March, 2012

Farther Faster: Credential to Credit

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South Piedmont Community College

Executive Summary

This report considers a number of issues related to retention and the associated issues related to persistence and degree completion among college students. The purpose of the report is to optimize existing SPCC policies that might impact retention, completion, and employability for students, families and communities long term. For the purpose of this report a Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) survey was developed and administered to the North Carolina Community College System institutions. The PLA survey assessed to what extent prior learning assessment is used among the North Carolina Community College System institutions.

A recommendation is provided on a strategy to address retention and close the gap to completion using existing systems within the North Carolina Community College System. The recommendation contemplates the expert evaluation of industry-recognized credentials and how these may be articulated for college credit. The report also looks at the economic impact and the acceleration effect this strategy may have to benefit students.

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Introduction

Retention, persistence and completion have been, and continue to be a primary concern for higher education. A significant number of college students choose the community college to begin their careers in higher education. These issues of retention and completion are of particular interest among community college leadership. Exploring the issue of retention and the completion agenda established by President Obama, this report outlines a strategy that could pave the way for many students to close the gap and make progress to completion faster and at lower cost.

A Frame of Reference: Retention Overview

It could be argued that retention and persistence are the two greatest threats to higher education and that these pose significant threats to the nation. Retention has plagued higher education for decades. While enrollment in college is an essential first step, completion is critical to the nation.

In 2003 the average national unemployment rate for those 20-24 years of age at all education levels was 10%. Those with a bachelor's degree had an average unemployment rate of 6% while those with a high school diploma or who did not graduate, had an average unemployment rate of 14% (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004, p. 1). In the current recession, unemployment rates are twice as high for those with just a high school diploma (10.8%) compared to those with a bachelor's degree or higher (4.9%)("About Us | Complete College America," n.d.). It is worthy to note that people with a college education are much more likely to participate in the governance of the nation, contribute their time and money to community service, consume fewer public services, and commit fewer crimes (Tinto, 2004, p. 7).

When considering income and education the disparity is much the same. The US Census Bureau reported that individuals completing their bachelor's degree earn nearly $1.0 million more during their working careers than do people with only a high school degree (Tinto, 2004, p. 7). To underscore the importance of retention and persistence, income levels of those with high school degrees versus individuals with some college

experience but no bachelor's degree, varied by only 10%. Their counterparts with a bachelor's degree enjoyed a 69% advantage on income. (Tinto, 2004, p. 7)

Foundation for Discussion

Tinto's work is often seen as the center of the retention conversation and a reasonable point from which to begin. Tinto offers five conditions that relate to successful retention efforts. These conditions include:

- Clear and high expectations.
- Academic support in the form of basic skills, tutoring and study groups. Social support in the form of counseling, mentoring and ethnic student centers.
- Frequent feedback about their performance. Early, often and connected to the classroom
- Involvement is a condition for student learning and retention.
- Relevant learning is a condition for student learning and retention. The more they find value in their learning, the more they see it as connected to their interests the more they persist (Tinto, 2003).

Without question, the conditions Tinto outlines are valid and meaningful even as they age since his early work. These points launched and provided a framework for considerable discussion regarding the best strategies and tactics to employ to keep students in school.

As retention is considered for the critical role it plays in student success, it would be a mistake not to consider U.S. education attainment information as a way to highlight the importance of the issues. In 2010, the Lumina Foundation issued a report on education attainment and progress vis- a- vis its 'big goal' (Matthews, Jancek, & Powell, 2010). The goal established by the Lumina Foundation was for America to increase higher education attainment rates (the proportion of the population that holds a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential) to 60 percent by the year 2025.

At present 37.9 percent of the population holds a two or four year degree, considerably short of the goal established (Matthews et al., 2010). What is more sobering is the staggering number of degrees that must be produced to reach this goal. The academy must increase the number of degrees awarded each year, every year,

by 278,000 (2010). What is encouraging is that there are approximately 22 million Americans that have some college level experience but do not hold a degree (2010).

Exploration of Other Conditions

What follows is an exploration of additional considerations of the primary conditions that Tinto outlined. There has been criticism of Tinto's early work, subsequent evolution, and the basis for his position. Tinto posited that the college environment affected student outcomes, as do faculty-student interaction, peer group interaction and extracurricular activities.(Metz, 2004, p. 6) Metzner and Bean proposed the inclusion of psychological, societal, economic and interaction factors, with the psychological and environmental factors being key components contributing to student attrition (Metz, 2004, p. 9). From Metz's perspective, Tinto did not reach far enough to address retention comprehensively, or at the very least, Metz considered additional factors.

