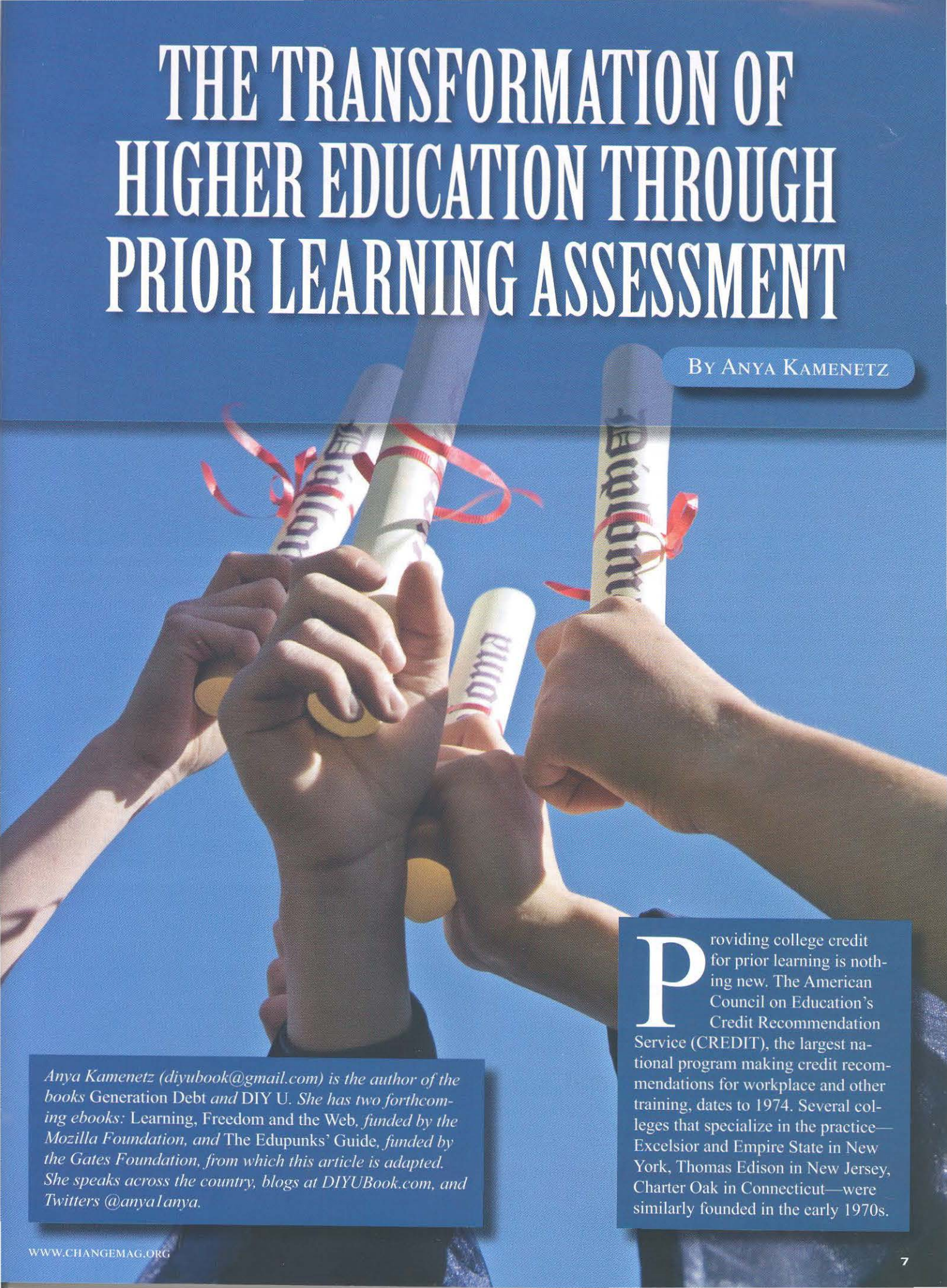
THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

By Anya Kamenetz



Providing college credit for prior learning is nothing new. The American Council on Education's Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT), the largest national program making credit recommendations for workplace and other training, dates to 1974. Several colleges that specialize in the practice—Excelsior and Empire State in New York, Thomas Edison in New Jersey, Charter Oak in Connecticut—were similarly founded in the early 1970s.

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But granting credit for prior learning through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has never really caught on. Nominally, thousands of colleges grant credit by portfolio, accept the recommendations of CREDIT, and honor the College Board's College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and the military's Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) examinations, but in practice, the portion of students who actually get these credits on their transcript is very small.

