

ACCELERATED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES AND

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

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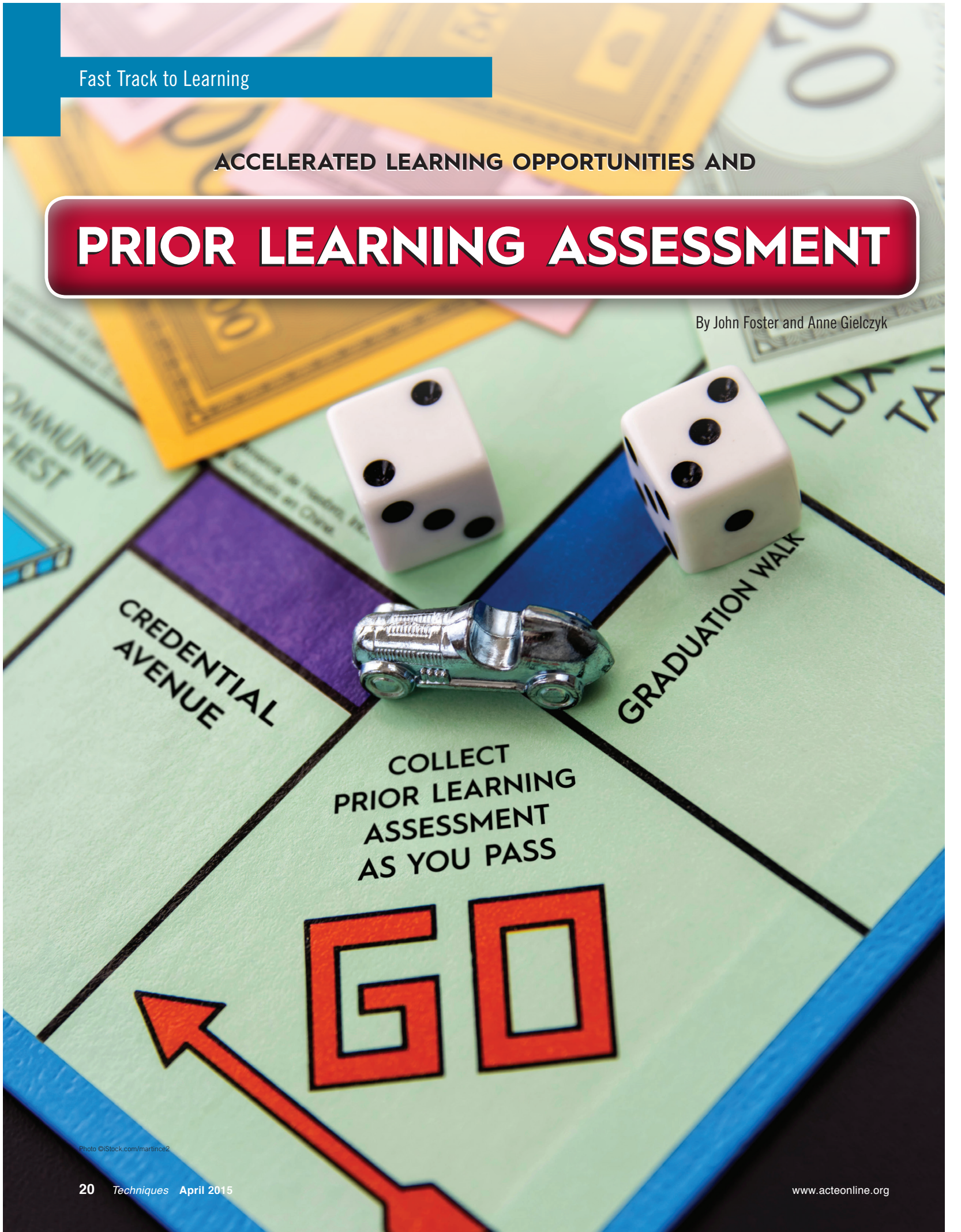


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Two-thirds of students graduating from U.S. colleges and universities are leaving these institutions with some level of debt, states a 2013 Forbes.com article by Chris Denhart.¹ The author also cites information from the Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) Project on Student Loan Debt which states that “the average borrower will graduate \$26,600 in the red,”² with 10 percent of graduates having a debt accumulation of more than \$40,000. Furthermore, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau estimates that student loan debt has already reached a new high, crossing the \$1.2 trillion threshold, according to the article.

Student loan debt is now the second highest category of consumer debt, measuring at 6 percent of the overall national debt, states Denhart. These are staggering numbers, to say the least, especially as tuition costs continue to rise each year.

The nation is witnessing a shift in how individuals are learning, as well as how they are being trained and earning their degrees. Much of this shift can likely be attributed to the upwardly spiraling costs of continuing an education. Individuals are actively looking for alternatives, such as obtaining a degree online while maintaining a full-time job; seeking out credentials, certifications and certificates of competence that are relevant to employers; and reviewing options for obtaining credit for their real-world experience. Secondary and postsecondary students, as well as displaced workers and those serving in the military, are just a few of the groups looking for alternative education options.

More and more, educational institutions are acknowledging that skills are not always learned in the classroom. Pursuing postsecondary education upon completion of high school is not the norm it once was. Individuals have many opportunities to gain knowledge and skills throughout a lifetime from many other avenues than in what was previously viewed as a “common” educational track.

