TOPcast Episode #176: Credit for Prior Learning

Narrator: University of Louisville understands that their students come from diverse backgrounds with aspirations, drives, and needs to match.

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(Musical Intro)

Tom: From the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning...

Kelvin: And the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning...

Tom: I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hello, Kelvin.

Kelvin: Hello, Tom.

Tom: How are you today?

Kelvin: I'm all right. I think I'm all right. It's a little gray outside, just a little cold outside, but it's warm inside. And there's coffee, so how bad could it be?

Tom: Sounds like a holiday carol of sorts. Yeah.

Kelvin: [Chuckles]

Tom: Well, today it's a little cool for the State of Florida. It was forties overnight, which is brisk for us, but it was nice. Broke out the sweater, and we're having our holiday party, and so, yay. It's the right weather for it. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: You looked festive. I meant to ask you before we hit the recording whether... It was funny. My gut was, "Is there a holiday party? Tom's awfully festive."

Tom: Yeah, he doesn't usually clean up like this.

Kelvin: [Laughs] No. Looks like a holiday sweater.

Tom: We're going to force everybody out to our YouTube channel, so that they can see my festive attire.

Kelvin: What's he wearing? What's he wearing? That's right. It's not even an ugly sweater. It's a nice sweater.

Tom: No, this was a gift from the great Betty Laster, who you may remember.

Kelvin: Aw. That's right, who had the best email handle for an institutional email ever. Betty Laster, first initial, last name, blaster@UCF.edu.

Tom: [Laughter] That's awesome. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: Cool. Well, I mean, we typically check on what's in the Thermos. I don't have anything today except deconstructed coffee with me, but I imagine you are very consistent and have something in the mug, perhaps even holiday-themed perhaps.

Kelvin: Yeah. My kid already beat up on me. She said, "Is that a holiday coffee?" I'm like, "I mean, I can call it whatever you want to call it."

Tom: Pick your holiday. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Not precisely, although I did order it, and it was like a special order. So, my coffee today, a little unusual, is a blend. I don't do a whole lot of blends, but it's a weird blend because it's technically a blend, but it's all from the same area. It's a trifecta of three different Ethiopia Yirgacheffe coffees all combined into one. So, get this, they called it a “Yirgafecta.” [Chuckles] A Yirgafecta from Sightseer Coffee in Austin, Texas. Very colorful bag that it came in. Just got it last night. Just opened it today. It's interesting though, because Sightseer Coffee includes this little sort of social activist information. They say that, worldwide, coffee farm workers are made up of about 70+ percent women out there harvesting and processing coffee, but women end up being practically shut out of farm ownership and management and so forth. So, Sightseer Coffee only sources from women-owned farms, and they try to pay above the fair market value just to promote that.

So, I thought that was a really interesting bit of statistical factoids and innovation, leaning into something and trying to make something a little bit different, a little bit better. And so, I thought all that fit with today's episode topic.

Tom: Did you?

Kelvin: Can you find a connection? I did. [Laughter]

Tom: Did you think that, huh? I think it's all interesting.

Kelvin: It is interesting.

Tom: I also think it's interesting, just as a side note here, every time you drink a blend, you say, "I don't usually drink a blend."

Kelvin: [Laughs]

Tom: I think it would be interesting to know how many times a blend has appeared on TOPcast. Maybe not as many as I'm thinking.

Kelvin: I don’t think it’s been many.

Tom: [Chuckles] But for something you don't drink very often, it feels like it makes its appearance periodically.

Kelvin: Yeah, I think it's relatively rare. I will look into that for you, and I'll report back.

Tom: [Chuckles] It's a job for AI, that analysis.

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: All right, so the theme. So, social impact and female workers, I don't know. I'm going to say something with the social impact and creating access.

Kelvin: Yeah, that's along the lines. I was thinking of something that you're breaking through, you're changing, you're innovating in a model, keeping something. There's the status quo, and you're opening a door somehow. Yeah, I thought like that, that stuff. Yeah.

