RAND

Research Report

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Awarding College Credit for Industry Credentials

Findings from Ohio Community Colleges on Outreach and Intake Practices

States and colleges across the country are engaged in efforts to award college credit for various types of learning that took place outside a college environment through such experiences as military training, on-the-job training, and industry credentials awarded for noncredit training (Kilgore, 2020; Klein-Collins et al., 2020; McKay and Douglas, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019; Soler et al., 2024). These credit for prior learning (CPL) opportunities aim to help college enrollees immediately earn college credit and avoid the duplication of coursework for skills and knowledge they already hold. When individuals earn CPL, they can potentially save time and money on earning college credentials. Colleges may attract a broader set of individuals to enroll and build on their existing skills and credentials.

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) has been a leader in establishing statewide transfer agreements for college credit. Ohio established its first statewide CPL transfer agreements for high school technical coursework in 2007, and in 2021, the state expanded its agreements to industry credentials. As of April 2025, ODHE has approved more than 50 industry credentials for statewide CPL across Ohio's public colleges (see Appendix A).

Statewide articulation agreements aim to streamline certain CPL opportunities for individuals and college staff and ensure consistency across colleges in which CPL opportunities are offered (Soler et al., 2024). CPL policies set by a single college are often not eligible for transfer (Kilgore, 2020; Ryu, 2013). But statewide CPL agreements ensure transfer across Ohio public community colleges and universities. Statewide articulation agreements can also reduce college costs for awarding CPL by centralizing approval processes.

Although state CPL agreements streamline some aspects of CPL, community colleges and universities play a critical role in ensuring that students can access the credit they are eligible for (Daugherty et al., 2023; García and Leibrandt, 2020). Research suggests that CPL take-up among eligible students is often low (Klein-Collins et al., 2020), and there is wide variation in college practices around CPL outreach and intake (Kilgore, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Prospective and incoming students often lack information about CPL opportunities, encounter administratively burdensome processes for accessing credit, and are charged fees for certain forms of CPL at many

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We identified several findings from our research in the state of Ohio:

- Community colleges have integrated Ohio's new statewide agreements that award college credit for industry credentials into their existing outreach and intake processes for varying types of credit for prior learning (CPL).
- The staff at Ohio community colleges frequently reported engaging in four of seven promising CPL practices: (1) maintaining a website with clear points of contact on CPL, (2) training frontline staff (admissions, academic advisors) on CPL, (3) providing one-on-one advising to students on CPL, and (4) awarding CPL credit on student transcripts within the first semester of enrollment.
- The staff at Ohio community colleges less frequently reported engaging in three promising CPL practices: (1) systematically engaging employers in CPL outreach, (2) screening students for CPL at the time of enrollment, and (3) using data to inform program improvement.

We suggest seven practices that community colleges might adopt to improve student access to CPL:

- Develop a website with clear language describing CPL opportunities and how that credit feeds into degree programs.
- Hire designated staff to oversee CPL for the college and provide frontline staff (e.g., advisors, faculty) with training on CPL.
- Engage employers and industry partners in outreach on CPL.
- Systematically screen incoming students for CPL.
- Provide one-on-one advising support to help students navigate the CPL process and ensure that CPL aligns with their college program.
- Ensure that CPL is immediately placed on student transcripts with no additional fees for students.
- Examine CPL data to inform program improvement and outreach efforts.

colleges (García and Leibrandt, 2020; Kilgore, 2020). Postsecondary colleges can increase access to CPL by broadly informing prospective and incoming students about CPL opportunities, streamlining intake processes, and minimizing costs (Kilgore, 2020; Lakin et al., 2015).

This report outlines seven promising approaches to CPL outreach and intake for community college leaders and staff. To identify these promising practices, we drew on our prior research with the state of Ohio and stakeholder engagement (Daugherty et al., 2023), the broader literature on CPL practices, and input from our advisory group, which included state agency and community college staff overseeing CPL in Ohio. We then examined the degree to which Ohio community colleges used these promising practices through interviews and surveys with the staff and leadership at 13 community colleges and a scan of websites across all of Ohio's 22 community colleges.

Although our findings offer important guidance for colleges scaling CPL efforts, there are several limitations to our approach. Because there is little rigorous evidence on the efficacy of CPL outreach and intake practices, the resources we used to identify promising practices were primarily guidance documents, implementation practices, and descriptive research. The Ohio community colleges that agreed to participate in data collection may not have been representative of all community colleges in the state. Universities also play a (smaller) role in implementing Ohio's statewide CPL initiatives, but they were not included in our sample. We limited data collection to the perspective of those who directly oversee CPL and did not gather the broader perspectives of staff and students.

In the next section, we describe college and state efforts to scale CPL and briefly highlight the literature on promising college CPL outreach and intake

processes. We then describe our approach to assessing Ohio community college practices. We conclude with a brief discussion of the key takeaways from the research and recommendations for how states and community colleges can strengthen CPL outreach and intake practices.

Background

We start with a brief overview of state and college efforts to scale CPL. We then describe the evidence on promising approaches that colleges might adopt to ensure strong outreach and streamline intake processes.

An Overview of Credit for Prior Learning

The efforts of colleges to award CPL is not new. College credit for military experience expanded between the 1940s and 1970s as a way to provide pathways to college for returning veterans, and CPL opportunities opened up more to civilians in the 1980s (García and Leibrandt, 2020). College efforts to scale CPL have accelerated over the past 15 years as a result of various initiatives highlighting CPL as a promising strategy for increasing college access and completion (e.g., Klein-Collins, 2010). It is now common for colleges to offer credit for a variety of prior learning opportunities, including high school coursework, work experience, and industry credentials (Kilgore, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Colleges assess prior learning in different ways, including standardized assessments (e.g., the College-Level Examination Program [CLEP] exams), college-designed assessments, portfolio review, and mapping common learning experiences (e.g., industry credentials) to courses (Hayward and Williams, 2015).

Studies indicate that CPL can be effective in helping students advance in their education and completing college credentials. One study that examined data across 72 colleges found that students who received CPL had better academic outcomes than similar students who had not received CPL (Klein-Collins et al., 2020). Another study found that individuals who passed the College Board's CLEP exams were 5.5 percent more likely to complete college credentials than their peers who failed the CLEP exams, and students who passed the CLEP exams also experienced small increases in earnings (Boatman et al., 2020). Studies in other settings have demonstrated better graduation outcomes for students who earn CPL compared with students who do not earn CPL (Hayward and Williams, 2015; Kuang and McKay, 2015).

Although CPL may be valuable in attracting students and increasing completion rates, students commonly face issues accessing CPL because of limited awareness and burdensome administrative processes (Klein-Collins et al., 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Students learn about CPL and the processes for receiving credit in varying ways across colleges (Kilgore, 2020; McKay and Douglas, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Studies suggest that many students do not report having the information needed to access CPL (García and Leibrandt, 2020; Kilgore, 2020). In addition, students must complete paperwork and engage in assessments, and many colleges charge students for these processes (García and Leibrandt, 2020; Kilgore, 2020). Students—particularly those who work and face competing family and life responsibilities—may be deterred by the time and effort it takes to complete these CPL processes (Kilgore, 2020; Klein-Collins and Olson, 2014).

Ohio's Statewide Articulation Agreements for Industry Credentials

As states and community college systems across the United States began to scale CPL over the past 25 years, advocates and researchers discovered that the complex, decentralized approach to CPL was not working for individuals (e.g., Kilgore, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019; Ryu, 2013). In response, many states and systems established policies calling for common approaches to CPL. A national scan found that at least 42 states have state or system policies that dictate how public postsecondary institutions should award CPL (Soler et al., 2024). These policies vary widely; some simply require colleges to offer some CPL to students and provide limited guidance on which CPL opportunities should be provided and/or how those opportunities should be awarded

Abbreviations

AP	Advanced Placement
CLEP	College-Level Examination Program
CPL	credit for prior learning
CTAG	Career-Technical Assurance Guide
CTE	Career Technical Education
ITAG	Industry-Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guide
ODHE	Ohio Department of Higher Education
PLA	prior learning assessment

and tracked (Soler et al., 2024). Other states and community college systems have established more robust efforts to align practices across colleges. For example, some states and community college systems have established crosswalks that clearly demonstrate how certain types of learning map onto college courses; others have set standards around data collection on CPL, and some have restricted the ability of colleges to charge for CPL and/or provided funding to support CPL.

In the 1990s, Ohio established statewide agreements that ensure the transfer of general education courses, and this action helped establish a process that was later used for CPL (i.e., noncredit transfer agreements). Ohio began to offer credit for high school career and technical education courses in 2007 and later established statewide credit for military training and occupations. In 2021, the state began developing articulation agreements that would expand statewide credit to industry credentials. Ohio's 2021 CPL initiative resulted in Industry-Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guides (ITAGs), and the state has approved more than 50 ITAGs to date. ITAGs offer individuals a chance to earn college credit for nursing licenses, information technology certifications, advanced manufacturing certifications, and credentials in other fields (e.g., food service, aviation) (see Appendix A).

ODHE worked with a steering committee that included college administrators, industry representatives, and state agency staff to identify which industry credentials to prioritize for statewide credit. ODHE then leveraged an existing process for statewide articulation agreements to establish ITAGs, pulling together panels of industry and college representatives to assess the learning objectives associated with the industry credential. Once the panel's work was complete, ODHE approved the ITAG, posted it to the state's website, and announced the approval to the leaders of all public community colleges and universities in Ohio.

