When Training Hours Turn Into College Credit: Advancing Equity with Credit for Prior Learning

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CHANGE IMPACT

Introduction

Consider this common scenario: A youth worker completes state-mandated training, a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) certification, and over 400 hours working directly with youth. But when they apply to college, none of this required learning counts. This highlights a systemic disconnect: **while youth work develops essential skills, higher education controls the credentials, and the two systems are not (yet) connected.**

The result is an unnecessary barrier to advancement, requiring workers to spend additional time and money earning credentials that may overlap significantly with knowledge they have already gained through training and experience. This paper examines the role of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) in advancing equity, strengthening career pathways, and supporting greater economic mobility for youth workers.

What is Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)?

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) addresses this disconnect by translating workforce learning into academic credit through credit equivalencies, portfolio reviews, and articulation agreements. Ideally, training for youth workers sits at the center of a Venn diagram: required training for licensed programs that is completed on work time and paid for by the employer, which then translates into a portable, credit-bearing benefit for the staff member.

Community college is frequently cited as the most reliable springboard into the middle class, but research[1] shows that adult students often leave school before earning a credential due to costs like transportation, childcare, and textbooks. CPL mitigates these barriers. Furthermore, Data from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) confirms that **marginalized students who earn credit for prior learning earn degrees faster and more frequently compared to their peers who do not**.[2]

CPL as a Structural Equity Intervention

More than a policy adjustment, Credit for Prior Learning is a mechanism for institutional creativity that modernizes our definition of merit. As technology reshapes the workforce and learning increasingly occurs in diverse settings beyond the traditional classroom, higher education is being challenged to recognize and credential knowledge gained through experience. **CPL serves as a structural equity intervention by reducing the duplication of learning, lowering tuition costs, and accelerating the time to a degree.** It is fundamentally the recognition of professional dignity. By recognizing experiential knowledge, we validate the lived expertise of youth workers. It is important to note that college is not for everyone, and CPL is not about forcing workers to matriculate; rather, it is about expanding access to opportunities and giving people more options for advancement.

We estimate there are over 50,000 youth development and school-age childcare professionals in New York City alone. The youth services field is largely made up of entry-level and minimum-wage jobs filled predominantly by women, people of color, and young adults ages 18-29[3]. At least half of this workforce holds a high school diploma or some college, but no degree. In a sector staffed by first-generation

[1] https://nycfuture.org/pdf/CUF_OpportunityCosts_Final.pdf
[2] https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524578.pdf
[3] https://www.epi.org/publication/child-care-workers-arent-paid-enough-to-make-ends-meet/, https://tinyurl.com/TASC-RoomToGrow,, https://tinyurl.com/2012-afterschool-findings

students and members of marginalized communities, requiring a seasoned leader to enroll in an introductory course that forces them to re-purchase and re-learn knowledge they already use daily is an unnecessary barrier to a degree.

CPL addresses the primary drivers of attrition: time and cost. Specifically, CPL mitigates the "hidden" costs of higher education:

1. **Direct Financial Relief:** Reduces tuition debt and the need for expensive textbooks.
2. **Logistical Sustainability:** Eliminates the need for additional childcare and transportation associated with redundant classroom hours.
3. **Persistence:** Validates the learner's existing identity as a professional, fostering the confidence necessary to navigate the matriculation process.

CPL functions as a targeted equity strategy by:

- **Dismantling Duplication:** Ensuring workers do not waste resources on redundant learning.
- **Lowering the Financial Floor:** Directly reducing the total cost of degree attainment for low-wage earners.
- **Accelerating Time-to-Degree:** Shortening the distance between entry-level roles and thriving-wage careers.
- **Recognizing Lived Expertise:** Shifting the power dynamic by validating the rigor of field-based, culturally-responsive knowledge.
- **Affirming Professional Dignity:** Formally acknowledging the intellectual labor inherent in frontline youth work.