Tom: Okay. Shall I tell the listening, viewing audience how that does fit into it?

Kelvin: I can't wait to hear what you say.

Tom: [Chuckles] Well, it has to do with our guest and the work that he is doing. So, Kelvin, you recently interviewed Dr. Matt Bergman. Dr. Bergman is an ambassador with CAEL, the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. He is also a senior fellow with Kentucky's Council on Post-Secondary Education and a “partner faculty” member there at the University of Louisville, so a colleague of sorts for you.

Kelvin: Yep.

Tom: Anything you want to say about the interview before we cut to it?

Kelvin: Not much. I mean, I think you'll tell right away, Matt is top-notch, knowledgeable. He doesn't talk about this a lot, but he's been a real practitioner. He's, as a faculty member, worked in programs that have really made strategic use of the stuff that we talk about, which is Credit for Prior Learning or Prior Learning Assessment, which is sort of the innovative breakthrough access strategy, if you want to go backwards to a reverse connection to the coffee thing. So, he's the real deal, which is why he has all these other roles with these associations and organizations, advancing and championing this effort. Yeah, I would say he is himself sort of a national champion in this space.

Tom: Awesome. Well, through the magic of podcast time travel, here is your interview with Dr. Bergman.

(Musical Transition)

Kelvin: Hi, Matt. So good to have you on TOPcast today.

Matt Bergman: Thank you so much for having me today.

Kelvin: I've been looking forward to the conversation. While through the years, I think Tom and I have certainly mentioned Prior Learning Assessment, or Credit for Prior Learning here and there, we've never really had a focused conversation about it, so I can't think of anybody better to come and help us do that. So, thank you so much for being here. Do you mind just doing a little level setting? I am sure that our audience all have some at least passing familiarity with these concepts of Credit for Prior Learning. Can you just give us an encapsulation of "What is it?"

Matt: So, Credit for Prior Learning is becoming more widely known, but still has a range of people across the country at more traditional institutions that don't really necessarily perfectly get the concept. It is pretty simple in that it is an evaluation and assessment of college level and credit-worthy learning that happens outside the confines of the college walls. So, we're looking at ways to translate really high-level knowledge that would perfectly articulate to either a class, or some category, or topic that would work for a major, or an overall degree plan.

Kelvin: Thanks for that. So, what about the Prior Learning Assessment versus Credit for Prior Learning? Two names for the same thing? Are there fine grain differences?

Matt: Yeah, so there are a wide range of acronyms used across the globe. We're seeing RPL, which is Recognition of Prior Learning, in Europe, RAC in French-speaking Canadian provinces, Recognition of Acquired Credit. And then, Prior Learning Assessment was generally the standard we saw in some of the national studies, which we were a part of that 72-institution study. But our standard-bearer, the

Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, has gravitated us towards Credit for Prior Learning as a more encompassing characterization of what we are doing with this process. So, Credit for Prior Learning is now basically the standard, especially in the United States, and starting to gravitate internationally, but all the same thing.

Kelvin: Thank you for that. Can I ask you to zoom in just a little bit? Give me the creamy center of this, like the center of the Oreo cookie or the Rolo candy or something. How does this work for a learner, perhaps post-traditional, who's coming into an institution, who has a robust set of background experiences? What happens for that learner through Credit for Prior Learning that would be beneficial to them?

Matt: Well, it happens in such an interesting range of ways for a wide range of learners, starting with our traditional learners that are doing really well in high school and have AP. So, advanced placement testing is credit for prior learning, so it's easy to understand for a more traditional faculty and honestly a great linchpin in helping us understand why it's so valuable for adults, too. If we're going to acknowledge Advanced Placement for 17 and 18-year-olds, why wouldn't we then consider some portfolio-based credit or challenge exams or other ways to translate learning into academic credit from external sources?

