

CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

from the student, campus, and industry perspectives



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BACKGROUND

Validating and credentialing college-level knowledge and skills acquired outside of the classroom is increasingly seen as a vehicle for supporting increased education attainment, especially among adult nontraditional students. This alternative mode of academic credentialing, known as prior-learning assessment or credit for prior learning (CPL),¹ can benefit working adults entering postsecondary education from the workplace or the military. CPL plays a dual role—meeting continuous learning demands of today’s knowledge-driven economy as well as contributing to the nationwide efforts to raise the education levels of average American citizens.

As adult nontraditional students and their prior learning experiences have become a prominent part of policy discussions in recent years (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and HCM Strategists 2012; Lane, Michelau, and Palmer 2012), demand for more and better information about their actual experiences of gaining credit for prior learning is also growing. Though CPL is a longstanding practice, it is unclear the extent to which it is well-understood and accepted on United States campuses today. In this context, the American Council on Education (ACE) conducted an exploratory survey on current CPL policy and practice at a spectrum of U.S. colleges and universities to provide a “snapshot” of current practice in this rapidly evolving area.

In addition to surveying higher education institutions, ACE gathered reactions from existing clients of the ACE Credit Recommendations and Transcript Services—both students and employers—to gain insights into their experiences in the use of prior learning (for more about the survey, see Appendix 1). As a longtime college credit recommendation provider, ACE has direct access to students who use CPL in postsecondary programs and to organizations that provide employees with CPL options for their workplace education. This survey aims to update and enhance our understanding of the role of CPL in meeting an individual’s goals and other basic information about CPL, such as acceptance rates; campus policies and practices; the utility of awarded credit; the motivations of and challenges for students; and education opportunities in the workplace.

Drawing on responses from three groups—students who sought credit for prior learning, college administrators in institutions that award credit for prior learning, and industry representatives sponsoring employee education programs—high-level findings include:

- There is a high overall success rate in earning academic credit or employer recognition for prior learning experiences (82 percent);
- The vast majority of responding campuses award academic credit for prior learning (92 percent);

¹ While this brief primarily uses the term “credit for prior learning,” “prior-learning assessment” can be used interchangeably. For more information about prior-learning assessment, see Appendix 2.

- Across institutions and assessment methods, there is variation in prior learning acceptance rates, campus policies, and types of earned credits;
- Students seeking credit for prior learning encounter a lack of information about their options; and
- Industry-based education benefits are available but possibly underutilized, due in part to a lack of incentives or services to support an employee’s educational progress.

ACE CREDIT RECOMMENDATIONS AND TRANSCRIPT SERVICES

Awarding credit for non-collegiate learning began in the 1940s, when ACE established services to assist campuses in granting credit for what veterans had learned while in the service. In 1974, ACE’s program expanded to include civilian work-related education, launching the ACE College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT®). It has since reviewed and provided academic credit recommendations for more than 30,000 courses, exams, and certifications offered by the military, employers, government agencies, professional associations, apprenticeships, etc.

ACE publishes course and occupation descriptions and academic credit recommendations on an

official transcript, which can be obtained by participants for a nominal fee. The ACE transcript can help students get their training translated into academic credit at approximately 2,000 colleges and universities that consider the ACE credit recommendations.

For training programs outside of the military, ACE conducts about 70 credit reviews and issues approximately 10,000 transcripts annually. The recommendations do not guarantee academic credit at a particular institution. It is entirely at the discretion of each institution to determine the acceptance of ACE recommendations.

Applying prior learning toward a postsecondary degree, certificate, or credential allows the nation to capture the large investments made in workplace education and training. CPL also helps colleges and universities meet the unique needs of adult nontraditional students—a large proportion of the postsecondary student population. Application of CPL may help more nontraditional students find smoother pathways in and through postsecondary programs. While recognizing its growing importance for private and public benefits, this exploratory survey highlighted several areas where the implementation of CPL might be strengthened.

RECEIVING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The overall success rate in earning academic credit or employer recognition for prior learning is high (82 percent of adults who sought to apply ACE's credit recommendations).

Who is most likely to pursue some form of validation and recognition for prior learning experiences, and why? What do such individuals have in common? According to the demographic profile of the 1,348 ACE transcript service users who participated in the survey, prior learning credit seekers tend to be middle-aged, white, female, employed full time, without a baccalaureate degree, and currently enrolled in college (see "Characteristics of Respondents" box on page 4). While they generally mirror traditional college students in terms of gender and racial/ethnic makeup, they are more likely to be adult workers with full-time jobs. Given their age, employment, and education status, it makes sense that their most common purpose of utilizing prior learning is to accelerate the path to a postsecondary credential, particularly the bachelor's degree.

Nearly all ACE transcript users who participated in the survey said that they had attempted to use the recommended credits on campus or in the workplace (94 percent), and that most such attempts were successful (82 percent). Their underlying motivations were to earn a college degree or a certificate (54 percent) or earn it faster (46 percent). Respondents repeatedly pointed out that the prospect of saving time and money was a major motivational factor. The credential that most respondents were pursuing or had already earned in connection with the recommended credit was the bachelor's degree (70 percent), followed by the associate degree (21 percent) and the certificate (9 percent). Postgraduate degrees were mentioned by a few respondents.

the student perspective

“It worked very well for me, as I was able to obtain my bachelor's degree by transferring six credits from ACE. Using ACE-recommended credits saved time and most importantly, money.”

—Female employee and baccalaureate degree holder who was enrolled in graduate school

“This process helped transfer my 12 graduate credits from the Federal Executive Institute [VA] to the university I was attending in order to finish my master of science degree.”

—Full-time employee, 52, master's degree holder, and not enrolled in college

“I applied all of my electrical trade school credits from ACE to the community college. I was only 13 classes (36 credit hours) away from receiving my associate degree because ACE assisted me. I currently have nine classes (27 credit hours) left as I continue to take classes and finish my schooling.

“Thank you, ACE, for helping me to go back to school and complete what I started 19 years ago.”

