



# All Learning Counts

## State Policy Brief

November 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 well-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)—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 State Policy Brief serves as an introductory look at the core issue, as well as existing and exemplary policies from both New England states and early adopters across the U.S.

## 2. Overview

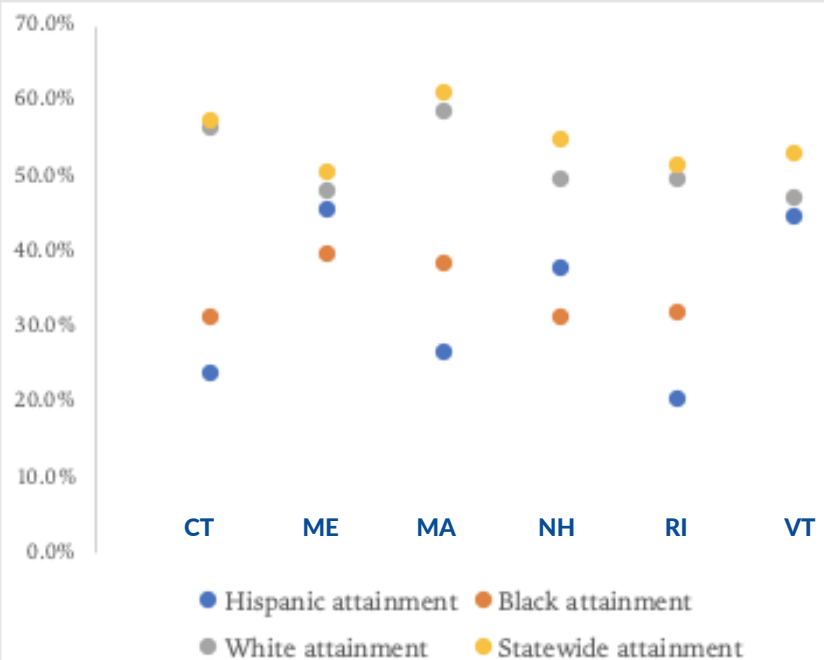
A key factor in increasing attainment rates and closing the significant gaps (See Figure 1) among minoritized communities in New England is institutions' commitment to taking a broader and more inclusive approach to the recognition of prior learning that results in credit awarded to individuals with validated work or 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 reality of many in our region, we cannot afford to allow 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



37% of Americans believe if they lose their job because of COVID-19, they will need additional education to replace it.



22% of respondents with prior learning experience identified as Hispanic, Black or Asian. This is comparable to the overall non-white population in New England.\*

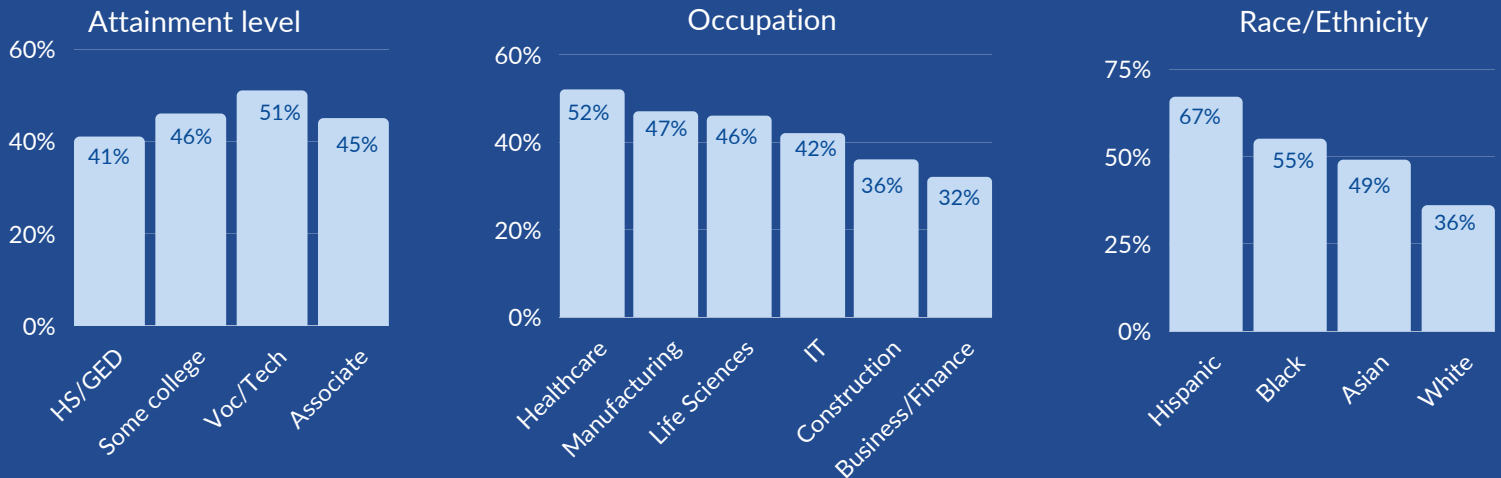


More than half of respondents would be more likely to consider a college/university in their state if it had policies that expanded learning recognition

