perceive the need for additional education. Moreover, New Englanders who work in healthcare and manufacturing report the highest perceived need for additional education. If inclusive learning recognition policies are implemented at institutions across the region, those who desire additional postsecondary education could translate their work and life experience to academic credit, shortening their time to credential completion.

Recognizing learning from prior learning assessment, work experience and other forms of subject mastery that minoritized communities such as Hispanic and Black New Englanders—who perceive the highest need for additional education—would allow for a more equitable and inclusive postsecondary landscape.

3. Survey Results

Adult learners in New England: experiences with recognition of prior learning experience & prior learning assessment (PLA)

These data come from a survey administered by NEBHE in partnership with Maguire Associates in May 2020. Respondents have a high school diploma and may have some experience with postsecondary education, but have not attained a bachelor's degree. The nearly 2,100 respondents are statistically representative of the six states' populations.

Profile

An estimated 8% of New England adults without a bachelor's degree have experience with prior learning assessment.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- 15% identify as Hispanic
- 5% identify as Black
- 2% identify as Asian

EDUCATION & WORK EXPERIENCE

- 59% are employed full-time
- 47% have an active professional certification or state industry license
- 18% are currently pursuing degrees



INSIGHT

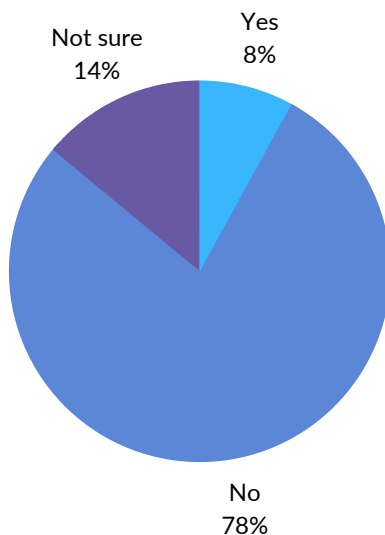
Those with PLA experience are more likely to be employed full-time than those without.

Part 1

What share of respondents received credit for prior learning assessment and how much?

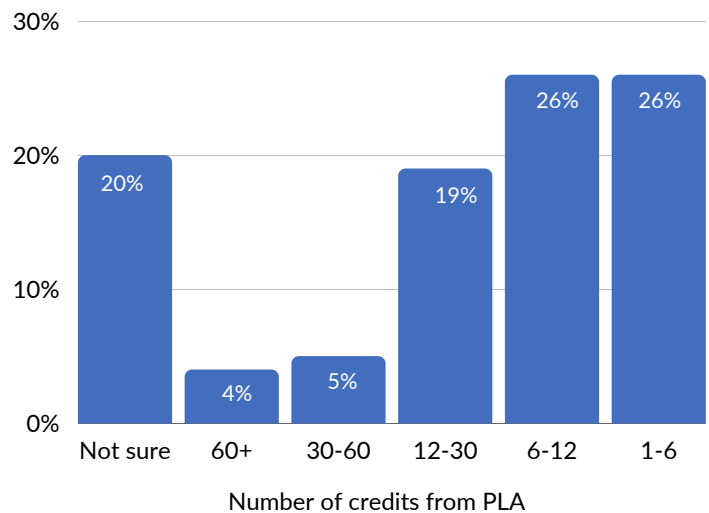
Do you have PLA credit from a college/university?

