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Restoring Accelerated Pathways at CCRI

By Douglas L. Flor, Ph.D.

THE BEFORE

Since 1964, when the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) opened its doors, various accelerated pathways for recognizing and awarding prior learning credit have been in use. These pathways shorten the time and decrease costs connected with a student earning of a certificate or Associate degree. Through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant, CCRI has been able to conduct their first wholesale review of all Accelerated Pathways and their associated policies, processes, and procedures. The easiest way to think about the work and the changes that took place is to tell the story through the metaphor involving the restoration of a classic car.

Let me introduce, CeeCee, a 1964 Chevrolet Impala.

Taking a quick glance at CeeCee, one can see that nothing appears to be seriously wrong with the vehicle. It has doors, tires, lights, and appears capable of getting students from one place to another. In May of last year I began the review with a gap analysis. But as I began to interview people, they would often say, “why are you here to examine what we do? If it isn’t broke, why fix it?”

Well, here is the reason why. People often get so comfortable and familiar with what we have that they don’t notice the wires hanging loose from the dashboard or that the dashboard has lost its luster or that there are stains on the carpet.



Pulling student data from Banner regarding students who took advantage of the Accelerated Pathways over the last 6 years, we saw that not very many people were using prior learning. Each year, CCRI has nearly 16,000 students on campus but only about 650 separate events for awarding of prior learning credit happened - with about 375 being successful passing of CLEP exams.

Approximately half of those CLEP exams were for foreign languages. For the previous six years CCRI averaged another 85 events initiated by current military personnel and veterans through Joint Service Transcript

reviews. We also reviewed about 75 portfolios and administered about 60 Departmental Challenge exams per year across the previous six years.

Just like this 1964 Chevy, the Accelerated Pathways at CCRI were roadworthy and could get students from one place to another. But there wasn’t very many students taking any long road trips, either. So CeeCee wasn’t being driven much, was definitely showing the wear and tear with age, and it was not being regularly maintained.

Popping the hood, I could see we had a good battery, hoses, and good ignition wires, but the radiator was rusted and the power steering unit was in need of some work. And just like with CeeCee, I found that regular maintenance had not been kept up over the last several years. We had a form for making sure that credit awards were placed in Banner and that fees were being paid, but we had no policy to guide decision-making. In terms of prior learning portfolios, there was also considerable variation in what was considered valid in the awarding of credit, there was no standardization of processes across academic programs, and the website still listed a faculty member who had retired several years prior.



We did, however, have a Technical Studies degree that was set up to accommodate I.B.E.W. apprenticeship program in which journeymen electricians having completed a rigorous national training program could earn 34 credits for their instruction in technical courses at their national training site located in Rhode island. In addition, when they completed their apprenticeship, they were awarded an additional 10 credits in Experiential Learning. Thus, every IBEW Journeyman earned 44 of their 60 credits towards their Technical Studies degree and only had to complete their General Education core courses at CCRI. We also had two additional Technical Studies concentrations in Medical Technician fields. Additionally, we were offering Standardized Credit awards to those who completed the four Real Estate courses required by the state of RI for licensure (up to 15 credits) and Police Academy graduates earn nine credits in CCRI's Law

Enforcement program. There are about a dozen opportunities in other areas inclusive of Fire Fighting, Emergency Management, and Financial Management.



Basically, CeeCee had “good bones” with which to work and definitely had potential for restoration. The rust had not eaten through the floorboards and the seats were such that it could still take several people in one trip. But, it was missing a number of pathways. And, with some hard work, we could get this '64 Chevy to be more road worthy and possible even be ready for a show or two.

THE RESTORATION

We began our restoration with getting a new chassis. Every vehicle needs to have a secure foundation in which to tie all the systems together.

This came in the first ever Prior Learning policy the college has ever had. In it, we highlighted the strategic areas necessary for good decision-making.



At CCRI, the processes and procedures regarding the recognition, evaluation of prior learning, and awarding of college level credit shall be:

- structured and implemented to maintain the institution's need to validate both the educational level and quality of the learning
- in compliance with state and federal legislation, as well as standards for regional (NEASC) and program accreditation, as well as the Council on Postsecondary Education
- proactive and highly visible via college media and marketing efforts, promoted well within and across the institution, and be accessible to all prospective and admitted students
- in the best long term interest of the student and recorded on their transcript such that the student, should they choose to extend their learning to other institutions, both within the state of Rhode Island or across the United States, will experience the least likelihood for loss of credits
- applied towards specific courses offered within a degree or certificate program at CCRI or advance a student towards the completion of a degree
- monitored and evaluated for continuous improvement of accelerated pathways and that the process and procedures for awarding prior learning credit are found to be effective in meeting the needs of all stakeholders, especially those of the students.

The two most important points, in my opinion, are that credit would be awarded to specific courses and that all advisement and guidance would be in the best long-term interest of the student.

CeeCee needed a new engine, though. The old one still ran, but it was not very reliable and certainly couldn't do a cross country road trip. CAEL, the Council for Adult Experiential Learning, had just developed the Accelerator - a web-based, prescreening tool where students could enter their information. We then review these respective reports and provide proactive guidance and specific direction on possible areas for which students could be awarded credit. Every student accepted at CCRI receives an email and a letter in which they are encouraged to complete the Accelerator. When they come in or call to schedule their Accuplacer exam, they are reminded again about the Accelerator. A third touchpoint is when they come in to register for classes, they are also encouraged to complete the Accelerator. As you can see, this allowed us to be very proactive in our approach to prior learning.



