## College Unbound's Student-Created System for Crediting Prior Learning

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### The Challenge

After her young son was diagnosed with lead poisoning, Liz Colon became a nationally-recognized leader in the effort to reduce lead paint poisoning. She made lead poisoning an issue in local and state political races, has been an expert witness in court cases, became a certified lead inspector, consulted on the well-known American children's educational series, *Sesame Street*, presented at national conferences, and helped pass major legislation.

When she decided to return to college, Liz had this wealth of experiential learning and 18 transfer credits. She chose to enroll at College Unbound (CU), an educational institution in Rhode Island, in part because the school's first guiding principle states that the prior experiences, knowledge, and abilities of adult learners are assets that "must be recognized, honored, used, *and credited* [emphasis added]" (College Unbound, n.d., para. 1). However, the college's fairly standard prior learning assessment program, which included standardized tests, ACE (American Council on Education) recognized licenses, and course match portfolios, asked Liz to do the work of breaking a lifetime of deep learning into course-based chunks that the institution could recognize. As one of Liz's classmates, Sonia Thomas, would later point out after a conversation with Donna Younger, an expert in assessing adult learners, to live up to its guiding principle, the college needed to do the work of recognizing Liz's real-world learning rather than requiring that she prepackage it for consumption in higher education course units.

With students like Liz in mind, in spring 2020, College Unbound made a commitment to revisiting its first guiding principle and its system to credit prior learning with students on board as co-creators. The college has found that centering prior learning in this way has proven one of the most mission-aligned academic endeavors we are taking on.

As readers of this journal know, prior learning is not a new or novel concept. However, a 2020 WICHE (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) study showed that at institutions that offer prior learning assessment, only around 10% of students participate (Leibrandt, Klein-Collins & Lane, 2020). At College Unbound, 26% of our students had earned PLA (prior learning assessment) credit as of January 2020. However, as a school created for students who have faced barriers to learning, we are determined to create a system that is understood and utilized by *all* of our students. Our system is influenced by critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), which view students as scholars and partners in the process, rather than as subjects submitting to assessment.

From its inception, CU has had policies in place for recognizing and awarding credit for prior learning as demonstrated in standardized exams such as CLEP (College-Level Examination Program), ACE (American Council on Education)-evaluated or NCCRS (National College Credit Recommendation Service)-evaluated training or credentials, and CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) portfolio assessment. Notably, CU helped pioneer interviewing for portfolio assessment with CAEL. However, as personnel and priorities changed at both CAEL and CU, this

method fell by the wayside. By 2019, PLA was underused at CU, despite a student body actively engaged in rich learning from community and professional work. We recognized that it was time to rethink and restructure our PLA process if we were to live up to our guiding principle to recognize and credit students' learning from prior experiences.

**The Process**

In spring 2020, College Unbound's associate provost invited students to participate in an institutional research project on prior learning assessment. By inviting students into the process of evaluating and proposing a new system for PLA, and by crediting them for their learning gained from this process, College Unbound hoped to build a structure as student-centered in its purpose as in its creation. Student voice was integral in this process and took the form of a semester-long course with the learning outcomes that follow.

By the end of the course, the student can:
- Explain the philosophy behind prior learning assessment, the nationally-recognized quality standards guiding best practices in prior learning assessment, the research on how PLA can benefit students, and the ways that it can be structured.
- Develop a prior learning assessment policies and practices proposal that is aligned with CU's mission and guiding principles, that has academic integrity, that does not introduce unnecessary barriers, and that supports learning.
- Use reflection to make meaning from experience.

The three students who participated in the course, who we will refer to as the "student committee" and who are co-authors of this article were: Liz Colon, the lead activist introduced above; Brenda Ketner, whose interest in the course arose from her years of work in human resources; Sonia Thomas, who is interested in education and has a background of significant community engagement activities. Their personal investment in this work and to the college has helped build a system of a deeply student-centered process.

The student committee interviewed alumni and current students on their experiences and understanding of prior learning assessment, analyzed CU's PLA data, read and discussed a variety of publications on PLA, interviewed the authors of *Assessing Learning*, Donna Younger and Catherine Marienau (2017), and studied nationally-recognized PLA programs at DePaul University, SUNY Empire State College, Thomas Edison University, and Central New Mexico Community College.