The idea that economic realities influenced persistence was proposed by Nora in 1990. His work found that campus-based aid programs and other federal financial aid had a significant impact on retention. These financial aid programs were found to be significant factors influencing Hispanic student retention and persistence (Metz, 2004, p. 10). Tinto (2004) offered recommendations to changes in Federal financial aid systems. The unmet need is defined at the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and sends many students down a path that is often the beginning of the end of a college career. A significant unmet financial need will send students on a path that requires part-time work (often for more than 20 hours per week), and they will likely be living off campus. These factors significantly reduce the probability that these students will persist to completion (Tinto, 2004, p. 6). The aid provided does not cover student living and educational expenses, so they are required to attend college and work, contributing factors leading to their departure. As further evidence of the economic reality, 2004-2005 saw the largest rate of increase in college costs in a decade ("Higher Education Landscape," 2010, p. 82). Students saw tuition and fee rates increased by more than 10% during those years ("Higher Education Landscape," 2010, p. 83). The economic impact was highlighted further by Tinto when he noted the total cost of a four-year public institution represents about 6

percent of income for students from high income families as compared to 71 percent for low-income families. By comparison, in 1979-80 the costs were 31 percent for low-income families. (Tinto, 2004, p. 12).

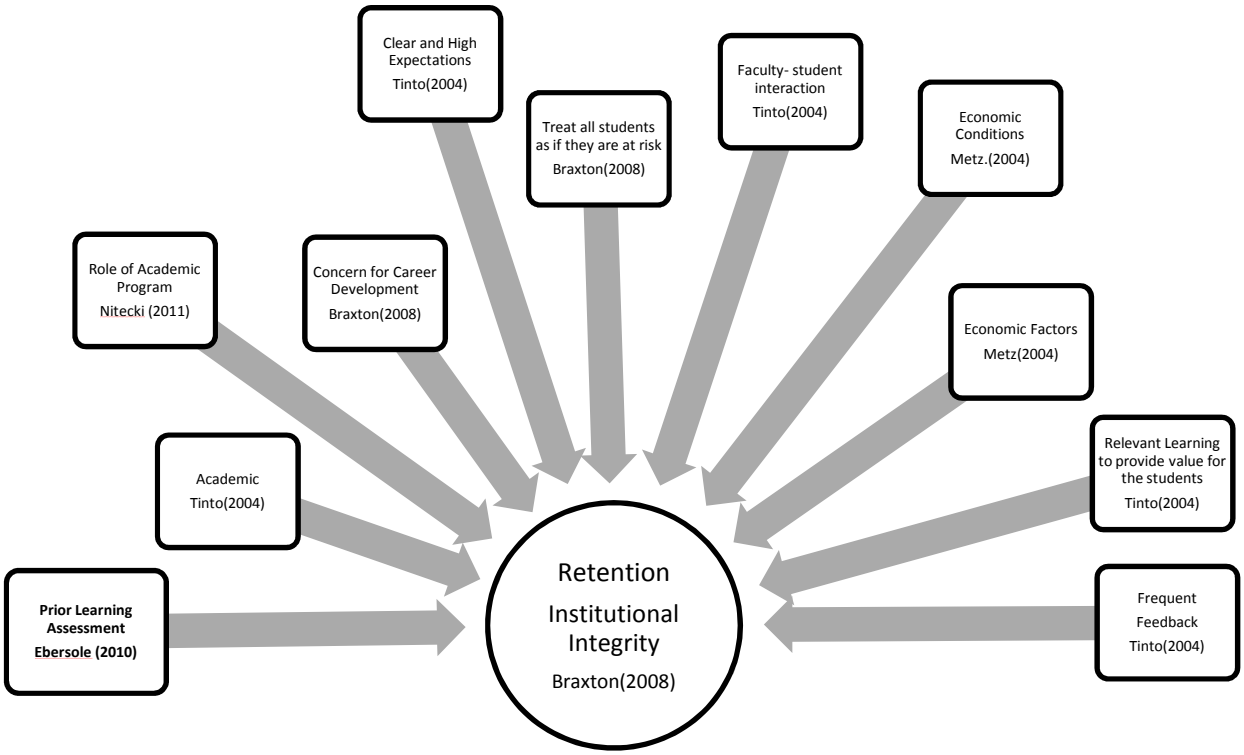
Tinto clearly saw faculty-student interaction as an influencer of retention. He did not specifically call out the influence the academic program can have on retention. Nitecki found that vocational-track students not only graduate but also transfer. In 2004, one third of all seniors who enrolled immediately in a community college (vocational track) did so with the intention of obtaining an associate's degree. By 2006, almost 47% of these community college students had raised their expectations to start or complete a bachelor's degree (Nitecki, 2011, p. 100). Nitecki posited that in spite of their status in terminal curricula, students in career-oriented programs are being retained and transferring, raising the question about the program's role in this trend (Nitecki, 2011, p. 100).