Working with CAEL, we recommended nearly 20 improvements in the Accelerator to optimize the horsepower we were needing for our '64 Chevy. The most important innovation we wanted was the Holley four-barrel carburetor – Student Learning Outcomes. We wanted SLOs from each of our courses taught at CCRI loaded into the tool. This provided us with a very targeted approach to thinking where credit may be recognized and awarded.

The initial results from the Accelerator reporting indicate that we are on track to triple the number of Prior Learning Credit events from the previous six-year benchmark average. In terms of Military personnel and Veterans, we are serving 240% more per month (six year average = 7, second quarter this year = 17). We awarded double the prior amount of average credits awarded in the prior six-year benchmark average and are on track to triple the total credits awarded for the year.

We know from analytics conducted on the previous six years that the Graduation Rate for those students that take advantage of prior learning credit is nearly four times that of those who do not.

In addition, when you take into account the higher Retention Rate for students who receive prior learning credit, CCRI's Completion Rate for the previous six years ranged between 70 and 90%. We expect to have a significant impact on these Key Performance Indicators over the next few years because of this restoration project.

The next important piece of equipment in our restoration of CeeCee, was a new paintjob. The old faded and dull finish was sandblasted off and replaced with several coats of fresh shiny new paint. For us, that meant updating the Prior Learning website that contains much of the information regarding the various Accelerated Pathways as possible. We hired Financial Aid TV to develop of 10 new videos for describing in less than 2 and 1/2 minutes each pathway. These are now on the website. In addition, in March, we launched a new \$30,000 media campaign to let people know of the exciting news about Prior Learning at CCRI. New promotional materials were created and placed strategically throughout CCRI and given to Enrollment coaches and Advisors. All of which were paid for by the TAACCCT grant.



In order to see clearly, we had to get rid of CeeCee's old glass and replace them with a fresh clean



windshield and rear window, as well as new mirrors. Being able to have great visibility ensures that we at CCRI can see where we have been, where we are now, and where we want to go, as well as any of the obstacles that may be in our blind spot.

As such, we have a complete list of Accelerated Pathways, inclusive of GED College Ready Plus, International Baccalaureate Diploma program, and UExcel exams from Excelsior College and Pearson, just to name a few. DSST, which was buried and hardly visible is now front and center to provide our veterans

with free testing for credit that is applied to specific courses. We have mapped out our updated processes and procedures so that we could examine where the obstacles may be that demotivate our students from seeking credits for experiential learning.

There were still two very important things crucial to success in restoring CeeCee. One of which is hidden from view and the other is more apparent, but both are absolutely necessary if we were to "get moving." The first of these two is having a new set of wheels. For being able to grip the road, have great traction for quick starts, avoid hazards, and have a comfortable ride there is nothing like a great set of tires. Here at CCRI, this came in the form of an all day, statewide summit on Prior Learning. Working with the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner we invited Scott Campbell from CAEL and Mary Beth Lakin



from the American Council on Education to be our Keynote speakers for the summit. These and several others, including yours truly, conducted workshops and presentations in prior learning.



The second and most important of these two is having a new transmission. Transmissions take the power from the engine and transfer it to the axels and then to the wheels. At CCRI, this was the TAACCCT grant. Without the TAACCCT grant, much of the work done to restore CeeCee, would not have been done. Through the funds of the grant we were able to have the new set of wheels (the statewide summit on prior learning). We were able to get the new engine (the CAEL Accelerator). We were able to hire a Prior Learning Coordinator who guided us to having a great new chassis - the first ever Prior Learning policy. We now have a new glass and mirrors to provide CCRI with great visibility for seeing the great work of the past and the vision for the future, and obstacles in the present. It also gave us a new coat of paint, the first media campaign regarding Prior Learning at CCRI – ever – and an updated website.

Because of the TAACCCT grant, the Prior Learning Coordinator position has been recognized as crucial to the success of the college and the position is now sustained as a line item in the regular annual budget.

RESTORATION COMPLETE

As you can see, we have moved from an old comfortable, somewhat unreliable, and yet sound vehicle to a newly restored, very dependable, great looking classic.



THE FUTURE

That is, however, not where we want to stay. Great restored classic cars like CeeCee are fun to take out on a sunny day for short rides around town, but they are not your everyday car. Instead, we are looking at upgrading to a whole new level of prior learning mobility. And here is where we are going: a new 2018 Chevrolet



Impala. This sleek new vehicle will get great gas mileage, has all the latest greatest safety features, Onstar with GPS tracking, tinted glass, and a 6-speed automatic transmission that has some real get-up-and-go.

One of the tenets of our new prior learning policy is the development of a new set of metrics that will enhance and build in efficiencies into the experience for the student, faculty, and administration. It is our intention to streamline the process for Portfolio Assessments through a SharePoint system that we have outlined and initial faculty responses so far are – wow, that would be great. This approach incorporates the application, opportunities for learning about what a portfolio really ought to look like, and a pedagogical approach that assesses learning from Declarative, Procedural, and Integrative learning perspectives along with a demonstration of learning where applicable (e.g., performing arts, advanced manufacturing, etc.).

We are investigating how we can have a consistent set of standards on what Departmental Challenge Exams need to cover for those courses where we will have them. We want to develop a committee from all three of the Rhode Island institutions that will have ACE trained and certified evaluators. This committee would work with the top 50 employers in the state to review employer lead training offered by these employers so that the employees of these companies will earn ACE transcript recommendations for these courses and earn credit awards to specific courses and degrees at CCRI and other institutions.

We want to work with professional organizations and state licensing boards to see where credit awards could be offered for certifications and licenses earned in a professional capacity. This links employers needs to colleges even more explicitly.

So CeeCee is not going away. And we are not satisfied with just keeping current and using best practices. Rather, we want to develop “Next Practices” and take CCRI faster and further in an even greater ride!