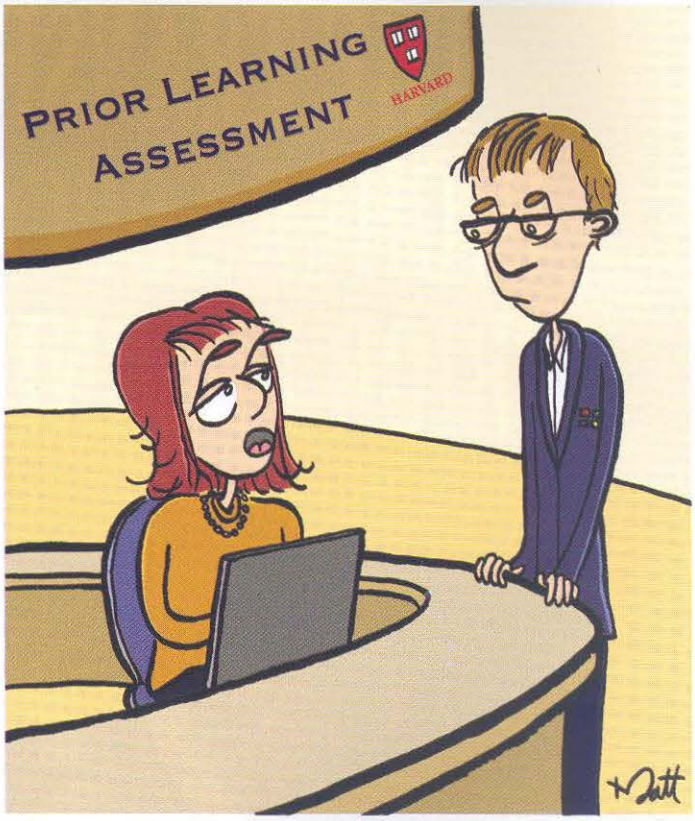
Historically, whether out of a sincere belief in the superiority of their own offerings or the desire to collect tuition revenues, the vast majority of colleges have put limits on the number of transfer credits they accept, even from institutions within their own state systems. They may also reserve the right to use PLA credits only for electives, rather than letting them satisfy core requirements.

"Lots of institutions have a PLA policy on the books but don't do much of it in fact," says Pamela Tate, CEO of the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). "An amazingly small number of people actually get credit for prior learning." Moreover, most students don't get their college's final word on how many credits are accepted until they've already made the decision to attend.

It's time for that to change.

Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, offers a proven pathway to raise productivity in higher education, to enable millions of students who have stopped short of a degree to complete their education, and to increase the application of more authentic and student-centered forms of assessment. PLA also offers a ready way to incorporate the past decade's revolution in open courseware and open learning into the existing framework of accreditation and assessment, making a college degree more affordable and accessible to all.

To understand the importance of portable credits, we must stipulate two truths: *most students don't start and finish at the same college,* and *lots of important learning takes place outside school.* Only 15 percent of those who start at a community college complete their degree within three years, and only 57 percent of those who start at a four-year college have finished within six years (NCES, 2011). One-third of students attend more than one institution during their college years (Flagel, 2010). At the same time, 65 percent of post-secondary learning, by spending, does not happen through colleges and universities but through workplace and other training (Carnevale, 2010)—to say nothing of the lifelong informal learning that people engage in on their own and that digital media make all the more accessible. But the current system is not designed to accommodate this new normal.



"I'm sorry, Mr. Gates. The computer science department refuses to give you any prior learning credits for your work in industry."

> **"At many colleges old credits expire, which leaves former students "in purgatory," unable to complete their degree. "I don't understand why they won't take old credits—no one takes away your degree," says Hooper.**

A Boon to Students

Like credit for internships and field research, PLA credits bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world; like independent study, they allow for customization of the curriculum. For students, the right to supplement their education with prior learning credits has obvious advantages.

First, it means they can finish faster because they're not starting at the beginning. According to a 2010 CAEL study of over 60,000 students at 48 colleges and universities, participation in PLA has a dramatic effect on graduation rates and time to degree. More than half of the participants earned a degree within seven years, compared to 21 percent of non-PLA students. The students saved between 2.5 and 10 months through PLA—even those who did not graduate accumulated more credits than non-PLA students. And the differences persisted after accounting for the level of academic

preparation, the income levels of the students, and the type of college.