Joining the conversation on how best to address the retention puzzle, Braxton offered a framework that is qualitative in nature. This framework captures many of the issues related to retention in seven recommendations. Among the seven recommendations, it is clear that a broad connection to the student must be made and that this work of retention belongs to the institution. Braxton noted that there must be an abiding concern for career development of the students, a demonstrated respect for students by being sensitive to their needs/concerns, and that institutions must develop a culture of enforced student success whereby all students are treated as if they are at risk. He also notes that faculty involvement is of high importance, that institutions practice institutional integrity in terms of what they present (say) to students and that this reconciles with actions (do), fostering of affinity groups or sub-groups that share interests and values (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2008).

Finally, in what could be argued as the most notable recommendation, Braxton recommended that institutions select and implement appropriate interventions. Implementation of instructional strategies and support service strategies need to be measured and must be appropriate to the student population (Braxton et al., 2008, p. 390). In effect, Braxton recommended that institutions need to respond, but do so thoughtfully. These recommendations, while in the spirit of Tinto's work theses, certainly provide a framework for the current

environment. There are a wide range of opportunities and avenues that institutions can pursue to effect an increase in retention rates. As seen in Figure 1 these initiatives must be grounded in the institution's integrity as it relates to commitment of retention efforts.

Figure 1.



The multitude of factors that can influence student retention in higher education.

Retention Summary

It is clear, from the considerable research available on the issue of retention there is no single remedy. There is no single combination of activities or systems that can be implemented to guarantee success. What is also clear is that institutions that seek to address this need do so with the systems and processes that meet the needs of their students. As Braxton concluded**, the issue of student departure is not the domain of a single department or division within the institution. It is in the domain of the institution itself (Braxton et al., 2008, p. 393)**. **Retention, persistence and addressing student needs must be in the DNA of the institution in order to**

succeed. That said Braxton boldly asserted that not all students will or should be retained (p.393) and that institutions should be deliberate in their retention efforts.

The political discourse is focused on the completion issue as President Obama outlined. The President set the nation's course to graduate 10 million more students by 2020. The nation's goal is to have the "best educated, most competitive workforce in the world" (Kanter, 2011). The landscape has changed with the traditional college student making up just 25% of those attending college. 75% of students attend part time. They commute and they juggle family, jobs, and school. The academy must address this reality and bring to bear every possible tool to support students ("About Us | Complete College America," n.d., p. 6). Without institutional commitment and an organizational culture that sees every student as a student at risk, student departure will continue to plague higher education. Furthermore, student success, as defined by completion will continue to drain local, regional, and national resources (financial, social and political). Now is the time to commit resources and energy to address retention and departures.

The Completion Agenda

President Obama has set the stage for a bold vision for completion that calls for higher education to put the United States back on top with the most educated workforce in the world by the year 2020 (Kanter, 2011). This is a significant mandate from the White House made more dramatic when considering the pace that must be kept to graduate new students to meet future demand. **Demand for workers with college educations will outpace supply to the tune of 300,000 per year. By 2018, the postsecondary system will have produced 3 million fewer college graduates than demanded by the labor market (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).** At current rates, degrees conferred would have to increase by about 10 percent a year to eliminate the shortfall—or the economy would need to slow its demand for higher education in its workers (2010). To meet current demand, employers provide a considerable amount of internal training. In fact, colleges and universities represent only 35 percent of the entire postsecondary education and training system. The rest consists of on-the-job training, formal employer-provided education programs, military training, apprenticeships, and a variety of other programs (2010).

