



# Credit for Prior Learning: Leveraging Past Learning to Close Present-Day Equity Gaps

## Key Takeaways

- » Inconsistent credit for prior learning (CPL) policies stunt students' access to postsecondary education and potential success.
- » Hundreds of thousands of students who could benefit from CPL are not veterans.
- » Expanding CPL policies could increase Black adult enrollment by nearly 50 percent.

California depends on a strong workforce to drive economic growth and build vibrant communities. However, the state's higher education system struggles to produce enough graduates to meet workforce needs. Millions of Californians, particularly people of color, face hurdles that stifle success in the traditional postsecondary education system and consequently lack the training sought by employers.<sup>1</sup> Without equitable pathways to and through postsecondary education, California faces labor shortages that could threaten the state's position as the fifth largest economy in the world. The lack of equitable pathways impacts California's economy as a whole and the lives of all Californians—especially the millions of Californians of color stuck in low-wage occupations who face stunted earning potential and limited economic mobility. Addressing California's labor shortage and increasing California's economic sustainability require the state to improve workforce development for traditionally underserved communities.

Numerous structural barriers prevent communities of color from succeeding in higher education and accessing good jobs, contributing to widespread inequities.<sup>2</sup> Roughly 50 percent of Black and Latinx adults do not have a college degree,<sup>3</sup> and though many are working, the vast majority work in low-wage occupations.<sup>4</sup> While these jobs are low wage, they are not necessarily low skill and may require experience and collegiate-level training. This type of job training and skill development

may be eligible for college credit if it were taught on a college campus. With the right programs and policies, institutions can leverage the skills and knowledge gained through employment, allowing students to count them toward the completion of meaningful credentials, whereby economic mobility increases—especially for communities of color.

CPL (also known as prior learning assessment) policies guide institutions in **evaluating and awarding eligible students with credit for previous collegiate-level learning gained outside of a recognized college classroom.**<sup>5</sup> Though California's three public higher education segments (the California Community Colleges [CCC], the California State University [CSU], and the University of California [UC]) offer CPL, eligibility requirements differ by segment, and individual faculty determine the credit awarded.<sup>6</sup> For example, CPL policies in California's higher education system largely include the option to offer credit for skills and knowledge gained through relevant work, volunteer, or educational experience, but only 13 percent of CCC awards credit for workplace training.<sup>7</sup> Offering CPL for workplace training is even rarer at UC institutions (See "CPL Policies in California vary by segment"). There is little evidence that CPL policies are consistently applied and widely used, though uniform use of such policies across segments could elevate individuals' economic trajectories while helping the state meet its degree attainment

goals and workforce demands.

Despite limited data on the use of CPL in California, research from other states shows its use could lead to positive outcomes. In one study, students earning 13–24 credits via CPL shaved 6.6 months off the typical five-year completion for a bachelor’s degree.<sup>8</sup> Benefits for Black students and students of color were even greater. For example, Black students who received 13–24 credits through CPL saved an average of 14.2 months toward their bachelor’s degree.<sup>9</sup> By not requiring students to pay for and retake courses with content they have already mastered, students are estimated to save from \$1,605 to \$6,000.<sup>10</sup>

California’s community college system in particular is projected to save \$6,750 per full-time equivalent student if students reduce their time to degree by one term.<sup>11</sup>

More consistently and widely adopting similar CPL practices in California could increase college affordability and completion, especially for Black students and students of color, many of whom rely on state and federal aid.<sup>12</sup> In fact,

California Competes’ research for the Success Center for California Community Colleges shows that if 4 percent of adult community college students completed one term early, the system would save approximately \$569,000 per cohort in state aid.<sup>13</sup> Decreasing the time to degree could support the state in reallocating resources more widely and could be crucial for students who cannot afford the cost of college, or students who have limited time for academics because of external obligations like full-time employment or dependents to care for.