Because Ohio community colleges and universities do not have common course numbering systems and course offerings vary across colleges, college faculty must review approved ITAGs and their learning outcomes to determine whether those ITAGs map onto existing courses. Community colleges submit evidence of how their courses align with the ITAGs for approval by ODHE-coordinated faculty panels. Once the faculty panel approves the ITAG course maps, a list of ITAGs mapped to eligible colleges and courses is posted to the ODHE ITAG website (Transfer Credit Ohio, undated-b).

Some industry credentials map onto courses that are offered by many community colleges across the state, while other industry credentials map onto courses offered by only a small group of community colleges (Appendix A).[1] ODHE expects community colleges that already offer courses that are aligned with an ITAG to have those courses approved, but ODHE does not expect colleges to develop new courses that align with ITAG credit. As a result, ITAG credit availability varies across colleges. On average, Ohio community colleges tend to offer ITAG credit for about 15 different industry-recognized credentials. For example, many Ohio community colleges offer courses that map onto emergency medical certifications, fire certifications, transportation certifications, and engineering technology or advanced manufacturing credentials, such as SOLIDWORKS and Autodesk. However, some colleges award credit for more than 30 ITAGs, including Lorain County Community College, Sinclair Community College, and Stark State College.

It is important to note that state CPL policies are layered onto existing college contexts for CPL. Prior to Ohio's statewide CPL initiative for industry credentials, some Ohio community colleges already had robust CPL efforts and awarded credit for industry credentials, while other Ohio community colleges prioritized CPL less. For more proactive community colleges, statewide CPL initiatives may not greatly

expand the number of CPL opportunities that are available to students, but they can help simplify processes for colleges. For less proactive community colleges, statewide CPL initiatives may have the potential to expand the number of CPL opportunities for students, reduce the college-level costs of offering CPL opportunities, and provide clear messaging to colleges that this initiative is a state priority. However, there is limited evidence on how state CPL initiatives are integrated into colleges that have existing CPL intake and outreach practices.

Promising College Outreach and Intake Approaches for Credit for Prior Learning

Ohio's investments in CPL articulation agreements and course crosswalks for industry credentials can help build the infrastructure that colleges need to award credit in a standardized way. State and college system policies may establish standards for some aspects of CPL—such as transfer policies, data-tracking, and the transcription of credit—but those policies rarely provide guidance on or resources for informing students about CPL opportunities and advising students about eligibility (Soler et al., 2024).

College policies and practices, therefore, continue to play a central role in determining whether students can access CPL. Historically complex administrative processes have limited student willingness to pursue opportunities for college credit (García and Leibrandt, 2020; Kilgore, 2020). Research shows that when individuals must seek out detailed information to make use of an opportunity or face bureaucratic hurdles to accessing the opportunity (i.e., administrative burden), they will be deterred from using those resources (Heinrich, 2016; Herd and Moynihan, 2018). Administrative burden may be a particular challenge for low-income communities and communities of color (Christensen et al., 2020; Ray, Herd, and Moynihan, 2023).

The broader literature suggests several promising outreach strategies that colleges can use to ensure that individuals are informed about CPL:

- **College websites can be an important source of CPL information for both prospective and current students.** At least one resource recommends having a clear website that provides basic information (Lakin et al., 2015). But the quality of the information provided on community college websites and the navigability and accessibility of those websites varies. Ideally, colleges will ensure that CPL information is on their enrollment page and that they use plain language to explain what CPL is and how it connects to their program. Students prefer websites that allow interaction (Nodine et al., 2012). Therefore, websites that allow students to immediately initiate the CPL process through contact information for individuals and/or online forms may increase the likelihood that students follow through with the process. In addition, prospective and current students may need to see how CPL feeds into college programs. Visuals, infographics, or flow charts (e.g., *pathway maps*) can offer a simple and visually stimulating way to illustrate how CPL feeds into programs and credentials (Daugherty et al., 2023).
- **It can be valuable for colleges to build broad awareness of CPL among staff and have dedicated staff responsible for managing the work.** Providing a robust set of CPL options, ensuring that staff and students are

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aware of those options, and staying on top of state and/or system policies requires substantial staff time and expertise. Coordination across different advising partners and clearly defined roles in advising can be critical (Karp et al., 2021). In addition, a single, centralized office responsible for coordinating CPL efforts across the college can help staff stay on top of the information (Wesley and Parnell, 2020). Individual academic departments may vary in terms of awareness and buy-in around CPL, and having a centralized office to educate departments may relieve administrative burden on the enrollment office. Centralized coordination of CPL screening and awarding can also create more consistency than having each department do it on their own. It can be valuable for colleges to provide training to ensure that advisors, admissions staff, and faculty are aware of CPL options and can easily refer students to the processes for receiving CPL. Advisors, faculty, and staff play a critical role in communicating with students about CPL opportunities and ensuring CPL take-up (Lakin et al., 2015; McKay, Edwards, and Michael, 2017; Palmer, Nguyen, and Love, 2021).

Employers or other industry partners could potentially play an important role in promoting CPL opportunities. Students most often learn about opportunities through personal networks.

- **Employers or other industry partners (e.g., credential-awarding bodies) could potentially play an important role in promoting CPL opportunities.** Surveys of students who have earned CPL suggest that students most often learn about opportunities through personal networks, such as friends or employers (García and Leibrandt, 2020; Kilgore, 2020). Employers and industry partners can better reach individuals who are not actively seeking college information (Bray and Beer, 2020; Daugherty et al., 2023). Communication from employers can also convey to employees that these opportunities for upskilling may be valuable to career advancement. However, many colleges rely on advisory groups to engage industry, and these groups do not typically lead to broad employer engagement in college initiatives (Fadem et al., 2015; Karam, Goldman, and Rico, 2022). A more intentional effort to engage industry in promoting ITAGs could include emails to employers or third-party credential providers with large numbers of eligible credential-holders requesting that these organizations share a two-page information sheet and pathway map to introduce their employees to CPL and opportunities to upskill (Daugherty et al., 2023).

The literature also suggests several promising intake and tracking approaches that colleges can use to ensure that CPL processes are accessible:

- **One-on-one advising can be useful for CPL intake.** Requiring advisors to discuss CPL with newly enrolled students during early advising sessions is a common way that colleges identify students who might be eligible for CPL (Kilgore, 2020; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019; Palmer, Nguyen, and Love, 2021). Colleges can also cut down on the administrative burden for students and increase the likelihood that eligible students access CPL by ensuring that advisors can streamline and avoid multistep administrative processes (Karp et al., 2021).

- **Colleges can proactively identify students who are likely to be eligible for CPL.** Colleges most often rely on advising sessions to screen students for CPL, but advisors are responsible for covering many topics and may not always have the time to discuss CPL with each student (Palmer, Nguyen, and Love, 2021). In addition, some colleges do not require new students to meet with advisors. Broader screening efforts before enrollment might allow advisors and admissions staff to identify the students who are most interested in and/or likely to be eligible for CPL. For example, colleges could incorporate questions about prior learning experiences into their admissions forms and admissions events prior to enrollment (Berek and Kortegast, 2022).
- **Colleges can increase access to CPL by adding credit to transcripts early and by not charging additional fees.** Dropout from college often happens within the first semester, so ensuring early, proactive access to advising can be valuable (e.g., Hatch and Garcia, 2017; Karp et al., 2021). Ensuring that CPL is put on a student's transcript prior to or within the first semester can help avoid duplicate course-taking and can provide the student with an immediate signal about the value of their prior learning in their current college program. Many colleges have charged students fees for CPL, and these costs act as barriers to CPL take-up (Kilgore, 2020). As part of its statewide policy, ODHE explicitly prohibits colleges from charging fees for the transcription of ITAG credit. Because ODHE coordinates most of the work to crosswalk prior learning to learning outcomes, this eliminates the costs for colleges to develop assessments or examine student portfolios.
- **Colleges can track data on CPL to help improve practices.** These data can inform program improvement and make the case for investments in CPL efforts (McKay, Cohn, and Kuang, 2016; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Yet, data collection on CPL is not common among colleges nationally (Kilgore, 2020; McKay, Cohn, and Kuang, 2016; Palmer and Nguyen, 2019). Ohio's statewide articulation agreements include college reporting requirements, and ODHE provides college staff with training on data collection. But colleges may not have strong incentives to comply with reporting standards because the data are not tied to funding streams.

Our Approach to Studying Outreach and Intake Practices in Ohio Community Colleges

We first identified seven promising outreach and intake practices that colleges might adopt to support the scaling of statewide CPL agreements based on the literature and from our discussions with an advisory group made up of Ohio state agency staff and community college leadership and staff (see Table 1). We grouped the promising practices into two categories: (1) clear and actionable outreach and (2) streamlined intake and tracking processes. We then identified specific indicators and data sources that could shed light on whether and how Ohio community colleges have adopted these promising outreach and intake strategies.

In January 2024, we conducted a systematic scan of Ohio's 22 community college websites to provide evidence on our first outreach measure.[2] For all other measures of promising practices, we drew from interviews and surveys we conducted in March and April 2024. For those interviews and surveys, we contacted staff who were the most likely to be overseeing CPL at each community college. Staff from 13 of 22 community colleges agreed to participate in the interviews. Collectively, we interviewed 19 community college administrators. Those who agreed to an interview were also asked to complete a short survey about their college's processes (see Appendix B), and we received 15 responses from staff (representing 12 of 13 community colleges where we conducted interviews).

