Widening the Pathway to a Degree: The Impact of Accepting Credit for Prior Learning at a Community College

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Credit for prior learning is a way to recognize previous experiences and knowledge as an equivalent to college level learning. Determining effective ways to accept credit for prior learning experiences can have a positive impact on students, including community college students, as they work to reach academic goals. This qualitative study aimed to understand the experiences of community colleges students who have received credit for prior learning on their academic transcript. Through interviews with students, benefits and barriers of credit for prior learning were discussed.

Barriers to credit for prior learning included a lack of overall knowledge on the types of credit for prior learning and the reliance on specific individuals, often academic advisors, to explain the process. Benefits of credit for prior learning included students feeling better prepared and more confident due to the rigor of their prior work as well as the ability for students to take courses more aligned to their interests because other general education courses had been completed. The results suggest that credit for prior learning is a valuable step in helping community college students complete their degree or transfer to a four-year institution.

**Keywords**: credit for prior learning, community college students, advanced placement
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WIDENING THE PATHWAY TO A DEGREE: THE IMPACT OF ACCEPTING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY
JESSICA BEREK
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Carrie A. Kortegast
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As the United States has shifted to a postindustrial economy, in which two in three jobs require at least some education or training beyond high school (Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011), obtaining college credentials has become more important for all those seeking employment. Although the common perception of college students are those who just graduated from high school and are able to attend a four-year residential university full time, reality paints a different picture. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2019), 41% of the nation’s undergraduates are enrolled at a community colleges. Additionally, 40% of first time freshmen are enrolled at a community college (AACC 2019). Terenzini and Pascarella (1998) refer to community college students as “richly diverse but nontraditional” and describe community colleges as consisting of "disproportionate numbers of non-resident, part-time, older, non-white, and working class students" (p. 155). Community colleges, known historically for serving diverse populations, are well-poised to fulfill the growing needs of workforce for skilled employees from all backgrounds to meet economic demands.

Yet many students who enter community colleges do not meet their educational goals even though an external imperative exists. A substantial proportion of students attending public two year colleges enroll with the intention to earn credentials yet make little progress toward a certificate or degree. After three years, just 16% of first-time community college students who began college in 2003 attained a credential of any kind (certificate, associate's degree, and/or bachelor's degree), and another 40% were still enrolled (Bailey, Leinbach, & Jenkins, 2006).
Community college students bring a diversity of experiences, competencies, histories and cultures to the classroom. This wealth of prior knowledge is often directly applicable to the knowledge base they are seeking to grow through their education but goes unacknowledged on their path toward a degree or credential. One effort to help recognize and value the knowledge community colleges students bring with them is through credit for prior learning (CPL). Research has shown that students who receive credit for prior learning are more likely to graduate, elect to pursue more courses, and have a stronger positive connection to the institution (Klein-Collins, 2010).

The College of Lake County accepts credit for prior learning from a variety of sources. Until 2015, the processes associated with accepting credit for prior learning were decentralized. Some decisions were made in central administrative offices (such as the Registrar), some were made by academic division leadership (such as a Dean) and others were made by individual faculty members. Additionally, information provided to students was limited, mostly provided by the College’s Testing Center staff.

A college-wide improvement project in 2015 refined these processes in order to provide clear information to students. This project was guided by assistance from an outside consultant and included significant input from college faculty and staff. At the time of the project, there was additional interest by college leadership in a more intentional promotion of credit for prior learning but since that time, no additional work as occurred. While research has demonstrated that community college students who utilize prior learning options have higher graduation rates regardless of degree type or major (Kuang & McKay, 2015), relatively few students at the College of Lake County have pursued these options.
The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how College of Lake County students have utilized credit for prior learning. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What barriers do students perceive in using credit for prior learning at the College?
2. What do students identify as the benefits of credit for prior learning at the College?
3. What areas of improvement do students identify regarding credit for prior learning at the College?

By focusing on students who have used credit for prior learning options and understanding more about their experiences with credit for prior learning at CLC, the research offers guidance to CLC within the framework established by Travers (2013) for high quality CPL programs (discussed later in this proposal).

**Literature Review**

Credit for prior learning, also known as prior learning assessment (PLA), is one strategy to capture the ways learning occurs outside of the college classroom. PLA, according to Klein-Collins (2006), “is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom, including from employment,...military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service” (p. 1). Prior learning can also include life experiences such as volunteering, work experiences, and industry trainings. Non-credit courses and independent study can also be included because all these experiences have the potential to add to the individual’s knowledge base.
In writing for American Council of Education, Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, (2015) categorize methods for credit for prior learning into four categories:

- Standardized exams such as Advanced Placement, College Level Examination Program, and DANTES Subject Standardized Test among others.

- Third-party evaluation services such as ACE College Credit Recommendation Service and the National College Credit Recommendation Service. These evaluations of employer training or industry certifications result in credit recommendations; institutions decide whether to award the recommended credit.

- Institution-led exams primarily known as challenge exams created by individual faculty to award credit for a specific class.

- Individualized assessments such as portfolios, skills displays, or other combinations typically coordinated as a demonstration.

These four categories help explain the breadth of learning that can occur outside of a formal classroom environment that could be accepted for academic credit. Each type has unique characteristics, policy, and process implications.

Because credit for prior learning is such a broad field, it is important to review a wide scope of research that helps elucidate its many facets. Within this literature review, there are four primary components: history of credit for prior learning, evolution of credit for prior learning, including international perspectives, credit for prior learning at community colleges, and types of credit for prior learning.
History of Credit for Prior Learning

Translating prior learning experiences to college credits is not a new idea. The American Council of Education (ACE) is a pioneer in the field with their work starting in 1942 regarding the evaluation of military training (Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, 2015). ACE continued to further the field by supporting the development of what became the College Board’s College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) in 1965 (Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, 2015). Although ACE served as a national leader, some state groups such as the New York State Education Department, also recognized early on that learning outside of a collegiate setting should be recognized and worked to define appropriate policies and procedures (Meinert & Penney, 1975).

As an historical overview, Travers (2012a) reviewed the foundational assumptions that have guided pioneering institutions at the forefront of accepting credit for prior learning. In the early days of prior learning, it was seen as a movement for educational social justice (Travers, 2012a). The first prior learning programs embraced that individuals could acquire college-level learning outside of the formal classroom setting and that an individual could know something that formal testing could not assess (Travers, 2012a). These principles still guide programs today and have helped shape the conceptual framework of a high quality credit for prior learning program (reviewed later in this proposal).

For as long as credit for prior learning has existed, colleges have been concerned about the financial impact. Specifically, one criticism of credit for prior learning is that it contributes to a loss of tuition dollars by granting credit for experiences outside of the institution. Fonte (2008) discussed financial implications of credit for prior learning. While there are multiple
factors to consider, Fonte (2008) summarized that it is “better to have a student earn a portion of credit through tuition-bearing courses than to have no student at all” (p. 64). Colleges must be concerned with financial impact of any policy but offering credit for prior learning provides students an incentive to earn more credits, increasing revenue potential.

**Evolution of Credit for Prior Learning**

Since the recognition of credit for prior learning in the 20th century, there have been additional areas of expansion and evolution. While the field already demonstrated breadth in the type of learning that could be considered for academic credit, it continues to progress by recognizing the importance of professional development for evaluators and by considering the changing landscape of higher education in the US and abroad. Credit for prior learning continues to be a dynamic field, with new perspectives shaping the direction for colleges and universities.

Evaluating prior learning experience for academic credit takes time and expertise on behalf of the evaluators. High quality professional development of evaluators is needed to make sure quality and rigor is safeguarded. Hoffman and Michel (2010) completed research with experienced prior learning evaluators across disciplines and institutions to describe best practices for other evaluators. All of the experienced evaluators surveyed described participation in training and development opportunities, including external conferences. These evaluators also described a commitment to student-centered learning and invested significant time in reviewing student portfolios (Hoffman & Michel, 2010). Resources to train and effectively support credit evaluators are important to sustain prior learning programs now and in the future.
As technology has changed higher education, it also impacts credit for prior learning. In attempting to answer the question “what’s next for prior learning?” Travers (2012b) noted several significant shifts within higher education that have occurred in the past two decades. People are no longer bound by a specific structure in the way that they acquire knowledge. Credit for prior learning is currently predicated on the fact that students may not acquire learning in neat packages (i.e., courses) already developed by institutions. However, as students continue to “self-author their learning to meet their needs” in increasingly digital and independent ways and not in a set time or place, defining credit for prior learning becomes more challenging (Travers, 2012b).

Credit for prior learning is an activity that extends beyond the United States higher education system. Because shifting economic and workforce demands are a worldwide phenomenon, international higher education systems have also grappled with similar pressures of how to best respond to change. The international research described below helps contextualize credit for prior learning practices in U.S. higher education institutions and illuminates similar issues.

Early research completed by Belanger and Mount (1997) declared that prior learning in Canada was gaining traction due to government and industry pressure to develop a prepared workforce for the 21st century. However, at that time, their research found that quality assurance and administrative issues had not been resolved that prior learning was not yet integral to university culture (Belanger & Mount, 1997). Although credit for prior learning began earlier in the United States than in Canada, the focus on meeting workforce needs and struggling to adapt into an established academic culture is a commonality in both countries.
A later study reviewed information presented regarding prior learning available at 60 Canadian universities (Wihak, 2007). While over one-third of the universities referenced the ability for students to use prior learning, information varied widely. There was significant variation in the ease of locating prior learning information, the quality of the information provided and number of supports listed to students (Wihak, 2007). Given the variety of prior learning types and institutional procedures, a lack of cohesive and centralized information can be a barrier for students to receive credit for what they already know.

Students in Australia, like those in Canada, were similarly presented unclear information on policy and practice within the higher education system of that country. Wheelahan, et al. (2003) conducted extensive research to inform national prior learning principles and operational guidelines, common to all sectors of higher education and training. Among other findings, Wheelahan, et al. noted that the use of prior learning was relatively low, and that it has not acted as a “mechanism for social inclusion to education and training pathways for students from disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 11). A desire for educational social justice in US prior learning programs is a shared, yet often unrealized, goal (Travers, 2012a).

On a similar social justice note, Andersson, Fejes, and Ahn (2004) reviewed prior learning practice in Sweden, with a specific focus on practices related to assisting immigrants. Prior learning in Sweden, especially alignment to secondary school system, was a common issue faced by institutions. Despite a number of challenges at various levels throughout the system, acceptance of prior learning “can be an entrance ticket to society” for immigrants. To that end, their research concluded that prior learning should be systematically supported by the Swedish government (Andersson, Fejes, & Ahn, 2004).
These international perspectives demonstrate that higher education globally has struggled to recognize, evaluate, and award credit for prior learning despite an imperative to do so. This need is both from employers as well as policymakers pursuing greater educational equity for citizens. The issue surrounding establishing policies, communicating practices, and helping students utilize the benefits will continue to be part of the evolution of all higher education institutions offering credit for prior learning.

Credit for Prior Learning at Community Colleges

Within the context of this study, reviewing research related to prior learning at community colleges is especially relevant. While community colleges can vary in size, structure, and the forms of credit for prior learning accepted, there are many commonalities such as types of coursework offered and composition of composition of the student body. Although there is not a significant amount of empirical literature on credit for prior learning at community colleges, these findings are directly applicable to the proposed research of this study.

As the result a federal grant, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) set forward to improve accessibility, consistency, transferability, and transparency of prior learning policy and practice throughout the system (McKay, Cohn & Kuang, 2016). In this comprehensive review, one significant finding was that all 13 CCCS consortium colleges, varying in size, programs offered, and student population served, were offering some type of credit for prior learning opportunity for students. However, each college had its own policy and regulations for accepting credit for prior learning.