To explore the impact of expanding CPL efforts in California, California Competes examined the population of Californians who may benefit from a wider implementation of CPL.<sup>i</sup> Drawing from publicly available data, this brief identifies potential beneficiaries of CPL and CPL’s relevance to closing California’s attainment and equity gaps across regions. This brief aims to inform policymakers and institutional leaders as they consider scaling programs like CPL to improve higher education’s responsiveness to workforce needs and reduce equity gaps throughout the state.

## CPL policies in California vary by segment

California’s policies on CPL have historically focused on awarding credit to military veterans. However, the state recently enacted legislation to expand the traditional use of CPL to also include nonveterans within the CCC system. Yet, even with the reforms to CPL in the community college system, UC and CSU have not made analogous reforms, leaving California’s three public higher education segments largely disconnected in the guidelines and procedures on the use and implementation of CPL.

### California Community Colleges (CCC)

In 2012, **AB 2462** (Block, Chapter 404, Statutes of 2012) was enacted to require the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office to determine how much course credit should be awarded for prior military experience by July 1, 2015. However, the legislature saw that after three years of implementation, the state’s community colleges still lacked a uniform policy to award course CPL experiences.

As a result, there were two laws passed in 2018 to align CPL policies across all community colleges: **SB 1071** and **AB 1786**.

- » **SB 1071** (Roth, Chapter 560, Statutes of 2018) requires the CCC to implement a consistent policy to award credit for veteran and military students using their Joint Services Transcripts.
- » **AB 1786** (Cervantes, Chapter 530, Statutes of 2018) requires an initiative to expand the awarding of course credit at the CCC for all students with prior learning, regardless of previous military experience.

After the two bills were signed, the CCC amended **Title 5, Section 55050** of the California Code of Regulations.<sup>14</sup> The amendment was approved by the system’s Board of Governors in September 2019, and districts have until December 2020 to implement local CPL policies. The statewide policy requires colleges to expand prior learning assessment beyond credit by exam to include, at least, evaluation of Joint Services Transcripts, student-created portfolios, and industry-recognized credentials. In addition, the regulation offers greater protection for students to prevent accumulation of credits that do not count toward a credential, and it maintains faculty primacy over the nature of the assessment and the credit award. Though CPL options for students have expanded with this statewide policy, implementation is not expected to be uniform across the system’s 115 colleges. A state-level advisory group made recommendations for district policies based on national best practices.<sup>15</sup>

i. California Competes originally conducted this research for the Success Center for California Community Colleges’ efforts to expand CPL policies within the community college system. <https://successcenter.cccco.edu/Strategic-Projects/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Initiative>

## California State University (CSU)

**Executive Order 1036**, originally written in 2008, outlines the CSU's CPL approach, which is broken into three articles: credit for examination; credit for demonstrated learning, knowledge, or skills from experience; and credit for formal instruction in a noncollegiate setting.<sup>16</sup>

### Article 1: Credit for Examination

The CSU endorsed a systemwide policy to guide the use of College Level Examination Program (CLEP) examinations to award general education credit.<sup>17</sup> This policy applies to both students transferring into and currently attending a CSU campus. CSUs also accept Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams in addition to CLEP.

### Article 2: Credit for Demonstrated Learning, Knowledge, or Skills Acquired Through Experience

Each CSU campus has the discretion to determine if students may earn credit through demonstrated learning, knowledge, or skills gained through experience. Each campus also decides the extent to which units earned for demonstrated learning shall be applied to a major, general education, or elective credit.

Conditions: Credits must be made in the context of the institution's mission and degree programs and will be valid at the CSU campus granting credit. Students must earn a sufficient number of undergraduate credits to establish evidence of a satisfactory learning pattern before credit for experiential learning becomes a part of their academic record.

### Article 3: Credit for Formal Instruction in Noncollegiate Settings

Students who have received formal instruction in a noncollegiate setting (including completion of formal instruction in the military and baccalaureate degree credit courses comparable to courses offered at most CSUs) can be granted credit toward admission eligibility and completion of a baccalaureate degree. Campuses will use recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE) to determine the amount of credit awarded. Every effort will be made to award credits for specific university coursework and/or category of university degree requirement, as opposed to elective credit. Credits awarded may not be equivalent or duplicative with existing credits and must meet the same conditions outlined in Article 2.