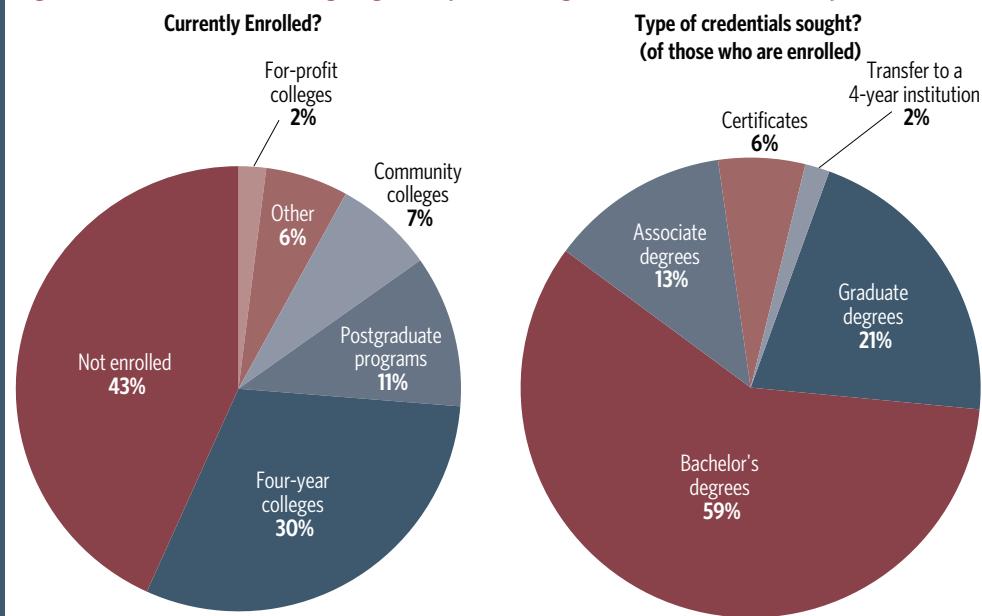
—Male, 50, employed full time, pursuing an associate degree at a community college

”

CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS SEEKING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING THROUGH ACE TRANSCRIPT SERVICES

- Respondents tended to be middle-aged adults. The average age was 41, and 75 percent were age 32 or older.
- Fifty-seven percent were female.
- Sixty-eight percent were white, 13 percent were African American, 9 percent were Hispanic, 3 percent were Asian, and 1 percent were Native American/Alaska Native.
- Seventy-two percent were working full time.
- Forty percent held a bachelor's degree or higher, 27 percent had attended some college but had no degree, 15 percent held an associate degree, and 6 percent held a certificate.
- Fifty-seven percent were enrolled in higher education at the time of the survey. Of those enrolled, 61 percent were seeking a bachelor's degree. (See **Figure 1** for details.)

Figure 1. Enrollment status and degree goals of prior learning credit seekers (ACE transcript service users)



Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

In addition, although not as frequently as they cited degree attainment goals, prior learning credit seekers expressed career-related motivations such as obtaining a pay raise (15 percent), making a career transition (11 percent), and getting a job or earning a job promotion (10 percent each).

the student perspective

“This is an incredible service. Because of this I was able to complete my math requirements via alternate means, greatly accelerating my degree progress by eliminating nine months of school.”

—Male, 36, associate degree holder, employed full time, and enrolled in a four-year university to earn a bachelor’s degree

“I just wish that more companies and organizations would become members of the ACE program. It was by far the best money spent towards my education—\$40 for 18 credit hours is outstanding!”

—Male, 34, no college degree, disabled veteran, unemployed and pursuing a bachelor’s degree

“I achieved my National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certificate, becoming a national board certified teacher librarian. I earned 10 semester credits that I applied to my educational record and counted towards my experience/pay chart.”

—Female, 34, graduate degree holder, employed full time, and not enrolled in college

“The university I am enrolled in was wonderful about picking up almost all of the recommended ACE credit hours. Had [it] not been for these hours I would not have been able to meet the mandatory 24 semester college credit hours for FAC-C [federal acquisition certification in contracting] certification. . . After 15 years of doing this job I would not have been able to stay in this field.”

—Male, 51, employed full time, no college degree, and enrolled in college

“I was close to losing my job because of the state requirement of the certificate I needed. To date, I am still employed and . . . I also want to thank ACE for being so productive and making it easy to help me earn my certificate.”

—Female, 45, bachelor’s degree holder, employed full time, and not enrolled in college

Despite many success stories, what challenges did students encounter in receiving credit for ACE-evaluated prior learning? The individual circumstances varied, but challenges tended to include: the campus or industry being unaware of ACE credit recommendations, not accepting the ACE credit recommendations, or applying credit in a limited way (e.g., elective credit only). Other challenges included difficulty in transferring prior learning-based credit from one institution to another; lack of clarity on the rationale for an institution’s inability to grant credit; lack of understanding on the part of institutions of course descriptions listed on ACE transcripts; and limitations of the pass/no pass nature of credit recommendations included on ACE transcripts.

the student perspective

“My well-known state university did not understand very much about the ACE credit recommendations even though ACE credits information was found in some of the college literature.”

—Female, 50, associate degree holder, employed full time, not attending college but intending to earn a bachelor’s degree in an accelerated manner

“I spoke to about 10 colleges and none would honor it.”

—Female, 36, master’s degree holder, attempted unsuccessfully to get nine graduate credits for her National Board for Professional Teaching Standards portfolio

“I earned an ACE Credit Recommendation (three graduate hours) for having completed the National Board Certification process. I tried to use the ACE credit to renew my teaching certificate, for which I needed three graduate hours, but my school district denied me the opportunity. They said they needed a transcript from an accredited university.”

—Female, 49, bachelor’s degree holder, employed full time, attending graduate school

“I was able to apply 43 credits toward my associate degree in general business. However, the university would not accept them as transfer credits toward a bachelor’s degree. The adviser there said that ACE credits are only awarded if based on training in the military. Unfortunately, this is a big deterrent in furthering my education, as I would have to make up the 43 credits, in addition to upper level courses for a bachelor’s degree.”

—Female, 51, associate degree holder, self-employed, and not enrolled in college

“ACE credits were applied but only as credits that I can’t use toward my current degree program, so essentially no credit was given for having the ACE credits.”

—Male, employed full time, and seeking an associate degree

“The courses that I took did not transfer when I attended tech school. There were no grades supplied, and without grades, the credits did not transfer. I was forced to take the classes again, costing me additional time and money.”

