



Credits2Career Portal

Recognizing the Value of Industry-Certified Learning at Virginia Community Colleges

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CASE STUDY

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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.

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) is expanding opportunities for prospective students by translating industry-verified certifications into academic credit and credentials. VCCS's constituent colleges are evaluating existing industry certifications across five in-demand career areas and making academic credit recommendations. The system is expanding its online Credits2Career (C2C) portal to incorporate those credit for prior learning (CPL) recommendations. The portal is intended to serve as the primary resource for identifying CPL opportunities across Virginia's 23 public community colleges. VCCS colleges also are collaborating to develop new CPL policies and procedures that reflect best practices across the system, which individual colleges can elect to adopt.

Motivation and Objective

VCCS's current C2C initiative leverages work across the system to promote a coordinated approach towards converting prior learning into academic credit.

Each community college in Virginia is responsible for independently evaluating and approving prior learning credit requests it receives from prospective students. Colleges recognize that this approach results in significant duplication of effort, unequal credit awards at different colleges, and difficulty transferring credits across the system. They are hopeful that a system-wide approach to evaluating industry-certified learning can reduce these inequities.

VCCS's new initiative will craft CPL policies and procedures to streamline the administration of credit for prior learning. Community colleges adopting these best practices expect they will be able to review, approve, and transcript credit for prior learning more efficiently, while still preserving each college's authority over final credit awards. Increased transparency around these processes is intended to engender additional support for CPL among faculty and administrators.

This initiative also combines VCCS's existing technology-based CPL capabilities, current workforce training strategy, and investments in new stackable credentials.

VCCS launched its first system-wide approach to CPL in 2017 when the [Credits2Careers](#) portal was created. The portal translates military education and training experiences into academic credit recommendations across all VCCS colleges and its 1,700 academic programs.

Recognition of Non-institutional Learning (RNL)

Initiative Partners

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) includes a central system office and 23 constituent community colleges located on 40 campuses. The system serves more than 280,000 students each year.

Enhancing the portal to incorporate industry-certified learning for non-military students aligns with Virginia's [FastForward](#) program, which provides short-term, noncredit training toward industry certifications in high-demand, high-wage fields. Also aligning with this work is Virginia's [Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back \(G3\)](#) initiative, a program to review 500 VCCS academic programs and transform them into shorter 'stackable credentials.'

Solution

The current initiative is evaluating whole industry-certification programs and exams. Any student earning one of those certifications can then seamlessly request academic credit without having to re-prove those competencies through a campus-based exam or portfolio submission.

Certifications are prioritized across five high-demand career areas identified in the FastForward initiative: *emergency medical services, healthcare, information technology, advanced manufacturing, and welding.*

The project consists of three main workstreams: 1) identifying and evaluating credit for prior learning; 2) developing best practices around campus CPL policies and procedures; and 3) expanding and marketing the online C2C portal. VCCS's role is to oversee and manage the project's execution — including the C2C portal expansion—and coordinate the activity of three working committees:

- The **steering committee** provides oversight on the direction and strategy of the initiative and progress of the work; it includes senior staff from 11 campuses (e.g., provosts, CAO, and VPs). The members also serve as champions for CPL across the system and engage with other states and systems to learn about other approaches to recognize non-institutional learning.
- The **faculty committee** is reviewing, certifying, and cross-walking industry-based CPL assessments to existing credit-based courses and programs. The committee is organized into five faculty teams—one per priority industry area—each with about 10 members recruited from various VCCS colleges based on their subject matter expertise.

- The **administrators committee** is developing standard CPL policies and procedures that colleges can adopt to promote more consistent and predictable credit awards. The committee includes one representative from each of the 23 VCCS colleges (members include CPL coordinators, Registrars, enrollment directors, advisors, etc.) and is organized into five topical subcommittees.

The **faculty committee's** five teams confirm the validity of credits previously equated by the various colleges, identify revisions to these recommendations, and search for new industry certifications that equate to college credits. Credit determinations are made after reviewing the credentialing authority and their formal assessments, learning objectives, curricula, level of exam difficulty, instructional hour requirements, and applicability to VCCS academic programs.

Faculty teams must agree on final credit recommendations; these guidelines are then placed on the VCCS Master Repository and sent to all colleges through VCCS's standing academic committee structure. Each individual college will review the materials, determine whether they agree with the credit evaluation, and decide if they will adopt the recommended course crosswalks.