## University of California (UC)

The UC system offers limited CPL options.<sup>18</sup> Credits are awarded to students who have taken and scored well on AP and IB exams. However, the exam scores accepted and the amount of credits offered vary by institution. With ACE's guidance, the UC system may also award lower-division units for military courses completed if the courses are consistent with UC policy on awarding transfer credit when an equivalent course is taught on campus. Credit for military courses is determined after matriculation at UC. While there are no explicit policies offering credit for work experience, vocational or technical training, or remedial academic or personal enrichment courses, courses completed at institutions that are not regionally accredited may be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

## Nearly 238,000 Californians could benefit from expanding CPL policies

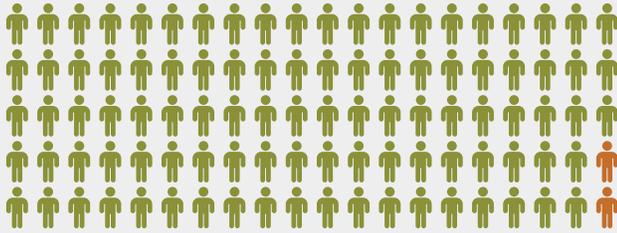
As many as 6.8 million Californians between the ages of 25–54 have earned at least a high school diploma, but have yet to earn an associate's degree or higher.<sup>19</sup> Many of these adults hold some college education or work experience that could translate to CPL. While California's limited use of CPL poses challenges

in determining exactly what type of prior experience would be worth credit, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that 3.5 percent of adults 25–54<sup>i</sup> received some form of CPL nationally. If we assume the same eligibility rate for Californians who have yet to earn a degree, that percentage would amount to roughly 238,000 adults who may receive credit. Even if only 1 percent of the 6.8 million Californians without a degree received CPL credits, these policies could serve 68,000 students—almost double the average student population at a UC.

i. This percentage is based on first-time postsecondary students in the 25–54 age category. Our estimate of 6.8 million Californians, however, includes adults with some college experience. [https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps\\_x=cmfca36](https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps_x=cmfca36).

**Figure 1: Many students who could benefit from CPL are nonmilitary veterans.**

Adults (25-54) without a degree by military experience



No Prior Military Experience 96% Prior Military Experience 2%

Only 2% of California adults 25–54 with a high school diploma or some college hold prior military experience.

## Nonmilitary veterans also have a lot to gain from CPL

Hundreds of thousands of Californians without a degree have work or education experience that could translate to CPL, and only 2 percent of that population are military veterans (Figure 1). This means over 200,000 nonveterans hold work or education experience that could be leveraged to complete a postsecondary credential through a more expansive use of CPL.

CPL policies were originally established by community colleges to reintegrate military veterans into the civilian workforce after World War I by providing credit for knowledge gained through military experience.<sup>20</sup> Since then, legislators have continued to use CPL policies to largely promote college access and success for veterans.<sup>21</sup> However, military veterans are not the only Californians with learning that could qualify for college credit. Nonmilitary veterans may have skills or knowledge gained through work-based training programs, public service academies, industry credential learning, work-based learning, apprenticeships, etc. that could be translated to CPL credits.

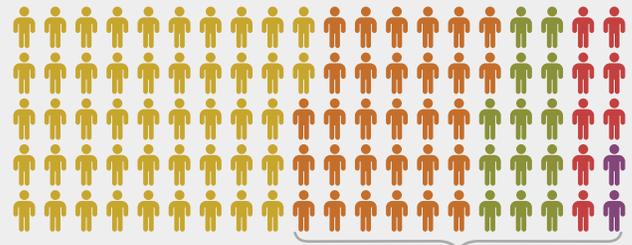
## CPL could significantly increase educational attainment for older Black students

While studies show higher persistence and completion rates for students who receive CPL compared to students who do not receive CPL regardless of race, the increase in attainment

could significantly reduce attainment gaps for groups who have historically struggled to access and succeed in postsecondary education.<sup>22</sup> While more Black high school students are enrolling in college, few are completing, and fewer Black students over the age of 25 enroll in college compared to other groups (Figure 3).<sup>23</sup> However, 30 percent of those who could benefit from CPL are Black (Figure 2). If CPL policies were expanded, nearly 50 percent more Black adult students could enroll in college (Figure 3), increasing access to and supporting success in postsecondary education even beyond the traditional student track.

