

# PLA BY ANY OTHER NAME SMELLS AS SWEET

*How Wisconsin Technical College System's Award-Winning Credit for Prior Learning Initiative is Fostering Adult Student Success*

Named the recipient of CAEL's 2016 Institutional Service Award for its Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) program, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) has employed its prior learning initiative to great effect. Given in recognition of a college or a university that provides exemplary service to adults, WTCS was selected for the Institutional Service Award owing to its work across the college system with a focus on Wisconsin's adult learners and helped them, through prior learning assessment (PLA), turn their work-based and experiential learning into college credit. In doing so, WTCS underscored that PLA is an academic priority that has seen real-world applications within Wisconsin's key industries.

WTCS includes 16 colleges throughout Wisconsin, accounting for approximately 300,000 students. WTCS' CPL program grants those students college credit for mastery of subject matter attained outside their respective institutions. This mastery can be assessed by transfer credits, articulated high school credits and by learning demonstrated through work or other non-classroom experience.

Following their acceptance of the award on behalf of WTCS at CAEL's 2016 Annual Conference this past November, we spoke with the program's co-coordinators James Mackey, Education Director for Manufacturing Programs, and Karen Showers, Education Director for Student Services, for insight into how the program has come to exemplify the tremendous benefits prior learning initiatives have for students and industry alike.

## CAEL: How did the CPL program take shape?

James Mackey: Receiving our TAACCCT grants<sup>1</sup> played a large role in allowing us to develop CPL, but a lot of the work really started before that with the Joyce Foundation<sup>2</sup> and our career pathway work. As we progressed, three of our colleges got involved with the TAACCCT grant in 2010 which worked so well, presidents from the system's 16 colleges got together and decided that they'd like to join together to go after a TAACCCT 2 grant, with a focus on manufacturing. That really put us on the map because it allowed us to hire great staff to drive that work through, which in turn gave us the great results which helped us earn TAACCCT grants 3 and 4. The presidents' decision to all work together as one system was really the turning point. That's when things really happened.

Karen Showers: Like Jim, I think that while the TAACCCT funding was a catalyst for CPL, our colleges were already engaged in innovative practices around career pathway work serving adult students that laid the groundwork. We're a technical college system and so our programs lead to employment. Because we're institution-focused on providing education that leads to

employment, CPL didn't seem like another initiative so much as it seemed like a continuation of the work we were already accomplishing.

### CAEL: In what ways has your work with Wisconsin employers informed the development of CPL?

Mackey: Every program we have has an active advisory committee made up of employers. Whenever we develop a program like CPL, we have to have evidence that the employers have bought in on it—all the way down to asking “Will this lead to developing the kind of people you'd like the employ?” We also go to labor market information, but when it really comes down to it, the colleges look at local employers and make sure that they're doing the work that the employers want. Because we work so closely with area employers, we're able to gain insight into the kind of skills and knowledge employees must possess to succeed on the job, and we've designed our program accordingly.

### CAEL: How has the CPL framework evolved since the initiative was first put into practice?

Showers: Early on, it was widely recognized that we should do a co-lead on this effort. I represent student services as an education director and Jim is an education director for manufacturing programs, and to be able to have people on both sides lets us focus on the institution-wide changes that are needed. This is not just prior learning assessment as most know it; there's so many other components to address to help us move this forward. Transparency in the advising process, involvement with the registrar's office to help code and describe prior learning assessment that's been achieved, and so on, this co-led effort has helped us move it beyond just the things faculty needs to do in thinking about how to enhance CPL.

Mackey: What's really unique is that our office here works with our system's groups to come up with a direction they'd like to take our programs. We help with the development of new programs, the marketing programs, and so on, and we work to ensure that everything is properly communicated system-wide. I think that level of communication and support is significantly different from what's being done by other groups. The average age of our students is 28, which is also unique. Our 'alternative' students are our normal students and for us and this gives us the tools to best serve them.

### CAEL: What challenges have you had to overcome in implementing CPL?

Mackey: CPL really works out well when we have smaller credit courses. When I started here we used to have nine credit courses in some cases, which is impossible to get credit for prior learning for, so that was something we had to adapt CPL around. We also didn't offer certificates at the time—we only had programs and degrees—and to offer them, they had them approved by the state which meant we needed to develop a whole understanding of how many credits are needed for a certificate, how certificates would be distinct from diplomas, and other bureaucratic revisions to reflect the changes CPL brought on. Overcoming these challenges involved not only recreating the structure of the curriculum, but also, operationally, evolving how things flow through our office and how the colleges work with their students in implementing CPL. That was the big job, and providing to students a level of transparency about the CPL process is something we continue to develop.

## CAEL: How has your work contributed to your understanding of the adult learner?

Mackey: For me personally, what I've learned over the last few years is how a person can become successful. I had initially focused so much on the instruction and development of the curriculum and not about the realities facing the adult learner at home that could lessen their chances at success. In developing CPL, I've gained a greater awareness of the overall adult learner experience.

Showers: I've found being involved in this work so rejuvenating in furthering my own efforts to encourage student success. It's been so motivating to discover measurable positive outcomes of prior learning opportunities because it informs how we evolve CPL. Prior learning is a constantly evolving environment and it's been edifying to be a part of its development.

## CAEL: What does it mean to you to win the Institutional Service Award?

Showers: I'm particularly proud of the work the colleges do. Sometimes it's challenging to have a shared governance, but this is one instance where it really has been fabulous. They've been the innovators and we've just been helping to shine a spotlight on those innovations and share the wealth.

Mackey: So often it becomes that we get too far removed from the real work and this has helped pull us get back together into the fold. At the award ceremony we asked attendees from the WTCS colleges to stand, and that's because it's really their work that makes this possible.

*<sup>1</sup>Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training, which "Provides community colleges and other eligible institutions of higher education with funds to expand and improve their ability to deliver education and career training programs that can be completed in two years or less, are suited for workers who are eligible for training under the TAA for Workers program, and prepare program participants for employment in high-wage, high-skill occupations." Source: United States Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration*

*<sup>2</sup>"The Joyce Foundation works with grantee partners to develop and advance policy reforms that promise to improve quality of life, promote community vitality, and strive for a fair society. Our grant making is driven by a belief that communities are stronger when they share benefits broadly among their people. That requires our public systems to get a few essentials right." Source: The Joyce Foundation*