Despite this variety, CCCS students who have earned credits through prior learning have higher graduation rates regardless of type of degree or certificate, over 20% higher retention rate
from year 1 to year 2, a shortened time to completion for degrees, and a higher graduation rate regardless of level of academic preparedness (Kuang & McKay, 2015). Their research echoes other large scale projects on credit for prior learning. These broad goals regarding retention and completion are what many community colleges are aspiring to achieve; this progress is quite noteworthy. Additionally, the CCCS has committed to improve and redesign of the prior learning processes available so that students across the state could have the same opportunities (McKay, Cohn & Kuang, 2016).

Another large scale research project that included community colleges as well (as four year institutions) was completed by Klein-Collins and the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). This research noted large gains by adult students thanks to prior learning. In the report Fueling the Race to Post-Secondary Success, Klein-Collins summarized the following:

The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. (Klein-Collins, 2010)

As community colleges look to improve student success, credit for prior learning charts a path forward. In key metrics such as persistence, time to completion and graduation rates, credit for prior learning helps students.

**Types of Credit for Prior Learning**

Credit for prior learning encompasses many options, typically falling into four broad categories defined by Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall (2015) for the American Council of
Education. Those categories are standardized exams (like AP and CLEP), external credit evaluation, local/institution specific exams (often called challenge exams), and individual assessment through skills demonstrations or portfolios.

In one study, the standardized exam CLEP led to the highest graduation rates for adults (52.3%) followed by using a combination of prior learning methods (29.9%) such as CLEP, credential evaluation, or portfolio review (Hayward & Williams, 2015). This information is important because there are a number of ways community colleges could accept or promote credit for prior learning options. By understanding the most successful methods, colleges may be able to devote resources in a more strategic way such as discounting exam fees or marketing pathways for students to progress after successfully completing a specific exam.

Within the types of credit for prior learning, several studies have focused on portfolio assessment to understand whether or not this method can meet the standards of college level learning. Portfolios are also often a more time consuming approach for both students and evaluators. Yet, the time invested can result in richer learning and assessment. The College of Lake County does not currently accept portfolios; research suggests that this may be a best practice that yields positive benefits as credit for prior learning and beyond.

Utilizing portfolios as a method for granting credit, specifically for adult learners, can serve a dual purpose by honoring the student’s prior experiences while simultaneously making them better prepared for their careers. Particularly for adults, identifying learning during portfolio development from concrete experiences related to theoretical concepts has provided students with a combination of theory and practice that can serve them well throughout their lives (Brown, 2011). Brown, McCrink, and Maybee (2003) stated, “The portfolio process can
serve as a "reflective bridge" between the learner, the academy and the workplace and augment competencies important for their academic and career success” (p.3).

With the potential benefits mentioned above, some have noted that institutions offering portfolio assessment are “downright passionate about their value” (Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009). Like with much of the field in credit for prior learning, portfolios have been adopted in different ways by different institutions. Yet, Klein-Collins and Hain (2009) noted that differences in implementation by the institution can still result in positive outcomes for students in achieving their educational goals.

Through traditional in-class learning or through credit for prior learning, institutions want to ensure their students have essential skills for success after graduation. In their research, Legrow, Scheckley, and Kehrhahn (2002) looked to understand in what ways and to what extent the cognitive problem-solving skills of adult learners who earned credit in a classroom course differed from the cognitive problem-solving skills of adult learners who earned credit through portfolio review. Students completing a prior learning portfolio, specifically those students with a rich base of prior experience, are able to draw upon their past histories in a way that enriches problem-solving. Furthermore, Legrow, Scheckley, and Kehrhahn (2002) added that the portfolio process “could be a beneficial educational activity for all experienced students…even if these learners do not use the portfolio to petition for credit” (p. 8).

Credit for prior learning is an expansive topic as the variety of research in the field demonstrates. From the historical beginnings through expansion and evolution, credit for prior learning includes international perspectives, highlights many different types of prior learning, including portfolios, and reaches across all higher education institutions, including
internationally and at community colleges. This research informed the proposed design described in the next later in this proposal.

**Credit for Prior Learning at the College of Lake County**

The focus of the research was the College of Lake County, a large suburban community college located 40 miles north of Chicago. Student headcount for the Spring 2019 semester was over 14,455 students, with a full-time equivalent student body of 7,747 (College of Lake County, 2019). The College accepts several types of credit for prior learning from a variety of sources, including three of the four categories established by the American Council of Education. Accepted forms include standardized exams including AP, CLEP, and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, institutionally-developed (“challenge”) exams, and third-party credentials or certificates, reviewed by external evaluators or through internal review by College faculty. The College does not have a process to guide student development of nor award credit for individualized assessments such as portfolios. Exam based credit for prior learning options have costs to students which vary between exam types, but credential review has no associated fees nor is there an administrative fee to post earned credits to a student’s College of Lake County transcript.

Credit for prior learning options are available in both transfer-focused liberal arts areas such as English and psychology as well as career-focused vocational areas such as automotive and criminal justice. Unless otherwise mandated by the state of Illinois, individual academic departments make the determination whether or not to accept a specific credit for prior learning option and at what level/score.
The processes associated with accepting credit for prior learning were determined by different areas of the College until a college-wide improvement project in 2015. This project was guided by assistance from an outside consultant as well as a college committee of faculty and staff. Before the improvement project, decisions regarding credit for prior learning dispersed throughout the College. Some were made in administrative offices (such as the Registrar), some were made by academic division leadership (such as a Dean) and others were made by individual faculty members. Additionally, information provided to students was limited, mostly provided by the College’s Testing Center staff.

The project commenced at the request of College administration and internal stakeholders to better serve students, with the hope of ultimately increasing enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. At the time of the project, there was interest by college leadership in more intentional promotion of credit for prior learning to bolster participation, but since that time no additional work as occurred. While research has demonstrated that community college students who utilize prior learning options have higher graduation rates regardless of degree type or major (Kuang & McKay, 2015), relatively few students at the College of Lake County have pursued these options. This study is important to assist the College of Lake County in recognizing student knowledge that has occurred outside of the institution, assessing and officially documenting the learning, and helping students use the knowledge to ultimately accomplish their learning goals.

**Conceptual Framework**

As mentioned above, credit for prior learning has been in place for decades. As prior learning programs have continued, it has been important to acknowledge that ensuring quality
and valid assessments of the learning is essential for accountability for students, faculty, and accrediting bodies (Travers, 2013). More specifically, Travers (2013) writes, “Institutions need to understand the interconnected dynamics of philosophy and practice within their own institutions and align these…across all constituents” (p. 57). To that end, research completed by Hoffman, Travers, Evans & Treadwell (2009) and Travers (2013) demonstrated that there are five critical factors essential to high-quality credit for prior learning programs. Those factors are:

1. Institutional philosophy, mission and policies that support CPL
2. Financial, administrative, faculty and technology support from the institution
3. Defined practices and ways in which students can engage in CPL and apply the credits to the curriculum
4. Professional development for faculty, administration and CPL program professional staff
5. Commitment to program evaluation and improvement

While all five components of this framework have well-established theoretical components as well as considerations related to practical administrative systems, this study will focus on the two which students can provide the best perspective. Thus, the following outlines these factors in more detail.

Financial, administrative, faculty and technology support from the institution (#2 from the list above) prompts consideration of the wide range of systems impacted by credit for prior learning. Costs associated with exams or administrative processing fees, faculty and staff familiarity with required paperwork, and information available through electronic means opposed to those requiring contact with a specific individual, are all part of this factor. This
component is directly connected to this study since these factors could be perceived as a barrier or benefit to students.

Defined practices and ways in which students can engage in CPL and apply the credits to the curriculum (#3 from the list above) refers to the availability of specified ways and types of prior learning as well as course crosswalks between a specific course and a learning experience from outside the College of Lake County. Students need to know what kind of learning may be eligible for college credit, what course(s) they can receive credit for, and that the prior learning will help them be successful in additional coursework in the discipline. Related to this study, these factors could also be perceived as a barrier or benefit to students.

Students are best able to provide insight on these aspects of the framework; at their core, they ask if the College has or has not provided the appropriate supports, practices, and ways students can use credit for prior learning. The College of Lake County describes serving students as the heart of their mission; these components of the framework are especially conscious of student impact. Additionally, this framework informs the rest of this research proposal including design and methods detailed in the next section.

**Research Design**

The research approach for this project was qualitative. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described, qualitative research can help illuminate how people interpret their experiences and the meaning attributed to those experiences. This qualitative research is guided by a constructivist epistemology. Constructivism focuses on describing and interpreting numerous realities as described by participants within in their experienced context. Constructivism also focuses on the
subjective meanings of these experiences, as well as the fact that the meanings can be varied and multiple (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Within the qualitative framework, the specific methodological approach to this research is a case study. Case studies focus on developing understandings and meanings about a particular phenomenon and presenting findings that are richly descriptive. However, more specifically, case studies are an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). For this research, the in-depth description was focused on student experiences in utilizing credit for prior learning and the bounded system was limited to the College of Lake County. The case study approach is especially appropriate for this research as the focus looks to understand the multiple meanings that exist for these students, specific to the context of this community college.

**Research Site**

The research site for this project was the College of Lake County (CLC). The College is a large, suburban community college located in the northern Chicago suburbs. The College had a Spring 2019 enrollment of 14,455 and a full-time equivalent student enrollment of 7,747 (College of Lake County, 2019). I selected this site was selected because of my professional connection to the College as a full-time administrator.

To determine the sample within the specified population, purposeful sampling was used. To understand and gain insight, a purposeful sample is selected on the basis from those which the most can be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, credit for prior leaning is the chief factor in selecting a sample.
The population of students at the College of Lake County who have utilized credit for prior learning within the last three academic years is relatively small compared to the overall enrollment. A summary analysis indicates that just over 500 students in each of the last three academic years have received credit on their transcript for a credit for prior learning option. Use of specific options varies but the most common method is Advanced Placement, which comprises 81% student participation in credit for prior learning.

Maximum variation sampling was utilized. Patton (2015) described maximum variation sampling by noting that “patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value” (p. 283). By identifying the widest range of characteristics, specifically by number of credits used through credit for prior learning and by type of coursework (such as using credit for prior learning to meet general education courses or technical, career focused courses), a robust understanding of factors relevant to the study have been explored.

Within credit for prior learning, there are noteworthy differences between participants related to the type of credit for prior learning. Students selected had utilized at least one credit for prior learning option in one of the last three academic years (2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19). Students may have used more than one credit for prior learning option and may have a range of credits earned for their prior learning. Utilizing credit for prior learning was demonstrated by having credits posted on their official academic record/college transcript. As much as possible, credit for prior learning options offered by CLC will be represented to contribute to a richly descriptive qualitative understanding.

This sampling excludes students who worked with individual faculty to waive a pre-requisite course but did not officially demonstrate prior learning in order to receive academic
credit. Additionally, this research looked to include a variety of demographic characteristics reflecting the greater CLC student body including characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and gender. However, the primary factor was first those who have utilized credit for prior learning.

Saturation occurs when no fresh data or insights are being generated through additional data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although it is difficult to predict in advance when responses from participants will reach redundancy, I originally estimated that 10-20 interviews would be conducted for this project. This reflected my desire to complete multiple interviews associated with the each of types of credit for prior learning offered by the College of Lake County (national standardized exam, challenge exam, credential review) to attain maximum variation for saturation. For this research, I conducted 17 unique student interviews. The participants had a range of credit for prior learning experiences including multiple different nationally standardized exams and local challenge exams. Only one student interviewed had utilized credential review to receive credit for prior learning. Less than 2% of the students in the academic years identified pursued this option.