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The completion agenda takes on new meaning when focused on the performance of completion and graduation in North Carolina. **By the year 2020, 63% of all jobs in North Carolina will require certification or college degree. As of 2011, just 36% of the adults in North Carolina have an associate degree or higher.** This presents a skills gap of 27% by the year 2020 ("About Us | Complete College America," n.d.). These facts are magnified knowing that the part time students pursuing an associate degree on average take 3.6 years to complete their degree. Most require remediation, and of those that do complete remediation, less than 10% graduate in three years (Carnevale et al., 2010). According to a recent report, fewer than half of all community college students with a goal of a degree or certificate meet their goal within six years (Center for Community College Engagement, 2012). These are sobering issues that require attention and thoughtful action to enable the individuals and families to succeed. Moreover these issues must be addressed if the United States is to remain competitive in the global economy.

With communities and the country at risk of a continued erosion of United States competitiveness due to a lack of an educated workforce, there is documented cost of the low graduation and completion rates. A recent study highlights what the authors frame as the hidden cost of community colleges (Schneider & Yin, 2011). The study looked at the first time, full time, degree and certificate seeking students over a five year period from 2004-2008. According to the study, taking into account for students that transfer, one fifth of full time students who began their career in community college did not return for a second year (2011). In 2008-09, the data showed nearly $1 billion will be spent on first time, full time community college students who drop out before their second year. This amount is an increase of more than 35% than 2004-05 (2011). For the academic year 2008-09, North Carolina saw $5.2 million of Federal student aid spent on first year, community college students who subsequently dropped out. This lost investment is in addition to state and local appropriations which exceed $25 million in State or local expenditures for this same population (2011).

Moving forward with an understanding of retention issues, an appreciation for the challenges facing community college students, and with a backdrop of the national agenda on completion a host of questions are

presented. Among these questions is one that asks, how do we move students farther and faster to completion toward a prosperous future that serves individuals, families, and the nation?

Stackable Credentials

There has been much conversation in the media about stackable credentials. This strategy, where institutions and organizations build ladders for individuals, falls closely in line with the Completion Agenda. Many states have taken steps to build pathways for adults to make their way to and through certificate and credentialing programs with the focus on completion, job-ready skills, and gainful employment. Adults who need to upgrade their academic skills typically must complete basic or developmental education before they can enroll in college-level courses (Community Research Partners, 2008). The dilemma for higher education is that only one-quarter of students who take three developmental education classes complete all three courses in five years; only 4% graduate; and 78% leave school without a credential (Grubb & Columbia Univ., 2001)

There are many stackable programs that are showing promise. From Community Research Partners (2008) these are national programs showing success:

Washington I-BEST

Washington I-BEST, which integrates basic math and English into community college technical courses, is perhaps the best example of a program model focused on academics and job training. Geared toward adults in need of basic education or ESL, local I-BEST programs “contextualize” academics to a particular career field—students learn the reading, writing, and math within the context of job-related tasks. To achieve the dual purpose of delivering job training and academics, I-BEST programs are co-taught by an adult education instructor and a career-technical college faculty. The state of Washington requires community colleges to incorporate I-BEST programs into a one year technical certificate or other occupational training program that has been proven to enable graduates to secure higher-wage jobs. ESL students who participated in I-BEST earned five times more college credits, and were 15 times more likely to complete workforce training, than adults in traditional ESL programs.

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Southeast Arkansas College Fast Track

As part of Arkansas's TANF-funded Career Pathways initiative, Southeast Arkansas College has integrated basic concepts related to allied health careers in its Fast Track developmental education program. Fast Track compresses two semesters of remedial reading, writing, and math into one semester in order to move low-skilled students more quickly into allied health courses. Fast Track participants are four times more likely to complete developmental education than students in traditional remedial courses (Community Research Partners, 2008).

Kentucky remediation bridge pilots to Career Pathways

Kentucky is testing a number of strategies for connecting basic and developmental education students to the state's Career Pathways initiative. Ashland Community and Technical College has integrated remedial math and writing into a credit-bearing anatomy and physiology course to expedite transitions to healthcare degree programs. Jefferson Community and Technical College has partnered with the local adult education center to integrate academic tutoring into first-year HVAC courses. It builds on a small scale study that found that full-time students, after completing one year of the HVAC program, raised their college entrance scores enough to bypass developmental coursework (Community Research Partners, 2008).