Second, according to those who run these programs, the process of reviewing credits for prior learning, especially when students put together a portfolio that demonstrates that learning, is valuable in intangible ways. Students take the time to reflect on, assimilate, and integrate what they've learned and to think about how it fits with their future goals.

"We're seeing transformational effects," says Nan Travers at Empire State College, a major center for prior learning assessment. Travers is a participant on an international team that is studying prior learning and the author of a chapter on PLA in the US in a forthcoming book.

> Across the board what we've found is that clearly students who are participating in PLA have greater reflection skills, better problem solving skills, more tacit knowledge, more self-regulated learning, more self-direction, better study skills, and a better understanding of the role of faculty.

They have also been found to have feelings of pride and accomplishment from the process of reflecting on their prior learning.

Jim Hooper could be a national poster boy for prior learning credits. This father of five works for an insurance company in Lyndhurst, New Jersey. After high school he attended college for a few years, but "I wasn't ready for college at that point," he says. He earned a paralegal certificate, worked in a law firm, and then shifted into programming, getting training through the Chubb Institute (a for-profit technical college chain in the northeast that is now called the Anthem Institute). Through his work in information technology, he got a job at his current company 15 years ago. The insurance industry has an extensive program of professional designations awarded through state-administered exams, and Hooper has passed 15 in 20 years.

Despite his wealth of professional training and solid professional job, Hooper still felt a need to earn his bachelor's degree to increase his employment options and his future earning potential, as well as for general self-improvement. "I want my kids to know it's important to have a degree. I'm also on the school board of my town, so I figured it would be good to have my degree. And who knows where the future will lead?"

He began the process with Thomas Edison State College (another PLA center) in 1999. The first step was to convert his professional training into ACE credits. Based on his transcripts, exam results, and other evidence, Thomas Edison eventually awarded him 70 credits from his traditional college classes and 76 ACE credits from his insurance, IT, and paralegal training. Only 120 credits are required for a bachelor's degree, but the 146 credits Hooper had accumulated didn't line up perfectly with general education requirements. So starting in 2004, Hooper took the remaining classes he needed at Thomas Edison, all online. He graduated in 2009.

Hooper reports that his friends are jealous of his accomplishment. At many colleges old credits expire, which leaves former students "in purgatory," unable to complete their degree. "I don't understand why they won't take old credits—no one takes away your degree," says Hooper. "I think they just want more money. That's the beautiful thing about Thomas Edison—they're so flexible. If it weren't for them and ACE, I wouldn't have my degree." Today, Hooper is considering going back for a master's degree. "I'm proud of what I did and how I finally accomplished it," he says. "And I want to keep learning."

While it's clear how PLA can benefit students like Hooper—a significant portion of the population, considering that 78 percent of the jobs lost in the most recent recession were lost by men, and adults over 40 were another of the groups hit hardest—it may be less clear how a robust PLA policy can benefit institutions. Won't it lead to lower standards for teaching and learning? Or a loss of revenue to the college if students are finishing faster?

Empire State College's experience suggests not. While it is part of the public college system of New York, Empire State is unique in many ways. It offers both online and on-campus programs, and the in-person classes take place in several locations around the state. It has a large population of veterans who receive credit for their military training. And it has been an innovator in prior learning assessment, transfer credit, and personal learning plans.

"Students come in and work with a guide we call a mentor to plan an individualized degree program based on their educational goals and their needs," says Joyce McKnight, a faculty mentor and academic coordinator of the college's Community and Human Services division. "Let's say I was your mentor. I would call you up, and I would have a list of all the courses you passed at previous colleges. We could both see them on our online Course Planner. And I would talk to you about your hopes and dreams. We'd be on the phone for one and a half or two hours in that initial conversation."

The mentor helps students match their goals and interests to the framework of academic programs offered by Empire State in order to create a personal degree plan that may be designed around a problem in society such as suicide or

Centers for Prior Learning Assessment

Learning Counts
http://www.learningcounts.org

Empire State College
http://www.esc.edu/esconline/online2.nsf/EShome.html

Charter Oak
http://www.charteroak.edu/

Excelsior College
http://www.excelsior.edu/

Thomas Edison State College
http://www.tesc.edu/

local food supplies. The mentor also helps decide which of the courses already taken can fit into the new degree plan, according to Empire's "liberal transfer policy." Of Empire State's 20,000 students, approximately 1,000 to 2,000 a year earn prior learning credits, and eligibility is being extended to the graduate and adult learning programs.