Data collection

To collect the richly descriptive data required for this project, interviews were conducted with students who have utilized a credit for prior learning option at the College of Lake County. As Patton (2015) described, interviewing allowed me to “enter another person’s perspective” (p. 426). More specifically, the interviews conducted were completed in a semi-structured format.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend the semi-structured approach to allow for responses dynamically to the situation at hand as well as to allow the respondent the opportunity to explore new ideas or an emerging worldview. Other types of interviews, such as highly
standardized or, conversely, unstructured are not the best approach for this study. In the case of a highly standardized interview, it is unlikely to lead a full understanding of participant’s perception or experiences without the ability to probe and explore based on the stated responses. Conversely, an unstructured interview format is best suited when the study is a mostly unfamiliar topic and a researcher would be unable to develop robust questions. In this case, I am an experienced higher education professional, having led work in credit for prior learning at a community college and will be able to develop appropriate questions in advance.

To collect interview data, participants first needed to be recruited. Students who have had credits for prior learning posted to their transcript in the last three academic years received an initial invite to their College email briefly explaining the study and the opportunity to participate. Two additional follow up emails were sent but only those students did not respond to the initial email. The initial email sent to eligible students was also shared with career counselors and academic advisors as another avenue to reach participants. These College staff members work directly with students on setting educational goals and selecting courses; they may have a personal connection to students who utilized credit for prior learning. However, all interview participants identified came forward through the direct email correspondence.

Once a student agreed to participate, they were interviewed in an individualized setting. I coordinated directly with a student respondent to select a time and location convenient to the participant for an interview. Originally, all interviews were planned to occur face to face at a location convenient to the participant. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were moved to occur virtually in a video conferencing platform. With permission, each interview was recorded. Each student completed an individual consent form prior to participation and
again confirmed their consent for the interview to be recorded at the beginning of the video interview session. Individual interviews are preferred because it allows space for each student to share their highly personalized experience regarding their educational goals and the role credit for prior learning has played in the journey.

The interview protocol consisted of 11 questions (see Appendix A). During the interview, participants were asked specific information such as age, field of study, and educational and career goals. Questions started with an initial rapport-building focus and progressed to those more specifically focused on credit for prior learning experiences. As the interview continued, the semi-structured approach allowed student participants to naturally explore relevant topics within their experiences of credit for prior learning as well as broader themes related to their educational experiences.

Pilot interviews were conducted in advance of interacting with respondents. Using guidance from Patton (2015) on the six types of questions to stimulate responses, most questions focused on experience and behavior related to credit for prior learning. The interview questions used to guide the semi-structured interview is included in Appendix A. Each interview lasted between 35-65 minutes, with most taking approximately 45 minutes. This time included my additional follow up questions based on initial responses as well as any additional questions from the participants.

In addition to the data from interviews, I collected relevant artifacts from the College of Lake County related to credit for prior learning. These artifacts included informational webpages, publicly available process descriptions, and forms students are required to complete. This review provided a deeper understanding of the student experience.
Data Analysis

To transcribe the interview, each interview file was uploaded to a computer-based transcription service. After the computer initially transcribed the verbatim results, I reviewed the data for accuracy and context. To capture the interview fully, I listened to the interview while reading the transcript and made necessary edits for clarity and accuracy such as correcting spelling mistakes or denoting the appropriate speaker. This process helps ensure qualitative reliability. To help protect the identities and enhance confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) clearly state that “data analysis is best done with data collection” (p. 101). To that end, interviews were transcribed, reviewed, and edited shortly after they were conducted. Completing this work helped aid in the important goal of reaching data saturation.

The foundational construct for the first cycle coding was descriptive coding. A descriptive code is a label assigned to data to summarize in a word or short phrase as the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). For the second cycle coding, patterns coding was used. Patterns coding is a way of grouping summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). However, Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) also note that more than one approach for coding efforts may be appropriate and that some methods can be compatibly “mixed and matched” as needed. To that end, emotion and process coding were also used during first cycle coding.

The coding process was conducted independently, additionally, multiple reviews of the data were performed. To identify the themes, the coding of the interviews was completed first
and additional artifacts, such as the College of Lake County website and associated credit for
prior learning forms, second. Given the importance of factors two and three of the high quality
credit for prior learning conceptual framework by Travers’ (2013) the initial coding used themes
from these components as relevant descriptors. Additional themes related to college
affordability, student sense of belonging, and the rigor of credit for prior learning options also
emerged.

Once identified themes and additional interpretation were completed, especially those
findings aligned to the components of a high quality credit for prior learning program,
summarized results will be presented to inform practice at the College of Lake County. Because
other research has suggested favorable student success outcomes as a result of using credit for
prior learning and because the relative number of students who use these options at the College is
low, the themes of the study can contribute to future decisions or investments by College leaders.

**Trustworthiness**

In this study, internal validity was increased through triangulation. Triangulation can be
an important tactic in boosting the credibility of the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Specifically, data was reviewed though multiple methods. Artifacts reviewed include the
information available on the CLC website describing credit for prior learning as well as
associated forms available to request credit for prior learning.

In addition to triangulation, another method for establishing validity is disclose any
“negative or discrepant information that runs counter to themes” (Creswell, & Creswell, 2018, p.
321). While themes presented are supported by data, evidence that runs counter to the stated
themes have also been discussed. This adds depth to the descriptive nature of qualitative
research and explains varying perspectives as part of a student’s experience using credit for prior learning.

As suggested by Gibbs (2007), reliability can be strengthened by documenting and adhering to the definition of codes. Working definitions of codes have been documented throughout the coding process. These definitions were informed by the five critical components of high quality credit for prior learning programs (Travers, 2013) and the sub-research questions. Frequent comparison of interview data with established codes support the reliability of the data.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) list a series of questions that can be asked with the intention of undermining the trustworthiness in qualitative research. One question is regarding the ability to generalize from a small, non-randomized sample. While this proposed study will use a small, non-randomized sample as mentioned, themes emerging from the maximum variability sampling method utilized in the study will demonstrate commonalities among diverse perspectives and experiences. An additional question on the theme of trustworthiness is establishing when it is appropriate to stop collecting data. By coding and analyzing data in a timely fashion, achieving the goal of saturation has been closely monitored.

Qualitative research precludes the ability to generalize in a statistical sense. However, as a measure of external reliability extrapolation is worthy to consider (Patton, 2015). Extrapolations assume similar, yet not identical conditions, for other applications of findings. In presenting this study, there is a focus on how these locally derived results may guide other practitioners outside of the College of Lake County in their work.

Finally, as an ethical practitioner, it is important to explain my connection to this project. This acknowledgment, often called a reflexivity statement, helps label how the researcher affects
and is affected by the research project (Probst & Berenson, 2014). It can also contribute to the overall integrity of the project. In this case study, I acknowledge my current professional connection to the work and have an interest in the outcome as it may impact my work in the future. As part of my position, I previously led a project related to credit for prior learning that developed many of the current practices and information available to students at the College of Lake County. While I have not personally benefitted from credit for prior learning policies or practices at any previous institutions, I believe there is value in learning that occurs outside of an academic setting and that the learning can equate to similar experiences offered for college credit.

**Limitations**

While the experiences shared by students as a result of using credit for prior learning at the College of Lake County are important to understand, one acknowledged limitation is that the research has only been conducted at this one comprehensive community college. Applying the results of this research to other state institutions that have different structures of higher education, such as career and technical schools, may not be an ideal fit. Nonetheless, the comprehensive nature of CLC provides value to both career and technical and transfer focused community colleges.

Credit for prior learning processes can vary considerably between community colleges so this limitation could be noteworthy. However, in reviewing the literature, the wide variation between colleges is actually a shared challenge among all institutions and internationally. Although completing research at one college cannot be applicable to all colleges, the College of Lake County is similar enough to provide value to many others.
In addition to variability in credit for prior learning processes, another limitation of this research is related to the types of credit for prior learning accepted by the College of Lake County. Individualized portfolios are not accepted by the College but are accepted by other community colleges. The portfolio process is unique; because no students at CLC have received credit for this type of work, it somewhat limits the reach of these findings. Nevertheless, many other forms of credit for prior learning are accepted so the College is still a valid site for study.

Despite these limitations, there is significant information applicable for practice at the College of Lake County.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed the need to study credit for prior learning at community colleges by connecting with students who utilized CPL. It is important to understand both the benefits and barriers students experienced throughout the process of receiving credit for prior learning. By interviewing students who have been awarded credit for prior learning, the insights from their experiences can provide direction to expand and grow credit for prior learning opportunities. This research matters because community colleges are striving to meet external demands for an educated workforce. Recognizing credit for prior learning can be a factor in helping students persist, meet their educational goals, and ultimately contribute to economic prosperity.

Chapter 2 will present the findings from this study in an article format. The primary findings from this study include strong enrollment and persistence rates from students who utilized credit for prior learning, which aligns with prior research. Additionally, the academic rigor of credit for prior learning experiences helped students feel prepared for college level coursework. However, the research also found barriers related to credit for prior learning
including a general lack of familiarity as well as reliance on CPL information from personal connections or college officials. There are also recommendations applicable in practice for community colleges.

Chapter 3 is a scholarly reflection where I discuss key learning outcomes through the process of research, writing, and application to practice. As part of this reflection, I consider the dissertation process as a whole including what worked as well as challenges I encountered. This process has spurred me to consider things relevant to my professional journey, now and in the future. And, it is has helped me think about the ways I can and should engage with research in the higher education field.
As the United States has shifted to a postindustrial economy, in which two in three jobs require at least some education or training beyond high school (Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011), obtaining college credentials has become more important for all those seeking employment. Community college students often bring a diversity of experiences, competencies, histories and cultures to the classroom. This wealth of prior knowledge is often directly applicable to degrees and credentials they are seeking, but often goes unacknowledged. Thus, more community colleges are looking to reward students for credit for prior learning (CPL).

Credit for prior learning takes many forms including standardized exams, third-party evaluation services, institution-led exams, and individualized assessments. Providing community college students credit for prior learning not only rewards students for prior knowledge and competency in a particular area, but can also contribute to positive overall student outcomes. Students who receive credit for prior learning were more likely to graduate, elected to pursue more courses, and had a stronger positive connection to the institution (Klein-Collins, 2010). While there are benefits to students for receiving credit for prior learning, it is unknown how students learn about this as an option.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how students at a large, suburban community college have utilized credit for prior learning. The study focused on two primary research questions:
1. What barriers do students perceive in using credit for prior learning?

2. What do students identify as the benefits of credit for prior learning?

This case study included semi-structured interviews with 17 students regarding how they learned about credit for prior learning, experiences receiving their credits, and their perceptions of how credit for prior learning contributed to their educational goals. By focusing on students who have used credit for prior learning options and understanding more about their experiences, community colleges can more effectively help students transition to college and ensure that more students are able to complete their educational goals.