—Male, 51, bachelor’s degree holder, unemployed, and seeking a certificate at a technical school

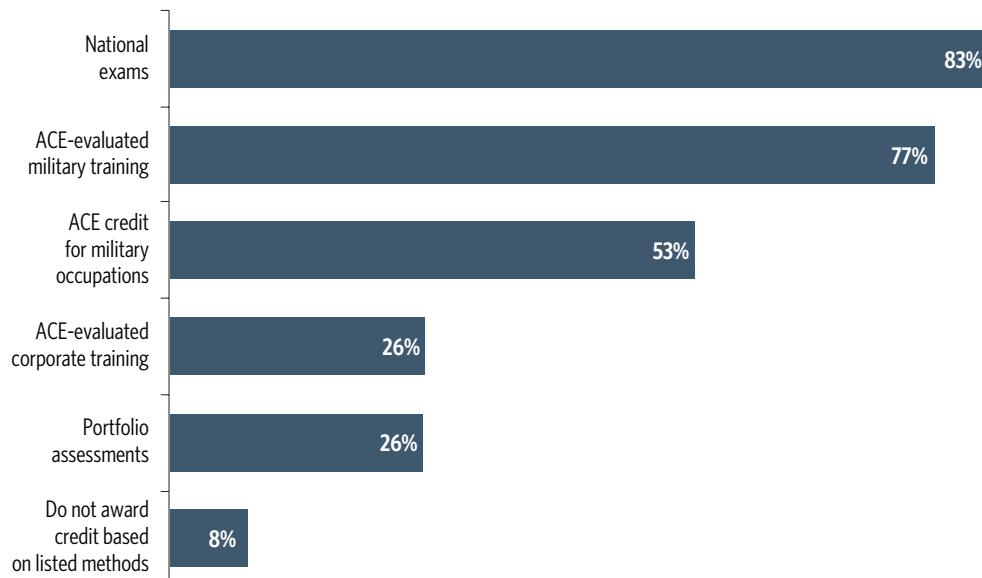
CURRENT POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE CAMPUS PERSPECTIVE²

Most campuses (92 percent of responding institutions) indicated they grant academic credit for prior learning. There is wide variation across institutions in the rate of acceptance of prior learning, the types of prior-learning assessments used, the policy in place, and the types of credits issued.

Campus Receptivity to Credit for Prior Learning

The vast majority (92 percent) of institutions that participated in the survey grant academic credit for prior learning based on at least one of the most commonly used assessment methods, such as national exams (e.g., the College-Level Examination Program, or CLEP; DSST, formerly known as DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support) Subject Standardized Tests; and Excelsior College examinations), ACE-evaluated military training, ACE credit for military occupations, or ACE-evaluated corporate training or portfolio assessments (see Appendix 2 for an overview of prior-learning assessment methods).

Figure 2. Overall campus acceptance of prior learning, by assessment type



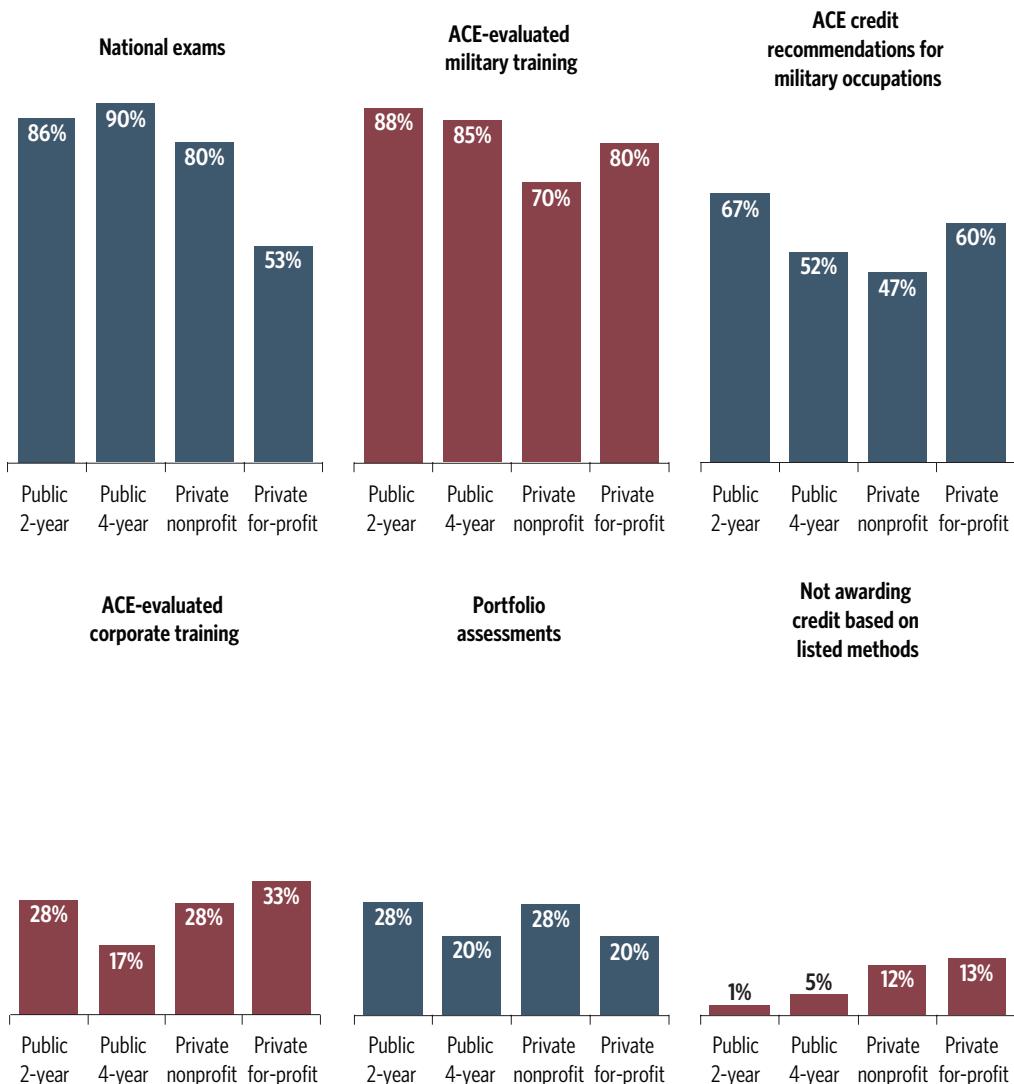
Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

Campus receptivity differs by prior-learning assessment method (see **Figure 2**). The most common assessment method in place appears to be national exams (83 percent), followed by

² Campus definitions of prior-learning assessment can vary. For example, at some institutions, portfolio assessments are considered prior-learning assessments, but the ACE-evaluated military trainings are administered as credit transfer rather than prior-learning assessment. (This is the reason that the ACE survey referred to specific assessment methods listed in Appendix 1 and did not use the term prior-learning assessment.) Other less common methods, such as institution-level evaluations of workplace training, are beyond the scope of the survey.