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Secondary Opportunities

There are a variety of paths for secondary career and technical education (CTE) students to take in order to gain advanced credit prior to entering a postsecondary program, including statewide and local articulation agreements. Secondary students also have the opportunity to take advanced placement courses and/or College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams, as well as dual enroll to earn college credits before high school graduation if there is a local community college or four-year university that participates in such a program.

Adult and Military Opportunities

In the nation’s ever-changing economic environment, individuals of all ages enter or re-enter postsecondary education for a variety of reasons. Many have found themselves as displaced workers seeking a new career path. Some may have raised their families and are now ready to choose a new career outside the home.

Additionally, the country’s military veterans often enroll in degree programs upon completion of their active duty. The credits earned from these courses are placed on their Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) transcript. But what about the vast amount of knowledge learned from military work experience that is not added to a transcript? For example, a veteran may have worked as a mechanic for many years while enlisted but was never formally enrolled in coursework that could be placed on a transcript. It only stands to reason that he/she should be able to gain some credit for those technical skills and knowledge without sitting in a semester-long course.

In scenarios like these, individuals have gained knowledge and skills outside the classroom and are looking for ways to shorten the time to a degree and lessen the amount of money it takes to earn it.

Prior Learning Assessment

Prior learning assessment (PLA), or credit for prior learning, has become an integral part of the degree program planning process for many individuals. A great deal of research has been done regarding overall degree completion rates of individuals who have been granted PLA credit. For instance, according to a study conducted by the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), of the 62,475 students they surveyed at 48 colleges and universities across the country, graduation rates were found to be two-and-a-half times higher for students with PLA credit. In addition, the study showed that PLA students earn degrees, on average, between 2.5 and 10.1 months more quickly than non-PLA students earning bachelor’s degrees.³

Significant research has also been done by CAEL on disaggregated populations. In the same study mentioned in the previous paragraph, researchers found that with 13 to 24 PLA credits, black non-Hispanic PLA students reduced the time it took to acquire a bachelor’s degree by an average of 14.2 months. Hispanic PLA students earned degrees at a rate that was almost eight times higher than that of Hispanic non-PLA students.⁴

Furthermore, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Center for Policy Research and Strategy conducted a survey on PLA acceptance. Researchers surveyed three groups: students who sought credit for prior learning, college

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administrators in institutions that award credit for prior learning, and industry representatives.

The study found that there was a high overall success rate (82 percent) in earning academic credit or employer recognition for prior learning experiences. The study also concluded that the vast majority of responding campuses (92 percent) award academic credit for prior learning.⁵

The ACE study indicates that applying prior learning methodologies toward a postsecondary degree, certificate or credential capitalizes on the large national investment made in workplace education and training.

The aforementioned studies highlight the potential benefits for adults seeking a baccalaureate degree and using PLA to gain credit for their knowledge and skills. There are several opportunities for adults to receive PLA credits. Organizations such as CAEL and NOCTI/Nocti Business Solutions (NBS) strive to help working adults and students earn credit for learning acquired outside the traditional college classroom. Adults have opportunities to create portfolios of their experience and expertise to be assessed for undergraduate college credit. Online portfolio development courses help degree-seekers demonstrate the college-level learning acquired through work, volunteering or military service.

In addition, technical skill assessments in areas such as automotive, carpentry, welding and culinary arts, to name a few, are available and have been recommended for college credit for adults who are working toward a degree program with the goal of obtaining college credit for previous work experience. These assessments give individuals who have vast knowledge and hands-on experience in

a technical skill area the opportunity to capitalize on their hard work and gain college credit.

These technical skill assessments are available for potential college credit at the secondary level, as well. If a secondary student meets the established benchmark on an assessment that is being administered as part of an end-of-program requirement for the CTE program, the student could have the added benefit of having college credits added to his or her transcript of the college they plan to attend.

Here's just one example of how PLA benefits adult students: An adult student seeking a degree in business administration had undocumented previous work experience as a cosmetologist for many years. Her college academic advisor at Liberty State College suggested she take the Cosmetology and Administrative Assisting PLA assessments through the NBS program. She achieved the required scores on both assessments and was able to earn six college credits toward her business degree from the experiences she gained throughout her life's work.

Conclusion

According to the findings in the previously mentioned ACE study, “Collectively, the United States spends approximately \$772 billion annually on postsecondary-level education and training, and the bulk of the spending supports education and training occurring outside of formal education institutions. Providing adults with ways to apply their technical experience toward postsecondary degrees, certificates or credentials is a logical way to put this investment to use.”⁶

PLA is certainly a viable solution to earning a degree in less time and with less

education debt. Using PLA benefits individuals by helping control education costs and by shortening the time to earning a degree. Institutions can benefit from the PLA model by increasing both completion and retention rates, and it doesn't stop there. As a whole, society benefits by increasing the number of technically credentialed individuals needed to maintain the nation's infrastructure and, ultimately, the standard of living. [Tech](#)

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ENDNOTES

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3. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. (2010). *Fueling the race to postsecondary success: A 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes*. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf
4. Ibid
5. Ryu, M. (2013). *Credit for prior learning from the student, campus, and industry perspectives*. Washington DC: American Council on Education. Retrieved from: www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Issue-Brief.pdf
6. Ibid.

EXPLORE MORE

If your school is interested in learning more about prior learning assessments with NBS, please contact us at noctibusiness@nocti.org.



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