**Credit for Prior Learning**

Credit for prior learning, also known as prior learning assessment (PLA), is a strategy to assess student learning that occurred outside of the college classroom. This knowledge and skill could have been gained from employment and work experiences, military training and service, civic and volunteer activities, as well as other industry certifications and trainings such as ones that occur in the automotive industry. PLA is seen as a “process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom” (Klein-Colins, p. 1). Credit for prior learning typically falls within four categories (Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, 2015): 1) standardized exams (e.g., Advanced Placement, College Level Examination Program, and DANTES Subject Standardized Test), 2) third-party evaluation services (e.g., ACE College Credit Recommendation Service and the National College Credit Recommendation Service), 3) institution-led exams (e.g., challenge exams created by individual faculty to award credit for a specific class), and 4) individualized assessments (e.g., portfolios, skills displays, or other combinations typically coordinated as a
demonstration). These four categories help explain the breadth of learning that can occur outside of a formal classroom environment that could be accepted for academic credit.

Translating prior learning experiences to college credits is not a new idea. The American Council of Education (ACE) was a pioneer in the field starting in 1942 with development of procedures to evaluate military training for credit (Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, 2015). ACE continued to further the field by supporting the development of what became the College Board’s College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) in 1965 (Lakin, Seymour, Nellum & Crandall, 2015). At the local level, some groups such as the New York State Education Department, also recognized that learning outside of a collegiate setting should be recognized and worked to define appropriate policies and procedures (Meinert & Penney, 1975).

In the early days of prior learning, it was seen as a movement for educational social justice (Travers, 2012a). These efforts embraced the idea that individuals could acquire college-level learning outside of the formal classroom setting (Travers, 2012a). These equity-minded principles still guide CPL efforts today and are particularly important at community colleges.

**Credit for Prior Learning at Community Colleges**

There are different approaches for credit for prior learning at community colleges. These approaches often differ based on the size, structure, and institutional policies of each college. While there has been a desire to increase the use of credit for prior learning at these institutions, the research is limited. Despite the lack of empirical literature on credit for prior learning at community colleges, findings from two related studies of prior learning at community colleges in Colorado provide insight into benefits and barriers of CPL.
Within the Colorado Community College System (CCCS), students that earned credits through prior learning had higher graduation and retention rates as well as shortened time to degree completion (Kuang & McKay, 2015). These higher retention and graduation rates for students that utilized CPL were consistent regardless of level of academic preparedness. While there were positive outcomes for students that utilized CPL, there were not standard policies and practices across the CCC system regarding how credits were awarded. Each school was different in the assessment methods used, the cost of assessment, and the way the credits can be applied (Kuang & McKay, 2015).

Subsequently with the help of a federal grant, the Colorado Community College System set forward to improve accessibility, consistency, transferability, and transparency of prior learning policy and practice throughout the system (McKay, Cohn & Kuang, 2016). In their review, McKay, Cohn, and Kaung (2016) found that all 13 CCCS consortium colleges were offering some type of credit for prior learning opportunity for students despite differences in institutional size, program offerings, and student populations. However, they found that there were not uniformed policies and practices across the CCC system for accepting credit for prior learning.

Similarly, in another large scale research project that included community colleges and four year universities, found notable achievements gains by adult students thanks to prior learning (Klein-Collins, 2010). After reviewing the data of 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions, Klein-Collins concluded that, “PLA [Prior Learning Assessment] students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students” (p. 57). Moreover, they found that the use of CPL shortened time to
degree for many students. As community colleges look to improve student success, credit for prior learning charts a path forward. In key metrics such as persistence, time to completion and graduation rates, credit for prior learning helps students.

**Methodology**

This study used a descriptive case study approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) given the limited research on the use of credit for prior learning at community colleges. For this study, the case focused on student experiences in utilizing credit for prior learning and the bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was limited to a specific comprehensive community college in the Midwest. The case study approach was appropriate for this research as the focus looks to understand the multiple meanings that exist for these students, specific to the context of this particular community college.

The research site, Clear River Community College (CRCC; pseudonym), was a large, suburban community college located approximately 40 miles outside of a major Midwestern city. CRCC had a Spring 2019 enrollment of approximately 14,500 students. CRCC accepted several types of credit for prior learning including standardized exams (AP, CLEP, and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests), institutionally-developed (“challenge”) exams, and third-party credentials or certificates, reviewed by external evaluators or through internal review by College faculty. CRCC did not have a process to award credit for individualized assessments such as student portfolios. Institutionally-developed “challenge” exams were evaluated by individual academic departments to determine whether or not to award credit for prior learning and at what level/score. CRCC did not charge for the review of credentials. However, there was a charge for
students to take specific exams (such as CLEP) on site at CRCC. There were no administrative fees to post credit for prior learning on a student’s CRCC transcript.

Approximately 500 Clear River students were awarded credit for prior learning during the academic years 2016-2019. The most common method utilized was Advanced Placement, which comprised 81% student participation in credit for prior learning. Students that received academic credit for prior learning between the academic years of 2016-2019 were invited to participate in this study. Seventeen students agreed to participate (Table 1). To help protect the identities and enhance confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Table 1
Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender (Pronouns)</th>
<th>Type of Credit for Prior Learning Used</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP and Credential Review</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amir</td>
<td>Man (He/His)</td>
<td>CLEP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>CLEP</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Man (He/His)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael</td>
<td>Man (He/His)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Non-binary (They/Their)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Man (He/His)</td>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>Man (He/His)</td>
<td>AP and Challenge Exam</td>
<td>Transferred to 4 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ximena</td>
<td>Woman (She/Her)</td>
<td>CLEP</td>
<td>CRCC Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Enrollment status was at time of interview.
Semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with participants lasted between 25 and 70 minutes. These interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and conducted virtually. Interviews started with questions focused on rapport-building. Building a rapport with participants, especially those new to video-conferencing systems, was important (Nehls, Smith, & Schneider, 2015). The interview progressed to questions about their experiences using credit for prior learning. The semi-structured interview approach allowed student participants to explore relevant topics within their experiences of credit for prior learning as well as broader themes related to their educational experiences. The CRCC website was also reviewed to assess what in institutional information about CPL was available to current and prospective students.

Each interview was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that “data analysis is best done with data collection” (p. 101). To that end, interviews were transcribed, reviewed, and edited shortly after they were conducted. This helped aid in assessing when data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was reached.

As suggested by Gibbs (2007), reliability can be strengthened by documenting and adhering to the definition of codes. Working definitions of codes have been documented throughout the coding process. The data were analyzed by multiple cycles of coding. The foundational construct for the first cycle coding was descriptive coding. A descriptive code is a label assigned to data to summarize in a word or short phrase as the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). For the second cycle coding, patterns coding was used. Patterns coding is a way of grouping summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).
Several strategies were utilized to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. The primary strategy was triangulation through the use of multiple methods of data. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, “Triangulation is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility of your research” (p. 245). The multiple methods of data reviewed include artifacts and information available on the CRCC website describing credit for prior learning as well as associated forms available to request credit for prior learning. Adequate engagement in data collection was also employed by reaching saturation - the point in which no additional meaningful information was gathered through the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, peer review was another component of trustworthiness essential to this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Especially through discussions as raw data was collected and initial findings emerged, colleagues provided guidance and feedback.

Findings

Participants shared information about how they learned about CPL options as well as their reasoning for pursuing CPL. The majority of participants received credits for AP exams (14 participants). Two participants used multiple methods (AP and an additional method). Three participants shared their experience using CLEP. The following outlines the four primary findings: personal support for college processes, perceived benefits of credit for prior learning, rigor of the credit for prior learning experience, and college affordability concerns.

Personal Support for College Processes

The first finding centered on support for college processes, specifically related to utilizing credit for prior learning in the transition to begin taking coursework. More than anything else, a personal connection to the college - someone who understood the admission and
application of credit for prior learning - was essential for these students. The CCRC website provided publicly available and up-to-date online information that listed course equivalencies based on exam scores, required documentation, and other information to support the utilization of CPL. However, only two students, Hope and Alice, mentioned using these tools to assist in their transition to college and accessing CPL. Hope shared that for each college she applied to, including CRCC, she “would look up each college’s website and figure out what credits they would take.” Similarly, Alice stated, “I went on the website and I found a page that listed the equivalencies and it showed what courses and how many credits for what courses.” All the other participants discussed specific individuals who provided them with the guidance they needed to understand how their CPL experience would apply. For instance, Maria shared, “My advisor was actually the one who told me about the AP stuff. She told me I could get credit a history class.” Similarly, Amir stated, “[Math professor] encouraged me to take the [CLEP] test to get into the next class.” Students relied on the help from a knowledgeable individual spurred these students to complete the necessary verifications and receive credit they earned from prior learning.

Academic advisors often were named as individuals that helped participants receive CPL. Students frequently provided the name of the advisor who had helped them, even if the conversation on credit for prior learning was years ago. Sara shared, “[Advisor] understood what the scores meant and was able to give me my class schedule with the right classes.” Advisors were important in not only alerting students that they could be eligible for CPL but also in helping students navigate the process to receive credit. Oliver said, “I didn’t know up until the moment that my academic advisor told me, ‘Oh, you get credit for this course.’” Similarly, Will shared, “[Advisor] guided me through the process” by connecting him to the correct forms and
what to do next. Will added, “It was great to work with [Advisor]. It was pretty seamless.”

Overall, participants identified their academic advisor as helping them receive credit for prior learning.

Students that were coming directly from high school indicated that their high school counselor provided them information about receiving CPL. Trevor stated that his high school counselors were “excellent.” He mentioned telling his counselors that, “It’s your job to steer me in the right direction. Then they would and it was very helpful.” Another student, Molly, shared that her high school counselor, Mrs. McCoy (pseudonym), encouraged her to attend community college and assisted her in completing the admissions application. During this process, Molly said Mrs. McCoy explained “what AP classes I would get credit for and where the courses would put me as far as getting my Associates.” Recent high school graduates found high school counselors to be a key resource in understanding credit for prior learning, in addition to their general questions about attending college.

Students also shared that co-workers and family friends informed them of CPL possibilities. Ximena, who worked at a medical supply factory, shared that her co-worker and fellow CRCC student, Andres, informed her of CPL options. She said, “He suggested that I go in and take the [CLEP] test but I didn’t know where exactly. So, he met up with me and took me to the testing center. And that day we filled out everything that I needed to do to take the test.” Not only did Andres tell her about the test, he also supported her in process of taking the test. For Will, a family friend connected him with the chair of the Math department at CRCC. The chair met with Will personally providing him with strategies and helpful materials to prepare for the challenge exam for Calculus 3. Will said, “I was really nervous but I did really well on the
challenge exam. It helped to know what to expect.” Will mentioned that his college advisor was valuable but the family connection to the chair of Math department was key in actually preparing for the challenge exam.

Overall, most students felt that they needed more support than simply reading information available online. Many students shared something similar to Layla when she said, “I found the website but I contacted a couple of advisors just to make sure I was doing things correctly.” Students wanted confirmation that their credit for prior learning experience was valued, applicable, and specific details related to their individual situation on what to do next. As Oliver stated, “For my government class, I had no clue what class it was going to transfer to. I had no clue if it was even going to apply to my degree program…advisors were the source of information.” Whether students found that support through college officials, high school officials, or some other person who happened to know how to help, it was key to establish a personal bond.

**Perceived Benefits of Credit for Prior Learning**

The second finding was that students found significant benefits in using credit for prior learning. At the time of the study, CRCC website provided little information on the benefits for utilizing credit for prior learning. Rather, it focused on the process for obtaining credits. While this information was important to students who were familiar with credit for prior learning, such as the participants in this research, it did not provide much guidance for individuals who were not already familiarly with CPL. The CRCC landing page for credit for prior learning contained one sentence on the benefits and states students can save time and money.
While saving money was discussed, participants often focused on time – saving time in their pursuit of a degree to reach their ultimate career goals. Isabel captured this sentiment saying, “I’m not starting from square one. I already have some ground built beneath me. I went in and I have like 20% done of my degree done. And I’m barely starting with my first college class.” Similarly, Amir, an international student from Nepal, also focused on time. One of his first courses in college was pre-calculus but his high school education already included higher level math and physics. By taking several math and science CLEP tests, he was able to stop “wasting time” and take courses more applicable to his engineering career path.