**Figure 2: Most Californians who could benefit from CPL are people of color.<sup>i</sup>**

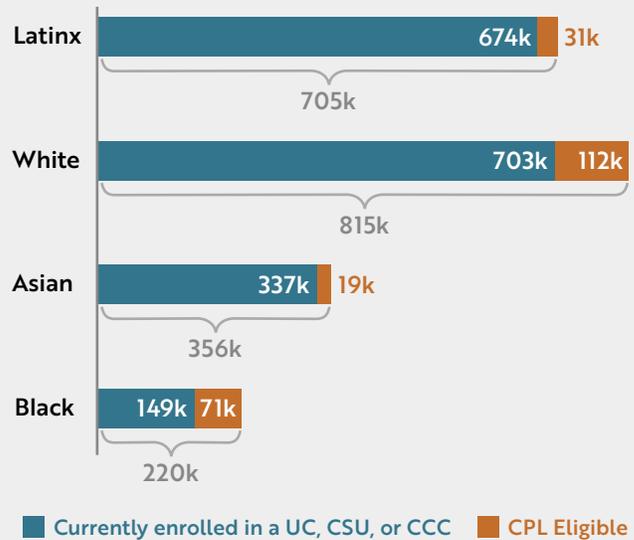
Adults (25-54) without a degree by race/ethnicity



White 47% Black 30% Latinx 13% Asian 8% Other 2%

**Figure 3: Expanding CPL policies could increase Black adult enrollment by nearly 50%.<sup>ii</sup>**

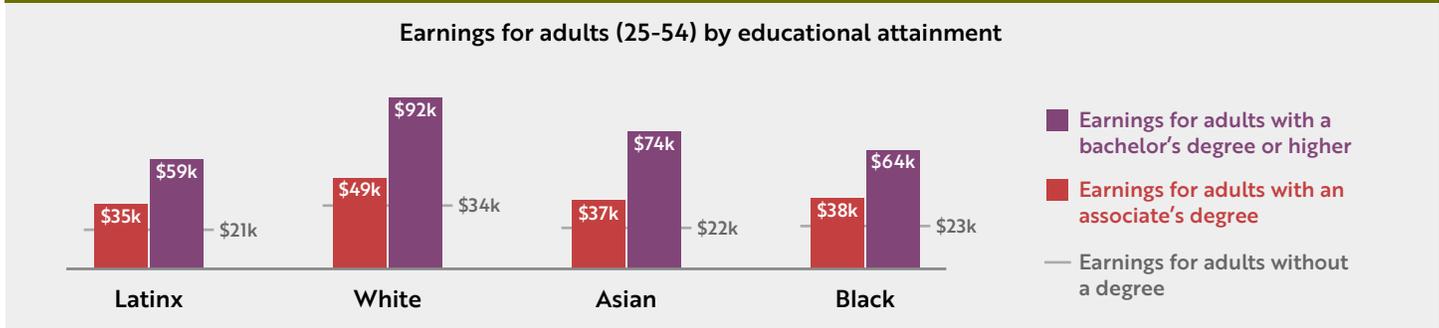
Total number of students who could be served by CPL



i. Unreliable data for individual groups not listed due to small sample sizes. Based on NCES data for noncredit course completion. [https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps\\_x=hgcac21](https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps_x=hgcac21)

ii. Based on IPEDS 2010 enrollment data for students 25+ attending a public two-year or a public four-year institution in California.

Figure 4: Californians with a degree earn significantly more than those without a degree. <sup>i</sup>



## CPL could increase economic mobility, but disparities by race and ethnicity persist

Nearly 60,000 Californians without a degree are working adults, 69 percent of whom work in low-wage occupations that pay less than the state's median wage of \$35,984<sup>24</sup>—a wage that has not kept up with the state's living costs.<sup>25</sup> A postsecondary credential may improve their job opportunities, making them viable candidates for higher paying jobs.