Steps to CPL Implementation for Youth Development Leaders

Front-line youth development jobs do not pay family-sustaining wages, making career pathways essential to help workers climb the ladder into education, social work, nonprofit management, or other related sectors. For example, entry-level out-of-school time (OST) roles can effectively function as two-year workforce development programs. If these roles are structured as goal-aligned learning experiences that are supported by coaching and lead to credential-bearing pathways, then CPL must be embedded from the very start. The progression should be seamless: Training → Credit → Degree Pathway.

To successfully execute CPL partnerships, executive leaders and higher education institutions will likely need to follow **six steps:**

1. Align training to competencies.
2. Sequence learning intentionally.
3. Identify higher education partners.
4. Secure credit equivalencies.
5. Communicate clearly to staff.
6. Track credit uptake and progression.

Partnerships must prioritize quality control and take the time to crosswalk syllabi to ensure all parties feel confident in the rigor of the learning. It is also highly recommended to use a cohort model to engage staff, as busy professionals need dedicated support to navigate the process. Furthermore, creating an MOU helps outline each partner's responsibilities and commitments clearly.

Key CPL Terms

Term	Definition
Credit Equivalencies	The formal determination of academic credit value for non-collegiate training or field experience.
Portfolio Review	An evaluative process where faculty assess a student's documented work history and life experience for credit.
Articulation Agreements	Binding partnerships between organizations and colleges that standardize how training translates to degree pathways.
Credit Caps	The institutional limit on the total number of credits a student can earn through prior learning assessments.
Transferability	The degree to which CPL-earned credits are recognized and portable between different academic institutions.

Conclusion

When we recognize learning that has already occurred on the job, we affirm that youth workers' knowledge is real, rigorous, and worthy of academic acknowledgment. Enacting Credit for Prior Learning is structural fairness and equity in practice. While building CPL partnerships may take time and effort, doing so can have a significant impact on the workforce and is an opportunity not to be missed.

Early Lessons from Practice: Change Impact and CUNY

A prime example of this blueprint in action is the partnership between Change Impact and the City University of New York (CUNY). Change Impact created Change Up Learning, an equity-driven, self-paced online training platform for educators, which provides a standardized learning experience for youth development staff. The platform serves as the foundation for determining credit equivalencies aligned to CUNY courses.

Because New York State regulations require after-school program staff to participate in 30 hours of training every two years, organizations typically pay for these trainings (and the staff's wages to attend them) out of their budgets and grants. Change Up Learning trainings are pre-approved to meet these state requirements.

"Earning credit through CPL allowed me to accelerate my degree at CUNY School of Professional Studies while learning valuable skills highly relevant to my job. The money I saved on tuition was a big help, too."
-Gus Cruz, youth worker

By exploring ways to adapt and meet higher education's needs, the training aligns fully to college course requirements. For example, a detailed crosswalk conducted with CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College faculty showed a series of 10 Change Up Learning trainings plus work experience covered nearly all of the requirements of *ECE 110: Psychological Foundations of Early Development and Education*, and *EDS 202: Special Topics in Secondary Education*. By adding a practicum so students could demonstrate a specific skill, observing child behavior, youth workers would now be able to earn credit at BMCC. Using this required workforce training as an on-ramp achieves multiple outcomes: lower barriers to entry for staff pursuing a degree, new incentives for organizations to offer employees, and a diverse pipeline of potential students for CUNY.

About Change Impact

Change Impact is a capacity-building organization with specialized experience in education, youth development, and workforce development. Since launching in April 2017, Change Impact has trained over 40,000 professionals, raised $240 million in grants, and designed strategies for more than 140 partners. Change Impact is a certified minority- and woman-owned business (M/WBE).

In 2021, Change Impact launched Change Up Learning, an equity-driven online training platform for youth work professionals and educators, with live and self-paced courses designed to deepen learning, bolster professional habits, and support career pathways. Change Up Learning is approved by a number of states to provide required training for child care and after-school professionals, as well as teacher and social work continuing education credits.