n=2,031

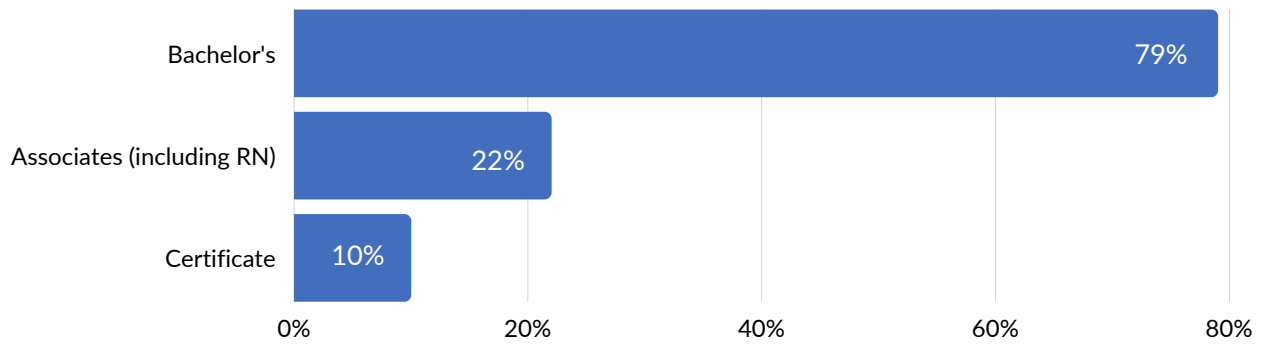


How many PLA credits do you have?

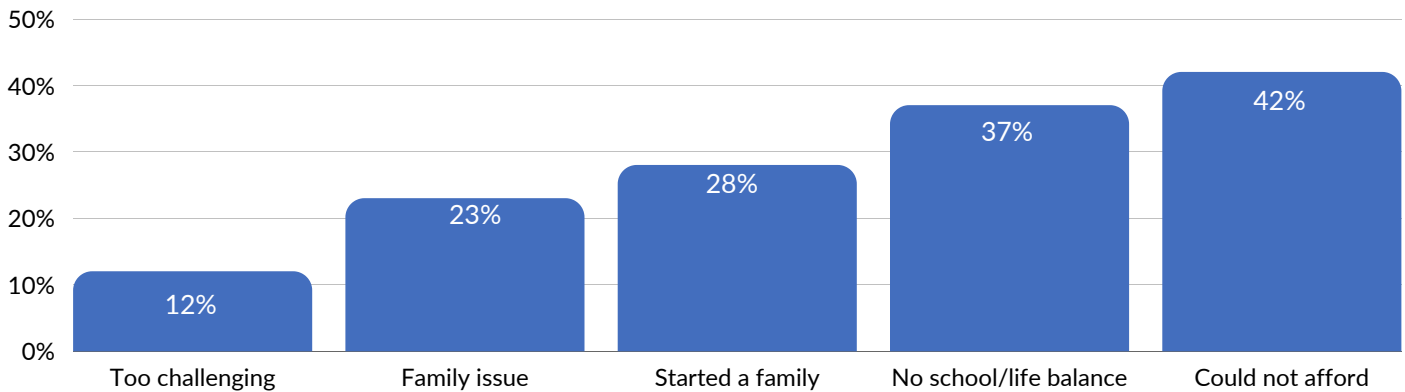
n=170



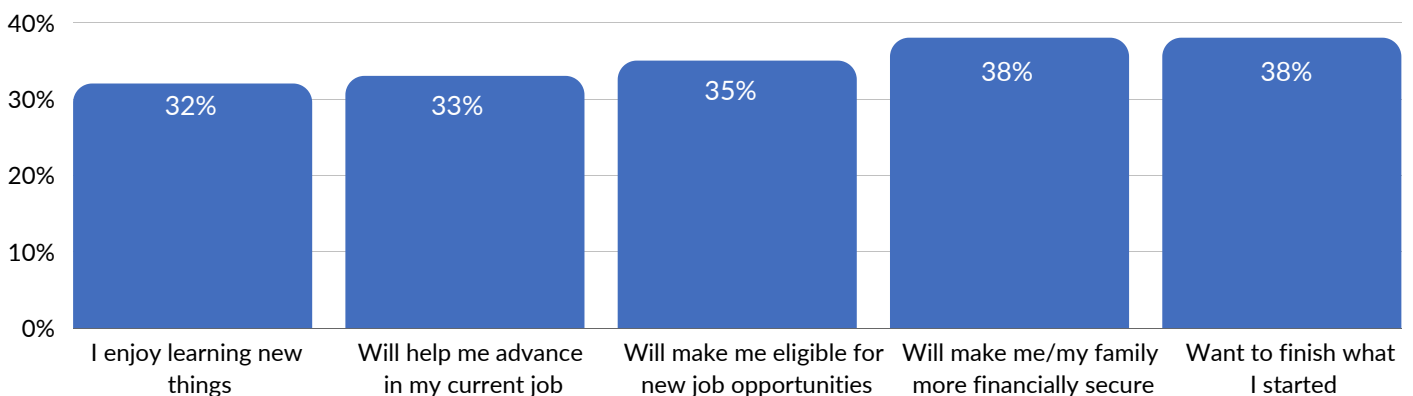
For those with 12-29 credits, the interest in pursuing a Bachelor's degree is higher than the interest in an Associate's degree or certificate