Despite holding work experience or potentially having completed some college, working adults without degrees often have levels of economic prosperity that mirror economic outcomes for workers with only a high school diploma and lag behind those with a college degree.<sup>26</sup> In other words, research has shown that wages and economic outcomes increase with quality postsecondary credentials, whether they are degrees or certificates that hold value with employers. Using CPL to acknowledge and credit relevant experience could instill a sense of belonging in academic settings<sup>27</sup> that encourages completion and pushes this population into higher income brackets. Though attainment may not level the playing field as workers of color will still see lower wages compared to white workers, it does increase economic mobility (Figure 4). Supporting this population to complete an associate's degree could increase annual wages by roughly \$15,000, on average, for the groups highlighted in this brief (Latinx, White, Asian, and Black). Incentivizing attainment through CPL could increase economic equity for Californians of color at a faster rate.

## Expanding the consistent use of CPL could uplift more students

CPL should be one part of the solution set to addressing the gap between the supply and demand of workers with postsecondary credentials and, if expanded, may benefit a significant number of individuals, businesses, and the state.  **Policymakers should consider the following in expanding the use of CPL:**

### 1. Increase the use of relevant work experience to award CPL credits across segments, including work experience beyond the military.

Existing legislation to expand CPL policies largely focuses on military veterans in California's community colleges. However, expanding CPL to serve students with relevant, nonmilitary experience across all three public higher education segments could support efforts to increase enrollment and educational attainment and to eliminate equity gaps throughout the state. CPL provides an opportunity to include students who may not have enrolled in postsecondary education otherwise.

Policymakers should follow the precedent set by CCC's efforts to expand CPL to serve all eligible students beyond veterans. Improvements would involve more consistently leveraging prior relevant work and volunteer experience in addition to prior education and military experience. Incentivizing working adults without degrees to return and earn credentials could support the state in meeting its workforce demands since high school graduates alone are unlikely to fulfill this need.

i. Based on American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2017.

## 2. Consider using CPL as a strategy to support low-income students' financial plan.

Given that affordability is a significant barrier to completion for the state's students of color, California should consider using policies like CPL to reduce college costs. As the state reevaluates its financial aid system, legislators should consider expanding policies like CPL that could benefit the growing nontraditional student population and support low-income students. Expanding the use of and increasing the uniformity of CPL could support students in reducing the cost of college and time to completion by accounting for terms or credits satisfied with prior experience. Moreover, expanding the use of CPL could save not just students money, but also state and institutional resources by improving graduation rates and reducing time to completion.

## 3. Increase employer partnership to promote degree completion.

The difficulty in validating and credentialing learning that has taken place outside of a postsecondary institution contributes to the limited use of CPL.<sup>28</sup> However, increasing partnerships between employers and postsecondary institutions could ease the burden on faculty to single-handedly develop and evaluate prior learning assessments. Such a partnership could provide more clarity on what work experience is relevant and applicable for credit. Increasing the collaboration between employers and institutions could also increase the clarity of the process

and benefits for working students since both parties would be involved. Policymakers could encourage workforce development boards (that develop regional strategic plans to support economic expansion and develop talent) and community college regional consortia to connect employers and institutions so they can develop more consistent and accurate CPL assessments and pathways across all segments.

## CPL merges California's equity and economic goals

As our leaders consider ways to expand access to higher education and meet workforce needs, policies like CPL pose promising solutions in accelerating completion and increasing opportunities for economic mobility. CPL could save state funds, yield cost savings for employers in need of training services that would be more expensive otherwise, and increase degree completion and affordability for students completing college.

Working Californians should have their college-level skills and knowledge evaluated for credit, which will consequently grow the state's economy and promote the development of a more highly skilled workforce as more Californians attend and complete postsecondary credentials. By focusing on a policy that may significantly impact people of color, CPL efforts could decrease equity gaps within the state's higher education and workforce systems.

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# Notes

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