ACE-evaluated military training (77 percent) and ACE credit for military occupations (53 percent). ACE-evaluated corporate training and portfolio assessments are least likely to be honored (26 percent each). Only 8 percent of campuses do not grant prior learning credit based on the major assessment methods listed in Appendix 1.

Figure 3. Prior-learning assessments currently in place, by institutional type



Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

As **Figure 3** shows, with the exception of for-profit institutions, credit by national exams is practiced widely in all types of institutions (86–90 percent). Relative to other sectors, the for-profit sector is fairly receptive to military-based prior learning, as indicated by the high rates of acceptance of the ACE-evaluated military training and the credit recommendations for military occupations (80 and 60 percent, respectively). This may be a reflection of veteran-focused

recruitment practices in the sector.³ In comparison with public institutions, private nonprofit colleges and universities are somewhat less receptive to military-based prior learning.

Among campuses that do not use the prior-learning assessment methods included in the survey, one campus mentioned it employs its own institutional challenge exams. These campuses also reported that their non-acceptance policy is unlikely to change in coming years for various reasons, including questions about academic rigor, perceived accreditation restrictions (that accepting ACE credit recommendations is noncompliant with accreditation requirements because ACE is not an accredited institution, which is indicative of a misperception about ACE credit recommendations on the part of institutions), low student demand, and faculty resistance.

Campus Policy

When institutions were asked whether they have CPL standards or policies in place to guide and ensure consistent implementation across the campus, their responses were generally positive but varied depending on the assessment methods used. Most institutions have campus-wide CPL policies, but those policies are often applied in conjunction with department- or college-level policies. At some institutions, certain types of prior-learning assessments such as ACE-evaluated military training are implemented as part of the broader credit transfer policy, while at others CPL is practiced without a formal written policy.⁴

Most often, policies exist regarding national exams and portfolio assessments. The policies related to national exams tend to be institution-wide (83 percent), but portfolio assessments are likely to be guided by departmental or college-level policies. It is important to note that one in four institutions that recognize the ACE credit for military or workplace education have no formal policy at any level.

Who is responsible for establishing the CPL policy? This responsibility generally falls to registrars, with some institutional variation. At four-year public institutions, chief academic officers (CAOs) are also responsible for developing policies, while in for-profit institutions CAOs are more likely than registrars to assume that role. In addition, in comparison with other assessment methods, portfolio assessment policies tend to be drawn by academic affairs officials, such as CAOs, deans, or department chairs. CPL policies are sometimes set by academic committees or the faculty senate of individual campuses, while some public institutions follow system-wide standards developed by the state system office or the system department chair.

Implementation and Type of Credit Awarded

More than 90 percent of campuses said that registrars are the lead officials in administering various types of prior-learning assessments except for portfolio assessments, for which this

³ Nevertheless, generalization is difficult due to low responses in the for-profit sector.

⁴ Survey responses may not fully reflect the complexity of campus policy and practice, which is a limitation of this analysis. For instance, an institution at which prior-learning assessment is practiced primarily at the discretion of individual faculty members or only within an adult degree program, without broad consultation across the campus, may have reported that there is no standard campus policy.

percentage is lower (81 percent). In interpreting and applying CPL policies, registrars work closely with other campus officials such as CAOs, deans, department chairs, faculty committees, system academic officials, admissions offices, transfer offices, veterans affairs offices, academic advisors, prior-learning assessment committees, prior-learning assessment coordinators, testing offices, and distance education offices. Though registrars may have the primary responsibility for administering CPL policies, other campus officers or offices that also play a role in the application of the policies vary significantly depending on the campus, program, or type of CPL.

Table 1. Type of credit awarded, by type of CPL (percentage of awarding institutions)

Type of CPL	General education credit	Major core course credit	Elective course credit
National exams	93%	74%	85%
ACE-evaluated military training	81%	67%	92%
ACE military occupations	83%	71%	92%
ACE-evaluated corporate training	88%	73%	98%
Portfolio assessments	76%	77%	86%

Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

How is prior learning credit accounted for on students' transcripts? Institutional policies on prior learning can have a greater impact on an adult learner's progress toward degree completion when policies allow application of CPL to major requirements or general education requirements. As **Table 1** shows, campuses are generally more likely to award elective course credit for prior learning (85–98 percent of responding campuses) than general education credit (76–93 percent) or major core course credit (67–77 percent). There is one exception: Credit by national exams is more likely to be applied toward general education credit.

From the students' perspective, the ability to apply CPL toward their major is of great benefit.⁵ In this respect, community colleges and for-profit proprietary institutions may be relatively more "adult-friendly," as the survey data indicate that they are more likely than four-year institutions to award major core course credit for various forms of CPL (about 75 to 100 percent of the responding community colleges and for-profit institutions award major core course credit as opposed to 59 to 71 percent for their four-year counterparts).

Prior learning sometimes results in a course waiver, not a credit, ultimately requiring students to complete additional coursework. Course waivers rather than full credit for prior learning runs counter to nontraditional students' motivation to decrease time to the degree or certificate.

⁵ This is not to suggest that elective course credits do not help students meet graduation requirements at all. At issue is excessive credit accumulation that does not help to meet the requirements for degree completion.