VCCS course equivalencies will be reported annually by all colleges. In fast moving disciplines, such as Information Technology, the system attempts to review crosswalks more often. Whenever possible, CPL reviews for high-demand, priority areas are performed at the system level, while inviting representatives from constituent colleges.

The **administrators committee** is examining campus level CPL processes, including how students learn about CPL and how prior learning credits are transcribed. The subcommittees are reviewing different aspects of the process, including course crosswalks, best practices, and data collection procedures. Findings and recommendations will be shared across the colleges.

VCCS is overseeing the expansion and marketing of the C2C portal. The consultants who originally developed the portal will incorporate features to instantly connect validated certification exams to academic credit conversions and programs.

Implementation

The initial military-focused portal permitted VCCS to pilot test its strategy around portal development. The original portal has shown promising results in boosting military enrollments, while also increasing recruitment and access for underserved populations. VCCS plans to relaunch the expanded portal in spring 2021.

Once the rebranded C2C portal is live, students can create a free online account. They can search for certifications in the portal and learn which academic credits they can request. The associated academic programs and degree maps will illustrate how the credits could be utilized. Credit hour usage may vary depending on each college's program offerings and the course requirements for selected programs.

For example, credits earned from a health certification may apply to a nursing degree, but might not satisfy any requirements for a business degree; alternately, some colleges may not offer a nursing degree to which the credits could be applied.

Students can enter additional courses, credentials, or other achievements into the portal to determine whether colleges might grant credits for those activities. Once a student decides which program is the best fit, they can use the portal to request an enrollment advisor who can help facilitate the prior learning credit request and/or enrollment at the college. The portal also provides detailed information on expected degree costs and labor market information on related careers.

Students are not charged any fees to use the portal, access academic credit recommendations, or for any credit hours that may be awarded. For example, in-state students awarded nine credit hours could save as much as \$1,500 in tuition and fees. However, students may have previously paid for workforce training and/or certification exam fees in advance of receiving academic credits.

Prior to re-launching the C2C portal, VCCS will re-brand it to appeal to all adult learners. A marketing campaign will include informational videos, social media content, and print materials to develop awareness and explain program benefits, with marketing efforts focused on traditionally underserved populations.

Business Model

VCCS's business model for this initiative is centrally organized, but uses resources from across the system. The system-level strategies and college-level supports required front-loading the investment in the initial activities. Start-up costs totaled about \$450,000 over two years (which was in addition to the prior investment required to build the original C2C military portal). Ongoing activities are expected to cost about \$60,000 per year.

Startup costs included a combination of faculty and staff time, technology development, and marketing expenses. Faculty team leads and members received \$3,000 and \$1,000 stipends, respectively, from VCCS.¹ The steering and administrators committee members did not receive personal stipends, but VCCS provided \$1,000 stipends to each college with an administrators committee member. The initiative's stipends and compensation expenses represented nearly half (47%) of start-up costs during the first two years.

More than half of all start-up costs reflect activity at the system level, including project management and portal development and marketing. The technical consultants and related costs to expand the C2C portal accounted for about 30% of the start-up costs. However, the current project builds on the previously developed military portal, which cost about \$900,000 to develop in 2017. Together, those investments reflect the 'full cost' of the portal (only the portal expansion expenses are reflected in the initiative costs and ROI, because the military enrollment associated with the initial portal are not reflected in the current initiative).

Ongoing costs include tech-related costs for portal administration, maintenance, and related updates. Other recurring costs include staff time for continued overall oversight of the C2C portal, marketing expenses, and periodic review/revision of the crosswalks.

The C2C initiative utilized grant funding to finance the portal expansion, stipends, meeting expenses and project management. VCCS and the colleges also made in-kind contributions by reallocating staff time to support this work.

¹ VCCS Human Resources policy specifies that faculty receiving stipends for consulting/professional services must perform associated tasks outside (or above and beyond) their normal working hours. As a result, the stipends were assumed to reflect the cost of faculty time devoted to the initiative.

Once the initial certification evaluation and portal expansion is complete, ongoing program costs will be sustained primarily through budgeted state funding. VCCS typically receives about \$500,000 annually from the Virginia military affairs budget, which is expected to continue supporting VCCS's CPL work, including the expanded C2C portal, since it will still include its original military-focused capabilities.

Generating ROI for the Initiative

The return on investment² for this initiative comes from new student enrollments the portal is expected to produce. No fee revenue will support this initiative since prospective students are not charged fees to use the portal, or when college credits are awarded as part of an industry-certification evaluation.

