

Pennsylvania community colleges may let adults earn credit for their life's work

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By Bill Schackner

Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges on Monday unveiled a statewide effort to enable adult learners to transform life and work experiences into college credit, saving money and time spent working toward a degree.

The Prior Learning Assessment initiative, dubbed "College Credit FastTrack," is intended to boost degree completion rates in a state that has struggled to entice adults back into the classroom.

It was announced at a Harrisburg event and already has begun accepting pitches from individuals hoping their life experiences are worthy of credit.

The effort is being funded by a \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Those interested are directed to a website, ccfasttrack.org, where they create an account, identify a campus and search for a course or courses that they believe match their experience. They then are guided through the process of applying and developing a portfolio documenting that experience, which is reviewed by faculty for its credit-worthiness.

The cost of creating a portfolio is a non-refundable \$125 fee, according to officials with the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges.

The credit could be toward an associate degree but could also serve as the foundation for a bachelor's degree.

Danielle Gross, a commission spokeswoman, said officials estimate that 57 percent of jobs in Pennsylvania by 2018 will require some of kind of training beyond high school.

"Some post-secondary education is as necessary now as a high school degree was in previous generations, and many adults want to gain a degree and gain re-employment with as little time in the classroom as possible," Nicholas Neupauer, commission board chair and president of [Butler County Community College](#), said in a statement.

"College Credit FastTrack will enable these students to complete a life-changing degree program more quickly and at a reduced cost."

For those who already possess a degree, the program can lessen the cost of either adding a credential or changing careers by shifting into a new discipline.

Officials at the Community College of Allegheny County, one of the participating schools, said a three-credit course earned under the program would cost less than half of one taken at CCAC's per-credit rate of \$105.

An administrative assistant in a government office who is skilled at doing research, drafting legislation and has attended hearings may have accumulated the basics for an introduction to political science, said Mary Frances Archey, CCAC's vice president for student success and completion.

Microsoft or Cisco training might apply to computer-related courses, police training could be relevant to criminal justice studies and emergency medical training might be applicable to health science classes, Ms. Gross said.

Pennsylvania degree attainment for those 18 and over ranks 30th among states and District of Columbia, Ms. Gross said. Just over a third of Pennsylvania's adult population — 33.9 percent — has an associate's degree, compared with the national average of 34.7 percent.

Most neighboring states are higher, she said.

Ms. Archey said the cost per portfolio and proficiency students must show in creating the portfolio mean the credits are being just given away free.

"I think it's going to help a lot of non-traditional students, many of whom started college a long time ago," she said.