LACK OF CLEAR, CONSISTENT INFORMATION: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Students who participated in the ACE survey did not always understand the reasoning behind the decisions of institutions or employers regarding CPL. Respondents indicated confusion when confronted with difficulties in gaining acceptance of ACE credit recommendations. It is important to note that ACE credit recommendations do not guarantee academic credit at a particular institution and it is entirely at the discretion of each institution to determine whether, and how, the recommended credits may be applied at that institution. This also means the credit may be reevaluated if transferred to a different institution. This issue is no different from the other credit mobility challenges currently confronting higher education institutions.⁶ Individuals at institutions who evaluate transfer credit do not always have accurate and consistent information on the application of CPL. Policies and practices vary widely from institution to institution. The following accounts illustrate specific challenges students confront in this respect.

the student perspective

“I explained what I knew about ACE credits to an advisor at the college in hopes that she would be able to tell me if some of these credits would apply towards a bachelor’s degree. I was then told that I would have to register first and then have my credits evaluated. However, I do not want to go through registration costs unless I know for sure that some of these credits would apply.”

—Female, 50, associate degree holder, employed full time, not attending college but intending to earn the bachelor’s degree in an accelerated manner

“I do not understand how an official ACE transcript does not qualify to count towards my education.”

—Female, 56, no degree, employed full time, and seeking a certificate in a four-year university

“I was not aware that ACE was not an accredited institution [of higher education]. I had to apply to the university and pay them an additional \$550 to get them to switch over my transcript from ACE to come from an accredited university.”

—Full-time employee, 35, applied ACE credits to earn a master’s degree faster and to obtain a pay raise, holding a master’s degree and not enrolled in college

Even those students who understood the ways in which ACE credit recommendations might be applied toward a degree or other credential confronted confusing requirements and com-

6 According to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the American Council on Education, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation’s 2001 “Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit,” “It is the receiving institution’s responsibility to provide reasonable and definitive policies and procedures for determining a student’s knowledge in required subject areas . . . [and] to advise the student that the work reflected on the transcript may or may not be accepted by a receiving institution as bearing the same (or any) credits as those awarded by the provider institution, or that the credits awarded will be applicable to the academic credential the student is pursuing.”

plex processes. Some of them postponed their education or made decisions they later regretted due to the difficulty of navigating through the sometimes confusing and challenging processes. Their experiences seem consistent with campuses reporting that multiple offices and decision makers are involved in the implementation of CPL, often depending on the specific prior-learning assessment method. This could lead to students' difficulty in finding the right point of contact or feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the process.

the student perspective

"Getting the ACE credits was very easy to do. The process in the school was a lot more complex than expected. I have to write a paper on each ACE credit."

Male, 48, no degree, employed full time, and enrolled in a four-year college to earn a bachelor's degree

"I have tried to use my ACE credit towards my school, but following the system was a difficult process. I wish those of us adult learners who have been working full time and taking these classes should be credited towards their promotion and college credit."

Female, 48, no degree, employed full time, working toward a bachelor's degree in a four-year college, and unsuccessful in applying ACE credits

"The credit was not properly applied. Although the course I took was 100 percent fiscal law, I did not receive finance, economic, accounting, or budget credit for the class. Instead, due to how the course was coded on the transcript, I received an elective credit for upper level management . . . which I do not need for my degree. There was no management education during the course."

Female, 38, no degree, employed full time, and pursuing a bachelor's degree

"It was difficult finding a college that would accept my ACE credits and use them towards a degree, but after several months of searching I found a terrific college that accepted my ACE credits."

Female, 59, no degree, employed full time, and enrolled in a four-year university

"I had to do some advance planning as the ACE units I had received were not accepted at my university. I transferred them to a participating community college and then transferred all credits through the AA degree that the university must accept."

Female, 55, associate degree, unemployed, enrolled for a bachelor's degree

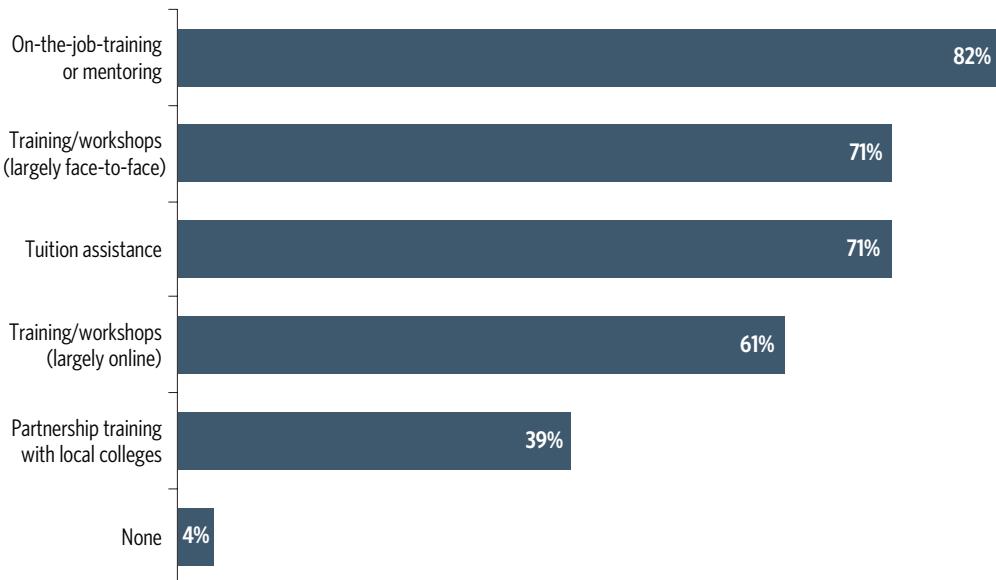
ACE provides on its website a list of 2,000 colleges and universities that would consider ACE credit recommendations. Yet, some students' needs appear to be unmet, as many respondents suggested providing a list of institutions that *accept* the ACE credit recommendations. This is a challenge because of the different ways in which credit recommendations are accepted and applied on individual campuses.

CPL AND OTHER EDUCATION BENEFITS: THE INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Industry-based education benefits, broadly defined, appear to be generally available. However, employee incentives or support services may not support employees' full participation in further education.