The student committee found that many CU students were unsure about what PLA was and how to begin the PLA process. Furthermore, students perceived taking a course as an easier and faster process toward degree completion than attempting to get prior learning credit. The upfront cost of PLA for students in terms of both time and potential assessment fee (as low as $25) was a deterrent to utilizing PLA, even when students knew it could decrease their costs toward degree completion in the long run. The committee identified a lack of clarity regarding PLA: mixed messages from CU staff, unclear processes, and a lack of examples and commonly shared information. The committee also advocated for common criteria, but multiple assessment methods to acknowledge the variety of student learning and ways of presenting it. For PLA to work at College Unbound, the process would need to be scaffolded, much more hands-on, and as clear as possible.

The student committee identified the following principles to guide the creation of a new system for assessing and crediting prior learning at College Unbound:
- Credit is granted for verifiable learning, but not for the experience itself.
- Students are awarded credit for verifiable, college-level learning regardless of how, when, or where it was acquired (CU Guiding Principle #1, see Appendix C).
- Learning is often "multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative ... not ... broken into

compartmentalized subject-matter packages nor individualized silos" (CU Guiding Principle #3, see Appendix C). Thus, while it is the responsibility of learners to demonstrate their learning, it is the responsibility of the college to articulate this learning to appropriate outcomes and credits.

- The prior learning assessment process is inclusive of and available to all students and will be conducted in consideration of their learning style.
- Policies, procedures, and criteria used to determine credit for prior learning will be transparent and applied consistently and equitably for all students and in accordance with CU's educational standards.

**Where We Are Now**
In summer 2020, a director of independent learning joined the staff and a new PLA system began to be piloted. College Unbound's PLA system has been renamed "Learning in Public" (LIP) to honor the college's reflective, life experience-based curriculum. Learning in Public allows students to use the same system to get credit for work they have done in the past and work they are currently doing independently.

Assessment is offered through portfolio and recorded or written narrative, portfolio and knowledge sharing, or portfolio and behavioral interview. Subject-area experts in the learning area conduct assessment using The Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF) (SUNY Empire State College, n.d.) to determine college-level learning, and College Unbound learning outcomes to determine placement of credits. Regardless of the chosen assessment route, the process begins with a conversation between the student, the student's advisor, and the director of the LIP process. Initially, this conversation was positioned as an intake interview that would map out a student's next steps and guide them in understanding the evidence they needed to collect. After students collected evidence of their learning, the assessment process would begin with a second interview. A recording of this interview along with the student's evidence would be sent to a subject area assessor. However, this process proved too time-consuming for adult learners. We quickly realized that students were engaging in deep reflection in the initial intake interviews, making the second interview feel redundant and potentially patronizing. Thus, the intake interview began to evolve into a conversation, which serves not only as a time for students to identify learning and identify the evidence they need to collect but as evidence itself. Borrowing from the generative knowledge interviewing methodology (Peet, 2017; Peet et al., 2010), we invite students to tell stories about the challenges, successes, and realizations that they have experienced in their personal and professional lives to guide them in naming and claiming their tacit learning. Here are some typical prompts:

1. Describe what you did, where you did it, when you did it, and how you spent your time. Prompt for sensory detail to help ground the learner in a moment.
2. Describe one or two specific challenges or "aha" moments you had. How did you respond?
3. What are your takeaways? What is it that you want to remember from this learning experience?
4. What has been the impact of this learning experience for you? For others?
5. How will you apply what you have learned going forward?
6. What new questions has this experience raised?

This initial conversation is now recorded, and pieces of it can serve as part of the evidence of learning a student submits in their portfolio.

We also decided to explore the welcoming nature of conversation that occurred when an ally to the student was present in the generative knowledge conversation. Every College Unbound student is assigned an advisor, called their lab faculty, at the start of their time at the college. We have found the presence of the student's lab faculty or another chosen ally helps guide the student in identifying learning experiences, and fosters more open and reflective dialogue. Rather than reinforcing the "imposter syndrome" many adult students bring back to school with them,

often characterized by feelings of inferiority regarding their identity as capable scholars, the language of these conversations centers on appreciation. That is, instead of demanding a student "prove" their learning, this supportive framing encourages students to identify, reflect on, and share their learning experiences. This new framing has been particularly important in beginning the prior learning assessment process with students who have been recently released from the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institutions. The supportive nature of the conversation invites creative inquiry and reflection, and gives space for a student to hear their learning reflected back to them before beginning to dive deeply into collecting supporting materials. In line with an appreciative inquiry framework and taking an asset-based inquiry approach (Harper, 2010, pp. 63-74), this model allows us to focus on students' accomplishments and potential – the "barriers" to their degree completion are reframed as important and legitimate learning experiences. By participating in a PLA process based on narrative, the student is framed as a creator of knowledge and their own narrator.