Using these three sources of data (the website scan, surveys, and interviews), we analyzed to what extent Ohio community colleges may be implementing the identified promising practices or employing other innovations. We also share barriers and

TABLE 1

Indicators of Promising Practices for Outreach and Intake on Credit for Prior Learning at Community Colleges

Practice	Indicator	Data Source
Clear and actionable outreach		
1. Provide a clear and actionable website for prospective learners.	• The website clearly describes how the community college awards credit for industry credentials. • The website provides a way for students to take immediate action to initiate CPL processes. • The website offers clear information that shows how credit for industry credentials feeds into community college programs.	• Website scan • Survey
2. Ensure that all student-facing staff are prepared to provide information.	• The staff across all relevant departments receive shared training that explicitly describes CPL opportunities (including statewide agreements) and community college CPL processes. • The community college centrally coordinates around CPL efforts to ensure streamlined outreach to staff and students.	• Survey • Interviews
3. Engage employers and industry partners in promoting the opportunity.	• The community college has evidence of active employer outreach efforts to the employer's workforce. • The community college provides systematic outreach to major employers about credit for industry credentials.	• Survey • Interviews
Streamlined intake and tracking processes		
4. Systematically screen all students for prior credit.	• College application forms include questions on industry credentials. • The community college has other streamlined processes to identify eligible students for CPL.	• Survey • Interviews
5. Engage in a streamlined one-on-one advising session.	• Advisors hold one-on-one advising discussions about industry credentials with every (eligible) student. • CPL verification processes can be completed in just one meeting with staff.	• Survey • Interviews
6. Ensure that credit is added to the transcript early and with no additional fees.	• The registrar or designated staff transcript student credit for industry credentials immediately. • The staff minimize student costs for transcripting credit.	• Survey • Interviews
7. Use data to improve CPL practices.	• The staff periodically examine data on CPL. • The staff leverage data to improve CPL practices.	• Survey • Interviews

opportunities discussed by participants for improving access to CPL experiences, particularly for adult students with industry credentials.

Findings on Credit for Prior Learning Outreach Strategies at Ohio Community Colleges

In Table 2, we highlight our findings on how many Ohio community colleges were leveraging the three promising CPL outreach strategies that we identified. We then provide more detailed descriptions of how Ohio community colleges were carrying out their CPL outreach efforts.

Practice 1: Provide a Clear and Actionable Website for Prospective Learners

Many Ohio community colleges had websites to communicate information about CPL, but the depth and specificity of the information related to ITAGs varied. In our scan of community college websites, we found that most of the state's community colleges had a landing page dedicated to CPL. However, fewer than one-half of the colleges that had a dedicated landing page were directly linked on the main admissions webpage, where prospective students are more likely to begin their search. Institutions were more likely to provide general information about CPL rather than details about the availability

TABLE 2

Key Findings from Ohio Community Colleges on Promising Credit for Prior Learning Outreach Practices

Indicator	Key Finding
Practice 1: Provide a clear and actionable website for prospective learners	
The website clearly describes credit for industry credentials.	• 18 of 22 (82%) community colleges had a landing page dedicated to CPL. • 8 of 22 (36%) community colleges had a website that discussed ITAGs or credit for industry credentials in more general terms.
The website provides a way to initiate CPL processes.	• 6 of 22 (27%) community colleges had a website that provided direct contact information for a specific person handling CPL or ITAGs. • 6 of 22 (27%) community colleges had a website that provided a web form to request more information on CPL.
The website offers clear information on how CPL feeds into college programs.	• 1 community college website provided dropdown menus showing how the offered ITAGs lead to degrees or certificates. • No community college website provided a visual map showing the path to a degree with credit from industry credentials.
Practice 2: Ensure that all student-facing staff are prepared to provide information	
College staff across departments receive shared training on CPL.	• Interviewed staff at 8 of 13 (62%) community colleges share CPL information in staff meetings or by email. • Surveyed staff at community colleges were the most likely to report providing CPL training to admissions staff (11 of 12 or 92%) and advising staff (10 of 12 or 83%). • Interviewed staff at 1 community college held mandatory training on CPL.
The community college centrally coordinates CPL.	• Interviewed staff at 6 of 13 (46%) community colleges reported having a CPL coordinator, usually housed within student services or academic services. • Other community colleges relied on program or department chairs to handle CPL requests.
Practice 3: Engage employers and industry partners in promoting the opportunity	
The community college demonstrates evidence of employer engagement.	• Interviewed staff at 12 of 13 (92%) community colleges reported engaging with local employers and building partnerships through advisory councils or committees and other formal and informal channels.
The community college provides systematic employer outreach on CPL.	• There was little evidence to suggest that community colleges were systematically partnering with employers to conduct outreach specifically around CPL.

and benefits of specific types of prior learning. Few community colleges provided information about either ITAGs explicitly or policies on credit for industry credentials in more general terms.

It was less common for community college websites to provide ways for students to directly contact college personnel with CPL questions. Approximately one-quarter of Ohio community colleges listed on their website a specific person, staff email, and/or phone number for students to contact with questions about CPL. Other colleges tended to provide a general email for further inquiries.

Some community college websites provided students with an immediate option (e.g., a linked button, sign-up form) to initiate the process of determining whether students might qualify for CPL opportunities. Our interviews with Ohio community college staff suggested that another common method of CPL intake was online forms, and staff at six community colleges reported on our survey using some type of CPL web form. Allowing students to directly access an intake form on the website could be a way to broaden CPL access because some students may be deterred by a multistep process. On the other hand, some college staff highlighted reasons for requiring discussions with advisors or CPL staff prior to filling out forms. For example, the processes and forms may differ depending on the type of prior

learning and the department or field. This initial conversation may ensure that students receive the correct forms and information. In addition, one-on-one conversations allow staff to provide a full overview of the process and communicate the value of following through and receiving CPL.

Only one community college offered clear maps on its website that demonstrate how the college's degree or credential programs align with credit for industry credentials. Visually appealing road maps that show how credit for industry credentials can fit into a larger program of study (e.g., pathway maps) can be a useful way to communicate to students how they can benefit from CPL. However, we found only one community college with clear guidance demonstrating how its programs tie in with credit for industry credentials. Figure 1 demonstrates how that community college uses dropdown menus to show how industry credentials map onto specific degree paths at the college, further bolstering the website's utility in communicating this benefit to students.

Practice 2: Ensure That All Student-Facing Staff Are Prepared to Provide Information

Most community college interviewees reported disseminating information on the new statewide articulation agreements for industry credentials to relevant staff at their colleges but not always in standardized ways. Almost two-thirds of the community college staff who participated in our interviews reported sharing information about CPL internally through emails to and meetings with staff. The information was passed down in varying ways through vice provosts, chief academic officers, program deans, or CPL directors and was usually sent to admissions or enrollment management staff, academic advisors, and program chairs. Administrators usually sent email updates on changes to policies or new instructions from ODHE that were forwarded to appropriate staff and also highlighted changes at general staff meetings that occurred with varying frequency. Most college staff we surveyed also reported offering training to admissions and advising staff. As one community college provost and chief strategy officer explained,

> It's not much of a process. We have a regular meeting with the academic leadership team, which basically consists of the deans and then also regular meetings once a month with our academic leadership team along with program directors and the advising lead, our College Credit Plus lead and our registrar. So, the communication channel [is] theoretically from that group down to the faculty and the people they supervise. It's not a perfect process, but that's the way that we get information out when we get something in from ODHE; they will forward that around to the appropriate parties.

Most community colleges offered some training on CPL for broader staff, but it was rare for community colleges to require training. The frequency of staff meetings related to CPL policies—but not necessarily solely focused on ITAGs—varied widely. No college staff we spoke with said that their community college regularly offered faculty training. Almost two-thirds of interview participants indicated that they meet at least annually to hear about state policy updates. Community colleges with a designated staff person overseeing CPL usually find multiple ways to remind other key staff about critical updates and information, such as through monthly meetings with the provost or senior leadership, annual meetings with faculty, and meetings with advisors prior to course registration periods. One registrar mentioned that information on new CPL policies is not always immediately available:

> We have a SharePoint site . . . that can be viewed by the advisors and all of us staff that would use those tools. Too often, I think we have to go looking for the information instead of it being shared with us. But, then I don't know. There's so much information. If it were shared with us on a regular basis, I'm not sure we'd really look at it anyway.

The staff at one college described a more systematic approach to training for enrollment and outreach staff and advisors through their e-learning platform. That college also provides trainings at new program chair orientations and one-on-one follow-

FIGURE 1

One Ohio Community College's Information on Industry-Recognized Credentials and Connections to College Programs

Computers and IT

^ Information Technology

If you hold any of these certifications, you're eligible to receive credit for these LCCC courses:

Certification	Course	Course Name	Credit Hours
CISCO Certified Network Associate (CCNA)	CISS 165 CISS 166 CISS 167	CISCO I: CCNA 7 Introduction to Networks CISCO II: CCNA 7 V7 Local Area Network Operations CISCO III: CCNA 7 V7 Routing and Wide Area Network Operations	9
Cisco Certified Technician Routing and Switching (CCT)	CISS 165	CISCO I: CCNA 7 Introduction to Networks	3
CompTIA Security +	CYBR 251	Cyber Defense Methods	3
CompTIA Network +	CISS 145	Local Area Networks	4

These courses lead to these degrees and certificates:

^ Short-Term Certificates

- Computer Information Systems -Network Infrastructure Technology/CCNA (CISS 165, CISS 166, CISS 167)
- Computer Information Systems – Network Security Foundations (CISS 165, CISS 166, CISS 167, CYBR 251)
- Computer Information Systems – Network Administration (CISS 165, CISS 166, CISS 167)
- CyberSecurity Bootcamp I – Cybersecurity Specialist (CYBR 251)

v Associate Degrees

SOURCE: Screenshot from Lorain County Community College, undated (as of June 2025).
NOTE: The CISCO and CompTIA credentials are used as one example from the webpage.

up meetings with chairs to discuss CPL policies. One manager of curriculum, transfer, and articulation explained this process as follows:

> Advisors receive training, and our admissions enrollment staff receive training. I deliver that to the advisors, and they train the trainer, trickle it down. And that's within our e-learning shell. It's like a stand-alone training, then we do a new chair orientation, and then I usually individually will meet with new chairs, especially if they're brand new to the process, to talk about PLA [prior learning assessment], what the process looks like, what they have to do, [and] the steps to complete on their end. And then faculty aren't necessarily trained, but it's definitely explained to them as part of course development now too.