The industry perspective reported in this section is derived from a small number of ACE Credit Recommendation corporate clients that participated in the survey. The survey asked about their employee education benefits in general, such as in-house training and tuition assistance, and about ACE-evaluated training programs in particular.

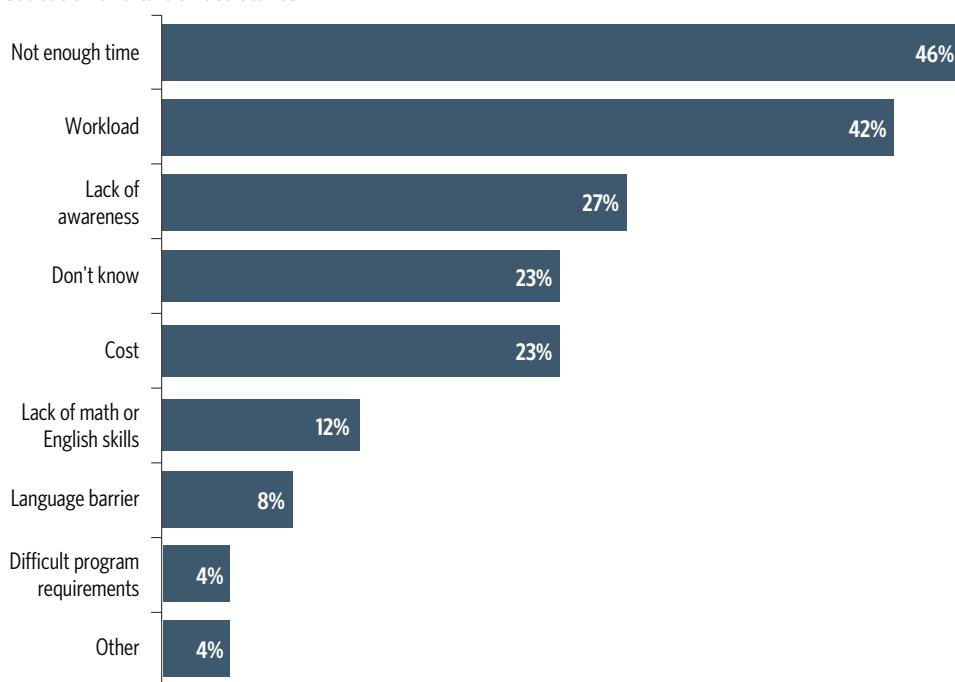
Figure 4. Educational opportunity and tuition assistance availability in the workplace



Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

Nearly all respondents (96 percent) stated that they provide employees with some type of educational benefit through direct training or financial sponsorship. As **Figure 4** shows, on-the-job training or mentoring is offered by most, followed by workshops, tuition assistance, and partnership training with local colleges.

Figure 5. Employers' view on major barriers to their employees taking full advantage of employer-sponsored education and tuition assistance

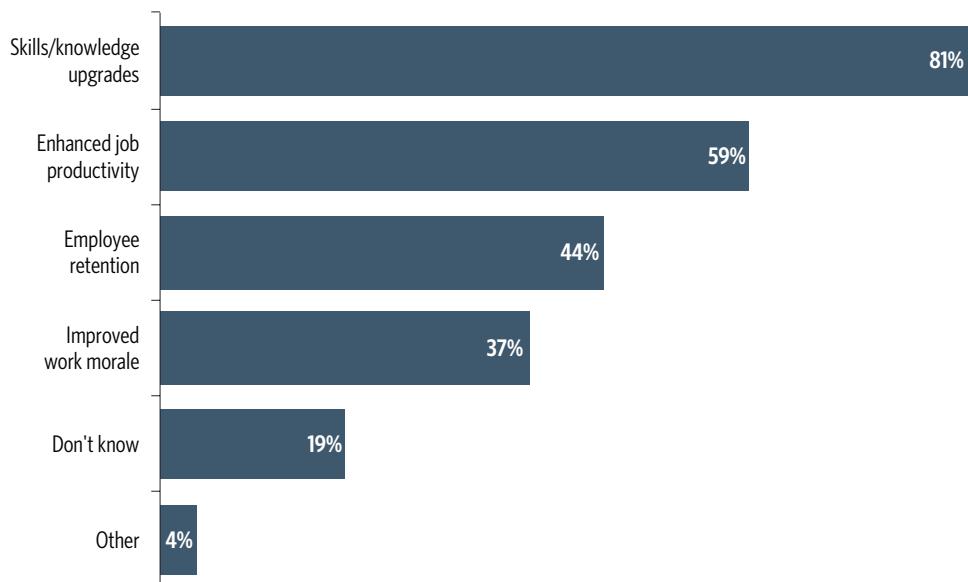


Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

How do employers incentivize their employees to use the education and/or tuition assistance that they offer and what challenges do employees encounter? A sizable number of respondents said they do not offer any employee incentives to use education benefits (30 percent). In addition, as **Figure 5** illustrates, the top two barriers to employees taking full advantage of available training and tuition assistance are time constraints (46 percent) and workload (42 percent), according to responding employers. Only a small percentage of respondents cited as a barrier that their employees may be unaware of available offerings (25 percent).

Although employees seem to know they can benefit from education and financial assistance available in the workplace, their workload prevents them from fully utilizing available benefits. In order to resolve the issues of time constraints and workload, employee support services are important. Some employer practices are instructive in this regard. For instance, some employees are paid half their hourly rate for time they are in class. Others are allowed some release time to attend classes for a portion of their work day. Such strong employee incentives and support services can play a key role in expanding the educational attainment of employees.

Figure 6. Employers' views on the benefits of ACE-evaluated employee training



Source: American Council on Education (ACE), 2012, ACE Survey of Credit for Prior Learning.

Employers surveyed are clients of the ACE credit recommendation service and as such they have gone through the process of having their workplace educational programs evaluated for credit recommendations to offer an additional educational benefit to their employees. In efforts to inform employees about the value of ACE-evaluated training, employers primarily used company websites (67 percent) or newsletters (56 percent) followed by other more personal means of communication—such as supervisor counseling, human resources (HR) outreach, or mentoring. When asked about employees' enrollment in postsecondary education through the use of ACE credit, as shown in **Figure 6**, industry respondents valued more-immediate outcomes, such as increases in skills and knowledge (81 percent) or productivity (59 percent), rather than what could be greater and more sustainable long-term benefits to employers, such as staff retention (44 percent) or work morale (37 percent).