\*NEBHE analysis of U.S. Census data, 2019

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

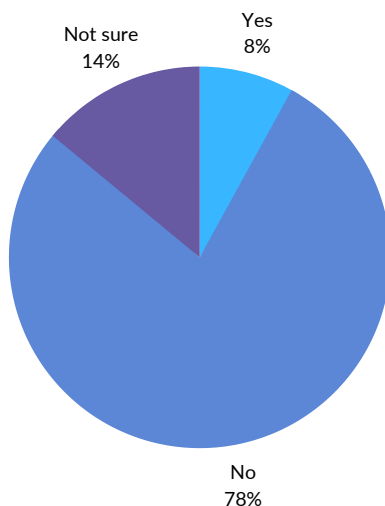
Those with PLA experience are more likely to be employed full-time than those without.

### Part 1

Who has received credit from prior learning assessment and how much?

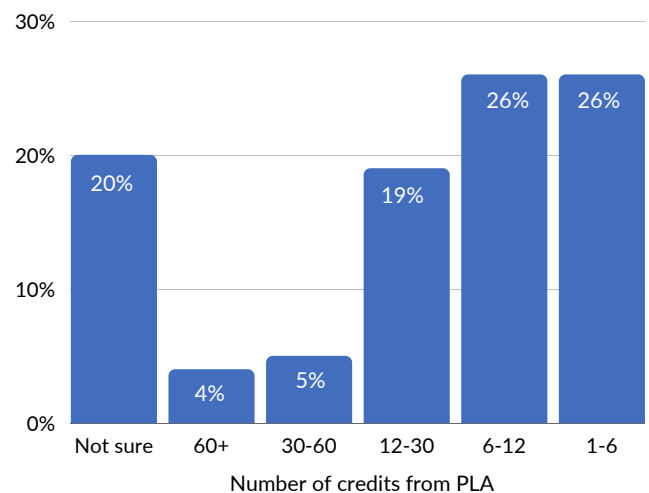
Do you have PLA credit from a college/university?

n=2,031



How many PLA credits do you have?

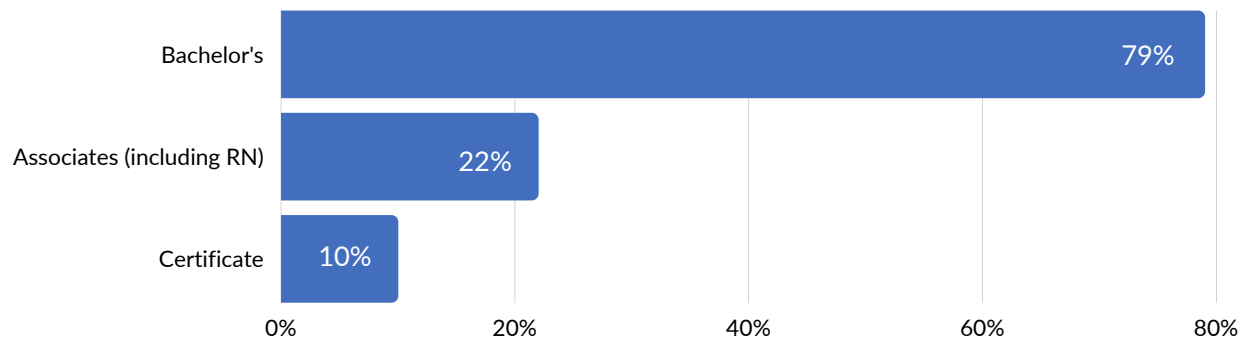
n=170



Part 1, cont.

Who has credit from prior learning assessment and how much?