Maricopa Community College "chunking" model

In Arizona, Maricopa Community College has partnered with local healthcare providers to design a sequence of four credit-bearing certificates leading to an associate's degree in health information technology. As a result, Maricopa enables students to complete their degree in more doable "chunks," exiting and re-entering school after each certificate(Community Research Partners, 2008).

The adult are coming to institutions across the country, arrive with a wealth of experience and knowledge that is not recognized by the academy. One of the significant barriers found to making the transition from unemployment to education to employment is the gap between non-credit training and for-credit programs (2008). The lack of college credit for prior training and occupational certificates is one of the essential gaps preventing retention, persistence, and completion (2008).

Prior Learning Assessment

One strategy that must be considered when attempting to address the needs of students in light of the current environment, the complexities of higher education, and the completion agenda, is prior learning assessment (PLA). Prior Learning Assessment is a term used to describe learning gained outside a traditional academic environment. Simply put, PLA is the assessment and recognition of learning and knowledge acquired while living life. PLA is recognition of knowledge gained through working, participating in employer training

programs, serving in the military, studying independently, volunteering or doing community service, and studying open source courseware. In short, **PLA is the evaluation and assessment of an individual's life learning for college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training** ("CAEL - Prior Learning Assessment Services," n.d.).

PLA is not a new concept. American war veterans returning from World War II were the driving force behind this strategy. Returning from active duty, veterans requested that their formal and informal training acquired during their military service be recognized with academic credit (Romaniuk & Snart, 2000). Until then only formal, classroom, institutionally directed learning was deemed worthy of credit. This was the beginning of the movement that evolved into what is now considered PLA.

We know that the nature of the academic program can have a positive impact on retention. Vocational program students persevere at significant rates. It is worthy to note that students that are afforded prior learning assessment can show considerable promise in the area of completion. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) allows for students to be provided academic consideration for skills and competencies they bring to the institution, whether these skills have been gained in a classroom or in the workplace. With attention from the Lumina Foundation and the Obama administration, institutions are rediscovering prior learning assessment. PLA can accelerate degree completion and reduce student cost (Ebersole, 2010, p. 26). The focus is on what skills and competencies the student possesses rather than on where the student obtained those skills.

A study by the Center of Adult and Experiential Learning of more than 62,000 student records revealed that PLA students persisted to completion at higher rates than other students and did so in a shorter length of time (2010, p. 30). While Tinto contemplated the connection between faculty and student to aid retention, he did not explore the idea that the student could be bringing valuable skills to the classroom. Nor did he see that these could expedite the education process to completion. PLA provides additional opportunity for retention and lowers the economic burden of higher education for low income households. This study focused on three primary research questions. Compared to students who do not earn PLA credits, do students who earn PLA credit have better graduation rates? Secondly, do these students have better persistence? Finally, do these

students earn their degrees in a shorter timeframe (Klein-Collins & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010)?

What the study revealed was that PLA students had a much higher degree-earning rate than non-PLA students. Rates of completion in a seven year period were more than double for PLA students irrespective of whether the students earned a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree (Klein-Collins & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). Further, the study showed that these levels of success were accomplished regardless of students' academic ability, age, gender or race, or whether students received financial aid or not (2010).

Finally, the issue of persistence was evaluated as it relates to accumulated credits without degree completion. PLA students, who did not complete (56%) their degree, earned more than 80% of the required credit to complete their course of study(Klein-Collins & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). This compares to just 22% for the non-PLA student who accomplished similar credit accumulation (2010). PLA students also enrolled at higher rates; earned degrees in a shorter timeframe, and those that did not complete accumulated considerably more college credits than their non-PLA peers. .

This study is noteworthy for a number of reasons. It presented the data from the largest pool of PLA students evaluated to date. The indicators provide a clear picture of the results and impact PLA can have on student success. The study included a substantial group of representative institutions with a high-level of experience with PLA and CAEL accredited processes.

Employers are the ultimate judge of the products of higher education. Administrators should be concerned about the perspective of employers with respect to individuals who progress using PLA as a strategy to complete their degrees or certificates. One study showed great insight into the employer perspective on cost and time. The cost savings from PLA were seen by employers as a value both to the company and to its employees, with slightly higher perceived value for the company. The time savings that results from PLA was seen by employers as valuable to both the company and to its employees, with slightly higher perceived value for the employees (CAEL,

2012). While this study had a very small sample size it does provide guidance for higher education as to how PLA may be perceived in the private sector. Indications are that, among employers interviewed, PLA was generally well received (2012).