Staff at another community college reported considering mandatory trainings but had not yet implemented that effort at the time of our study.

Community colleges managed CPL activities in varying ways; staff we interviewed at approximately one-half of the participating colleges reported centrally coordinating CPL processes. Usually, one person at a community college was designated to receive updates from the state and oversee CPL processes. Staff we spoke with from six of 13 community colleges had a coordinator or specialist who was explicitly designated to handle college-wide coordination around CPL. Most of these positions are managed through academic affairs departments. One community college had a designated person assigned to handle prior learning matters under the registrar.

A prior learning coordinator at one college reported that they moved CPL from a decentralized model, in which pathway advisors specialized in advising for different program paths (e.g., business, health, manufacturing), to a more centralized process based on a new dean's vision. All CPL now is housed in one department—the Workforce Development and Work-Based Learning Center—which contains five advisors and one supervisor specializing in workforce success.

The prior learning coordinator at one college speculated that expanding CPL trainings outside of advising—so that the training is the responsibility of everyone—may have helped ensure that more people are aware of prior learning on campus:

> We've gotten a little more intentional. I think that was another kind of point when PLA was living in advising, it was really easy to not necessarily worry about [training] because somebody was there doing it. And so, then when I moved out, it kind of forced them to answer that question. It couldn't just be, "Oh, go ask [staff name]." I think that caused a little bit of momentum on their end, and we've got more training through e-learn[ing] for them now.

Expanding CPL trainings outside of advising—so that the training is the responsibility of everyone—may help ensure that more people are aware of prior learning on campus.

In lieu of a centralized prior learning advisor or coordinator, other college staff spoke to CPL coordination happening at the program chair–level or with academic deans of divisions or departments. There may be some value to having a more distributed model of CPL oversight because program departments are often the ones that map CPL to specific courses and ensure that students do not enroll in duplicate courses. However, it is unclear whether program-level CPL administration will ensure that departments across the college are consistently learning about and aligning practices with statewide initiatives around credit transfer.

Despite varying approaches to CPL oversight across community colleges, our findings suggest that community colleges can benefit from having (1) a designated person who receives state policy information and disseminates that information to advisors and program chairs; (2) a staff member who can coordinate student advising policies around CPL, manage and track data, and provide professional development to academic and departmental advising staff and faculty; and (3) academic and faculty advisors who can broadly communicate about CPL in consistent ways and rely on central administrative systems to move students through the CPL process.

Practice 3: Engage Employers and Industry Partners in Promoting the Opportunity

Some community colleges reported communicating with employers about CPL. Interviewees from five of 13 colleges discussed engaging with employers specifically about CPL. These interactions with employers typically took place through a separate workforce development office at the college or through advisory councils for specific academic programs of study. These interactions often involved only a few employers, and advisory councils typically covered a number of topics beyond CPL. One prior learning coordinator described how they folded CPL into employer engagement meetings and noticed more employers becoming familiar with the opportunities:

> We actually do a lot of their lunch-and-learns, where we take a couple of topics at a time . . . and so, that was a good way of reaching several topics. . . . I mean on the CPL, we kind of tie it in with the other ones, so that it would be beneficial. Anytime we have an advisory [topic] . . . on the agenda, it would be work-based learning/internships/apprenticeships, and then we would have a section on CPL. They've heard it before, but just to remind them [of] some of the things we offer. So, anytime we have an opportunity, it's becoming more of a buzzword here. People are learning more about it, so when you say it, it's not Greek to them anymore.

Interviewees from other community colleges relied on more informal conversations with employers that sometimes led to more engagement. One prior learning coordinator described working with a large employer to develop a CPL opportunity and align course learning outcomes as a "huge" lift:

> I think it took almost a year to really get everything straightened away, and the only thing we really found was that we didn't have any courses, per se, that match. We were willing to work with [the large employer] to develop something, and so we use the ITAG for tourism for our class.

Most community college interviewees did not report broader or more-systematic efforts to provide outreach to employers about CPL opportunities. Broadly engaging employers through advisory meetings and ITAG alignment panels is likely not the best way to let workforces know about CPL opportunities. These ad hoc presentations and discussions with employers are unlikely to translate into conversations with individuals who might qualify for CPL. If colleges are able to distribute clear and individual-facing information to employers, such as industry-specific pathway maps and basic CPL information, that might support more-systematic employer outreach about CPL.

Employers may not have clear incentives to promote CPL. Staff from at least two community colleges explained that sometimes employers are not interested in credit opportunities for students. One interviewee described working to explain to an employer that receiving college credit and moving toward an additional credential (i.e., upskilling) would benefit both the employer and learner. Interviewees from another community college mentioned relying on an older survey in which employers ranked the importance of degrees and certifications for future workers last among their priorities. This underscores how employers' perceived value of college credentials is essential to their engagement about CPL. Employers may only be willing to consider CPL for fields in which there is a stronger preference for credit-bearing college credentials (e.g., health, business).

Findings on Credit for Prior Learning Intake and Tracking Processes at Ohio Community Colleges

We identified four promising intake and tracking strategies for community colleges to improve access to CPL. In Table 3, we provide our key findings on how many Ohio community colleges reported implementing these four strategies. We then provide more detailed descriptions of how Ohio community colleges were carrying out their CPL intake and tracking efforts.

Practice 4: Systematically Screen All Students for Prior Credit

Most interviewees from community colleges reported that their colleges do not prompt students to provide information on prior learning on their applications. In an ideal world, enrollment management staff and academic and program advisors would have a systematic way to review student eligibility for CPL during application submission. The ability to assign credit earned and communicate that to the student—flagging the potential for CPL early, before students start classes—can help students and staff with academic course planning and provide a financial incentive for students to stay enrolled in their degree program. Our survey responses suggested that as many as four community colleges might be prompting for this information, but interviews with staff suggest that only two colleges may be incorporating questions about CPL at the application stage.

One community college application includes a multiple-choice question on whether students have participated in different exams (e.g., CLEP, Advanced Placement [AP]), enrolled in Ohio's dual-enrollment program College Credit Plus, or attended an Ohio Technical Center. Through its customer relations management system, the community college uses this information to send students instructions on how to submit scores to the college, submit other documentation (such as evidence for an industry credential), or provide more information about how to earn college credit. According to one dean of enrollment management,

> We have a statement on our application that says if you attended a career center [for formal job training], you may be eligible for college credit. If they select yes, they put in their career center information, and that was the email I referenced earlier that I made some updates to just recently. That's a more broad email that talks about, "Here's all the ways you could potentially earn credit coming from an Ohio Technical Center or a Career Center," and it highlights your articulation agreements.

Staff from another community college reported including information on the application that asks students to identify which types of CPL opportunities they may be interested in. If students check relevant boxes for different types of prior learning, the college will send automatic communications on next steps, which usually involve directing students to their academic advisor. A prior learning coordinator at one college explained that this process at the application stage is meant to help initiate academic advising conversations later:

> The first thing is a new student, you are going to get asked a question on our application. Students can self-identify if they align with one of the PLA options that exist, and if they do, then they're going to receive an email communication to their [college] account like, "This is what you chose, and this is why you chose that." [These are] your next steps kind of thing. Most of the next steps, other than standardized testing, are directing them to their academic advisor, the goal being that students will come into their advising session already knowing like, "I have a credential and that means something," even if they don't know what to do.

In addition to the two Ohio community colleges where interviewees reported incorporating application questions, one community college reported including some CPL questions in a new student survey. Using those responses, the college can identify potential candidates for prior learning every semester for follow-up conversations.

Interviewees from several community colleges flagged potential roadblocks to adding CPL at the

TABLE 3

Key Findings from Ohio Community Colleges on Promising Credit for Prior Learning Intake and Tracking Practices

Indicator	Key Finding
Practice 4: Systematically screen all students for prior credit	
The application forms include questions on industry credentials.	• Surveyed staff at 4 of 12 (20%) community colleges indicated that students can report on industry credentials in mandatory orientations or on enrollment forms. • Interviewed staff at 2 of 13 (17%) community colleges reported including questions about CPL on application forms.
The community colleges screen for CPL eligibility in other systematic ways.	• Community colleges used varied methods to establish eligibility for CPL at intake. • Surveyed staff at 9 of 12 (75%) community colleges reported having a CPL office that students can call to ask about forms and policies. • Surveyed staff at 9 of 12 (75%) community colleges reported having website forms for notifying college staff of industry credentials that may be eligible for CPL. • Most community colleges do not require students to fill out forms to receive CPL, but web-based forms are used for intake.
Practice 5: Engage in a streamlined one-on-one advising session	
Advisors engage in one-on-one advising sessions.	• One-on-one advising conversations are the main way that community colleges identify students who might benefit from CPL and begin the intake process, but staff at only 4 in 13 (31%) community colleges reported that these discussions are mandatory. • 9 of 15 (60%) surveyed staff across 12 community colleges reported that learning about the steps to receive CPL was "somewhat easy" for students; 25 percent reported that the process was "somewhat" or "very difficult." • Surveyed staff at 11 of 12 (92%) community colleges reported that all incoming students are asked about industry credentials in one-on-one advising sessions. • Surveyed staff at 11 of 12 (92%) community colleges reported that students can ask staff or faculty and department leaders about CPL forms or policies. • Staff at 8 of 9 (89%) community colleges reported that students learn about CPL experiences either prior to or within the first semester.
CPL verification processes are completed quickly.	• Most community colleges have mechanisms to verify and understand students' potential eligibility, but verification is often a multistep process and requires proactive student follow-through with staff.
Practice 6: Ensure that credit is added to student transcripts early and without additional student fees	
CPL is added to the transcript immediately.	• Interviewed staff at most community colleges reported that once students are identified (which can take time), the process to receive CPL for industry credentials is usually quick and not burdensome to staff. • 13 of 15 surveyed staff (87%) across 12 community colleges perceived that completing the steps to officially register CPL on transcripts was "somewhat" or "very" easy for students.
There are few or no student costs for CPL.	• Interviewed staff at most community colleges reported that they did not charge fees to transcript ITAG credit.
Practice 7: Use data to improve CPL practices	
The staff examine CPL data.	• The staff at 8 of 10 (80%) community colleges indicated that they meet at least once per year to assess data and reflect on program improvements related to ITAGs.
The staff use data to improve CPL practices.	• Community college staff reported changes to CPL practices over time but did not report that these efforts were tied to data analysis.

