



Dr. Nicholas Neupauer Guest Column From The Post-Gazette

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Give credit where credit is due

A commonly accepted practice in higher education is to use placement testing, internships, AP tests, cooperative education, independent learning and field experiences to enhance student knowledge and award college credit. The emphasis these days is on what students have learned rather than the traditional focus on how many hours they have clocked in classrooms while earning passing grades.

Colleges and universities also are offering new, innovative methods of learning, such as online courses and online-classroom hybrids, which accrediting agencies assess and accept.

This is why some of us involved with community colleges question the Feb. 7 Post-Gazette editorial, "College Discredit: Life Experience Is Not the Same as Academic Rigor," that criticized Pennsylvania's new College Credit FastTrack system.

College Credit FastTrack was designed by the state's 14 community colleges to allow students to earn college credits by providing evidence that they have mastered certain course content. It is a rigorous process in which students are assisted by an adviser to create and submit an academic portfolio for review. If the evidence they offer stands scrutiny, they can receive credit so they can enroll in more advanced courses and move closer to graduation. This reduces both the time and cost to complete a college degree.

Requiring students to take on additional student loan debt to sit through a course in which they're already proficient is wasteful. This is especially true for returning adults and dislocated workers who come to community colleges hoping to get a new job or advance within an industry in which they already have experience.

Montgomery County Community College student Anthony Caso is a prime example. He is a 15-year veteran of the police force, a graduate of both the Philadelphia Police Academy and an FBI detective school. Mr. Caso also took training courses at county and state levels and holds an incident-management certificate from Auburn University. By submitting to the Prior Learning Assessment program at the community college, he was awarded 27 credits towards his associate's degree. Certainly Mr. Caso's 15 years of experience, multiple certifications and ongoing training were an adequate substitute for Intro to Criminal Justice, safety and first aid, and incident-management courses, among others.

This type of placement testing does not in any way diminish the value of degrees earned with this kind of credit. The mere fact that credit is earned outside of a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom does not make the learning irrelevant.

As president of a community college, I am often told by employers that they need qualified applicants for their job vacancies. A 2012 Lumina Foundation study indicated that 75 percent of Americans would be more likely to "enroll in a higher education program if they could be evaluated and receive credits for what they already know."

Pennsylvania is at a crossroads. We know that in many parts of our state, the economic climate is changing and workers need to update their skills and credentials. By 2018, nearly 57 percent of Pennsylvania's jobs will require some sort of postsecondary education credential. If Pennsylvania does not provide the workers that industry needs, industry will go elsewhere.

There is no rationale for wasting taxpayer dollars and students' time and money to teach things students already know. Awarding credit for prior learning is not a gimmick. College Credit FastTrack is merely the newest, most efficient vehicle to earn such credits through Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges.

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