Prior Learning Assessment Strategies

Among the variety of options available to engage PLA as a retention and completion strategy, institutions may engage in one or all of the following methods (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007):

- College-Level Examination Program (CLEP)administered by the College Board
- DANTES Subject Standardized Tests program (DSST) by the Educational Testing Service
- The American College Testing Proficiency Examination Program (ACT/PEP)
- Excelsior College Exams—formerly Regents
- College Examinations
- Thomas Edison College Examination Program (TECEP) by Thomas Edison State College
- Advanced Placement Examinations (AP)

Beyond testing, the option of a portfolio is the most complex option for considering prior learning. Portfolios are formally submitted for review and assigned to a subject matter expert trained in assessing portfolios. There are several styles used for portfolios. A narrative portfolio may generally run about 15-20 pages and have discrete sections such as a personal learning theme, summary of learning objectives, essay, and significant documentation (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007). Trained subject matter experts review the portfolio using defined criteria and a standard evaluation process. Sample criteria may include: a discussion of concrete experiences by student, evidence of observation/reflection of student, evidence of conceptual learning, student's application of learning, documentation or effectiveness and style of writing (2007).

Allowing credit for prior learning is valuable to the adult continuing education student because it can subsequently provide (Gambescia & Dagavarian, 2007):

- direct transfer of credits to the student's degree completion program;
- transfer of credits giving the student an advanced standing status;
- waiver of a course, but not credits, in the student's degree plan; and
- satisfaction of a prerequisite requirement before taking a course

Even as credit by exam is a popular and widely advertised option to consider and measure prior learning, the application of this practice is wide ranging. How a student accomplishes the task of a 'test out' is varied and is not consistent from one institution to the next, even among institutions that are members of the same system. Moreover, the cost, access, and convenience of these exams is often so onerous that students simply opt to take the course instead of testing out. This costs precious time and burning valuable financial aid resources in the process, both of which put a student further at risk of not completing.

Another option for prior learning assessment that has gained attention of late is the option of awarding credit for industry recognized credentials. State-wide articulation agreements for industry credentials allow institutions to grant credit for those who have earned recognized credentials and licensure in Florida ("Office of Articulation," n.d.). **This could curb the hidden costs of community colleges and shorten the time to degree completion by allowing students to earn credit for proven competencies rather than through seat time (Schneider & Yin, 2011).** The acceptance of competencies and mastery of skills as evidenced by the awarding of industry-recognized credential provides a practical and meaningful option.

Over the past 10 years, there has been significant growth in certificate awards. Most of that growth is in awards for short--term programs certificates, which have increased about 40 percent since 1997--98 (College Complete America, 2010). This is not surprising given the constraints previously outlined in this report on retention as well as the financial and domestic demands placed on students. It seems that many are opting for a short term certificate to gain access to competitive jobs, rather than risking the longer term and far less likely route to completing a degree.

To reiterate the need for increased completions, based on a study by the Lumina Foundation the U.S. will need to increase the number of degrees completed at a rate of nearly 300,000 annually to reach a goal of 60% degree completion among adults age 25-64 (Matthews et al., 2010). This daunting task is made possible in part by the fact that 22 million Americans hold some college credits but no degree (2010). With the PLA as a tool, institutions may be in a good position to consider past college experiences as well as the host of other PLA strategies to award credit and move Americans down the path further, faster.

The Economics of PLA

Financial reasons are among the primary reasons students leave college. Having to work and make money represented 54 percent of the responses in a recent survey when asked why students did not complete their program (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2011). Textbook costs and other fees also impacted students' decision not to complete a program. Among the respondents who completed, 23% said these costs affected them financially. Of those that did not complete, 36% said these costs affected them (Johnson et al., 2011). Respondents in this study said that work and family responsibilities would make it difficult to return to college once they had dropped out. 56 percent said they really needed to work full-time, and this was a major reason for them not returning. Among those who leave school, 7 in 10 did not have scholarships or financial aid compared to about 4 in 10 who did graduate. 2004-2005 saw the largest rate of increase in college costs in a decade ("Higher Education Landscape," 2010, p. 82). Students saw tuition and fee rates increased by more than 10% during those years ("Higher Education Landscape," 2010, p. 83). The economic impact was highlighted by fact that the total cost of a 4 year public institution represents about 6 percent of income for students from high income families as compared to 71 percent for low-income families. By comparison, in 1979-80 the costs were 31 percent for low-income families. (Tinto, 2004, p. 12).

