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The American Council of Education recently upgraded their recommendations on credit hours awarded for the NCRC. Join us on Episode 37 as we explore the benefits of PLA; make connections between WorkKeys levels and post-secondary performance; and examine how administrators and faculty can use WorkKeys Estimator to align their competencies to specific WorkKeys benchmarks.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 37



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Links and Resources

- [WorkKeys for College Credit – ACT Workforce Summit Presentation](#)
- [The PLA Boost Report from CAEL and WICHE](#)
- [ACT WorkKeys Estimator](#)
- [ACT WorkKeys Profiling](#)
- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)

Transcript of Episode 37

Jingle Open with Music: Let's Get Ready for Work

Lynette Drop Quote: The availability, or absence of public transit can really impact a local area or local jurisdictions' workforce attainment goals, or higher education attainment goals, or economic development goals. Our students are one flat tire away from dropping out. Transit is the through line that can connect all of these critical aspects of community development and community health.

Jasen teaser: We know the ACT WorkKeys NCRC as a launchpad for career pathways. Did you know working learners can also earn college credit for the NCRC? Learn more on why this matters with Episode 37 of Ready for Work.

Jingle Open

Jasen: Career Pathways are a special blend of training and job progression. When the training includes post-secondary learning, the WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate from ACT can translate to college credit that jumpstarts the learning journey. Awarding credit through Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, for short, boosts confidence and increases the pace to program completion. Colleges increase enrollment while helping build the regional talent pipeline.

The American Council of Education recently upgraded their recommendations on credit hours awarded for the NCRC. Join us on Episode 37 as we explore the benefits of PLA; make connections between WorkKeys levels and post-secondary performance; and examine how administrators and faculty can use WorkKeys Estimator to align their competencies to specific WorkKeys benchmarks.

Voices of excellence for episode 37 include Jenna Cohen, the Senior Director of Workforce Product here at ACT, along with Dr. Cindy Hill, an industrial-organizational psychologist for ACT's WorkKeys Profile team. Lynette Livingston is an executive dean at Chippewa Valley Technical College in Wisconsin and gives us insights from the field on success with credit for prior learning in partnership with high schools across the region.

In a recent meeting of the Work Ready Communities alumni program at ACT, Jenna Cohen gave us a quick intro to Prior Learning Assessment to award college credit.

Jenna: Higher learning assessment is the process for evaluating knowledge and skills. College credits for learning from on-the-job training. Independent study. Military and volunteer service. Training courses and our certifications. And work experience. When we think about the National Career Readiness Certificate it really falls into that - training courses or certification.

Jasen: PLA can take many forms, as Jenna explains.

Jenna: There are a variety of prior learning methods and that includes industry recognized certificates, evaluated non-college training standardized tests, student portfolios, and then of course, that all leads to college credit and college completion.

Jasen: PLA can generate powerful results as Cindy notes in her overview of recent research on the practice of PLA.

Cindy: This study is done by CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. They did the two different institutions, so it's a really broad study. The encouraging part is it showed that giving PLA it increased degree completion, reduced time to degree, reduced cost, increased credit earning; I mean all of these wonderful things. With PLA, adult students increase their credential completion rates. It was 49% with, 27% for those who didn't, so that's a pretty huge difference there.

Jasen: Cindy shares how PLA is an effective tool for equity in the workforce ecosystem.

Cindy: Diversity - being able to help all the marginalized groups actually be able to be more successful. They were able to show 24% boost for Hispanic adults; 14% for adult black adults; 25% for adults at community colleges; so, really big numbers for those groups.

Jasen: PLA helps remove financial barriers for adults and families.

Cindy: For adults in particular, who have got families saving money, being able to get out there and get the job and start making that additional money - huge amount saved, nine to 14 months, in terms of finishing. Then all of that time that they save, so, really great encouraging numbers that make a real difference; I mean it's like a semester there.

Jasen: Getting specific to the WorkKeys NCRC, the ACE recommendation is a framework for colleges to deploy PLA. Ultimately, colleges have flexibility in their PLA, as we'll learn in a moment from Lynette Livingston. The ACE framework is a great place to start. Jenna shares specific competencies and credit levels endorsed by ACE for the WorkKeys NCRC.