Further, almost two-thirds of employers said that they do not monitor or do not know whether they monitor the progress of employees who enroll in higher education using ACE credits (56 and 7 percent, respectively). Without the effort to assess the outcomes and impact of employer sponsorship for employee education, employers are likely to maintain the status quo rather than expanding such opportunities for their employees.

As revealed by the following accounts, existing industry clients feel strongly about the value of ACE credits, at least in terms of recruitment and reputation enhancement.

the industry perspective

“ACE provides an excellent opportunity for young people to attain credit for industry-based training.”
—Vice president, nonprofit association

“As a training organization, we advertise our participation in ACE credit services as a way to differentiate us from our competition.”

—Sales operations manager, training organization with more than 100 but fewer than 499 employees

However, as illustrated earlier in the brief, employees encountered situations in which ACE credit recommendations were not uniformly accepted by all industry organizations toward a certification, salary increase, or promotion as the employee may have expected. More study is needed to understand the current state of and best practices for communicating about CPL and other educational benefits within the corporate workplace setting.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory survey provides a “snapshot” of the state-of-the-art in the use of CPL by students, campuses, and employers. Initial evidence suggests that those seeking credit for prior learning through ACE credit recommendations are most likely to be adult workers holding full-time jobs and pursuing a postsecondary credential, particularly a bachelor’s degree. Consistent with their demographics, the common reason for utilizing prior learning is to create an *expedient* path to their education and career goals. The vast majority of them (82 percent) are successful in earning academic credit or employer recognition for their prior learning experiences, but some exceptions exist. Challenges included awareness and receptivity issues on the part of higher education institutions and employers, coupled with the information challenges faced by students who confronted difficulty navigating through complex validation processes.

There is broad acceptance of CPL across campuses (92 percent)—even greater levels of acceptance than previously documented (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning 2010)—but acceptance levels vary by the type of CPL, from national exams such as CLEP, DSST, and Excelsior College assessments (83 percent), to ACE-evaluated military training (77 percent), ACE credit recommendations for military occupations (53 percent), ACE-evaluated corporate training, and portfolio assessments (26 percent each). Registrars generally have responsibility for establishing and implementing CPL policies, but policies and practices in place vary significantly from campus to campus. As student respondents indicated, the challenge of obtaining the right information and making informed decisions while navigating through the institutional differences is significant.

Although educational opportunities seem to be available in the workplace, they may be underutilized due to workload issues or a lack of time on the part of employees and the lack of support by employers. Greater incentives and support services, such as workload adjustments, coaching/counseling, and periodic assessments on academic progress will help increase employee participation in workplace-based learning and postsecondary education. Though this survey indicates that many students are benefiting from applying their CPL to complete a degree, certificate, or other credential, more work needs to be done to expand the opportunity to more students and make CPL a well-understood and deeply ingrained practice on campuses and within industry.

Implications

Collectively, the United States spends approximately \$772 billion annually on postsecondary-level education and training, and the bulk of this spending supports education and training occurring outside of formal education institutions (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2010). Providing adults with ways to apply such education and training toward a postsecondary degree, certificate, or credential is a logical way to put this investment to use. These accelerated paths for nontraditional students can help states and the nation as a whole meet their

goals for college completion. This is not to suggest, however, that CPL is a simple solution to the many issues around adult education attainment. CPL is a useful tool and the ACE survey suggests areas of focus to increase its successful application.

Value of prior learning-based credit

Even when prior learning is recognized as academic credit, the actual benefit of the resulting credit may be somewhat limited. Institutions that implement CPL tend to grant elective course credit rather than general education or major core course credit. We know from existing research that many students in a bachelor's degree program accumulate more than 120 credits—the number of credits typically required for graduation. Earning additional elective course credits based on prior learning may not be what adult students desire or need in order to cross the postsecondary-credential threshold. With greater understanding of the credit review process and other prior-learning assessment methods, institutions can implement new ways for prior learning experiences to fulfill graduation requirements. For example, they could require, as some institutions already do, that students complete additional supplementary assignments for CPL to qualify for major course credit.

Student-institution mismatch

According to the campus responses in the ACE survey, community colleges and for-profit proprietary institutions are generally more receptive to CPL and more likely to grant major core course credit than are other institutions, a signal that these types of institutions may be more adult-friendly and more inclined to acknowledge the significant learning adults may accumulate throughout their lives. In contrast, most student respondents who had attempted to utilize ACE credit recommendations reported that they were working toward or had earned a bachelor's degree in connection with ACE credits. Comparing the campus and student reporting, there appears to be a gap between the types of degrees sought (bachelor's degrees) and the most common credentials that the more CPL-receptive institutions provide (associate degrees or vocational certificates).

Transferability of prior learning-based credit

A large number of adults with military training are potential consumers of CPL, but such individuals are not examined in this brief due to the low number of survey responses. However, the limited data supplied by 126 military respondents indicate that in contrast to the civilian adult learners analyzed in this brief, the service members and veterans who are seeking CPL tend to be somewhat younger and interested in earning an associate degree. It is likely that credit mobility issues experienced by civilian survey respondents, as reported in this brief, would also impact the service members and veterans with military-based learning. Because of the inability of students to transfer prior learning-based credits from one institution to another, those who successfully attained an associate degree with military-based prior learning credits may encounter similar credit mobility issues on their paths to baccalaureate degree attainment.

Information challenges

The lack of clear, consistent information on CPL does a disservice to students seeking to use it as an accelerated path to a postsecondary credential. As expressed by many respondents quoted in this brief, applying prior learning on campus or in the workplace is not always a transparent and straightforward process. Deterred by misinformation or insufficient information, many ended up altering their education plans, often increasing both the cost and the time required to earn a degree. The variability or inconsistency within and across institutions in such areas as policies and practices, access to information, and points of contact underscores the importance of providing accurate and sufficient information and student support services for adults who are seeking a college or program that recognizes prior learning, or who are navigating the often complex process of gaining CPL or transferring it to another institution.