And when adults connect with our institutions that do more of this for adult or post-traditional learners, they do it in a range of ways, including credit-bearing courses that are really geared at generating a portfolio, and then other meandering self-directed approaches that students don't have to pay for in developing a portfolio. And these are all generated to navigate the financial models at various institutions, so it's just a range of ways to assess and recognize this acquired knowledge, and then translate that into academic credit in a degree program or elective credit, or even with our College Level Exam Placement, or CLEP, for some general education credit.

Kelvin: Yeah, I love placing all those examples on a bit of a continuum, including things like advanced placement and CLEP. I think that's really smart for people grasping that. What would you say is, from your vantage point, if there is one, the most dominant approach that you see?

Matt: So, as we are seeing expansion of Credit for Prior Learning across this country, we're seeing more and more uptake of portfolio-based evaluation. And this is happening because so many institutions, including the University of Louisville, and the University of Memphis, and SUNY Empire State University, Vermont Community College, Minnesota State, Metropolitan State, they have all been talking about how we're doing this on the ground level in coursework in programs. And we've coalesced around these ideas of standard approaches, and we're not perfectly aligned on everything we do, but we have some standard rigorous processes by which we evaluate some external learning, maybe from

corporate sector, nonprofit government, and then translate that into academic credit in some discipline.

And this is all over the map, so this could go from healthcare to business accountancy, all the way into more general integrated studies, or organizational leadership type of broad-based adult-friendly programs. So, this is happening and starting to permeate a lot of really otherwise traditional institutions, and what you're going to see is a great level of greater adoption. So, we are at close to 90+ percent that offer some form of credit for prior learning, and now we're going to see that really expand into a range of disciplines, not just in individual programs, at respected institutions.

Kelvin: So, let me pull that thread a little bit. I was going to ask you what you know about the proportion of at least American higher ed institutions who are engaging in these credit for prior learning practices, but you just said 90%. So, are you saying that 90% of American higher education institutions are doing some level of credit for prior learning? And then, if you are, that may be just one program, or what else do we know about how far it goes?

Matt: Yeah, so I did say 90%, and I say that because we incorporate things like IB, International Baccalaureate, and AP credit into the CPL spectrum of offerings. So, CLEP exams, College Level Exam Placement, those things are widely accepted, and oftentimes not a lot of skepticism is pushed onto those forms of credit for prior learning. But what we're seeing is more and more institutions are now incorporating the portfolio process for post-traditional or adult learners into really a lot of boutique type of programs. So, pockets within institutions where adults type tend to cluster, and these may be majors that are fully online. They may be majors that have evening, and online, or shorter compressed courses that really accommodate those working learners that are going to connect with our institutions.

Now, there are certainly many institutions that are very traditional in the way that they operate and have in-class, only 16-week or 15-week semester scheduling. Most of their students are on a campus. But honestly, we have moved dramatically towards this idea that there are other ways to connect with the universities. And roughly 76% of the American going population has some form of non-traditional characteristic, whether they be completely separated financially from their parents, they may be working full-time, they may be a parent themselves, they may be going part-time. So, they're operating within higher ed not in the very traditional sense of going first time out of high school, and full-time, and living on campus. So many of our students just operating differently in higher ed than they did many, many years ago.

Kelvin: So, I'm going to push in just a little bit. So, I think, again, that's very smart framing to say 90% of higher ed institutions in the United States have opened a door, whether it's International Baccalaureate, CLEP, AP, something. That makes

sense. But if we were to zoom in on, I'll use your framing, the portfolio-based assessment of experiences outside of, let's say, starting an academic path at an institution, do we have a sense of how large that proportion is?

Matt: Yeah, I would have to really look up the most recent report from AASCU, but they worked with CAEL to look at the institutions that are starting to adopt more and more CPL into their natural way of operation. And I believe it was between 50% and 65%, but I'd have to look and really dig into that number. So, in your fact checks, you can put that number in, and we can go look. [Chuckles]

But what you're seeing is a rapid acceleration, much like we saw with COVID and online learning. The adoption of online learning was so dramatic and so fast with COVID, and what we saw when people went back to regular operation, they weren't doing the exact same thing that they always were when they were only in class. They adopted things from that online practice that made their work more efficient as faculty members, and it truly changed.