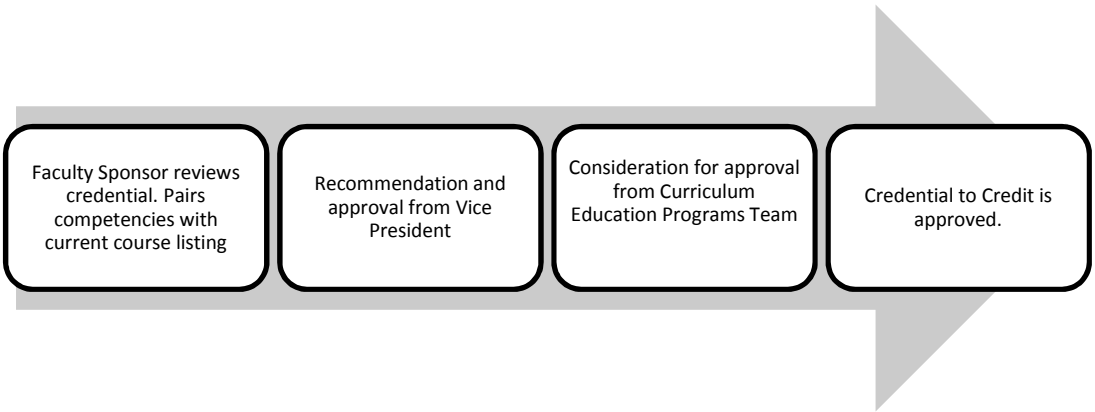
The financial barriers to completion are evident. When considering PLA as a strategy for completion one cannot discount the fact that PLA acts as an accelerator to completion. PLA earners with associate's degrees saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning associate's degrees (Klein-Collins & Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). Assuming that a student could save a single, full time semester load using PLA at an institution, with a credit hour cost of $66.50 and an estimated cost for books of $650.00, the value of the PLA is $1,714.00. What is of equal or greater value, is the time savings that benefits the student and moves them farther, faster down the pathway to completion. Table 1 illustrates a sampling of proposed credentials with the associated courses and credits to be awarded upon approval.

Table 1. Sampling of credentials to be considered, college credits and estimated savings.

Credential	Credit to be awarded	Cost @ $66.50 per Credit	Estimated Books/Fee	Total Estimated Savings
North Carolina Electrical License	10 credits – Electrical Program	$665.00	$350.00	$1015.00
Microsoft Office User (MOUS)	15 credits – Computer Program	$997.50	$350.00	$1347.50
Certified Computer Network Associate	12 credits – Computer Networking Program	$798.00	$350.00	$1148.00
MSSC Certified Electronic Technician	13 credits - Electronics Program	$864.50	$350.00	$1214.50

As seen below in Figure 2, the procedure to have credentials considered for articulation and inclusion in the C2C program is based on recommendations from expertise found in the faculty ranks, the Faculty Sponsor. Faculty Sponsors are subject matter experts with considerable depth of knowledge in their specific field of study. Further, the Faculty Sponsor is uniquely qualified to provide the insight necessary to reflect on appropriate and meaningful third-party credentials. With a clear understanding of the demands and rigor required to earn these industry credentials, a Faculty Sponsor will pair the mastered skills/credential with course competencies found in the SPCC course catalog, to arrive at the course pairing sequence. Once the course pairing process is completed, the Faculty Sponsor will present a recommendation to the respective Vice President. The Faculty Sponsor and the Vice President will review the recommendation, industry credential, employment data and related materials that support the recommendation for consideration. A recommendation for consideration and approval is presented to the SPCC Curriculum Education Programs Team.

Figure 2. Credential to credit process map



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The SPCC Curriculum Education Programs Team is a faculty-based team that regularly considers program changes, course substitutions, and pre-requisites to courses/programs. Upon approval from the Vice President, the SPCC Curriculum Education Programs Team will consider the recommendation from the Faculty Sponsor, to include a given industry credential in the C2C program. Upon approval, notification is made to all appropriate parties internally, and corresponding changes are made to the SPCC catalog.