Clearly, information challenges are a major barrier to the success of CPL. One might think this is relatively easy to overcome without large investments on the part of campus and industry leaders. However, CPL is only one of many alternative or accelerated pathways to higher learning—the information challenges may go well beyond CPL when taking into account the variety of adult pathway models available. Many emerging, innovative ideas, such as competency-based approaches and the massive open online courses known as MOOCs, are useful for adult nontraditional students who need more diverse paths to achieve their education goals. However, it may become increasingly challenging for such learners to navigate through different learning paths and align all acquired credentials across various providers. Access to transparent and easy-to-use information and student support services is lacking. One possible solution is a comprehensive information portal that links resources across different learning providers and maps education pathways for students with differing entry points into higher education.

This brief seeks to illustrate the current status of CPL policies and practices by cross-examining the student, campus, and industry perspectives. The good news is that the odds of gaining academic credit or employer recognition for prior learning are generally high. However, the variations in campus receptivity to CPL, the diversity of CPL policies and implementation procedures, and the multiple decision makers involved may create gaps where students' needs are not met, particularly with regard to their ability to make informed decisions and the transferability of prior learning-based credits. The question of whether the use of CPL is fully optimized remains unanswered. To address this question fully, additional research is needed, especially regarding the type and amount of prior learning credit that students can apply to their programs, the range of student services supporting use of CPL, and experiences of students seeking to employ CPL from military education and training.

APPENDIX 1:

THE ACE SURVEY OF CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

The survey examined the acceptance and utility of all major prior-learning assessments: national exams (e.g., CLEP, DSST, and Excelsior), ACE-evaluated military training, ACE credit recommendations for military occupations, ACE-evaluated corporate training, and portfolio assessments. Descriptions of each of these methods are offered in Appendix 2. Campuses were also asked to mention other assessments in place beyond this list. About 1,800 responses were submitted online across the three target groups, which are described in detail below. The survey questions were developed specifically for each target group.

Survey target groups	Number of valid responses	
Students	Recent clients of ACE Transcript Services with valid email addresses (N=10,580, from January 2010 to January 2012)	1,348
Colleges and universities	Registrars at accredited, degree granting institutions with valid email addresses (N=2,788)	414
Industry	Currently active clients of ACE Credit Recommendation Services with valid email addresses (N=162)	28

Students. Between January 2010 and January 2012, more than 10,000 individuals had requested transcripts for ACE-evaluated courses/programs and had a valid email address at the time of survey. Of these, a total of 1,348 sent valid survey responses. The respondents' demographic backgrounds are shown in the "Characteristics of Respondents" box on page 4. Since the ACE transcript users had participated in non-military training, ACE conducted a parallel survey for student veterans, but due to low responses (N=126), the results from the veteran survey are not reported in the current brief. It should be noted that the student perspective reported in this brief only pertains to the use of ACE credit recommendations and may not apply to other types of prior-learning assessments.

Colleges and universities. Approximately 2,800 accredited degree granting postsecondary institutions from all sectors—two-year and four-year, public and private (including for-profit private)—were invited to participate in the ACE survey. The email invitation was sent to the registrars, who, according to some anecdotal experiences, are typically responsible for administering CPL. (This was confirmed further in the ACE survey.) Of the 414 responding institutions, 53 percent are private nonprofit campuses, 23 percent are community colleges, 20 percent are public four-year institutions, and 4 percent are for-profit institutions. The responding institutions are by no means nationally representative, and may be subject to selection biases. It is important to note that the campus perspective presented in the brief is not confined to ACE credit recommendations, and includes all major prior-learning assessment methods.

Industry. In 2012, 162 organizations among active clients of the ACE-evaluated corporate programs had a valid email address. These organizations consisted of government agencies, professional trade associations, unions, and private firms that represent a wide range of fields including teaching, the oil industry, and public services. The survey was sent to the industry representatives who hold a position title of training specialist, certification manager, HR director, vice president, or president. A total of 28 organizations provided valid responses. The industry survey is focused on education opportunities available within organizations as reported by the select industry representatives and does not reflect the perspectives of employees. The industry perspective drawn from this survey only applies to ACE-evaluated corporate training program providers at the time of the survey.

APPENDIX 2: COMMON APPROACHES TO PRIOR-LEARNING ASSESSMENT

There are four generally accepted approaches to prior-learning assessments: national standardized exams, challenge exams within institutions or departments, individualized assessments such as portfolio-based assessments, and ACE credit evaluation of corporate and military training. Below is a brief description of each approach (except for ACE credit recommendations, which are described on page 2).

National exams

Several types of national standardized exams are currently available: the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), developed by the College Board; the Excelsior/UExcel college exams by Excelsior College; and the DSST program, formerly known as the DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support) Subject Standardized Tests.

- CLEP is a testing program focusing on the learning in the first two years of the college curriculum. CLEP exams are offered in community colleges and universities in 47 states, and a study (Barry 2011) indicates that students who participate in CLEP programs have significantly higher cumulative grade point averages than non-CLEP students when controlling for demographics and prior achievement.
- Excelsior college exams (ECEs) allow adults to earn college-level credit in select subject areas by passing proficiency exams. For example, the nursing ECEs offer credits that are accepted at hundreds of institutions, according to Excelsior College. These exams are also offered in the arts and sciences, business, and education fields.
- DSST Exams, formerly known as the DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support) Subject Standardized Tests that were historically used by military service members, are now available to anyone seeking credit by exams in 38 subject areas. These exams are focused on the content areas usually taught at the lower and upper levels of bachelor's degree programs, including social sciences, math, applied technology, business, physical sciences, and humanities.

Challenge exams

These institution-led exams are often offered when CLEP exams are not available. Challenge exams are typically written and administered by academic departments or individual instructors in the departments. Therefore, the implementation varies widely by campus or by department. Students are typically charged a fee for taking these exams and a processing fee, both of which vary by campus. Challenge exams were not among the major assessment methods studied in this brief.

Portfolio-based assessments

For decades, institutions assessed individualized student portfolios, collections of work reflecting the knowledge and skills students gained outside of the classroom. LearningCounts, a nationwide program of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, now offers students a more standardized process for demonstrating prior learning and receiving a transcript of potential credits. Students build their portfolios by taking an online course and then submit their work for review by faculty members at participating institutions.

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