That said, we're seeing the enrollment declines forcing more and more faculty, more and more administrators to consider this practice as an opportunity for new market segments, new prospective students that wouldn't otherwise have connected with the institution. And what we're seeing from another recent finding, over 80% of adult learners when deciding where to go are considering whether or not the institution has CPL. So, they're making that decision based upon whether or not your institution has credit for prior learning. That decision making data point is so important because now students are striving towards this idea of efficiency and then this acknowledgement of what they've already accrued as far as knowledge in industry and nonprofit and government sector.

Kelvin: That is still a very large proportion. I mean, if you're anywhere close to accurate in you're off the cuff remembering there, I mean, honestly, that's a bit of a larger proportion than I was expecting. Is there anything… I mean, you've really leaned into the diversity of approaches and the varied implementation methods. But in your work, is there a major obstacle that you run across again, and again, and again that if ameliorated would unclog and foster even greater dissemination of these practices and greater adoption?

Matt: Yeah, I often say standardization and rigor of process are the two key elements, and really accelerating adoption. My friend, and I always call one of the founders of CPL, Nan Travers up at SUNY Empire State University, has said the best way to create greater levels of adoption and eliminate all skepticism is to take a portfolio that was generated by an individual student under FERPA regulations and show it to other faculty because they will see the level of consistency, the level of thought, and then the rigor involved in the evaluation, and oftentimes say, "Oh, this is great. We should do more of this." So, I think greater adoption means consistent approaches, standard operating procedures, and then just showing

faculty what they don't realize exists as a really high-quality process of evaluating external learning for academic credit.

Kelvin: That's excellent. I mean, and that's probably a great place to leave it, but I generally like to offer our listeners a final gift, final word from our guests. Is there any one practical tip or admonition or principle that you would want to leave ringing in the ears of our listeners?

Matt: So, if listeners are thinking about or considering or starting the process of adopting more CPL at their institutions, the key element in success is having a champion for this work, whether you are a large or small institution, an individual that has some element of faculty background, or connection and rapport with faculty to navigate that process. And then, standard approaches really accelerating access to larger groups of learners. What we found in the PLA Boost study, which was published in 2020 with 72 institutions, we found that what we found before. And that is, students graduate at a higher level, higher rate, they get to graduation faster, and those are great things. But there is also a concern that we might lose tuition credits, granting these credits, as they do the evaluation. But a beautiful finding from that study, the 72-institution empirical study, was that students that had access versus students that didn't took on average 17.6 more credits with that institution.

So, it's very counterintuitive to think that, if granted credits, you would take more credits. But when you look at the national rate of adult student persistence, it's not pretty. And if we are to increase that by roughly 10 points, we have a net positive revenue. So, now you're seeing greater levels of persistence, sense of belonging in the process for acknowledgement of who they are and what they've done, and now they're persisting at a higher rate, therefore generating more tuition, more dollars to your institution as a result of incorporating this process into your natural fabric of institutional work and serving adult learners at a greater clip.

Kelvin: Well, that's great. It's been so good having you on TOPcast today, Matt. And Tom will join us in the wrap around, and I'm sure he'll add his appreciation as well.

(Musical Transition)

Tom: So, Kelvin, that was your conversation with Matt Bergman.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, probably not the first time he's talked about those topics.

Tom: [Chuckles] Probably, but it was really interesting, right, because I think this is an area that is probably not leveraged enough for creating access for students with so much mobility with students with collections of credits from various places, acquiring skills on the job site, or in the military, or whatever they are. It just feels like there are more avenues to gather credential-type skills and competencies that could be granted credit of some sort, more so than in the past.