What are the main reasons you decided to stop taking college courses in the past? (n=60)



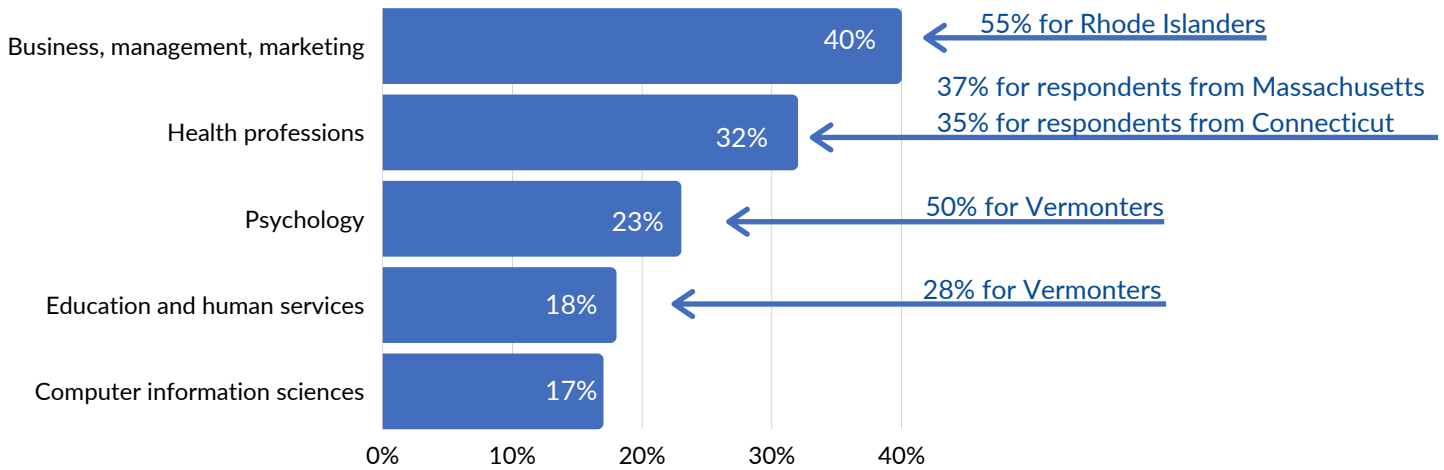
What are the main reasons you are considering taking college courses in the future? (n=60)



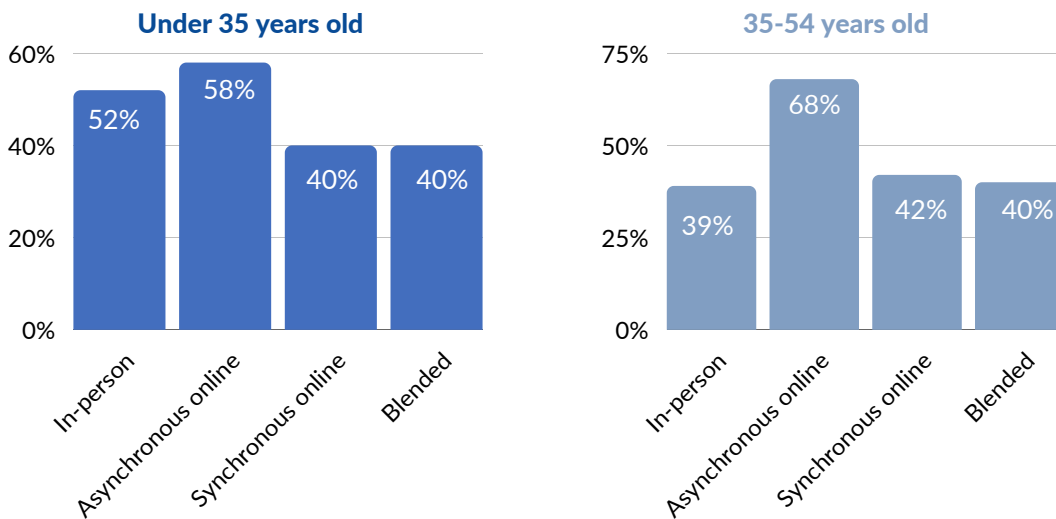
Part 2, cont.

