



# Professional Learning Evaluations

Validating Workplace Training as an Onramp  
to College Credentials

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## Validating Workplace Training as an Onramp to College Credentials

*This case study is a part of a series that examines the business models behind new 'recognition of non-institutional learning' initiatives. These initiatives are designed to validate learning that occurs in non-college settings, and these studies illustrate the potential return on investment and sustainability of these initiatives.*

SUNY Empire State College partnered with several employers, including CVS Health, in 2019 to conduct evaluations of college-level workplace learning that is offered for select career pathways at those companies. These Professional Learning Evaluations (PLEs) examine the competencies workers must demonstrate to successfully complete their workplace education and training programs. SUNY Empire translates the competencies learned through these programs into equivalent academic credits and courses. Employees who decide to enroll at the college can then apply those credits towards a certificate or degree program, or affiliated micro-credential. SUNY Empire's approach combines well-established methods for evaluating formal training offered in classrooms or online, with new approaches that evaluate competencies acquired through on-the-job training (OJT).

### Motivation and Objective

For years, SUNY Empire has worked with employers to evaluate their formal training programs through its [employer partnership program](#). Traditionally, employees who successfully completed these formal workplace education and training programs, and then enrolled at the college, would earn academic credit based on SUNY Empire's [PLE recommendations](#). However, as industry training approaches shifted to incorporate more informal on-the-job training (OJT), these partnerships began to require new approaches to capture that learning.

Initially, SUNY Empire asked students to complete individualized portfolios as a way to evaluate competencies learned through OJT. Over time, these portfolios confirmed that many of the competencies students learn in college could be acquired through OJT. Since portfolios are often time-consuming and costly for employees and the college, eligible informal college-level learning is not always transferred into college credits and credentials.

### Recognition of Non-institutional Learning (RNL)

#### Initiative Partners

**SUNY Empire State College** is part of the State University of New York (SUNY) and provides services to 10,000 students, of which more than 90% are undergraduate students, across 34 educational centers in the state of New York, with a strong focus on adult learners.

**CVS Health** is one of the largest retail pharmacy chains in the United States, with 300,000 employees, 9,900 stores, and 1,100 walk-in clinics in the Americas.

*The initiative also includes three organizations engaged in a similar approach as featured for CVS Health:*

The **Golub Corporation** operates around 135 supermarkets under various brands in the Northeast.

**Fort Drum** is a U.S. Army reserve located in northern New York state at which SUNY Empire has a location.

The **NY State Commission of the Blind** provides legally blind New York State residents with vocational rehabilitation and other services.

SUNY Empire is beginning to shift its evaluation of workplace OJT directly to the training program. This shift is expected to streamline the credit recognition process and reduce administrative efforts to validate learning.

SUNY Empire's corporate partners indicated they are motivated to participate in these PLE programs to improve both educational and workplace opportunities for their employees and communities. They want to leverage existing investments in their education and training programs, while cultivating new ways to develop their workforce, retain workers, and increase employee access to new roles within the company. Companies that initiate a PLE can also reduce the time and cost employees must devote to pursuing postsecondary credentials.

## Solution

SUNY Empire is working with four organizations—CVS Health, Golub Corporation, Fort Drum, and the NY State Commission of the Blind—to expand on its existing PLE work by developing a competency-based evaluation of on-the-job training. College-level competencies learned in the workplace are translated into academic credits towards postsecondary credentials, including micro-credentials embedded within degree pathways. SUNY Empire piloted its new approach with CVS Health, and the remainder of this case study will focus on that partnership and process.

SUNY Empire relies on various sources to identify companies interested in PLEs. Industry leads can come from existing campus partnerships, alumni connections, faculty working collaborations, and employer networking. After an alumna encouraged CVS Health to approach SUNY Empire, they worked together to develop and pilot a new competency-based PLE program to evaluate CVS Health's Store Manager in Training (SMIT) program. Upon successful completion of the pilot, they proceeded with two additional evaluations for Shift Supervisor and Pharmacy Technician training.

CVS Health indicated that they pursued the partnership to demonstrate the importance their company places on the time and effort employees invest in training. It also allows CVS Health to give back to the communities it serves, through workforce development and by opening training to nonemployees serving in the military.

All of SUNY Empire's PLEs are approved in advance by the Provost. The college's Center for Leadership in Credentialing Learning then forms an academic review team which conducts an initial meeting with the company. The team reviews and assesses the course materials, instructor materials, assessments, and grading or evaluation rubrics provided by the company. The team also typically conducts an on-site visit to assess learning activities and delivery.

For the Store Manager in Training (SMIT) Program, traditional evaluation methods that compare curriculum and learning objectives were used to evaluate the formal training administered online. The evaluation of the on-the-job portion of the training utilized a rubric that store managers use to evaluate employee competencies.

This OJT approach relies upon employer assessments of their workers' competencies. The academic review team used the internally developed [Global Learning Qualifications Framework](#) (GLQF) and the national [Connecting Credentials](#) Framework to determine whether CVS Health SMIT participants gained the appropriate store manager skills and knowledge.