The importance of time was expressed in other ways as well, including gaining time to explore other courses. One student, Jane, received credit for taking a CLEP exam in Spanish. She said, “Spanish level one would have just been a waste of time. I already knew it. So now I can spend time learning something new.” Sam, who utilized AP credits, stated something similar,

[CPL] made me able to take classes that I was just purely interested in, rather than stuff I felt I was required to take…I was actually able to have, like, a very positive experience because I was just taking things that I really wanted to learn about.

Hope summarized the benefits by saying, “The best part was just being able to bypass classes and quickly take courses I wanted.” Saving time in order to graduate faster or to explore new courses was an important benefit shared by students.

The ability to save money by utilizing credit for prior learning was also discussed. However, students discussed it as a secondary outcome of saving time and coupled this with a discussion of the costs of obtaining credit of prior learning. These costs often included exam fees, study materials, test transcript result fees, and time contacting various agencies to
accomplish this work. Kim shared, “It was just one English course, like three credits, it was still like $300 or $400. If I transferred it to another school, it would have been like each credit is $600 or something…either way, money saved is money saved.” However, especially as it related to AP exam fees, students focused on the costs associated with acquiring the credits and did not easily see the net savings, often focusing on the upfront costs. Sara said, “AP exams can be kind of expensive. And, then if you want extra study guides, those cost money.” Several students also mentioned the costs of sending AP scores to various schools. Students acknowledge that credit for prior learning could save them money on the cost of tuition, however, they were very aware that obtaining those credits had their own costs.

Although not all students saw the long term cost savings towards degree completion, some did. One student, Alice, attended a public school district where AP exam fees were reduced or waived. She felt fortunate but said,

Even if I had paid full price for the tests, I think it would have been worth it because of just how expensive courses are at most colleges. The time saved in getting my degree was so great for me that I think way outweighed any of the financial costs.

While most students focused on the concrete and immediate costs of exams and related fees, some were able to look positively towards the future savings on tuition.

The benefits of credit for prior learning most cited by students focused on time, more so than saving money. The benefit of time took a variety of forms and also included time to explore additional coursework that may not be directly part of a prescribed degree plan. While saving money was a helpful benefit to utilizing prior learning credits, it was not the primary benefit recognized by students and still came at a cost.
Rigor of the Credit for Prior Learning Experience

The third finding was that the rigor of credit for prior learning helped students feel well-prepared for college coursework. In particular, students who took AP courses and received AP credit at CRCC were quick to acknowledge how much work was required. Sara said, “My [AP class] was very fast paced. We were stressing ourselves out so much.” In college, though, the experience of challenging AP coursework was useful as they pursued coursework at the college level. For example, Emma received AP credit for English I and was able to start in English II at CRCC. She stated, “I felt pretty prepared for English II. I didn’t feel overwhelmed or anything with it.” The demands of the credit for prior learning experience helped with a successful transition to College and strong positive connections with the institution and an uplifting academic experience overall.

Several students mentioned that pursuing AP while in high school was difficult for a variety of factors. Participants discussed the pressure to succeed from parents, peers, and the general achievement driven culture in their respective high schools. Sam said, “At my high school, the culture around AP classes is that if you are available to take them you need to take them…and my parents wanted me to save money when I go to college.” These factors often encouraged participation in AP, even if at the time students did not fully understand the benefits of them at the time. Kim stated, “It felt expected of us and all we knew about it is that it would transfer to college, but we didn’t know any specifics.” Participants were told to take AP classes from many sources but did not know exactly what it would mean for their future.

While reflecting on taking AP classes, participants often described them as stressful. However, participants believed the stress and difficulty level of their AP courses led to a more
positive transition at the beginning of college. Layla stated, “[AP courses] really prepare you for college level courses and the amount of studying and work you have to do. You get the work ethic down for college.” On a similar note, Isabel shared, “I didn’t feel overwhelmed by all these expectations that my professors were presenting because that’s the environment that was already set in the AP class.” Some students, particularly those who were pursuing multiple AP classes simultaneously, felt that college was more manageable than high school.

While the AP students interviewed came from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, there was an undercurrent of privilege in their experiences. Two of the three students who utilized the CLEP exam as their form of credit for prior learning identified as Latina and pursued CPL in order to receive credit for fluently reading and speaking Spanish. Both of these students mentioned that AP was not an option recommended to them and a general apprehension about higher level academic work in high school or college. Ximena said, “[Everyone] is so, so smart at CRCC. It gives me a little bit of intimidation. This test helped me out instead of feeling intimidated or discouraged.” While different than the experience of AP courses, the CLEP exam also provided validation and assurance to the participants who used that option.

Participants discussed their experience with AP courses and being able to receive college credit as enhancing their self-confidence in their ability to do college-level work. Trevor, who was the first person in his family to attend college, stated, “The AP credit that I got proves that I am able to do this.” Another student, Rafael, discussed being the first in his family to attend an American college and being apprehensive about college generally. Rafael imagined being at college with “like 150 people in the same class and that was just daunting.” But, he later added,
“I took about 15 AP courses and then later tutored people in these classes. It’s the same stuff, same amount of rigor as college, and I knew I could do it.”

In addition to self-confidence, having a rigorous credit for prior learning experience seemed to contribute to an overall positive connection to Clear River Community College. All of the students who participated in this research were either enrolled at the college for the next semester or had transferred from CRCC and were enrolled at a four year institution. In addition to their persistence, students articulated a strong affinity and sense of belonging to CRCC. Responses ranged from a general sense of feeling welcomed (“everyone is friendly” or “people are really helpful when I had questions”) to an absolute commitment to the College (“this was one of the best decisions of my life” or “I am forever grateful”). Most specifically, they were thankful especially for professors who helped for them explore opportunities to continue their education. Credit for prior learning strengthened their desire to keep learning and it felt personally meaningful. Sara said, “The teachers are super, you know, understanding and do what’s best for the student.”

Credit for prior learning experiences provided rigorous, and at times stressful, learning experiences and helped students gain the skills they needed for a successful transition to college. With that foundation, they were able to springboard into college with confidence and remain persistent in pursuit of their goals.

**College Affordability Concerns**

The fourth finding was that college affordability weighed heavily on participants’ minds. Concerns about affordability largely influenced their decision to attend community college rather than a 4-year institution. Alice, like many others, stated, “It didn’t happen to be my first choice.
I had gotten accepted at to four year colleges and I couldn’t afford it.” Students indicated that the lower cost of attendance opened the door for them to consider attending a community college as a post-secondary option. Knowing that they could receive credit for prior learning helped solidify their decision. As Isabel shared, “[CPL] did play a role in which schools I would apply to because some would take them and some wouldn’t. [CRCC] took quite a handful of them.” Despite the lower cost to attend a community college coupled with being able to receive CPL, participants expressed significant concerns about costs to attend college.

One of the most direct statements on affordability was from Sam, a participant that transferred to art and design school after attending community college. Sam’s decision to first attend a community college was influenced by several factors, including that they would receive credit for prior learning. Sam stated, “College is priced like a luxury, but then regarded as a necessity.” They also believed that student loan debt is a “very big crisis in America right now.” Sam shared that they were thankful for their relative privilege in having parents who supported their education. Sam’s parents helped offset costs for art lab fees and other extra opportunities for study. For Sam, the concerns about college affordability were focused at a systemic level and influenced by classmates and friends who did not have the same support.

Trevor, a first generation college student, discussed having a “panic attack” near the end of his senior year of high school about making a decision about where to attend college. He had been accepted to multiple colleges and universities but ultimately decided to attend CRCC because of the cost and not wanting to assume large amounts of debt. Trevor spoke in detail about what he called “pricing schemes” at different colleges. In particular, he noted the significant difference in “sticker price” from private schools where he was accepted and cost
after receiving scholarships. With a sincere dose of humor, he likened the experience to a high pressure sales experience. Trevor said, “Colleges were like...‘For you? For you, I’ll make you a deal on the price.’” He started to consider community college as a lower cost alternative: “I looked up [community college] tuition and it said that it can anywhere from $2,500 to $5,000 a year. I was just sitting there like, ‘Oh, I don’t even have that much money.’” Trevor ultimately received a full scholarship to community college as part of the honors program and was able to transfer to a liberal arts college debt free.

For some students, other colleges were never under consideration. While demonstrating strong academic skills in high school, several participants never felt that anything other than community college would be within reach financially. Even with lower cost of tuition at CRCC, participants discussed still looking for ways to cut costs. Ximena mentioned her excitement in discovering that she could earn “eight credits almost for free” through CLEP exams on the way to pursuing her Associates degree. Her ultimate plan was to transfer to a four year university but admitted that she did not know how that would happen since she needed to work full-time. Alice said that being able to afford college was her primary concern about the future and cost was “always part of the conversation” with her family and friends when they asked about her progress and future plans.

College affordability played an unexpectedly large role in the conversations with students regarding their experiences on credit for prior learning. While acceptance credit for prior learning was a helpful factor in deciding to attend community college, the low cost of attendance was more important overall, even for those with other sources of financial support.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand how students utilized credit for prior learning. The nature of this work was exploratory because there is very little information regarding community college students’ perceptions of their credit for prior learning experience. The research yielded results highlighting benefits and barriers related to credit for prior learning focused on the student perspective. Additionally, new information discovered through this research can be further explored in future research.

One benefit was that all students were enrolled and persisting towards academic goals. This is especially noteworthy as this research occurred during a time of national enrollment declines across higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were enrolled at CRCC or had already transferred to another four-year school. Prior studies found that community college students with credit for prior learning had higher persistence rates (defined by year to year continuous enrollment) that non CPL students (Kuang & McKay, 2015).

Another benefit was that the rigor of credit for prior learning experiences prepared students for college level coursework. For students who took Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, the high school instruction was challenging and comparable to courses that they later took in college. The experiences of AP coursework served to motivate students as they transitioned to college. This reinforces work prior focused on students at four year colleges; nationally representative data showed students with AP credit take more college credits in their first year of college yet still show higher achievement (Evans, 2019). For students who used other credit for prior learning options, their previous experiences were an accurate reflection of their skills and abilities in that specific subject and they were successful in subsequent courses in
college. This aligns with the research of Klein-Collins (2010) which found credit for prior learning students had better academic outcomes in terms of persistence and graduation rates than other students.

Students with credit for prior learning show a motivation and commitment to completing their educational goals. Additionally, all students in this study were consistent in stating that credit for prior learning prepared them for college. In order to amplify these benefits, community colleges may need to focus on sharing credit for prior learning student success stories, especially with faculty and advising staff. If more stakeholders understood the student success associated with credit for prior learning, they may want to expand these opportunities to other students.

One barrier highlighted through this research is a lack of familiarity with credit for prior learning in general. This was especially true of options outside of AP. AP is discussed often in high school; even students who did not utilize AP were aware of the format. However, most students who received one type of credit for prior learning were unaware of other formats. For example, if a student received AP credit, they did not realize there were other standardized exam options (like CLEP).