What are adults' experiences with higher education and who is interested in pursuing a credential?

What general types of college courses are you interested in taking? (n=394)



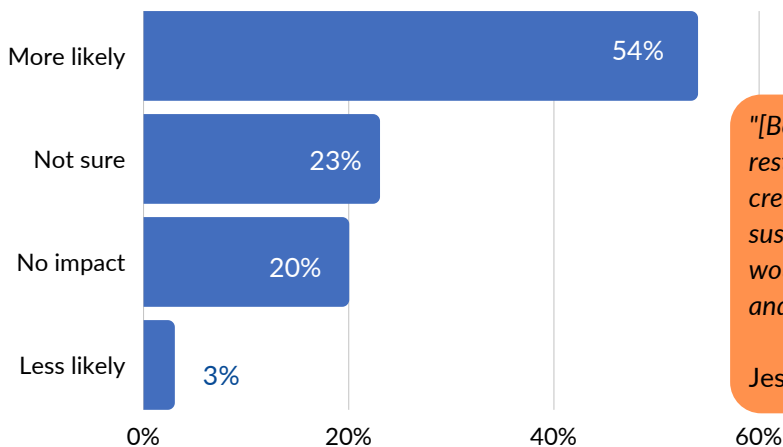
How appealing are each of the following instructional formats? (n=2,031)



Part 3

What share of respondents are interested in expanded learning recognition opportunities?

If a college or university in your state offered more opportunities for learning recognition, how would that influence your future decision? (n=1,861)



"[Before enrolling at Tufts], I was taking classes in the restaurant industry...[for which] I [might've] received credit in business management, environmental studies, sustainable agriculture...If this had been a possibility, it would've shortened my time to get back to the workforce and lessened my debt load."

Jesse Lauden, Student, Tufts University

New England adults who intend to continue their postsecondary education cite the following reasons:

- **38%** want to finish what they started
- **35%** want to become eligible for new job opportunities

Because nearly 25% of all respondents have at least 30 college credits and 47% are employed full time, recognizing these learning experiences and awarding credit where due will shorten respondents' time to degree and, therefore, quickly put them on track to advance in the workforce.

Part 3

What are the potential cost savings from expanded learning recognition?

	Public 2-year Institution	Public 4-year Institution
Average tuition per credit	\$176	\$440
Average tuition for degree	\$10,652 60 credits	\$52,800 120 credits

Source: NEBHE Analysis of IPEDS data, 2019



<u>Number of credits recognized</u>	<u>Associate's degree</u>		<u>Bachelor's degree</u>	
	% of degree	Total savings	% of degree	Total savings
6	10%	\$1,056	5%	\$2,640
12	20%	\$2,112	10%	\$5,280
30	50%	\$5,280	25%	\$13,200

While awarded credits should cut down on the cost-to-degree for students with prior learning experience in or outside of an academic setting, many institutions in New England charge a credit assessment fee, a fee per every credit awarded and, in some cases, a fee for a portfolio development course to ensure students maximize their credit. Cumulatively, these costs may nullify any savings a student might have acquired with a low- or no-cost prior learning assessment process. Currently, there are no New England states that award scholarships or grant funds to cover fees associated with assessment of prior learning. State-sponsored scholarship programs that assist with prior learning assessment-related costs would help students navigate these assessment processes, encourage them to engage with prior learning assessment processes and shorten their time-to-degree.

4. Institutional Practices in New England

Some New England institutions have policies related to broad recognition of prior learning already in place. However, many of these policies are not holistic enough to be widely effective for all students. Moreover, information related to obtaining credit for prior learning experiences is often difficult to find, credit assessment processes can be cost prohibitive and credit awards are not guaranteed nor may not be transferrable to another institution. If students do not receive credit for subjects in which they can demonstrate mastery, they may be deterred from enrollment and completion of a credential. NEBHE's adult learner survey illustrates the fact that institutions' implementation of broad recognition of prior learning experiences would positively affect prospective students' desire to enroll.