The academic review team recommended that SMIT completers earn 32 college credits, while the Store Supervisor training recommendation was five credits. SUNY Empire provides the partner companies with the final credit recommendation, conducts a follow-up meeting, and compiles a final report.

A PLE typically requires about four months to complete once the college has received the review materials. SUNY Empire re-reviews the recommendations every five years; companies are required to notify SUNY Empire if any changes are made to the training in the interim.

As part of this process, the academic review team builds a sample degree pathway for each PLE review. They map the PLE credits to the college's area of study guidelines, which outline the competencies all students need to meet. For example, the team created a flexible business management bachelor's degree using the 32 credits from the SMIT evaluation as the core with the remaining degree requirements built around it.

Students at SUNY Empire can also design their own degrees, which may vary based on additional prior learning and previous college experiences.

Additionally, the college is developing topical micro-credentials (e.g., a human resources micro-credential) that students may earn along a degree pathway.

## Implementation

The viability of the PLE model depends on enrolling current or former employees from partner companies. The college anticipates a total of 25 students from the CVS Health SMIT and Staff Supervisor workplace training programs will enroll during the first year academic credit is available. Enrollment is expected to grow by 15% annually, adding five new students each year.

As of spring 2020, 15 training participants expressed interest in degree opportunities available at SUNY, while one student registered but did not enroll in a degree program. CVS Health indicated many workers were working long hours because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which may have limited their capacity to attend college during this time.

SUNY Empire asks its partners to assist in marketing efforts by informing their employees about the program and helping their employees understand PLE. CVS Health shares the information with employees, promotes the partnership, and connects interested individuals with appropriate contacts at SUNY Empire. As the program launched, CVS Health held a series of informational meetings to provide information and gather feedback on the program and the messaging around it.

Some companies require all workers in certain positions to participate in their training (e.g., store managers at CVS Health), which provides a steady source of potential new college students. Current and former training participants remain eligible for SUNY credits as long as the training program has not changed since it was evaluated. Other prospective SUNY Empire undergraduates learn about PLE credit opportunities through the college website and information sessions, admissions process prompts, orientation, and the required Educational Planning Course.

To avoid potential conflicts of interest around credit recommendations, the PLE process is free for partner companies. Students can obtain PLE academic credit at no cost or risk, making it less expensive than both traditional courses and the portfolio review process (previously used for OJT training) which assesses a \$700 fee. CVS Health also provides its employees with \$1,500 in tuition assistance, including course materials, further reducing employees' college costs.

In 2020-21, SUNY Empire's in-state tuition and mandatory fees totaled \$305 per credit hour. Students earning 32 credit hours from the CVS Health SMIT PLE would save \$9,760, while the five credits from the Store Supervisor PLE would save students \$1,525.

## Business Model

SUNY Empire's business model benefits from its deep experience with PLE. It has developed a standardized evaluation process with well-defined staff time and costs for various PLE activities. As a result, PLE costs are similar across companies and positions. The college typically evaluates training for several different positions at a company, although each is conducted separately.

The direct PLE development costs for both the CVS Health SMIT and Staff Supervisor training are estimated at about \$3,000 each; the direct cost for the final Pharmacy Tech PLE is expected to be similar. After indirect institutional costs are factored in, such as college supported personnel, marketing, and other operating costs, the overall investment is closer to \$37,000 for the initial PLE and \$33,000 for each additional evaluation at the same company.



**Start-up costs** account for nearly all resources required for a Professional Learning Evaluation. Each faculty team member receives a stipend of approximately \$500 for the 26 hours budgeted toward the PLE process and creation of the degree pathway. The largest PLE expense, however, is the compensation costs for project coordination, management, and administrative support. Other compensation costs include oversight and approval by senior administrators and adoption of the credit recommendation by the Registrar's office.

Compensation accounts for about three-quarters of all start-up expenses. Stipends and operating expenses (travel, meeting, and marketing materials) each separately account for about 11% to 13% of expenses.

The time and expense that CVS Health devoted to the project—project engagement, transmittal of training materials, communication and recruitment, pilot feedback information sessions, and staff time for training while not in stores—are excluded because these are not costs that colleges looking to develop these types of programs will incur.

**Ongoing costs** for PLE are intermittent. Once a PLE credit recommendation is complete, the only additional program costs over the next four years are modest marketing expenses. Every five years thereafter, the college re-evaluates the workplace training using a similar approach to the initial evaluation, at about 80% of the initial cost.

At SUNY Empire, external grants usually fund experimental work. Grant funding is supporting most of the work to expand competency-based on-the-job training PLE opportunities described in this case study.

However, the Center for Leadership in Credentialing Learning, which leads the PLE work, receives budgeted institutional support. These general funds, which also support the Director's position, are used for the PLE process (at a cost to the college) and recouped later through increases in tuition revenue from new students.