Empire students have earned college credit for running a business, military training, professional licenses and certifications, or even hobbies such as doll collecting, gardening, or theater. Students who want this kind of credit must take an online workshop where they reflect on their learning and create a "portrait" of their experiences, which may be a written essay or multimedia presentation documenting what they've learned and how it satisfies the college's requirements.

Empire State has relationships with many subject-matter experts, both on the faculty and not, who have the ability to evaluate these learning portraits in a wide range of disciplines and determine whether they deserve college credit. "We don't give credit for life experience, but *learning* from life experience," McKnight says.

How about the economics of PLA? At Empire State, adjunct faculty mentors earn $100 to $150 for working with a student to create a portfolio and then evaluating it. An adjunct might earn $2,000 for teaching a four-credit course, so if there are fewer than 20 students in that course, PLA is cheaper. That savings is passed on to the student, who pays $80 to $100 when seeking four credits through PLA. "I would say that it's never cost the college as much to do a PLA as it does to teach the class," says Nan Travers.

Meanwhile, the college is investing its resources in building closer one-on-one advising relationships, along with authentic and holistic assessments. This is an excellent example of the unbundling of services and specialization that innovation theorist Clayton Christensen describes as an aspect of the future of "disruptive innovation" in higher education. It would be a particular boon in state systems like California's where overcrowding is forcing students out of core courses needed for their majors.

How prior learning assessment works

The nonprofit Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has pioneered much of the research on prior learning and portfolio-based assessment. CAEL is currently piloting a national service for PLA called LearningCounts.org, created to work directly with colleges to extend the reach of PLA.

CAEL CEO Pamela Tate says,

> Anyone who thinks they might have something they've learned at the college level—they could have learned it through courseware on the Internet, military, jobs, volunteer work—they can come forward and say to one of our trained advisors on the phone, "I'd like to consider getting my learning assessed."

The advisor then determines if the person is a candidate for prior learning.

If so, there are several options. Students can apply for an ACE credit recommendation or take a CLEP exam. Or they can earn the credit directly through LearningCounts' online portfolio class. The six-week course costs $500, plus $50 for each credit evaluated.It teaches students how to create a portfolio, with a narrative describing what they've learned and how it satisfies specific requirements and objectives, as well as evidence such as performance awards earned at work or from volunteer organizations, news articles, or audio or video files.

"Let's say you were a banker for 20 years but you never got a college degree. You think maybe you could request 15 credits in business and finance. You would go through a faculty evaluator in each area of expertise that you're putting forward," Tate says.

LearningCounts has 500 faculty evaluators who have agreed to review portfolios for a nominal fee, and they're adding more to cover every possible area of academic expertise, from sales and marketing to nuclear physics. Once a faculty member reviews the portfolio, the credit is added to an ACE transcript and submitted for review to the college a student chooses.

Briana Taravella, 54, works as an administrative assistant at Thomas Nelson Community College in Virginia, one of LearningCounts' pilot institutions. When the news came across her desk that Thomas Nelson would be selecting five students to take the portfolio course, she decided that she had to be one of them.

"Credit-by-portfolio and credit-by-assessment offer a further tantalizing possibility: the opportunity for students to earn bona fide college credit for learning done in free and open networks.

I took a secretarial course at ITT Business Institute back in the 70s. Back then it wasn't an associate's degree. I've been a secretary for 30-plus years now, so there should be a way for me to prove I can write a business letter so I don't have to start all over again.

Taravella ended up assembling portfolios for a total of 18 credits. She calls it "a grueling process." For each one, she had to write at least a 15-page narrative full of examples and footnotes and submit extensive supporting documentation, such as old transcripts and professional evaluations. Taravella's narratives cover almost her whole career. "I worked at the Watergate Hotel in the 70s when we had a Xerox machine that took up an entire room!" she says. She also got her supervisor to write a testimonial letter.

In order to get college credit for prior learning through a portfolio, students need very strong writing skills. They also need tenacity to get through the process—of the five students who began the pilot at Thomas Nelson, Taravella is the only one who prevailed. But Taravella says preparing her portfolios has been personally validating. It's helped her realize exactly how much she knows and allowed her to reflect on her life and career. "You really have to tap into the recesses of your mind. It's given me a lot more confidence, because I realize what I have done in my life."

As a national clearinghouse to promulgate and promote credit by portfolio, LearningCounts.org has the potential to be a game-changing innovation. About 100 colleges have agreed to send students its way to boost the number who earn transfer credit. In addition, it's doing a pilot program with Starbucks baristas. Starbucks is providing tuition assistance, and CAEL is providing career and education advising, plus assessments that can allow baristas to earn course credit for their training in restaurant hospitality, basic health, and even the intricacies of coffee roasting.