NOTE: Our survey included 15 unique responses from individually interviewed staff representing 12 of 13 community colleges. Two community colleges had three different respondents, and one community college had two different respondents. For cases in which college practices were discussed, we report the survey results at the college level. For cases in which perceptions of ease or difficulty of a policy were discussed, we report on staff perspectives, including conflicting opinions within colleges.

application stage. Staff from at least three additional colleges reported that they could see the possibility of adding questions about CPL at the application stage. But one interviewee discussed a lack of alignment between their community college's application system and the system used to manage student information and CPL. Another interviewee mentioned that, although they have had conversations internally, there are space considerations on the application form, and adding new questions received internal pushback. Community colleges must take into consideration the effect of adding administrative burden to the enrollment process that might act as a barrier to student enrollment.

Community college interviewees typically reported multiple methods to identify students who are potentially eligible for CPL, including online student-facing inquiry forms, staff-facing forms, advertisements in learning management systems, and advisor conversations. Inquiry forms about CPL are often broadly available to prospective and current enrollees, but most community college interviewees noted efforts to direct students to these resources during the enrollment process and first semester. For example, a few colleges rely on online inquiry forms to identify students for prior learning. As we noted above, some college websites include links to these forms so that students can initiate them at any time. Typically, a student can fill in their contact information and select potential types of credit they are interested in, and then the system may prompt them to upload documentation for a credential within that form. If a college has a prior learning coordinator, that person typically receives those student inquiries directly, along with other referrals from advising staff. Among colleges with a prior learning coordinator, this system can be relatively effective for identifying students who are eligible for CPL. According to one prior learning coordinator,

> Many of them are coming through the website, so I would say probably 60 percent to 65 percent of folks come through the website because the advisors are directing them there, or they're actually putting the information in for them.

Other community college staff reported internal, staff-initiated inquiry forms that academic advisors, program chairs, or other staff can fill out on behalf of students who are identified through advising conversations as potentially being eligible for CPL. These internal forms are sent to academic deans for further approval or to the registrar to follow up with the student on documentation.

The staff at two community colleges reported that their colleges had added a banner to student Canvas pages advertising CPL. As one prior learning coordinator discussed, "We're doing the banner for Canvas, which is what I've been wanting to do for a little while. It's not on the application. That's my barrier."

Most interviewees reported that the best way to screen students for CPL, including ITAG eligibility, was through advising conversations. However, fewer than one-third of community college interviewees emphasized requiring advisors to include CPL as a mandatory discussion topic. Regardless of whether colleges have intake forms available or a prior learning coordinator to manage communications and duties, colleges still generally identified students who are potentially eligible for credit through some combination of enrollment advising, central staff academic advising, or faculty advising to learn about students' credit backgrounds. As one prior learning coordinator explained, "The referral, the connection to PLA, does come still from the advising office, because they're working with their advisor first to identify either what options makes sense or how it fits into their program or which courses."

Practice 5: Engage in a Streamlined One-On-One Advising Session

Most of the staff surveys from community colleges reported advising conversations with enrollment advisors, academic advisors, faculty, and/or prior learning coordinators to initially identify students who could potentially be eligible for credit. Ideally, conversations with advisors and other staff happen within the first few weeks of semester enrollment as students are determining their course schedules. Eighty-nine percent of colleges we surveyed confirmed that CPL conversations typically happen prior

to or within the first semester. College interviewees emphasized the importance of getting credit on student transcripts early, before the students enrolled in duplicative credit.

Evidence on whether CPL processes were streamlined were mixed; one-half of community college survey respondents reported streamlined processes, while one-quarter of survey respondents did not perceive CPL processes as streamlined. As a dean of institutional effectiveness at one college pointed out, advising conversations were not solely about CPL opportunities: "[T]here could definitely be an advising, but that's among 1,000 other questions that they're asked."

In the best-case scenarios, if ITAG eligibility was confirmed during early semester advising, students were put in touch with the registrar or directed to an online portal to submit their industry credential documentation. Prior learning coordinators or academic advisors facilitated this process or worked in collaboration with academic deans to split responsibilities: One person liaises and clarifies policies with students, and another staff member coordinates with faculty to obtain any necessary approvals for credit.

The staff at some community colleges reported CPL processes that included more involvement from program staff (i.e., deans, faculty). Some colleges described CPL processes that required staff to coordinate behind the scenes, and in some colleges, students were routed from academic advisors or CPL coordinators to faculty department chairs or academic deans who oversee course programming to get approval for credit. Although coordination with program departments can increase the burden on students, program staff play important roles in CPL implementation, including assessing prior learning alignment with coursework, informing students about CPL, and aligning CPL practices with state initiatives. In addition, it is critical that students are able to use the credit toward their chosen program and meet financial aid eligibility guidelines.[3] Previously, many colleges would award CPL as elective credit that might not count toward a student's intended program. But colleges have worked toward ensuring that students receive CPL only when it counts toward a required course. One registrar noted, "We weren't going to award them that unless we were certain they were actually planning on using those credits."

Centralized processes and online forms to field prior learning requests helped facilitate CPL processes. Interviewees from community colleges reported that having a coordinator to ensure that the appropriate staff sign off on the process was important for making the process more efficient, particularly for students using proficiency exams or other assessments to receive faculty or program approval. According to one prior learning coordinator,

> When they're initially applying to the college and on the PLA request form that they're actually submitting to my office which one of those options they want, they'll go on there and say, "I want a proficiency exam," and it'll prompt to tell them what course. Or "I want to do articulated credit," "I have a credential," and it will prompt them to upload the pdf. So yes, portfolio, same deal. It's all within the same request form. I think that has also been really critical if we're talking about one centralized person. You also need one centralized process.

Another interviewee explained that, after trying out different software to coordinate CPL screening across departments, they decided that it would be nimbler and more cost-effective to develop their own internal system. That system was integrated with the college's current software and Google forms to facilitate cross-department communication to transcript CPL. As reported by one prior learning coordinator,

Eighty-nine percent of colleges we surveyed confirmed that CPL conversations typically happen prior to or within the first semester.

> [I was asked] if I could come up with an internal system, and so I developed our own. We had a contest, and we came up with [system name]. It's a CPL experience, and we have it through Google forms and through some other technologies where [students] can submit their portfolios. We have the rubric developed where the assessor can actually assess it online through their portfolio and then put the scores, and then it automatically goes to the registrar for final approval and posting to their transcripts or whatever. We're still fine tuning and it's got some little bugs in it yet, but it's been a nice little system and it's internal, so it didn't cost us anything other than my time of developing that. It's been used quite often.

Even for community colleges with application forms or student surveys, students often had to complete a multistep process with several meetings to access CPL, and the process can be labor-intensive on college staff. One college sends the results from a new student survey to a prior learning coordinator when adults express interest in CPL. As one prior learning coordinator explained, they then email a welcome letter to those individuals who expressed an interest in CPL:

> I'm sending a campaign out to these folks with a welcome letter, and the second paragraph, third paragraph down is [about] prior learning and to come talk to me. The [prior learning] coordinator has access to all the adult students.

Beyond an email, this prior learning coordinator then reached out to students for follow-up conversations. If the student connected with them, the coordinator could ensure that academic advisors were aware, but students and advisors still had to take part in advising or referral meetings. As reported by one prior learning coordinator,

> I'm getting that and then we have a follow up call to them, and if we are able to connect with them, one of the cases on the script has to do with prior learning. Same with our veterans. Then they meet with their advisor, and then their advisor is supposed to be asking that specific question: "How much learning have you had in your industry?" Especially if that learning relates to the program they're going into. It's just pounding them with that on a regular basis, and they're wonderful. They do a tremendous amount of referrals of faculty, which is newer, and that's because of the deans and allowing me into division meetings.

Students often had to complete a multistep process with several meetings to access CPL, and the process can be labor-intensive on college staff.

Practice 6: Ensure That Credit Is Added to Student Transcripts Early and Without Additional Student Fees

Community college staff participating in surveys reported few issues with making sure students receive that credit on their transcript once students were identified as being eligible for ITAG credit. Among the staff we surveyed, most perceived that completing the steps to obtain CPL on their transcripts was "somewhat" or "very" easy for students. One registrar described their college's streamlined process as follows:

> I feel like it runs pretty smoothly. I think it's just our advisors and our faculty advisors and really making sure that they asked the students that question when they first come and making sure that there's nothing that we're missing that could give them credit.