On a related note, another barrier seems to be the reliance of students on receiving credit for prior learning information from another person – college official, family member, or friend. This includes whether or not a course would be accepted and how it would appear on their transcript. Students articulated a need for personal support in their goal to utilize credit for prior learning. While information about credit for prior learning was on the institutional website and included in other materials, most students indicated they learned about CPL options through personal connections.
Prior research by McKay, Cohn & Kuang (2016) has also noted a similar finding in that simply the process of gaining or utilizing credit for prior learning can be a barrier for students. Their work highlighted the need for transferability and transparency of credit for prior learning policy. Similar to accepting transfer credit, each college maintains their own policies around credit for prior learning. There is not one central location for confirming acceptance; students must complete research for each institution. If students do not know that a range of credit for prior learning options exist or feel that they cannot understand and navigate the process of credit for prior learning without others, it would seem that the process is not clear enough. Credit for prior learning information is available but only if students know where to look; that is not the level of transparency students need.

In addition to the benefits and barriers described above, this research indicated that there is new information related to community college students who utilize credit for prior learning not previously described. Participants highlighted being able to save time and take courses that were more challenging as a motivator for them to use CPL. This information aligns with prior research and further expands the discussion and importance of credit for prior learning for community college students.

Participants in this study were focused on achieving their academic goals – by utilizing credit for prior learning they were able to keep learning and not repeat information they already knew. More than saving money by avoiding paying for additional courses or saving time by earning a degree faster, these students emphasized not being forced to repeat material they had previously mastered. Their focus was on the immediate impact of credit for prior learning and less on the long-term benefits.
Previous research (Klein-Collins 2010, McKay, Cohn & Kuang 2016) has demonstrated the long term benefits of credit for prior learning. This work has primarily focused on helping colleges see that the credit for prior learning policies and practices can be helpful to students and that credit for prior learning students have positive outcomes. The student view of the benefits of credit for prior learning seems to be slightly different. They were eager to move on to new things and to learn more in another subject or at a higher level of the same subject. The long-term benefits of saving money and time were not as important as the immediate progression to new material.

Furthermore, students with credit for prior learning described self-assurance and confidence as they began their community college coursework. Their success with credit for prior learning helped build the foundation for success in college. Because the college recognized their credit for prior learning experience as valuable and applicable to other coursework, they felt they were on the right path. Students believed that since they completed credit for prior learning, they would be able to complete other college level work.

Research specifically focused on community college students worked to define experiences that positively reinforce student confidence (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Zucks-Ahidiana, 2017). Throughout periods of “destabilization” or “earned success” while in college, student confidence is shifting (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Zucks-Ahidiana, 2017). However, Bickerstaff, Barragan, and Zucks-Ahidiana (2017) note that “confidence with which students enter the classroom has real implications for student behaviors” (p. 507). In their research, as students earned more successes they demonstrated an increased confidence in their ability to complete a college degree, as well as positive academic behaviors to achieve these aspirations.
While community college student confidence is not static, credit for prior learning may be the type of success experience that positively reinforces student confidence.

Credit for prior learning has several benefits previously highlighted in the academic literature. Nonetheless, the student perspective on the credit for prior learning experience adds depth to previous knowledge. The immediacy of being able to pursue new coursework, as well as confidence that that they would be successful in college, helped community college students appreciate credit for prior learning experiences as valuable as they worked to attain their academic goals.

**Recommendations**

Findings from this study indicate several promising practices to consider to increase the use of credit for prior learning in a community college setting. The first is to revise the webpage to attract a larger audience who may unfamiliar with credit for prior learning. Within the redesign, the focus of student recruitment materials should be saving time in their pursuit of a degree as the major benefit of utilizing credit for prior learning. This time allows students to pursue new options or to advance to higher level coursework. Students were most pleased with being able to take the classes that either they personally wanted to take or that matched their true ability. Given their lower cost of attendance, community colleges already established a reputation as a smart financial investment. Saving additional money through credit for prior learning is not as noteworthy as other benefits. While marketing materials would need to be carefully crafted so as to not diminish the role of general education or introductory level
coursework, a focus on the demonstrated abilities of credit for prior learning students could have a positive effect.

Second, robust training on credit for prior learning options for student support staff members, such as advisors at both the high school and college level, is needed. Although this information is communicated in other ways – through the website, in print materials – student connection to the knowledge through another representative is essential. And, by investing in training staff, the students they help can become ambassadors to other students. There were several students who earned their credit for prior learning based on the recommendations of friends, family, or in the case of Ximena, a co-worker. The students who utilized AP indicated the most familiarity with the process of credits transferring and being accepted by the college. It seems likely that advisors have a high degree of familiarity with this type of CPL. However, other forms of CPL may need more discussion in order to help share the benefits and applicability to specific students.

Finally, a revision and restructuring of onboarding and orientation experiences may be useful in order to customize the information for students with credit for prior learning. Students who have credit for prior learning, especially those with AP credit, may need different advice and information to successfully select the right courses and advance quickly. The students in this study all articulated a desire to transfer to a four year institution (if they had not already enrolled transferred) after completing coursework at CRCC. By understanding the credits a student brings to CRCC and their desired end goal at a different university, a personalized plan based on their specific experiences would be incredibly useful to students early in their matriculation. CRCC has recently begun to revise practices and administrative structures that support students in the
admissions process. This includes purchasing additional case management software as well as shifting to a coaching model so that students can establish more meaningful connections with staff. This recommendation could be extremely timely as they work to implement improvements.

**Conclusion**

This study sought to better understand the usage of credit for prior learning by community college students. Currently, prior learning can go unacknowledged on a student’s path toward a degree or credential. Or, if it is acknowledged, students can be surprised, confused, or frustrated by the process of receiving credit for their prior learning. Even students like Sam who are able to utilize credit for prior learning still sees major challenges. Sam said, “I get scared for the future because I want people to go to school…and I feel like part of the problem is that colleges can be very inaccessible to people.” In making college accessible for all, a particularly important aim for community colleges, credit for prior learning should be incorporated. Research has shown that students who receive credit for prior learning are more likely to graduate, elect to pursue more courses, and have a stronger positive connection to the institution (Klein-Collins, 2010). This study of Clear River Community College students who have successfully utilized credit for prior learning helped understand clarify the benefits, barriers, and areas of improvement from the student perspective and can be applied to other community colleges looking to help students in a similar way.
CHAPTER 3
SCHOLARLY REFLECTION

Reflection on the Dissertation Process

In the previous chapter, the research results were presented comprehensively in the form of a journal article. The chapter described related research, methodology, results, and a discussion of the findings. The following chapter is an introspective review of the process as a whole. The completion of this qualitative research project and progression through the stages of writing a dissertation has been a challenging, yet fulfilling, academic journey.

Overall, my original plan of research stayed remarkably consistent from proposal to execution. The guidance of my advisor and committee helped fine tune my initial proposal so at the time of research, my plan was solid. The one challenge in this process was that it took more time to execute on this plan than I originally anticipated. As I began, there were some unexpected procedural hurdles within the College as far as acquiring necessary approvals to access student data as a researcher. This delay was surprising because within my administrative role, I already have access to this information. However, I was ultimately able to indicate that this research was part of a legitimate educational interest. I was required demonstrate for the necessary senior leader the responsible for stewardship of this data that this my research could provide benefits to the College. These issues slowed the start of my research but were resolved by early March 2020.

Unfortunately, mid-March 2020 provided new challenges. Like many individuals, my personal and professional responsibilities dramatically shifted and increased in response to the
COVID-19 pandemic. As a new normal settled in, I was able to return to my research by June 2020. The only noteworthy change to my planned research was to shift my interviews from in person to an online videoconferencing platform. In some ways, this change may have encouraged participation in my study; students were more readily available for an online meeting at their convenience and by June had a high degree of familiarity with these types of videoconferencing tools.

Conducting the interviews with students was the highlight of this process and went well overall. The semi-structured interview format (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) was ideal for this project and provided enough organization to guide the conversation while also allowing students to offer their specific perspective. The number of questions and the thematic groupings helped set a positive tone that felt like a conversation. While there were a few participants who provided short responses, most became more comfortable as the interview continued and the understood my genuine interest in the specific details of their experiences, not just generalities.

One component I would change if I were to repeat this research would be to gain more insight from college advisors regarding their perspectives on this process. Multiple students described advisors as key individuals in their understanding credit for prior learning. While this expands the scope of the research, the overall findings would be more robust if advisors were able to contribute their experiences of helping students navigate the credit for prior learning process. Student interviews are essential for their specificity and personal perspective. Yet, the aggregate experiences of advisors who have assisted hundreds more students than those interviewed for this research could confirm or dispute the validity of these findings.
On a personal level, there are other components I would change as I reflect on this journey. There were certain points where my progress slowed or I felt unsure how to move to the next step. This typically occurred when I accomplished a specific component or goal and did not know how to keep moving forward. For example, I successfully defended my proposal and received IRB approval to conduct the research in Fall 2019. But after those milestones, encountering bureaucratic hurdles at the College seemed to stall me longer than needed. Another example occurred after I had completed and coded my student interviews. I struggled with the process of synthesizing themes into findings. The resolution to these delays was to seek guidance from my faculty advisor instead of trying to propel myself to find a solution. If I were to do this process again, I would set more regular check-ins to guide the work and resolve issues before they devolve into unnecessarily lengthy delays.

**Applications to Professional Practice**

My role at the College of Lake County is focused on primarily administrative functions, often with a focus on compliance and curricular issues. Although my actions and decisions are driven with students in mind, at times, my work feels disconnected from them. This process has helped me reconnect and reframe my work. It has also challenged me to think about my preconceived notions of what students need or want. In this specific research, I was knowledgeable about the field of credit for prior learning and felt that these interviews would likely confirm what I thought I knew. By conducting this research and directly asking students, my assumptions about credit for prior learning were challenged. This is likely the case for other projects or processes where college staff or faculty presume that they best understand what students need.
The students interviewed for this research were candid, thoughtful, and an often inspirational reminder as to why the field of higher education is so important. While the students in this interview were provided a small gift card for participation, it seemed that they more often valued simply being asked about their experiences and validated for their efforts. In practice, the decisions I make – on the topic of credit for prior learning or in other areas – can impact students. While quantitative data can inform those decisions, there is no replacement to qualitative research to support and explain with true depth. Even smaller scale decisions, which may not rise to the level of research, can be improved with feedback from students. In my practice, I need to remember that students often want to contribute and that it is worth the time and energy to ask them.

The results of this research will inform changes in practice at the College of Lake County. I have always held the goals of a dissertation of practice in high regard in order effectuate change in a meaningful way for the community college I serve. After successfully defending this dissertation, I plan to present my findings to relevant stakeholders in the enrollment, advising, and to senior leadership of the College.

As it relates to enrollment, it is important to capture credit for prior learning on the application or as part a student intake process. By having this information as soon as the student enters the College, advisors and other staff can make sure a student placed in the correct classes. Additionally, advisors may benefit from training on other forms of credit for prior learning, outside of AP exams. While AP is the most common, the use of other types of credit for prior learning are available and may be useful to students. As part of their holistic approach, advisors could screen students to see if there are any other prior experiences applicable to their academic
goals. Having examples for advisors – such as fluency in another language (tested through CLEP exams), professional certifications (evaluated through credential review), or prior experience in a specific subject even if it is not college credit (tested through challenge exams) – may be especially useful.