Free learning resources

For those interested in the future of learning, credit-by-portfolio and credit-by-assessment offer a further tantalizing possibility: the opportunity for students to earn bona fide college credit for learning done in free and open networks—for example, by watching videos and completing exercises from websites such as Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org), the Open Learning Initiative (oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning), or MIT's Open Courseware (ocw.mit.edu/), or by working with peers on a course at Peer 2 Peer University (p2pu.org). "We think we'll see a lot of people taking courses for free and coming to us for credit," says Tate.

Empire State is open to offering learners the opportunity to earn college credit towards a degree via open learning. "You could certainly use open educational resources and package that in a request for prior learning assessment," says Joyce McKnight. "What's assessed is not whether you've 'taken' an OER class, but what you've actually learned."

McKnight, on behalf of Empire State, has taken part in an international effort known as the OER University (Open Educational Resources University), which is dedicated to

Open Courseware Resources

MIT Open Courseware:http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm
This is the oldest and still the most popular site, with 1900 courses on everything from history to physics. A favorite for science and math.

Open Courseware Consortium: http://ocwconsortium.org/
This site has even more courses, from 200 institutions, including MIT. Student reviewers found this the "most powerful" and "most robust" open courseware website.

Khan Academy:http://www.khanacademy.org/
The Khan Academy has over 2000 videos covering basic math through calculus and trigonometry, physics, biology, chemistry, banking, finance, and statistics. The videos are short--5 to 15 minutes long--simple, and entertaining. They are also accompanied by a set of self-paced exercises that are structured almost like a game—answer 10 of one kind of problem in a row correctly, and you can move on to the next.

Academic Earth: http://academicearth.org/
This is like an academic Hulu. It collects and rates videos of lectures from colleges such as Yale, MIT, Harvard, Stanford, UC Berkeley, and Princeton.

Saylor Foundation: http://www.saylor.org/
There are 241 original courses listed on the site; the material comes from around the web.

Open Yale Courses:http://oyc.yale.edu/
Open Yale Courses has a few dozen courses from Yale University, with audio, video, problem sets, exercises, and tests.

Open Learning Initiative: http://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning
Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative has 13 free complete courses in topics ranging from physics to logic to French. The courses are highly interactive, using video, animations, and lots of embedded quizzes and assessments.

Peer to Peer University:http://new.p2pu.org/en/
This nonprofit allows anyone to join or create a study group. Mozilla Foundation supports P2PU's School of Webcraft to teach programming.

Wikiversity: http://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Wikiversity:Main_Page
Wikiversity has a wide variety of multimedia course materials. Courses are run on the site; students at universities create and publish course modules for other students' use.

helping open learners get assessments and credits for the learning they're doing out in the wild. Wayne Mackintosh, coordinator of OERU, says,

> It's a simple concept aimed at providing free learning for all students worldwide. … Given the technology we have, combined with free content licensing, it's certainly possible to provide learning materials for degree programs for free. We're working with institutions in the formal education sector that would be willing to provide formal academic credit for this sort of learning. What's important for us is the whole notion of credible qualifications. We want OER learning to be equivalent to a traditional university.

So far, Mackintosh's home university, Otago Polytechnic in New Zealand, as well as the University of Southern Queensland in Australia and Athabasca, an online university in Canada, have partnered with the OERU to develop tests and to award credits for learning accomplished through the use of open educational resources. The OERU will coordinate their efforts, as well as offer free teaching support by academic volunteers, who work like those in the nonprofit University of the People.

How large is the potential audience for college credit through open learning? MIT's Open Courseware, the most established open-courseware site, has had over 100 million users in the past decade. The Open Learning Initiative at Carnegie Mellon has had 400,000 open-course registrations in the past four years. Khan Academy draws two million unique visitors a month.

Not all of these people are capable of or interested in doing college-level work for college credit. But the interviews I have conducted over the past few years suggest that there is a population of learners who are highly self-motivated yet whose circumstances are not ideal for traditional college study. They would appreciate the chance to earn college credit through free and open learning at a modest fee.

When I met Joseph Frantz, he was a 20-year-old junior at California State University- San Bernadino (CSUSB), a public university in the windy foothills of the Sierras east of Los Angeles. He had left high school at 16, attended community college, then worked as a personal trainer and in a guitar store. His budget allowed only for a public university, whose quality disappointed him. "This is what you do?" he says he thought when he got to CSUSB. "This is it? The whole thing? It's a joke, it's a racket."