Community college interviewees explained that once they are aware of a student's ITAG eligibility and receive documentation, they usually award college credit quickly. One prior learning coordinator reflected on the ease of managing ITAGs over other forms of CPL by elaborating,

> ITAG is a tool that I use. It's really to me the one that makes the most sense, but what I love about it is [that] it's a no brainer. It's just, they've got it. We're done, and it's perfect. I can turn that thing around in an hour. Start to finish.

Another interviewee described how their process for adding college credit to a student's transcript for an ITAG might take a week or two, but the credit can usually be processed before students register for classes in consultation with their advisor. According to a provost and chief strategy officer,

> Once [the registrar] is done with their initial screening through Transferology and through the other TAG, [Ohio Transfer] 36 systems, whatever questions remain, they go to program directors, and we ask them to turn that around in a week or two. And I think most of the time it happens much more quickly than that.

Interviewees from community colleges emphasized the need for knowledgeable and reliable staff in registrar offices to ensure smooth CPL processes. These staff must be knowledgeable about the types of credit that are available and systems that are in place to expedite the transcription process. As reported by one dean of institutional effectiveness,

> ITAGs are these industry credentials that also have academic credit, but then it's a student uploading those and making sure that gets posted so records can add it. I'm really grateful, because we have a couple of folks in our records and registration office that I'm in constant contact with. The faculty can work on the middle part with the dean. But the proof is really in the pudding when it gets transcripted right, and we have some folks in our records office who are really good about that.

Consistent with state CPL policy, most community college interviewees and survey respondents did not report charging fees to add ITAG credit to transcripts. A few colleges (two of 12 surveyed, one interviewed) charged fees for ITAG credit to be transcripted, suggesting that ODHE may need to clarify no-fee policies. Rather than create a separate process for reviewing ITAG credit, colleges have tried to follow state guidance and streamline services by keeping their traditional prior learning forms and chain of command in place while waiving administrative fees for these types of CPL. From the perspective of one dean of enrollment's assessment of where their community college has adjusted course and where it needs to improve,

> We've always awarded credit for a number of industry-recognized credentials that align to our programs. We're now having it formalized and having it more visible at the state level. I think that gives us an opportunity to do a better job of raising awareness and providing opportunities and providing easier access, and that's one of the reasons we want to take a harder look at this. How do we make this process easier for students? We've already eliminated any type of fee they'd have to pay. We want to make the application process as smooth as possible. We want to make sure that the time frame from submitting to outcome is short end. We want to make sure that faculty has the resources that they need. We want to make sure that we have the transparency, even on our website, you have this credential, you'll get this credit. We have all the pieces—we just haven't done a good job of putting it together in a nice toolkit for everybody to access and understand and move through the process.

Some community colleges reported continuing to charge fees for more labor-intensive CPL assessment processes, such as portfolio reviews and proficiency exams. This is consistent with the broader field based on available literature.

Practice 7: Use Data to Improve Credit for Prior Learning Practices

The staff at a few community colleges mentioned that they regularly examined data on CPL, but there was no evidence that community college staff were using CPL data to inform improvements to

processes. Staff reported that they have the capability to pull a "running total of the course credits we have awarded over time" but did not regularly report on these numbers. A few interviewees described reporting updates as needed for college leadership or accreditation reports, and there was little evidence of CPL data use to regularly inform academic planning and strategy. One prior learning advisor reflected on their periodic use of data:

> I haven't done a lot with releasing the results of how many actually [use CPL]. Like every so often, just send them out a graph or something saying, "Hey, this is how many people we awarded credits to in [internal tracking system] for this term." Maybe I need to do more of that just to promote it.

A prior learning coordinator at a different college highlighted the ad hoc use of CPL data for various reporting requirements:

> I believe I can also look at it and see, like, which areas you know, like we talked about earlier, tend to use PLA more than others, and so I don't really report out to many others aside from the provost and usually the registrar.

And a provost from the same college reinforced the prior learning coordinator's perspective on the ad hoc use of CPL data:

> Periodically our president will ask for some updated numbers, and the [prior learning coordinator] and I provide those. But there may be times where we're writing a report for the Higher Learning Commission. We'll include our numbers in that as well. So, it depends on who's asking and [the] timing. We've always got it available, so [we] will report it at different events like that.

Only one community college used CPL data in more systematic ways. This college had a prior learning coordinator and an internal advisory committee that focused on CPL issues, and the staff at this college have been able to incorporate CPL discussions into regular (three-year) program reviews and generate data impact reports. These reporting mechanisms allowed the prior learning coordinator to hold conversations on how different types of credit are being used and who is underusing options for CPL.

Community college interviewees identified several issues that might be contributing to their limited use of data to inform practices. Some interviewees reported that relatively few students are receiving credit for their credentials through these new articulation agreements. For example, a dean of technical and liberal studies at one college mentioned that

> [w]ith ITAGs, it's very easy [to] process it. Hey, if they are taking this certification test or whatever, that's pretty easy to do. I'm still not getting a lot of students coming in with them. So, ITAGs I think have interesting potential. What I'm not seeing is a lot of students actually using those.

Given the newness of the initiative and low levels of take-up, colleges may have less incentive to examine data and identify areas for improvement.

Community college staff also reported challenges disaggregating ITAG credit from other forms of CPL in data systems. Interviewees from at least three colleges highlighted the coding processes for statewide CPL articulation agreements as being burdensome. As one prior learning coordinator explained,

> It's tedious. The awarding part is a pain on my end. Once the student has submitted, because normally I'm just going in and maybe the department chair is just going in and saying, "Yes, I approve this class [college class name]" for ServSafe. But now the department, because we have to code specifically as an ITAG, then we need to make sure that our registration knows to code this as an ITAG, not just as my normal PLA credit, which is the credit that they are receiving. But now we have this extra code or designated indicator on the reporting that is cumbersome on my processing end.

A manager for curriculum, articulation, and transfer at the same community college agreed:

> And then the other part of that is when there's overlap, when it's an ITAG and CTAG [Career-Technical Assurance Guide], we have to be sure that we know how if it's coming to us from the CTAV [Career-Technical Articulation

> Verification] report from the Career Center or if they are walking off the street with a credential. Then you got to report it as an ITAG as opposed to a CTAG, that's an "IT" instead of a "CT." So, it's kind of craziness.

Another Career Technical Education (CTE) coordinator at a community college flagged similar issues. Because this CTE coordinator was at a larger community college in terms of enrollment size, they expressed a need for more staff capacity to keep track of how to code types of credit properly in their reporting structure:

> Right now, if a student comes in with an ITAG, we award that under Career Tech[nology] credit, which is advanced standing credit, and they get coded "TP" for Tech[nology] Prep[aration], and that's what goes on their transcripts. But if someone ran a report, they wouldn't know that that's an ITAG versus being a CTAG [credit for a high school career and technical education course]. So, the state wants that, right? They want this data because they want to see how these programs are doing, and we would like to review it as an institution. This is the work that I do, because I oversee CTE, but the registrar's office has a ton of responsibility and the [information technology] department has [too]. So, trying to figure out these codes for these things, where does that fall in their list of priorities? And we don't have the people to do all the things that [we] are being asked to do. If funding did come down for these things that we're doing, then we could hire people to help make the process better.

Leading Practices and Areas of Improvement for Ohio Community Colleges

Ohio and other states are establishing statewide policy on CPL and crosswalking prior learning to college coursework. These efforts provide better on-ramps into college for current and future learners and save students money by ensuring that students' prior learning is recognized (Daugherty et al., 2023; Soler et al., 2024). In addition, CPL may improve economic and job opportunities by providing individuals with opportunities to build on their existing skills and knowledge and earn certificates and degrees.

Community college approaches to outreach and intake continue to play a critical role in shaping students' access to CPL.

Community college approaches to outreach and intake continue to play a critical role in shaping students' access to CPL. Community colleges that systematically assess students for CPL eligibility and offer streamlined processes for getting credit can help increase the likelihood that students follow through and get the credit they are eligible for.

We found Ohio community colleges were more frequently adopting promising approaches in the following four areas:

- **Many Ohio community colleges offered websites with information on CPL (practice 1):** Most colleges offered some type of information about CPL on their websites, but the quality of that information varied. Some colleges did not offer opportunities to immediately initiate communication or submit a form to begin the CPL process.
- **Many Ohio community college staff reported training student-facing staff about CPL (practice 2):** These trainings aimed to ensure broad awareness and outreach around CPL. Colleges that had centralized staff overseeing CPL reported greater capacity to stay informed about the state's new initiatives and oversee outreach and intake processes across the college.

Adding an application question or building screening into orientation may help advisors identify the students who are most likely to benefit from CPL.

- **Many Ohio community college staff reported providing personalized advising (practice 5):** Most colleges relied heavily on one-on-one advising sessions to screen students for CPL and initiate the process of verifying the prior learning and awarding credit. College staff reported that these personalized conversations and general staff awareness identified many students who might be eligible for CPL. These conversations also allowed advisors to ensure that the CPL was aligned with the student's planned credential (i.e., CPL was not being added as elective credit that would not advance a student in their program).
- **Many Ohio community college staff reported early and seamless transcription of credit (practice 6):** Interviewees at most colleges reported recording credit for industry credentials on student transcripts within their first semester. Staff also reported that their processes were streamlined, even though they often required communication between departments.