Kelvin: Yeah, yeah. And shout out, I mean, if you don't normally consult the show notes for these episodes, do, because Matt followed up with a couple of substantive read more about it resources, more data. He was a little like, "Ah, don't fact check me," but he's got some sources there that are worth reading, which I think are very interesting. And to your point, I know I was, in the interview, I said this, but I'm still rather struck with just the... I just don't think this way that, through the years of thought of Prior Learning Assessment or Credit for Prior Learning, I just haven't put Advanced Placement testing, CLEP, International Baccalaureate. I just haven't put those kinds of things on that shelf in my brain, and I think it was really smart to say like that.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. There's a YouTube channel that I will sometimes get vortexed into, and I think it's called Hacking College. And the whole purpose of it is to see how cheaply and how quickly you can get a bachelor's degree. And there are all these different schools, a lot of them are competency based that they gravitate towards because you can move at your own pace, and if you're motivated, you can go quickly. But to get there, they talk about all of these StraighterLines, and Sophias, and other kinds of places where you can do work for which you can be granted credit later. A lot of them are very low cost. And by doing all your gen ed there, for example, and then getting that accepted at another institution, they're able to hack college, and do your whole degree at X cost in Y time. And those are other ways of thinking about Credit for Prior Learning.

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, if our listeners look at those resources that Matt sent, at least one of them delves into some particulars in a much more focused way than we were able to get into in our conversation. You mentioned military experience credit, and I don't think we talked about that in the interview per se, but there's quite a bit about that and other kinds of sources. So, I think it's really awareness and definitional expanding to look at the practical things and go, "Oh, I see that and this and the other thing." And yeah, really, really interesting.

Here at this institution, one of the things that is well done is there's one program I'm thinking of. There's a course where learners can build out their evidentiary portfolio, and so that course is a container into which the validated portfolio components make up the content of the course. So, it's a way of doing that conversion. It's not the only way, but it is a way. I remember being fascinated being at some convening years ago. Matt mentioned SUNY Empire State. I met a colleague there and was really fascinated to hear about her work. She was talking about the way that they do things and the portfolio assessments, so lots of different ways of doing it. But one of those sources as well talked about, I think 15% of institutions that are engaged in Credit for Prior Learning, they use manual processes rather than technology-enabled efficiencies. So, it could be very laborious if you're not careful, I think. Right? So, there's trade-offs.

Tom: Maybe as a last point, do you want to maybe expand on what you talked to him about with this faculty champion idea?

Kelvin: Yeah. I mean, I thought it was a good thought, right? And we've seen this, Tom, through the years there at UCF about other kinds of adoptions of practices and innovations that having a faculty member who really buys into values, exemplifies, and who is respected and is seen as the real deal being the face of a, "Hey, this worked for me. It might work for you," not in some sort of slick used car salesman way, but in a just personal testimonial way, goes a long way to fostering adoption. So, I thought that was a brilliant mention. He said, "If you're going to do something, make sure there's somebody who can talk the talk."

Tom: Yeah, it's good advice, and especially for people who are thinking about, "What can I do at my institution?" That's a very practical step that one can do. All right. Well, I imagine your coffee is getting low, your blend, your Yirgacheffe, whatever it's called. [Chuckles]

Kelvin: Yirgafecta.

Tom: Yirgafecta, that was it. Sorry. You want to try and land the plane for us?

Kelvin: All right. Landing gear down, nose up. And we might say that Credit for Prior Learning is one strategy, and maybe we would even go so far as to say one underutilized strategy for better serving our potential learners, especially our adult and post-traditional students. Digital learning professionals, like all of us listening to or making this podcast, should be looking for ways to encourage greater adoption of CPL as part of our broad work. Would you agree with that?

(Musical Outro)

Tom: I would agree with that, yeah. I definitely think it's an area that we could be doing so much more in so many different ways. Well, great. Thank you to Dr. Bergman. Thank you, Kelvin. Until next time, for TOPcast, I'm Tom.

Kelvin: I'm Kelvin.

Tom: See ya.