The economic realities are clear. Without some intervention, financial reasons prevent students from entering college, cause them to leave college and are a primary driver preventing their return. The use of PLA as a strategy can address all of these to some degree.

NCCCS use of PLA

Knowing that PLA can increase retention, improve completion rates, lower cost to students, and shorten the time to graduation, why hasn't PLA been more widely accepted among colleges and universities? As part of this evaluation process, a study was conducted of Chief Academic Officers and Registrars among the 58 members of the NCCCS. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the methods of PLA currently being used and what type, the extent to which these methods are used to award college credit, and finally, what factors would promote the use of prior learning assessment to award college credit. A total of 132 surveys were administered with a response rate of just over 18%.

Based on the results of the survey, the most popular form of PLA being used is for institutions to award credit by exam (91.7%). Typically institutions offer students the opportunity to test out of a course and award college credit for successfully testing out of the course based institutional standards and guidelines. These guidelines are determined locally. Among the other options for PLA, military training/experience (58.3%) and other challenge exams (66.7%) were used to award credit but to a far lesser extent.

Among the reasons most cited to promote wider engagement and use of PLA is simply to support for the activity. 95.8% of respondents saw support from the local administration and support from the NCCCS system office as key components to further use of PLA to serve students. An equal number of respondents (95.8%)

found faculty support to be important in the engagement and success of this activity. Student engagement and understanding of PLA opportunities was also found to be a major factor in the utilization of PLA as an accelerator to degree completion among respondents (70.8%).

The direction provided by the data would indicate that if administration, the NCCCS and faculty were to support the implementation of a PLA strategy an institution would be poised to pursue the strategy. As is often the case, leadership among the ranks of the NCCCS, local administration and among the ranks of faculty will be required to implement the strategy. Absent the leadership individually or in collaboration with the others, PLA will likely continue to be an under-utilized, and clearly missed opportunity to serve students.

Proposal for Consideration – Credit to Credential (C2C)

South Piedmont Community College (SPCC) has implemented the following strategy as a pilot for the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). Modeled after the articulation agreements made in Florida among colleges and universities, SPCC will move to award specific college credit to individuals that present certain approved, articulated industry credentials.

The procedure to have credentials considered for articulation and inclusion in the C2C program is based on recommendations from experts found in the faculty ranks, the Faculty Sponsor. With a clear understanding of the demands for awarding these industry credentials, a Faculty Sponsor will pair the mastered skills/credential with course competencies to arrive at the course pairing sequence.

Once the course pairing process is completed, the Faculty Sponsor will present a recommendation to the respective Vice President and then to the SPCC Curriculum Education Programs Team for review and approval. Upon approval, notification is made to all appropriate parties internally, and corresponding changes are made to the SPCC catalog.

SPCC has developed a list of proposed credentials for consideration, having had Faculty Sponsors pair these credentials with corresponding courses currently found in the SPCC catalog.

Conclusion

Evidence shows that retention is at the core of all institutional challenges. Without significant institutional commitment the churning of students into and out of institutions will continue. The need for an expanded, highly educated workforce is a national imperative where we will see demand for post-secondary graduates outpace production in dramatic fashion.

Higher education provider must innovate, rethink and respond to the market forces for the benefit of their institution and to put the nation on firm footing for the future. Prior learning assessment must be part of the solution as the aging workforce and the impact of the great recession reverberates through the economy.

The challenge for the academy is to accept these competencies and skills that students bring with them to the institutions, understanding that the mastery of these skills is more important than where those skills were learned. Institutions must focus on learning and the recognition of learned skills and competencies. The role of the institution in this arena is verification and recognition of what a student knows, rather than dismissing the fact that the skills exist and hold no value since they were not learned within the confines of an institution of higher education.

On any given day in America and around the world, students attend internships, apprenticeships, clinical rotations, and co-operative education experiences. These experiences are intended to give students practical knowledge in the 'real world.' These experiences are completed and college credit is awarded. It is not uncommon that these experiences are required for graduation or awarding of a certificate. Just as institutions send students into the community to gain experience, these same institutions are receiving students with a wealth of 'real world' experience and providing no recognition or college credit for this experience.

The proposed C2C strategy provides institutions an opportunity to recognize and award college credit to credentialed individuals. The strategy supports and addresses current constraints and critical issues facing communities and the nation.

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