In contrast, few Ohio community colleges enacted the following three promising outreach and intake practices:

- **The staff at Ohio community colleges did not consistently engage employers in CPL outreach (practice 3):** State agency and college staff overseeing CPL could benefit from creating simple communication tools (e.g., pathway maps) that could convey the value of CPL opportunities to employers and their employees (Bray and Beer, 2020; Daugherty et al., 2023).
- **The staff at Ohio community colleges did not systematically screen students for possible CPL at the time of enrollment (practice 4):** In addition to advisor meetings, adding an application question or building screening into orientation may help advisors identify the students who are most likely to benefit from CPL and ensure that those students get the information they need to start the process.
- **The staff at Ohio community colleges did not frequently use data to assess student use of CPL and improve practices (practice 7):** Data can be valuable in building a stronger understanding of which students are using CPL and identifying how the college can strengthen CPL practices and student take-up.

Ohio community colleges with existing processes to handle industry-recognized credentials were better positioned to provide strong outreach and intake around ITAGs. More-proactive colleges reported adding questions to applications or banners within student portals to ensure that students received information about CPL opportunities when they logged on to the platforms. Some community colleges reported creating student-facing intake forms and establishing processes to streamline communication between departments. Some Ohio community colleges were independently making changes over time to streamline practices. The increasing emphasis on CPL as a state priority coincided with (and potentially influenced) efforts to expand the recognition of CPL at the college level.

Recommendations for Community College Outreach and Intake on Credit for Prior Learning

CPL can be a tool for increasing efficiency and supporting higher college completion rates. Many other states and systems are also looking to streamline CPL, and Ohio has been a leader in these efforts. Statewide CPL policies and articulation agreements are an important first step to streamlining CPL opportunities, yet college-level practices continue to play an important role in ensuring that students can access CPL. Community colleges (and universities) can establish outreach strategies to ensure awareness about CPL, streamline intake processes to minimize the administrative burden students face, and ensure that staff are using data to improve CPL processes.

We recommend that community college leadership and staff consider at least seven CPL outreach and intake practices to ensure that CPL is accessible to students:

1. **Develop a clear and actionable website.** Websites remain a common informational source for prospective and incoming college students. Community college websites should clearly communicate the value of CPL in simple language. Colleges can use information tools and visuals (e.g., pathway maps) to illustrate how CPL feeds into degree programs. Websites should provide contact information for staff or other ways for students to immediately take action to initiate the CPL process (e.g., contact information, online intake forms).
2. **Ensure that all student-facing staff are prepared to provide information about CPL.** Advisors, faculty, and other key staff should receive training on state initiatives and community college practices. Community colleges may also want to ensure that there is a designated staff person to oversee CPL across the school, follow information about CPL and inform others at the college, and streamline intake processes.
3. **Engage employers and industry partners in providing outreach on CPL.** Employers can play a powerful role in communicating about CPL to prospective students because they are a trusted information source and can signal that these opportunities can be valuable to career growth. State agency or community college staff could create simple communication tools, such as pathway maps, to communicate to employers the value of CPL to them and their employees.
4. **Systematically screen all students for potential CPL eligibility.** Community colleges rely heavily on one-on-one advising to screen students for CPL and initiate the processes for awarding credits. But advisors must cover many topics, and it can be valuable for colleges to leverage other approaches to catch as many eligible students as possible. Adding a question to application forms may help advisors and staff more proactively reach out to students. Simple web-based forms and banners in student information systems are other ways that colleges can allow students to self-identify and follow up with staff.
5. **Engage in streamlined one-on-one advising.** Community colleges should make the CPL advising process as quick and seamless as possible and minimize the number of steps and meetings students must engage in. One-on-one advising is important because processes for CPL may differ depending on whether the credit is awarded for an ITAG-approved credential or other types of prior learning. Students may not be able to navigate the complex set of CPL opportunities on their own. In addition, it is important for college staff to help students identify whether the CPL aligns with their intended program.
6. **Ensure that college credit is immediately placed on student transcripts without additional fees for students.** Students should receive credit on their transcripts within the first semester of enrollment to avoid duplicate course-taking. Furthermore, fees can discourage students from using CPL and should not be assessed for simple prior learning verification processes (such as with statewide CPL agreements).

7. **Assess data on CPL to inform program improvement.** Information on which students are receiving CPL and those students' outcomes can help identify areas for improvement. In addition, data on student outcomes help colleges make the case about the value of their investments in CPL. The ability to disaggregate student-level data and examine CPL by type, program, and student characteristic would be valuable. It would also be valuable to examine the outcomes for students who receive CPL. Community colleges should develop a regular process for incorporating these data into program improvement efforts.

These recommendations are valuable for community colleges in states that are scaling statewide CPL efforts, such as Ohio, but they are also broadly relevant to community colleges that want to improve access to CPL for prospective and incoming students. In addition, many broad-access universities offer CPL, and these promising practices may be relevant beyond community colleges.

APPENDIX A

Industry-Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guides by Field and Community College

In Table A.1, we show the industry-recognized credentials by field that Ohio has approved for college credit.

In Figure A.1, we show additional details on how ITAGs in Ohio are distributed among Ohio community colleges.

TABLE A.1

Ohio Industry-Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guides Offered, by Field

Career Field or ITAG	Industry Credential Name
Business technology	• Microsoft PowerPoint Associate-level certification • Microsoft Excel Associate-level certification • Microsoft Word Associate-level certification • Microsoft Access Advanced-level certification
Engineering and manufacturing	• Festo Level 1: Fundamentals Fluid Power—Hydraulics; Festo Level 1: Fundamentals Fluid Power—Pneumatics • NIMS Industrial Technology Maintenance Standard, Role: Hydraulic Systems Specialist, Duty Area 1: Hydraulic Systems and Industrial Technology Maintenance Standard, Role: Pneumatic Systems Specialist, Duty Area 1: Pneumatic Systems • IFPS Mobile Hydraulic Mechanic and Industrial Pneumatic Mechanic • IFPS Industrial Hydraulic Mechanic and Industrial Pneumatic Mechanic • Siemens SCE Certificate in Automation and Certificate in Advanced Automation • Rockwell Automation Studio 5000 Logix Programmer Certificate • Mitsubishi Electric PLC and HMI • Autodesk Certified Associate in CAD for Mechanical Design • Autodesk Certified Professional in Inventor for Mechanical Design • Certified SOLIDWORKS Associate in CAD Design • Certified SOLIDWORKS Professional in CAD Design • AWS D1.1 1” Plate 3G and 4G SMAW certifications or qualifications • AWS D1.1 Steel Structural Welding Code 3F GTAW, AWS D1.2 Aluminum Structural Welding Code 3F GTAW, and AWS D1.6 Stainless Steel Structural Welding Code 3F GTAW certifications or qualifications • AWS D1.1 1” Plate 3G and 4G GMAW certifications or qualifications • FANUC Certified Robot Operator with ROBOGUIDE • ETA-I: Photovoltaic Installer - Level 1 (PVI1) certification • ETA-I: Photovoltaic Installer/Designer (PV2) certification • NABCEP: Photovoltaic Associate • NABCEP: PV Installation Professional Certification • ETA-I: Small Wind Installer (SWI) certification • NABCEP: Small Wind Associate
Health care	• Chemical Dependency Counselor Assistant (CDCA) Preliminary • Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) • National Registered Paramedic Certification
Information technology and cybersecurity	• CompTIA Network+ • Cisco Certified Technician Routing and Switching (CCT) • Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) • CompTIA Security+ • Certified Ethical Hacker