Adult learners, no matter how accomplished in the rest of their lives, often have a shared sense of failure because they didn't do school in what they often describe as "the right way." This feeds a fraud/imposter syndrome, often inhibiting students from even being able to identify areas for which they could potentially get PLA credit in the first place. Brenda articulated this well when she referenced an interview with Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau in this journal (Travers & Mandell, 2019): "I especially identified with one of their observations about how students can experience what they refer to as 'anxious brain' and become intimidated by the process of getting credit for something they have previously learned" (B. Ketner, personal communication, April 4, 2020). The PLA process we are developing works to interrupt this. The transformative power of this process is that it reflects back to students their own reflection: students get the power to create their own narrative, are guided through supporting that narrative, and then get recognition for what they've built. This process centers the student voice and creates space for the student to hear their voice and their accomplishments. Though assessors serve the role of showing or reiterating this to the student, we've found that just the initial conversation has led students to significant reflection and feelings of affirmation. One student's experience going through the PLA process inspired him to completely rewrite and reframe his resume. The process illuminated a through-line between his experiences; he hadn't before identified how strong a mentor he was; he saw how helpful foregrounding his mentorship skills would be in applying for a managerial role.

When sent Liz's materials to assess, her assessor, a high-level employee in Rhode Island's Department of Administration, said, "... If this is Liz Colon, who has been more than a champion but an advocate, activist, and policy-changemaker around lead poisoning work in Rhode Island, she has probably understated her accomplishments for life credit." In response to this assessment process, Liz wrote,

> You have made a huge difference in my educational life taking on this project. As I've told you I always wanted a portfolio or timeline of my career and you helped shape the direction. This process really helped me to organize it in such a special way to be thoughtful, focused on learning and highlighting my accomplishments. (E. Colon, personal communication, August 18, 2020)

Liz is now likely to graduate up to two semesters earlier than she originally expected.

Over the next two years, the college hopes to build capacity for all students to engage with the PLA system. College Unbound is developing the capacity for behavioral interviewing to serve as the main tool in the next phase of this assessment process. Behavioral interviewing can be effective in identifying abilities that are transferable across contexts – thus, interviewing for behavior, i.e., a student's representation of their experience, can be indicative of future performance and a student's overall integration of and reflection on learning. Behavioral interviewing will expand not only PLA accessibility, but accessibility in assessment throughout the college by establishing a system for assessing conversation.

College Unbound looks forward to continuing to create a system that centers the student voice. As Brenda said,

> So many adult students walk around with so much learned experience that has yet to be tapped into. Given the right balance of resources, guidance, and simplified structure I feel we can make CU's PLA program easier to navigate and understand and, more importantly, less intimidating.

Working with our student advisory committee, the PLA system will, as Sonia stated, "continue to evolve, as effective, in-the-now, educational tools should."

## References

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## Appendices

A.  LIP Assessor Form.
B.  Assessor Guidelines.
C.  Guiding Principles.

# LIP Assessor Form

College Unbound recognizes that college-level learning can take place *outside* the classroom, and creates opportunities to credit this learning through LIP prior learning assessment. For more information, see LIP Assessor Guidelines here.

**Assessor Name: _____**

**Link to Assessor's CV/Linkedin Page: _____**

**Date: _____**

**Other LIPs this Student is Pursuing: _____**

**You are being asked to assess this LIP as a: _____**

**Student Name: _____**

**Title of LIP: _____**

**Part 1:** Fill in the highlighted areas below:

| Outcome Statement *What have you learned?* | Evidence *How do you show it?* | Yes, the student has met this outcome. | If the student has not met this outcome, how might the statement be revised to reflect what they have demonstrated and/or what additional information do you need? |
|---|---|---|---|
| Example: Can describe how conflict is a function of systems and from this understanding evaluate possible avenues for interventions. | Ex: RI 2017 Certificate in Nonviolence (TOT) Training of Trainers: The Institute for The Study and Practice of Nonviolence, and Board Member for "Peace in RI", 2014-2018. | *Yes* | *X* |
|  |  |  |  |

**Part 2:** Using the Global Qualifications Framework, please write in a level (100, 200, 300, or 400) next to the type and level of knowledge best represented by this submission. Please pick the **one** type and level of knowledge that best matches the students' submission. Your selection will be reviewed by the Provost's office.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Lower-level:**<br>100 = initial foundational knowledge<br>200 = building on foundational knowledge, moving toward application<br>**Upper-level:**<br>300 = application & analysis/reflection<br>400 = application, analysis/reflection, & creation/critique | |
| | Specialized knowledge |
| | Applied knowledge |
| | Integrated knowledge |
| | Communication |
| | Information literacy |
| | Ethical responsibility |
| | Sociocultural and civic engagement |
| | Learning engagement |
| | None of the above |

**Part 3:** Using 45 hours of engaged learning = 1 credit hour, how many credit hours do you recommend awarding from this submission? Please make an educated recommendation. Students can be awarded a maximum of 20 credits per LIP. Receiving 20 credits would be the rough equivalent of a minor. The Provost's office will review, assess, and assign all awards.