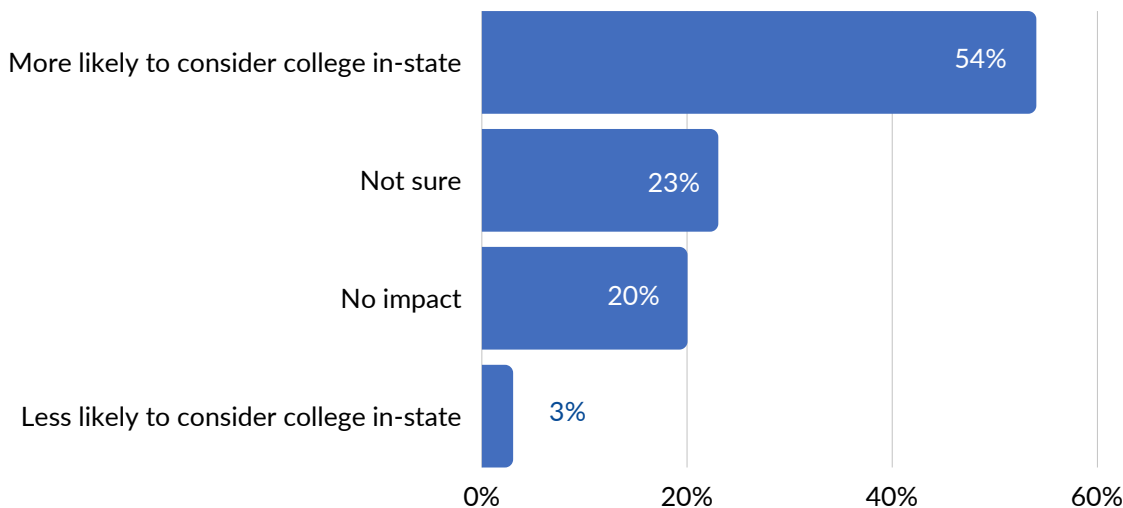
For those with 12-29 credits, the interest in pursuing a Bachelor's degree is higher than the interest in an Associate's degree or certificate



Part 2

Who is interested in expanded opportunities for recognition of prior learning experience?

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



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 to the survey 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.

25% of all survey respondents have at least 30 college credits. How does this translate to savings toward a two- or four-year degree at a public institution in New England?

	Public 2-year Institution	Public 4-year Institution
<b>Average tuition per credit</b>	\$176	\$440
<b>Average tuition for degree</b>	\$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>	
	<u>% of degree</u>	<u>Total savings</u>	<u>% of degree</u>	<u>Total savings</u>
<b>6</b>	10%	\$1,056	5%	\$2,640
<b>12</b>	20%	\$2,112	10%	\$5,280
<b>30</b>	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. State Policy in New England

Four New England states have state- or systemwide policies in place regarding recognition of prior learning. However, these policies merely give states and institutions permission to develop procedures in this arena and do not necessarily articulate explicit guidance to confer credit. For example, the Connecticut policy notes, "An institution proposing to award credit for prior experiential learning shall develop written policies and procedures" in accordance with established standards to award credit for non-academic learning. In short, many institutions and states in New England already have the foundation for broad recognition of prior learning. As NEBHE's recent survey of adult learners in the region indicates, adults in the region are interested in taking advantage of these opportunities if they were to become available.

*These New England states have implemented policies at the state or system level that include a provision for awarding credit for work experience or experiential learning*

State	Policy or Statewide Program	Administrator
Connecticut	<b><u>Title 10a: State Systems of Higher Education</u></b> Requires institutions proposing to institute prior experiential learning policies to adhere to a set of standards including portfolio development and assessment	Board of Governors
Maine	<b><u>PLA/Experiential Learning Portfolio</u></b> Defines PLA and experiential learning assessment for institutions within the University of Maine System. Of note, individual institutional policies may vary.	University of Maine System
Massachusetts	<b><u>My Experience Counts (interactive website)</u></b> State administered program that allows users to determine how their academic credit or work/life experience will translate to credit at in-state institutions.	MA Community Colleges
Vermont	<b><u>Transfer of Credit Policy</u></b> Allows institutions within the Vermont State Colleges System to award credit for work/life experience through VSC's formal assessment programs	Vermont State Colleges

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 State Policies Outside New England

### **Colorado State Board of Community Colleges and Occupational Education**

#### **Prior Learning Assessment Credit**

To award the maximum amount of credit upon entry to a Colorado community college, "a student's college level learning shall be evaluated for college credit at the student's request." This policy is based on three principles:

- "Learning occurs both within formal educational settings and in the community at large.
- The criteria for evaluation of such learning should take into consideration the educational goals which are identified by the student, as well as institutional and State System requirements.
- Evaluation of prior learning should provide substantive information about the knowledge, competencies, attitudes, values, and other dimensions of personal development which the individual possesses."

### **Indiana H.B. 1281**

#### **An act to amend the Indiana Code concerning higher education**

This bill allows recipients of grants, scholarships or remission of fees offered by the state of Indiana to use funds to pay for costs associated with prior learning assessment that the student attempts to earn during the academic year in which he or she receives the grant, scholarship or remission of fees. The assessment must be approved by the Indiana Commission on Higher Education and costs associated with the assessment process may not exceed 50% of the full tuition of fees for an equivalent number of credits at Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana.

Assessing individuals' prior learning experiences 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. Legislators have an opportunity to offset these costs by providing funding to cover and/or incentivize these assessment programs for institutions.

### **Key recommendations for state policymakers to consider:**

- All policies pertaining to prior learning recognition must be transparent and accessible
- The prior learning assessment process must be affordable for all individuals (state policymakers can institute 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