For senior leaders at the College, the recommended change in practice would be to provide institutional support in a clear and meaningful way related to credit for prior learning. Although credit for prior learning has been mentioned as important by leaders, there has been no strategy to maximize its use at the College. One of the most impactful ways to lead this effort would be hire or reallocate an existing staff member to be focused on credit for prior learning. This position could include student outreach, working with faculty to expand challenge exams available to students, and additional research on the outcomes of students related to credit for prior learning. The College has meaningful data and relevant information related to credit for prior learning; much of that data served as a basis for this work. However, current practice at the College does not monitor any of the data related to credit for prior learning. My desire in presenting this to senior leaders would be show the great opportunity credit for prior learning provides to students and subsequent benefits to the College. The College already has many of the important pieces in place. With a supportive senior leader and a solid plan, small investments in credit for prior learning can yield significant dividends.

**Application to Research**

My initial reaction to beginning the process of writing a journal article was a sense of unease. The unease was multi-dimensional – a lack of knowledge about where to start, personal self-doubt, and concern that my research was not contributing enough to field. Again, guidance
from my advisor was the key to overcoming my hesitancy. Her insight about the higher education landscape, particularly in specific journals that may be interested in this research, was the very helpful to nudge me in a productive direction.

During meetings with my advisor, I was able to relay with excitement insights participants had shared and themes that were starting to emerge. While this felt like a conversation to me, she was able to decipher meaningful components. She was able to relay with clear detail how what I told her transforms into the framework of a journal article. This roadmap made the process of writing feel more achievable. With this plan I dedicated myself to writing incrementally, knowing that each paragraph, page, and section would be a step towards a completed draft.

There were certain parts of writing the journal article that felt easy and exciting. Writing the findings section was particularly enjoyable because it allowed me to revisit the student interviews in detail. I knew that certain students seemed especially quotable but going back to every interview helped me recall how much I was able to learn from each student. There were times when I felt that I had too much I wanted to share and had to work to edit myself. Through the revision process my advisor was further edit, revise, and focus my voice in an even more meaningful way.

The discussion section of the journal article was a challenge for me. While I understood the goal was to place my findings in conversation with prior research, I missed the mark in execution by adding new data (quotes that belonged in the findings section) or offering action items (better aligned to recommendations). After meeting with my advisor about initial draft, we formulated a new plan of action. With a better understanding of the section I drafted an outline of
the revised components. I shared that outline, received additional feedback, and then rewrote the section.

By going through the process of conducting of research and preparing an article for publication, I have a new understanding of the iterative process of writing. As I turned in drafts for review, I felt like I was doing my absolute best and providing quality work. The first time I received feedback in track changes, it was deflating. When I talked to my advisor, she was encouraging and praised my writing. The positive feedback felt completely incongruent to what I had read. Nonetheless, I addressed the suggestions one by one. As I worked through the edits I began to see a sharper, better version of my writing. Each pass back and forth unfolded in a similar way but the sting of feeling like my best was not good enough lessened every time. I was able to quiet my self-doubt and move forward more quickly into action. Although I am sure there are some academic prodigies, through this process I learned that well respected researchers have to work at it. That knowledge humanizes the process and provides encouragement for any future efforts.

After completing a research project, I have a more well-rounded view of the level of commitment and effort completing research involves, particularly qualitative research. While I have always appreciated scholarly effort, I did not fully understand how much work it takes to thoughtfully conduct and analyze qualitative research. My work has also spurred me to be a more critical and reflective reader of other research. When studies pique my interest or seem to have especially noteworthy findings, I want to know as much as possible about how the results were achieved. I read all appendices, follow citations to other relevant works, and look for subsequent research by the authors. I want to understand how they were able to complete their work and
think about the ways I would have approached a similar project. Finally, now that I have completed a research project I am more comfortable and confident in my own academic skills. I am worthy of contributing to the discourse and allowed to have a differing but well-supported opinion of my own. Those who have more significant research expertise are not necessarily intellectual masterminds but hard-working practitioners, honing their craft and eager to keep learning – just like me.

In my profession moving forward, one of the key ways I plan to use research is to start by reminding myself to actually use the research available. When working day to day, it can seem as if no other community college has the same challenges we face. Each college is unique, but there is much to be learned from others and looking to the research from our peers is a great first step. Demonstrating a commitment to research is a behavior worth modeling to others I work with and to our students.
REFERENCES


The questions listed below will guide the semi-structured interviews with College of Lake County students who have utilized credit for prior learning options. Student participants will be interviewed once during this project. These questions are related to the sub-research questions and components 2 and 3 of high-quality credit for prior learning program framework.

**Introduction/educational goals**

1. Tell me a little about yourself. What are you studying at CLC?
2. What are your career goals? How did you decide on those goals?

**Process**

3. You received credit on your CLC transcript for work that occurred outside of CLC. This is called credit for prior learning - what type of CPL did you use?
4. What are the ways that you heard/learned about CPL before you pursued it?
5. Tell me about the process to obtain the credits for your prior learning? What did you do to first, next? Who helped you?

**Challenges/Barriers**

6. What kinds of challenges did you face during the credit-granting process for prior learning?
7. Some people would say that college credit should only be granted for learning that occurs at a college, anything else is not as rigorous. What would you say to that?

**Benefits**

8. Do you feel that CLC as an institution supports all learning, including learning that takes place outside of the college?
9. What benefits did you find in using credit for prior learning at CLC?
Improvements/Conclusion

10. What, if anything, would have made your experience utilizing CPL better?

11. Is there anything else you want to say about your educational experience at CLC overall?
APPENDIX B

IRB APPLICATION TO NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
Application for Institutional Review of Research
INvolving Human Subjects

Note: Please complete this form thoroughly keeping in mind that the primary concern is the potential risk (economic, ethical, legal, physical, political, psychological/emotional, social, breach of confidentiality, or other) to the participants. Include attachments of all materials to be used in the investigation (PDF preferred). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) must have enough information about the transactions with the participants to evaluate the risks of participation.

Names and employee IDs for all investigators (Z-IDs for students)
Jessica Derek (Z1835566)

Status (select all that apply):
☐ Faculty  ☒ Graduate Student  ☐ Undergraduate Student  ☐ Non-NIU Affiliate

Department (main PI):
Counseling and Higher Education (CAHE)

Phone (main PI):
815-753-1448

E-mail address (for all investigators):
All communications will occur via NIU email accounts (for all NIU affiliates).
Z1835566@students.niu.edu

Project Title:
Credit for Prior Learning at the College of Lake County

Note: All projects involving human subjects research must receive formal written clearance from the IRB prior to the start of data collection.

Type of Project (Check one)
☐ Departmental Research (faculty/student projects not externally funded and not indicated below)
☒ Graduate Thesis/Dissertation (IRB application should be submitted AFTER proposal defense)
Advisor/Committee Chair (& e-mail): Dr. Carrie Kortegast, ckortegast@niu.edu

☐ DNP Project (Doctor of Nursing Practice)

☐ Undergraduate Project (Senior thesis/capstone, research, independent study)
Advisor/Committee Chair (& e-mail):

☐ Externally Sponsored Research
A complete copy of the grant proposal or contract must accompany this application form for IRB review to take place.

- Source of Funding:
- Title of grant proposal (if different from IRB protocol):
- Name of principal investigator on grant proposal:
- Sponsored Programs Administration file number (or grant number if awarded):
  SPA#

☐ Other
Specify:

[1]

Revised 8/2019
Part I. Purpose and Procedures:

1) Describe the purpose of your study and the reason(s) this study is needed. Include any necessary background information and a description of your hypothesis or research question.

Credit for prior learning, also known as prior learning assessment (PLA), is one strategy to capture the ways learning occurs outside of the college classroom. In practice, colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom, from employment, military training/service, and industry trainings among others.

The College of Lake County accepts credit for prior learning from a variety of sources. Until 2015, the processes associated with accepting credit for prior learning were decentralized. Some decisions were made in central administrative offices (such as the Registrar), some were made by academic division leadership (such as a Dean) and others were made by individual faculty members. Additionally, information provided to students was limited, mostly provided by the College’s Testing Center staff.

A college-wide improvement project in 2015 refined these processes and in order to provide clear information to students. This project was guided by assistance from an outside consultant and included significant input from college faculty and staff. At the time of the project, there was additional interest by college leadership in a more intentional promotion of credit for prior learning but since that time, no additional work as occurred. While research has demonstrated that community college students who utilize prior learning options have higher graduation rates regardless of degree type or major (Kuang & McKay, 2015), relatively few students at the College of Lake County have pursued these options.

The purpose of this qualitative case study will be to understand how College of Lake County students have utilized credit for prior learning. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What barriers do students perceive in using credit for prior learning at the College?
2. What do students identify as the benefits of credit for prior learning at the College?
3. What areas of improvement do students identify regarding credit for prior learning at the College?

By focusing on students who have used credit for prior learning options and understanding more about their experiences with credit for prior learning at CLC, the research will offer guidance to CLC within the framework established by Travers (2013) for high quality CPL programs.

2) The following items will help the IRB reviewers understand the step-by-step procedures of your study:

2A) Explain the participant eligibility and exclusion criteria that will be used.

The population of students at the College of Lake County who have utilized credit for prior learning within the last three academic years is relatively small compared to the overall enrollment. Students selected will have had utilized at least one credit for prior learning option in one of the last three academic years (2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19). Students may have used more than one credit for prior learning option and may have a range of credits earned for their prior learning. Utilizing credit for prior learning will be demonstrated by having credits posted on their official academic record/college transcript. This will potentially exclude students who worked with individual faculty to waive a pre-requisite course but did not officially demonstrate prior learning in order to receive academic credit.

2B) Explain the recruitment procedures (how will participants learn about the study?). If using the snowball technique, please explain who contacts potential participants (other participants or the researcher). Please attach recruitment scripts, flyers, or postings.

Students who have utilized one or more credit for prior learning options in one of the last three academic years will be contacted via email. The information about eligible students will be gained through the college’s student information system (PeopleSoft). The initial recruiting email is attached to this application. Since students may not have extensive familiarity with some of the terms associated with this work, the invitation email tries to help explain the research in an accessible way. Follow up emails may be sent if not enough participants reply to the initial contact.

[2]

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2C) Explain the consent process (verbal and/or written procedures for informing participants of the nature of the study and what they will do).

[Please attach all documents (assent, consent, parent permission) that are appropriate for each group of subjects participating in the study. Consent forms should be prepared for adult participants (age 18 or over). Assent forms should be prepared for minor subjects appropriate to their ages, and permission form(s) for parents or legally authorized representatives should also be prepared. For children too young to comprehend a simple explanation of participation, parental permission is sufficient only if the research will provide direct benefit to the subject, a member of the subject's family, or other children with the same condition as the subject.]

If a student agrees to participate in an interview, the student will schedule a time with the researcher for a face to face interview. At the time of the interview, the researcher will verbally review and explain each component of the consent document. The attached consent document describes the nature of the study, that there are no risks associated with participation, and the benefits of participating among others items.

2D) Describe the data collection procedures including what data will be collected, how it will be collected (include a description of any interventions to be used), the duration of participation in the study session(s), and how the session(s) will end.

Data will be collected through student interviews. Students will be asked a series of questions related to their educational goals, and perspectives regarding their experiences with credit for prior learning at the College of Lake County. Interviews are anticipated to be between 45-60 minutes long and will only occur once with an individual student. The session will end with a final question asking students for any remaining comments related to their experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, students will receive their $10 gift card.

In addition to the data collected through the interview process, an artifact review of publicly available materials related to credit for prior learning at the College of Lake County will be conducted. This includes brochures and information posted on the College’s website, forms linked to appropriate pages, and the college catalog description of the process.

2E) If applicable, explain the procedures for providing compensation.

The researcher will purchase $10 dining dollars gift cards and will indicate the mention of this compensation in the recruiting email. This compensation is also mentioned in the consent document.