The SUNY Empire PLE approach can be financially beneficial to both the college and its students.

## Generating ROI for the Initiative

SUNY Empire expects that students who take advantage of these workplace PLE opportunities would not otherwise have enrolled at the college. The increases in student tuition, mandatory fees and additional state appropriations associated with these new students produces the return on investment (ROI).<sup>1</sup>

Even with modest initial enrollments, **PLE programs are expected to be profitable in the first year of operation because all costs are front-loaded in the start-up year** prior to student enrollment. When accounting for the initial start-up investment, both **the SMIT and Store Supervisor PLEs are projected to recoup their initial investment by at least the second year of operation at anticipated enrollment levels.** SUNY Empire would need to enroll 20 students a year in the SMIT bachelor's degree pathway to recoup its initial investment; the Shift Supervisor would only need to enroll eight students.

**The timing and magnitude of the financial margin depends on the number of PLE credits awarded, the number of additional transfer credits, and the type of credential.** The college's financial margin will be smaller for programs that award more PLE credits (e.g., the SMIT) because students need to complete fewer credits to earn their degrees.

Even though the average SUNY Empire student brings almost two years of transfer and prior learning credit when enrolling, students earning PLE credits towards their bachelor's degrees are still projected to enroll in enough courses to generate a positive financial margin. Programs leading to associate degrees or certificates may require longer to recoup the startup investment since these programs require fewer total credit hours than bachelor's degrees.

The SUNY Empire PLE approach can be financially beneficial to both the college and its students. A narrow comparison between the financial value of credits awarded versus credit earned (excluding PLE program costs) shows that **PLE programs providing greater savings to students generally provide a smaller financial benefit to the college.**

For example, the revenue from the Shift Supervisor PLE is expected to exceed revenue the college "lost" from awarding the five PLE credits.

<sup>1</sup> The return on investment includes the gross revenue from enrollment- and retention-related tuition and fees, less direct initiative expenses and additional instructional costs associated with enrollment and retention.

Revenue from the SMIT students, however, is not expected to offset forgone revenue from the 32 credit hours students are awarded in addition to their transfer credits. (Nevertheless, the ROI can still be positive when that revenue exceeds the program costs).

## Key Takeaways

### **1) Evaluating training programs—instead of their participants—reduces ongoing program costs and pressure to rapidly scale enrollment.**

By evaluating company-based training programs instead of students, the PLE business model requires little additional cost beyond the initial investment. This model lessens the pressure around scaling enrollment to cover annual operating costs, but companies and colleges still have an obligation to recruit and enroll students to provide a financial 'payback' on the initial investment. Since SUNY Empire's PLE development costs are similar across companies and programs, the per student program cost depends heavily on the number of students that matriculate from each of the corporate partners' training programs.

### **2) Routine evaluation processes can lead to standardized PLE development costs—meaning financial margins are maximized by other determinants.**

With multiple PLEs conducted over time, the college developed strong industry partnerships across sectors. This enables the college to leverage efficiencies with new partners and pathways, resulting in a standardized evaluation process. Applying this process to diverse content areas within and across companies still produces custom results for each workplace training program. Flexibility remains important, because of differences in programs and companies.

With similar PLE development costs across partners, the financial margin for each PLE program depends on factors other than cost, including: the length of degree/certificate program; the number of PLE credits available; the number of transfer credits students bring with them; the number of students that enroll, and their persistence rates and patterns.

### **3) Competencies are the key to credentialing different kinds of industry-provided training—but trust between higher education and industry is also critical.**

PLE models shift the evaluation of student learning from postsecondary institutions to companies; this approach relies heavily on trusting companies to evaluate individual learning. Using competencies to evaluate OJT programs expands opportunities to work with companies that may not have formal training programs. Colleges must be confident in their partners' oversight and verification of employee training, and acknowledge that managers are incentivized to fairly assess workers' skills so they have well-qualified employees.

As a result, part of the PLE review process includes an evaluation of partners' assessment processes of individual learning, their methods for verifying and tracking gained competencies, and general oversight of OJT procedures. Clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the partnership is essential to ensure all parties understand each other's function and are coherently working towards common goals.

### **4) Industry-developed competencies often align with college learning expectations, potentially driving new efficiencies in higher education.**

The PLE model leans heavily on competency-based trainings previously developed by the industry. Colleges and universities can expand credit for prior learning opportunities by recognizing that this work—establishing competencies and evaluating student learning—does not need to be redone by higher education to ensure it is valid. Leveraging industry-developed competencies by mapping them to competencies in higher education can save students time and money, while also helping colleges to reduce duplicative instructional activity (e.g., reducing sections of a course) and redirect their resources elsewhere.

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A Professional Learning Evaluation (PLE) model that recognizes and validates prior learning for competency-based on-the-job training can provide students with a way to improve their educational opportunities and employment options. Such an approach can be financially beneficial to colleges and universities, as well, by enrolling adult workers with prior training who otherwise may not pursue higher education.

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