These New England institutions have implemented innovative policies that award credit to students for what they know—no matter where their learning occurred.

Institution	Policy	Qualifying types of learning	Cost
<u>Lasell College</u>	"PLA courses require students to create portfolios that demonstrate prior learning through a self-paced, online learning platform. An approved PLA course can take the place of a required course for their program of study."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work experience • Employer training programs • Military service • Open online classrooms/courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First PLA course: \$650 • Subsequent: \$450 <p>(compared to regular \$1,800 per course)</p>
<u>Southern New Hampshire University</u>	Credit is awarded for industry-recognized credentials or prior learning assessment exams. Students may also receive credit for an assessment of their portfolio which may include work experience, military training, business ownership, volunteer work, or other life experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry-recognized credentials • IT certifications/credentials • Law enforcement training • Portfolio assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNIV-150: \$960 (3-credit portfolio development course) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ May award up to 6 credits • Additional portfolio assessment: \$125
<u>Community College of Vermont</u>	CCV hosts the Office of Prior Learning Assessment for the Vermont State Colleges System. Students may obtain credit for what they know through a portfolio course, course challenge (demonstration of mastery of a subject) or credit by examination. The centralized office increases transferability within the Vermont State Colleges System.	Demonstrated mastery of a subject, no matter where students acquire knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolio course/assessment: \$300 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Awarded credits are free • Course challenge competency-based pathway: \$150 • Exam: \$140
<u>University of Maine Augusta</u>	Students may obtain credit through examination, portfolio review or external training review. Over 40 industry-recognized credentials are already approved for academic credit. For experiences or credentials that have not yet been assessed, individual portfolio and external training reviews may be completed in collaboration with faculty sponsors to verify measurable skill acquisition and maximize awarded credit.	Demonstrated mastery of a subject, no matter where students acquire knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam: \$30-\$100 • Portfolio review: \$50 per credit awarded

With so many New Englanders out of work due to the impact of COVID-19, expanding credit for prior learning policies and programs to award credit for individuals' validated learning experiences is imperative to placing them on an accelerated credential path or professional advancement.

Exemplary Institutional Practice in Other States

Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS)

KCTCS transitioned its non-credit programs to be credit-bearing and ensured all programs within the system have stackable credential pathways. This way, individuals who complete a workforce training program at a KCTCS institution and have their skills validated by way of attaining a credential of value or industry-recognized certification, may easily continue on to a degree program without facing the hurdles of having their credit assessed. KCTCS has determined that many students obtain certificates, which are embedded in the majority of KCTCS's degree programs, leave school to work, and return later on to complete their degree. These returning students do not have to repeat courses to fulfill specific institutional requirements or pay for portfolio development and assessment courses, because all KCTCS institutions recognize credentials of value as automatically credit-bearing.

Source: Education Strategy Group. *A More Unified Community College: Strategies and Resources to Align Non-Credit and Credit Programs*. (2020).

Assessing individuals' prior learning experience and subsequently awarding credit is also costly for institutions. Therefore, instituting a low- or no-cost assessment process may not be a financial possibility without assistance from states. Institutions have an opportunity to offset these costs by partnering with states to advocate for funding to cover and/or incentivize these assessment programs for institutions.

As a first step in making the credit for prior learning process more accessible to all learners, institutions must make information more transparent and navigable on their websites. According to an institutional scan conducted by NEBHE, a minority of institutions advertise--or even make visible--the prior learning credit acquisition process. Before institutions can initiate an expansion of recognized learning, they must consider the accessibility of programs already in place. For more information about exemplary credit for prior learning websites, stay tuned for NEBHE's forthcoming summary.

"If I could change one thing about my experience, it would be making credits easier to transfer and having more programs like Duet and SNHU available to people who are already working."

Fred Mutsinzi, Graduate, Duet/Southern New Hampshire University

Key recommendations for institutional leaders to consider:

- All practices pertaining to prior learning recognition must be transparent and accessible to students/prospective students
- The prior learning assessment process must be affordable for all individuals (i.e. institutions can offer scholarships or grants to help cover assessment costs and other fees associated with learning recognition)
- Industry-recognized credentials and other non-credit bearing programs should be easily translatable to academic credit