Once the interview has concluded, the student participant will be handed the gift card by the researcher.

2F) If applicable, explain the procedures for debriefing participants. Please attach a debriefing script or sheet.

No debriefing will be necessary.

Reminder: Include copies of all questionnaires, surveys, interview questions, listing of all information/data to be collected, etc. with this application. It is the responsibility of the researcher to obtain any relevant permission for copyrighted materials. If the research involves an oral interview or focus group discussion that could evolve as it progresses, include a list of discussion topics and any “starter” questions for each topic that can reasonably be expected to be covered. If a draft of a written questionnaire or survey is attached, it should be clearly labeled as such and a final version must be submitted before data collection begins.

Part II: Research Participants

3) Participant demographics:

- Gender: All ☐ M ☐ F ☐ Trans ☐ Trans F ☐ Nonconforming ☐
- Estimated age(s):
  - 18-65
- Are any subjects under age 18? Yes ☐ No ☒
- Potentially vulnerable populations (please indicate if any of the following groups are the target population of the study)
  - Pregnant women & fetuses
  - Prisoners
  - Decisionally impaired/mentally disabled

Specific racial or ethnic group(s) (list in box):

If any potentially "vulnerable populations" will be the target of the study, be sure to include a response to 2A above explaining eligibility criteria.

- Target number of participants in the entire study (including controls) from start to finish (keep in mind that this is just an estimate of the total):
  20-25

4) Please explain any outside institutional (e.g., schools, hospital(s)) approval you will need to obtain and how approval will be sought. Provide scripts, letters, or emails providing any information that will be used to obtain needed approvals/permission. It is the responsibility of the researcher to follow all applicable policies of any outside institution(s).

In addition to requesting approval from the IRB of NIU, I will be requesting approval from the IRB of the College of Lake County (CLC), the site of my research. In consulting with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning, and Research, I was informed that if approved by NIU, the process for approval at CLC would be streamlined.

Part III: Risk/Benefit assessment

5) What knowledge/benefit(s) to the field will be gained from the study?

The benefits are to help improve the College of Lake County practices related to credit for prior learning. Since credit for prior learning has been shown to improve retention and graduation rates, this could positively impact students at the College. This research can also influence future policies and practices for other students at CLC as well as more broadly contribute to the body of knowledge for credit for prior learning at comprehensive community colleges.

6) What direct benefit(s) are there to the participant(s) (if any) from the proposed research? [For example, learning a new skill, psychological insight, teaching experience] [Please note that compensation is NOT considered a direct benefit.]

There are no direct benefits to the participants.

7) Describe any potential risks (breach of confidentiality, economic, ethical, legal, physical, political, psychological/emotional, social, etc.) to the subjects posed by the proposed research. (Note: Some studies may have "no reasonably foreseeable risks.") Investigators are required to report all unexpected and/or adverse events to the IRB. Therefore, it is important that you list all reasonably anticipated risks because unanticipated adverse events may need to be reported by NIU to GHRP.

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks.

8) Federal regulations require that researchers use procedures that minimize any risks to participants. What procedures will be used to minimize each risk and/or deal with the challenge(s) stated in "7" above?

Does not apply.

9) If support services are required to minimize risk of harm, explain what will be provided (list of services available).

[DeKalb area resource list: https://www.niu.edu/dh/research/compliance/resources/files/Counseling-Resource-DeKalb.pdf]

If using this, please include with your application.

Does not apply.

10) How do the potential benefits of the study justify the potential risks to the participants?

n/a

Part IV: Consent Document Variations

11) Will audio, video, or film recording be used?  Yes ☒  No ☐
If yes, specify the recording format to be used.

Interviews will be recorded; audio only.

Please keep in mind that specific consent must be sought in the informed consent document(s) by including a separate signature/date line giving consent for recording. This is in addition to the signature/date line giving consent to participate in the research project.

12) Will this project require the use of consent/assent documents written in a language other than English?  
Yes ☐ No ☒

Reminder: If non-English documents will be used, please have the document translator provide documentation (email or written) that the translation is equivalent to the English version. [This can be done after the protocol is approved in order to minimize the number of changes needed.]

13) Are you requesting a waiver of a signature on the informed consent document?  
Yes ☐ No ☒

Please indicate the justification for requesting this waiver:
☐ The only record linking the subject to the research would be the signed consent document and the principal risk of the research would be breach of confidentiality.
☐ The research involves minimal risk to the subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context (e.g., online surveys).

14) Are you requesting a waiver/alteration of some other aspect of the informed consent document? [This section is particularly relevant for studies involving deception.]  
Yes ☐ No ☒

14a) Please explain which aspects of informed consent will be missing or altered along with a justification for the change.

n/a

14b) Please explain how the project meets all of the following criteria:

1) The research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to the participants.

n/a

2) The waiver/alteration will not adversely affect the rights or welfare of the participants.

n/a

3) The research could not practically be carried out without the waiver or alteration.

n/a

4) Whenever appropriate, the participants will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation.

n/a

15) Will any HIPAA protected health information be collected as part of the data?  
Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

n/a

[Please provide a copy of your HIPAA disclosure form to be given to participants.]

16) Will any protected school records be collected as part of the data?  
Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, describe the procedures for protecting the information.

[5]

Revised 8/2019
Information related to credits earned through credit for prior learning will be accessed to find students eligible to participate in the study. This information will be accessed and utilized by the researcher and will be stored as a password protected file.

Part V: Confidentiality and Anonymity

17) Will identifying information be connected to the data, or is there a way to re-identify the data through pseudonyms or a code that is kept separate from the data? □ Yes (confidential data) □ No (anonymous data)

QUALTRICS USERS: You may want to keep your survey anonymous by allowing student participants to access a second Qualtrics survey where they enter their name and student ID if needed. This would require clear instructions in the original survey along with a link to the second survey where they enter the identifiers for course credit or entry into a drawing.

18) If you answered yes to question #17, describe precautions to insure the privacy of the subjects, and the confidentiality of the data, both in your possession and in reports and publications.

   The subjects will be assigned pseudonyms to protect their privacy. If specific identifying characteristics that could potentially reveal the student are described in relevant responses, the researcher will take care only select or describe non-identifying components in the research results. In general, the responses will be coded into themes so there is little risk of a breach of privacy. The participant’s responses to interview questions be maintained securely in password protected files.

19) If you are collecting your data through an on-line survey tool, will the survey instrument collect email and/or IP addresses with the data?

   □ No □ The survey will be set so that email/IP addresses are NOT collected
   (in Qualtrics: within a survey select “survey options” then “anonymize responses” toward the bottom)

   □ Yes □ IP and/or email addresses WILL be collected with the data
   □ N/A □ I am not using an online survey tool.

Please Note: Some electronic survey items may not be accessible to people who use screen readers as a way of accommodating their visual impairments. We recommend that you follow the link below to check the accessibility of your Qualtrics survey items: https://www.qualtrics.com/support/survey-platform/survey-module/survey-tools/check-survey-accessibility/

20) How will the records (data, recordings, and consent forms) be stored? Also indicate how long records will be kept and how and when they will be disposed of.

   [Note: Signed informed consent documents must be maintained for 3 years following completion of the study.]

   Audio files will be recorded on a smartphone and then uploaded to a secure site for initial transcription. Consent forms will be stored securely while research is ongoing and maintained for three years following completion of the study. Three years after completion, all records will be destroyed.

Part VI: Projects Involving Deception [complete only if your study includes deception]

21) Describe the deception used. Be sure to clarify whether this is deception by omission (an important aspect of the study is withheld from the participants) or commission (the participant is misled about some aspect of the study) or both. [Complete item 1d if aspects of consent are missing.]

22) Why is deception a necessary and unavoidable component of the experimental design?

23) Debriefing of participants will be:

   □ Immediate (directly following the research session)
   □ Delayed

[6]

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full (all aspects of deception will be revealed)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partial (some aspects of deception will remain unexplained)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a)</td>
<td>If debriefing is delayed, why is the delay necessary, and when will it occur?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b)</td>
<td>If debriefing is not full, why is partial debriefing necessary? Would the participant be harmed in any way by full debriefing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>c)</td>
<td>If debriefing is partial, will full debriefing occur later?</td>
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<tr>
<td>d)</td>
<td>Does the presence of deception increase risk of harm to the participants?</td>
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<tr>
<td>e)</td>
<td>Is the respondent free to withdraw his/her data after being fully debriefed?</td>
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24) Who will provide the debriefing?

**Reminder**: Please include a copy of your debriefing script/sheet with this application.

### Part VII: Credit and Compensation

25) If participants will receive course credit for participation, please describe it below.

- [ ] No, they will not receive course credit.

26) If participants will receive some other form of compensation for participation, please describe it below.

- Students will receive a $10 dining dollars gift card at the end of the interview for participating.

27) Describe any alternative tasks that will be available for participants to earn the credit or compensation.

### Part VIII: Conflict of Interest

28) Do any of the researchers conducting this study have any potential conflicts of interest? (Conflicts of interest may include financial or personal interest, or any condition in which the investigator's judgment regarding a primary interest may be biased by a secondary interest.)

- [ ] Yes
- [x] No

29) If yes to the above question, please describe the nature of the conflict of interest.

### Part IX: Researcher Qualifications

30) In addition to listing the investigators' names, indicate their qualifications to carry out the research described in this application.

- The primary researcher, Jessica Berek, has completed all doctoral coursework as part of the EdD program in Community College Leadership at NIU. She has been a college administrator in various roles for over 12 years, including 6 years at a community college.

31) State the date of completion of the CITI Human Subjects Protection training program(s) for the individuals listed in the question above. The required course is “Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher, Basic Course”. The required CITI training is accessible from the ORCIS website at [https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/training/index.shtml](https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/training/index.shtml)

If you have comparable training elsewhere, please include the certification with this application.

To be completed by investigator and confirmed by advisor (if student project) and departmental reviewer.

Check the items that are accompanying this completed application form:
1. ☑ Subject recruitment/introductory materials
2. ☑ Informed consent documents (select at least one):
   - Consent form for adults (if participants are age 18 or over)
   - Consent form for minors (if participants are under age 18)
   - Parental permission form (if participants are under age 18)
3. ☑ All surveys, questionnaires, interview questions, or other instruments to be used
4. ☑ Grant proposal SPA included on front of application (for externally funded projects)

REQUIRED SIGNATURES: ALL PROJECTS

CERTIFICATION

I certify that I have read and understand the policies and procedures for research projects that involve human subjects and that I intend to comply with Northern Illinois University Policy. Any changes in the approved protocol will be submitted to the IRB for approval prior to those changes being put into practice unless it involves an immediate safety issue for a subject during a procedure. (In such instances, the researcher is required to promptly notify the IRB after the fact.) I also understand that all non-exempt projects require review at least annually.

* Investigator(s) Signature(s) ........................................ Date

* Signature of Faculty Advisor (Student Projects Only) ......... Date

* Signature of Authorized Departmental Reviewer ............ Printed name Date

* PIs (both faculty and students), faculty advisors, and ADRs may choose to send an email statement (or email thread) indicating acknowledgement of the certification statement above in lieu of signatures.

Return this form, together with necessary documentation, to the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at researchcompliance@niu.edu (a single PDF is preferred, but we can work with multiple files and Word documents). For information or additional assistance with the approval process, please call our office at (815) 753-8588 (Lowden Hall, 301) or access the ORCIS web page at https://www.niu.edu/divrsearch/compliance/index.shtml

[8] Revised 8/2019