In the past a bright, rebellious student like Joseph might have gotten bored and quit college for good. But Joseph had glimpsed another way.

> I lived in Boston for a year with some guys who went to MIT. They just loved learning things. They would watch TED Talks and MIT Open Courseware videos in our little dining room. When I came back here to school I realized, the lectures I'm attending are the same topics they give at MIT, and if I watch them online I can watch them whenever I want. Then one day, I was searching YouTube to clarify some math concepts, and I found Khan Academy. I thought, this is so much easier! And I stopped going to class.

Today Joseph is earning straight A's as an economics major at CSUSB. In his free time he writes fiction and reads authors such as Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem. He tutors other students in economics but rarely goes to class himself, preferring to teach himself with free videos, reading, and problem sets online.

The main sites he likes to use are MIT's Open Courseware—which is organized in full courses with 50-minute videos, problem sets, and sample exams—and Khan Academy, which features much shorter, 5- to 10-minute tutorials. "That guy Sal Khan, he's like my hero. He's so funny. He has this comedic timing even when he's talking about math."

Joseph developed his self-teaching methods over time, through trial and error. He finds them a lot more efficient than waiting to learn at the instructor's pace—and even fun.

> I go from the MIT to the Khan. Khan reinforces MIT. MIT presupposes that you have all this knowledge, and Khan doesn't. Sometimes I go back to the textbook and if it's really something I can't understand I go to the tutoring center or professors' office hours. Between all that it makes it really easy to learn things. I tutor math and econ at the learning center and I tell students to go watch the Khan videos when they don't have a solid background in something.

He also checks definitions on Wikipedia, searches and posts questions and answers on Urch.com (a forums site that has a message board for PhDs in economics), and finds free textbooks to download on TextbookRevolution.org.

"At least for me, learning has to be question-based," he says. "I found that the biggest challenge to learning online is knowing the questions to ask." Another way to begin an online learning journey, he tells me, is to simply listen for words you don't understand. "In class a word is usually linked to a concept—say Eigen vector, or Bayesian analysis. Google it and it might lead to a Wikipedia entry, and then you get the basic framework of what this is. Then go over to Khan Academy and have him illuminate it more clearly until you get it."

Matheus Lelis is another bright student who uses open courseware to stave off frustration. He's 20 years old and came to America from Brazil when he was 10. While he had always earned top grades, his immigration status makes him ineligible for federal financial aid such as Pell Grants and student loans. He's fallen into a gray area. "I couldn't enroll as an international student because I didn't have a student visa, and I couldn't enroll as a permanent student because I didn't have a green card. It's frustrating!"

Currently, Matheus is enrolled at Bristol Community College near his home in Massachusetts, taking non-degree courses and paying out of pocket while he tries to straighten things out.

> I have a calculus class at BCC that I attend only to mark attendance, but I can't understand anything the professor is saying [because English is not his first language]. So I go home and open the MIT calculus course, do homework and go back to class just so I'm not withdrawn for absence.

In his study of computer science, Matheus follows the courses of Harvard professor David Malan. He says doing computer science courses online is "pretty handy." "The professors write their code a lot faster than you can, but they still want you to go along with them, so it's good to be able to pause it, finish writing it and then keep going."

Matheus and Joseph are onto something. No one should have to attend a sub-par class just to be marked "present" when there are better alternatives available online.

What the emerging ecosystem of open learning has lacked until now is a solid link to the formal education system. Making it easier for students to earn college credit for the very real learning that is happening on open courseware sites but for prices similar to those offered by LearningCounts.org would be good for both the open-learning world and the formal learning world.

One can easily imagine a public university that operates like a digital Oxford, in which faculty mentors, like those at Empire State, focus their efforts on helping students build a personal learning plan, relating their studies to a broader academic framework, and evaluating their work. Students, meanwhile, take the reins of their own learning, conducting study independently, collaborating with others, and pursuing their interests in the context of nearly infinite resources.

We're at the very beginning of seeing what free and open courseware can do to transform higher education. Prior learning assessment offers a clearly marked way forward. C

Resources

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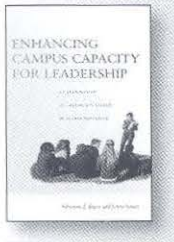

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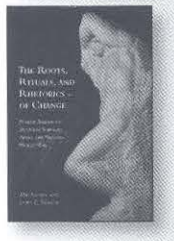

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