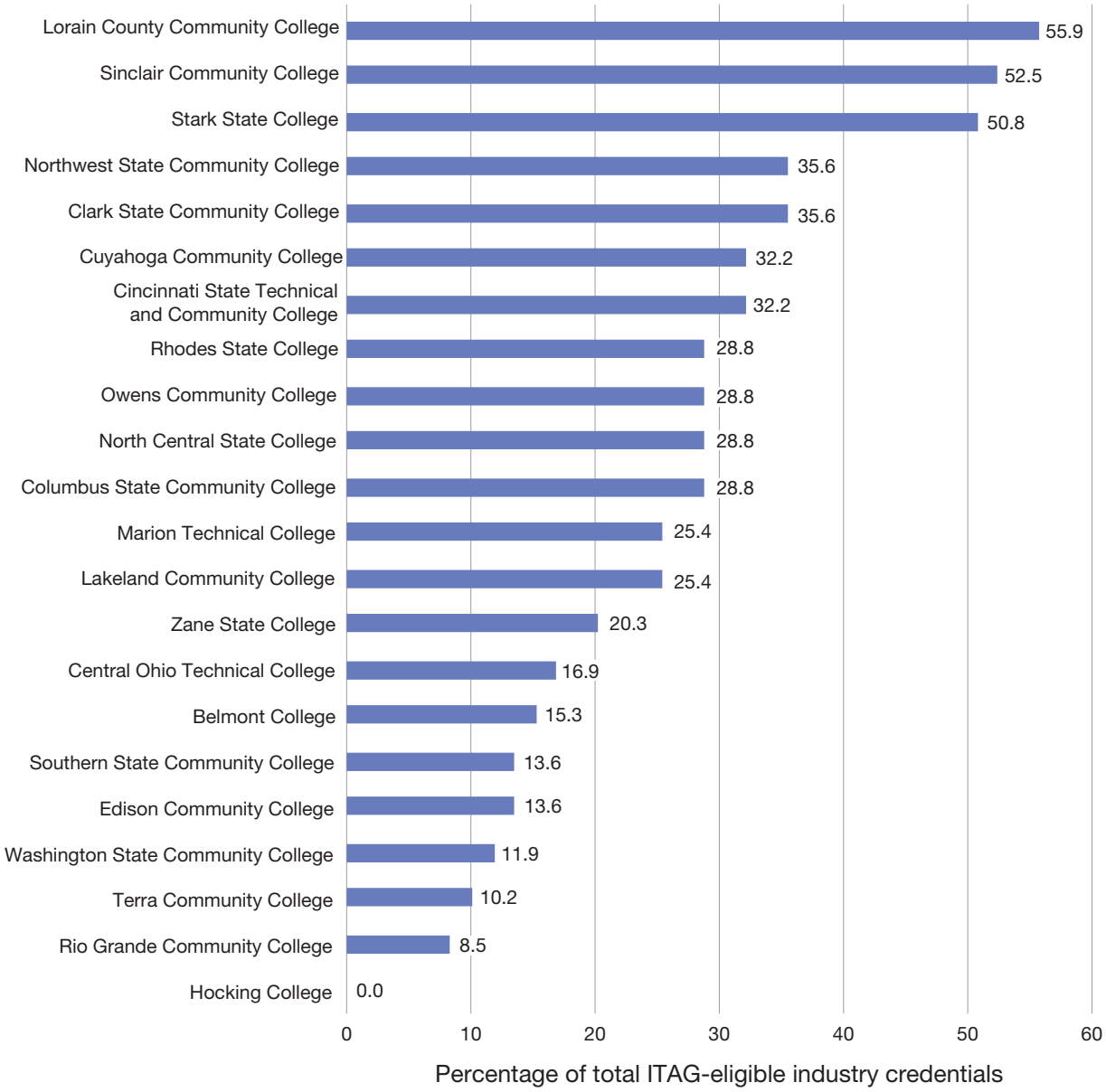
Table A.1—Continued

Career Field or ITAG	Industry Credential Name
Public safety	• Ohio EMT certification • Ohio Advanced EMT certification • Ohio Paramedic certification • National Registry EMT certification • NREMT AEMT certification • NREMT Paramedic certification (EMT) • Ohio Paramedic certification • NREMT Paramedic certification • Ohio Firefighter I certification • Firefighter I certification with Pro Board seal • Firefighter I with IFSAC seal • Ohio Firefighter II certification • Firefighter II certification with Pro Board seal • Firefighter II certification with IFSAC seal
Transportation	• Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Private Pilot-Airplane License • ASE—Automobile and Light Truck Certification
Other	• sUAS Safety Certification Level 1 • ServSafe® Manager Certification • Child Development Associate (CDA) • OSHA 10-Hour General Industry Safety and Health card • OSHA 10-Hour Construction Safety and Health card

SOURCE: Features information from Transfer Credit Ohio, undated-b.
NOTE: AEMT = Advanced Emergency Medical Technician; ASE = National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence; AWS = American Welding Society; CAD = computer-aided design; EMT = Emergency Medical Technician; ETA-I = Electronics Technicians Association, International; FANUC = Fuji Automatic Numerical Control; GMAW = gas metal arc welding; GTAW = gas tungsten arc welding; HMI = human-machine interface; IFAC = International Fire Services Accreditation Congress; IFPS = International Fluid Power Society; NABCEP = North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners; NIMS = National Incident Management System; NREMT = National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians; OSHA = Occupational Safety and Health Administration; PLC = programmable controller; SCE = Siemens Cooperates with Education; SMAW = shielded metal arc welding; sUAS = small Unmanned Aircraft System.

FIGURE A.1

Share of Industry-Recognized Credential Transfer Assurance Guide–Eligible Credentials Mapped to a Course, by Community College



SOURCE: Features information from Transfer Credit Ohio, undated-a.

NOTE: We used ODHE's student-facing Credit Transfer Tool to tabulate only the distribution of industry credentials that have ITAG-eligible courses across all Ohio community colleges (e.g., the "Credentials" tab in the tool). In total, we counted 345 unique opportunities to get ITAG credit for the different industry-recognized credentials listed in Table A.1 across all Ohio community colleges and a total of 59 industry-recognized credentials. Numerical differences in credentials between Table A.1 and Figure A.1 are from the different ways that ODHE websites split up separate credentials related to AWS. The percentages represent the share of industry-recognized credentials that have ITAG credit offered at the community college from the 59 types of industry-recognized credentials listed in the online tool. For example, if a college offered credit for three different AWS welding certifications, one Child Development Associate certification, and two different SOLIDWORKS certifications, they would have six total industry-recognized credentials available for ITAG credit, representing 10 percent of the 59 total industry credentials offered for CPL in the state. Under this metric, because no college offers every potential course that is eligible for ITAG credit or every industry-recognized credential, it is not possible for colleges to reach 100 percent. This metric can show which colleges have a higher concentration of courses that can be mapped to an ITAG based on existing course offerings.

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions

In this appendix, we present the survey questions that were given to staff and leadership at 13 community colleges in Ohio prior to their interviews. The survey questions are presented without revision.

1. Institution Name:
2. Interviewee Name:
3. Who is filling out this survey?
   a. Myself
   b. Another colleague at my institution
4. Do you have a single office with at least one dedicated staff member that coordinates CPL processes at the institution?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not sure
   d. Other:
5. In your view, how easy is it for students to gain information and learn about the steps needed to receive CPL at your institution?
   a. 1 – Very difficult
   b. 2 – Somewhat difficult
   c. 3 – Neither difficult nor easy
   d. 4 – Somewhat easy
   e. 5 – Very easy
6. In your view, how easy is it for students to complete the steps and fully obtain CPL on their transcripts?
   a. 1 – Very difficult
   b. 2 – Somewhat difficult
   c. 3 – Neither difficult nor easy
   d. 4 – Somewhat easy
   e. 5 – Very easy
7. In which of the following ways can newly enrolling students report on the industry credentials they've earned prior to enrollment?
   a. All incoming students are asked on general application forms
   b. All incoming students are asked to complete mandatory orientation or enrollment forms
   c. All incoming students are asked by advisors in one-on-one advising sessions
   d. Incoming students can fill out a form on a website
   e. Incoming students can ask staff about forms and policies in person
   f. Incoming students can visit or call the CPL office to ask about forms and policies
   g. Incoming students can ask faculty and department leaders about forms and policies
   h. Not sure
   i. Other:
8. When do you usually find out that students have prior learning experiences that may be eligible for college credit?
   a. Prior to application, through student questions
   b. During application submission, before acceptance
   c. After acceptance, before first semester starts
   d. After student has enrolled, during first semester
   e. After student has enrolled for at least two semesters
   f. Other:
9. Please select the types of CPL that students must pay a fee in order to receive credit. (choose all that apply)
   a. AP/IB Exam
   b. CLEP/DANTES Exam
   c. Other exam credit
   d. Portfolio Assessment
   e. Career-technical HS courses (CTAGs)
   f. Industry-recognized Credentials (ITAGs)
   g. Military
   h. None
   i. Other:
10. Please specify which of the following groups of college staff receive training on CPL options? (choose all that apply)
    a. Dedicated CPL staff
    b. Admissions/enrollment staff
    c. Advising staff

d. Faculty
e. Academic deans
f. Other administrators
g. Other (please describe): _____
h. No one receives training on CPL

11. How frequently do college staff meet to assess data and reflect on program improvements related to ITAGs?
    a. Weekly
    b. Monthly
    c. At least once per term
    d. At least once per year
    e. Every few years
    f. Never
    g. Other:

Notes

[1] Universities in Ohio also offer ITAGs for overlapping coursework and engage in the same process as community colleges, but we narrowed the scope of analysis for this report to the state's community colleges.

[2] During our data collection, we included Eastern Gateway Community College as the 23rd community college in Ohio; however, that college closed in October 2024. Therefore, we reference 22 total community colleges.

[3] One way that students enrolled in eligible career pathways can receive federal financial aid is through "ability-to-benefit" alternatives, such as completing six credit hours, 225 clock hours, or equivalent course work toward a degree or certificate. Students cannot receive aid while earning those six credit hours (Federal Student Aid, undated).

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About This Report

Many individuals who enroll in college have different forms of prior learning (e.g., military experience, on-the-job learning, industry credentials) from which they developed similar skills and knowledge that are provided in college courses. To allow these students to build on their prior learning, colleges frequently offer college credit for prior learning (CPL). CPL can help engage new learners who might not otherwise have clear on-ramps to formal learning or degree programs.

Colleges vary widely in the kinds of CPL they offer and in their processes for marketing CPL and awarding credit. Some U.S. states, such as Ohio, offer statewide articulation agreements for CPL to improve student access across the state's postsecondary institutions. These statewide agreements aim to streamline CPL opportunities for students, ensure consistency in how colleges are providing CPL, and increase individual access to college pathways.

In 2021, the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) began to develop statewide articulation agreements for industry credentials. ODHE convened panels of industry representatives and college faculty to review specific credentials and crosswalk those credentials to learning outcomes. Colleges then mapped these statewide articulation agreements and learning outcomes to relevant coursework offered in such fields as advanced manufacturing, information technology, and nursing.

In this report, we aim to offer useful guidance on practices that can help increase student access to CPL for community college staff and leadership overseeing CPL in Ohio and across the United States. We identified seven promising outreach and intake processes from the broader literature and our advisory group. We then leveraged information from interviews with Ohio community college staff and leadership, a pre-interview survey, and a statewide website scan to assess whether and how Ohio community colleges were using these promising practices. Our findings indicate that Ohio community colleges are frequently implementing some of the promising practices (e.g., websites with CPL information, training for staff, one-on-one advising with students, quick credit transcription) but are less frequently implementing other promising practices (e.g., outreach to employers about CPL, early CPL eligibility screening, data-informed practices).

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