Example: A student whose job includes writing a monthly company newsletter, high-stakes reports, and regular business communication might earn 3 credits for Professional Communication. A student who was a full-time journalist at a newspaper for ten years and has also worked as a communications professional would earn 20 credits.

**Proposed: ____credit hour(s)**

**Why:** Please elaborate on the number of credits proposed. You are encouraged to write out the calculations and reasoning that led you to your decision. **_____**

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**Part 4:** General comments for the student:

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**Part 5:** Do you have any recommendations for improving this form or assessment process?

**Assessor Signature: _____**
*Thank you for helping us develop a prior learning assessment process that recognizes, honors, and credits student's learning from experience.*

# Assessor Guidelines
What does LIP assessing entail?

College Unbound recognizes that college-level learning can take place *outside* the classroom and has processes to help students earn credit for that learning. For students seeking credit for college-level learning that's taken place outside the CU classroom, assessing independent learning may be accomplished through standardized tests, course challenge examinations, *or* (and here's where **you** come in) by demonstration of outcomes through portfolio, interview, and/or written work.

**Eligible Assessors:**
- Have master's degrees or higher, or demonstrated expertise in their field.

**As an Assessor, you will:**
1. Receive an email from the Director of Independent Learning with a student's completed work and reflection.
2. Receive a form for you to fill out after you review the students work.
3. Be expected to do this within a week of receiving the student's materials.
4. Receive $20 per assessment (unless you are a full-time College Unbound employee). Payment will be sent out at the end of every semester. Necessary paperwork will be sent your way.
5. Provide feedback on this pilot process and materials which will inform future iterations as well as the development of assessor training.

**Principles to assess from:** Our assessing philosophy is geared toward competence and learning outcome, *not* towards the students' ability to write academic papers or use specific jargon. CU uses the Global Learning Qualifications Framework to determine college-level learning.
- Credit is granted for verifiable learning, but not for the experience itself.
- Students are awarded credit for verifiable, college-level learning regardless of how, when, or where it was acquired. (CU Guiding Principle #1)
- The objective is to evaluate "development, integration and application."(GLQF)
- Learning is often "multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative, not broken into compartmentalized subject-matter packages nor individualized silos" (CU Guiding Principle #3). Students should use their own voice and assessors need to be able to meet the students where they are.
- The assessment process is inclusive of and available to all students and will be conducted in consideration of their learning style.
- Policies, procedures, and criteria used to determine credit for prior learning will be transparent and applied consistently and equitably for all students and in accordance with CU's educational standards.

If you have any questions, please reach out to the Director of Independent Learning at
lips@collegeunbound.org

**Guiding Principles:**

1. Learners come to CU with prior experiences, knowledge, and abilities which must be recognized, honored, used, and credited. The multiple roles of these adult learners (workers, community members, partners, parents) are considered assets, not barriers. Our students are supported as scholar practitioners.
2. Curriculum begins with the student and builds from there. It must be personalized around the unique skills, knowledge, and needs of individuals—acknowledging that students have different goals and are at different places in their lives.
3. Learning in the world is multi-faceted, interdisciplinary, and collaborative; it is not linear nor is it broken into compartmentalized subject-matter packages nor individualized silos.
4. When assessment is shared between professors, academic advisors, workplace mentors, field experts, and peers, the learning is rigorous, relevant, and ongoing. When students open their work to public analysis, the learning increases.
5. Competence is not demonstrated through a single event; rather, a range of evidence in different contexts over time must be presented before judging competence.
6. Technology must be used to do more than deliver content; it must be used by students to discover, create, use, share, assess, discuss, manipulate and reshape content, and to connect with others.

**Vision:** College Unbound models the possibilities of higher education for adults where lifelong learning is valued and enables people to be fuller participants in creating the lives to which they aspire.

**Mission:** College Unbound's mission is to reinvent the higher education experience for underserved adult learners, using a student-driven model of rigorous and engaged scholarship.

**Target Market:** College Unbound believes everyone has a right to postsecondary education.  CU looks to serve adult learners who have not yet completed their degree and are able to participate fully in the curriculum with the necessary technology, language, writing, and other systemic supports.  CU's program is designed for adults looking to advance in their current careers, move into new vocations, or spark change that improves the quality of life for themselves and others.