VCCS anticipates 65 new students could enroll with seven to nine CPL credits via the portal during the initial launch year, and possibly grow by 25% annually. **At anticipated enrollment and CPL credit levels, the expanded C2C portal is projected to have a positive annual return on investment by the second year of operation**, which is after all start-up activity is complete.

Since most initiative costs are front-loaded, **recouping both start-up and ongoing annual costs will take significantly longer, even as the annual financial margin grows larger each year**. For example, at expected enrollment and growth levels, recouping the initial investment and projected ongoing costs would likely take five years.



The size of the financial margin depends, in part, on the type of credentials students pursue and number of CPL credits awarded. Since associate degrees require more courses, these degree pathways are projected to generate more college revenue than certificate programs, even in cases where associate-degree seeking students have as much as a two to three course head start (by acquiring more CPL and transfer credits). Recouping all program costs within five years of operation would likely require three times as many certificate-seeking students as associate-degree seeking students.

Excluding program costs and focusing narrowly on the 'value' of these programs shows they can generate revenue that exceeds the foregone revenue from awarding CPL credits. Assuming students are awarded between seven and nine credits for prior learning, the revenue 'gained' from new course enrollments is expected to exceed the revenue 'lost' when providing prior learning credit.

Once the enhanced portal is complete, VCCS's technology-based approach will allow CPL to easily scale to hundreds of users at little additional cost. **Using technology to recognize non-institutional learning and expand college access can increase ROI without requiring a commensurate increase in program costs.** Colleges may find they are fielding more CPL requests, but the approval process should require less time with the pre-established credit determinations, policies, and procedures resulting from the work of the administrators committee.

The sustainability of this initiative benefits from a dedicated funding source to support ongoing costs. Established state funding for VCCS's military-related work will support the expanded portal going forward.

Key Takeaways

1) Front loading project costs can lessen ongoing financial requirements, but recouping that initial investment requires scaling enrollment.

The VCCS business model relies heavily on fixed startup costs for initial development. The ongoing costs for portal management and maintenance are simple to budget; marketing and recruitment costs can be adjusted depending on the effort level required.

² 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.

Essentially, the ongoing costs for the initiative are not directly influenced by the number of students utilizing the technology, rendering future expenses less volatile and easier to manage.

This upfront cost model has a lower marginal cost for each additional student who uses the portal, so scaling enrollment does not significantly increase costs. However, with expenses largely fixed and already expended, reducing unit costs (e.g., cost per student) requires increasing the number of students using the portal, and generating ROI requires converting those users into students.

2) Initiatives that evaluate programs, rather than students, limit variable costs associated with increased participation.

Recognition of non-institutional learning (RNL) initiatives that certify programs rather than individual students (through exams or portfolio reviews) have fewer variable costs. All prior learning models have costs associated with awarding and transcribing credits, but evaluating and certifying whole programs eliminates the variable costs related to exam administration and grading. As a result, the cost per student in program evaluation models are expected to decline faster over time because few additional costs are associated with enrolling more students.

3) Coordinating system-level initiatives can leverage prior investments and best practices to lower costs.

VCCS's coordinated strategy among its various initiatives allows the system office and colleges to build upon prior investments and learnings. This aligned approach minimizes duplication of work, decreases development time and costs, and focuses attention on new and innovative practices. The current C2C project leverages internal and external best practices from several other projects.

The military portal evaluation team structure served as a prototype for the current project's structure. The work also draws upon the [American Council on Education's](#) (ACE) approach to credit evaluations, where faculty are selected from various colleges and programs to provide diverse perspectives on CPL crosswalks.

4) System-wide collaboration can produce campus-level efficiencies.

VCCS's history of strong system-level support and guidance can introduce efficiencies across its colleges. Pooling resources to develop CPL crosswalks reduces the time (and expense) individual colleges spend to evaluate credit awards, minimizing duplication of effort. The same credentials no longer need be validated multiple times at multiple institutions.

System-wide coordination is particularly important because of student transfers. System-wide recommendations provide colleges with confidence that the recognition of learning credits awarded by other colleges are equivalent to the academic expectations at their college. Transparency in the evaluation process is critical, ensuring all colleges understand the rationale for credit recommendations, have access to the supporting materials for the recommendation, and retain final decision-making authority.

Recognizing and translating industry-verified learning into academic credit and credentials can be financially beneficial for students and colleges. These benefits are multiplied when investments and initiatives around technology, recognition of non-institutional learning frameworks, and stackable credentials are coordinated across the system to provide students with flexible pathways to training, careers, and degrees.



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