Jenna: We have up to six credits for the Platinum badge - and that's three credits lower division courses, which includes subjects of technical mathematics and introduction to information literacy. We have our Gold NCRC, which is up to four credits which could be again in that lower division, those 100 and 200 level courses - technical mathematics and introduction to information literacy, once again. And again, the same institution level same credits but for the Silver, up to two credits and that would be one hour in each of those subjects that you just heard me describe.

Jasen: The ACE recommendation carries a great deal of influence in the PLA space. Jenna shares why this endorsement is important to the mission of ACT. We'll also hear from Cindy on the rigor of the ACE process and the benefits of the review for WorkKeys users.

Jenna: Information about the American council on education - I'm just going to highlight that their members educate two out of every three students and all the accredited degree-granting US institutions. There's over 1700 colleges and university-related associations. It's one of the only major higher education associations to represent all types of us accredited degree-granting institutions, two-year four-year, public and private. So, this is just letting you know their street cred, who they are, what they have in their back pocket, and why we felt it was important to continue to partner with them.

Cindy: And that was part of why I really wanted Jenna to explain who ACE is, that they do have that cred. And how important that is - I mean you don't just get this. They don't just kind of look at it and say, oh yeah, this is really good. Let's give these kids these credits. I mean, these people, this is a process. And so, there's a whole content review where they go through and make sure that you know the subjects are covered in sufficient depth, there's an evaluation component, all of that. And then there's a whole additional technical review from the panel and they have a psychometrician on there to really go in depth and question our psychometricians. So, you know, all of that is really looked at. Really the ACE review is an independent third-party review of the whole program. And we did give them four live forms of each one of the assessments as well, so they could see the assessments as part of their review.

Jasen: Cindy shares some of the highlights of the review and affirmations from ACE for the WorkKeys approach.

Cindy: I don't know about y'all, but I just did an absolute happy dance over this. I'm guessing Jenna did it too. NCRC's three exam results are excellent for measuring student readiness for the workforce, but this is the part I really loved, as well as their ability to succeed in post-secondary learning institutions. It was great for both. The exams gauge the skill gaps between students'

ability and workforce expectation, which is what we know. And then, the results can be used to improve educational curricula, giving institutions a blueprint to map what students are learning, to workforce demands. I mean that goes back to Jason saying, you know, forming those partnerships. These are some things that I think could help maybe bring people on board for the different partnerships.

And then, credentialing levels are quite rigorous. We knew that, but compared to national norms, they are quite rigorous. That was the part that I really wanted to put like, in all caps. Additional comments from the ACE review panel is I think, stuff we know, and you all probably know it all too. The validity evidence is outstanding. Compelling are the numbers of studies - the outstanding evidence of exam fairness. I have to admit, with our North Star being a lot of the focus of our institution - outstanding evidence of fairness was very exciting. And then, you know we know, WorkKeys - evidence of a review of required job skills; demonstrated increase in NCRC associated with increased in skills. So, some of what they said was just validating what we knew and some of it and what we've been telling people for a long time. It was nice to hear it from an independent third party.

Jingle/Bumper and Segment Music

Jasen: Lynette Livingston of Chippewa Valley Technical College is a frequent contributor to ACT's research. Lynette produced a segment for the recent ACT Workforce Summit that we used in the Work Ready Communities event as well. Lynette shared with us best practices for deploying the ACE-PLA-WorkKeys framework with powerful results.

Lynette: We've made it a priority to make sure that we have a process for awarding credit, but we also want to know if it's making a difference for our students. So, specifically what we look at is core success. We look at students' graduation, as you remember it's about persistence and completion. And we want to see how long it's taking them to graduate. They can tell you now after collecting this data for a number of years, we're really happy with the results that we see students who do receive credit for prior learning do actually graduate at significantly-higher levels. In fact, that students who enter into programs without a credit for prior learning award, we thought that it would be true, and we read about this through the national literature. But now of course, we follow that in our own work. And we can see over a 20% difference in graduation, within two-years or three-years time, between students who earn a CPL credit and those that do not. It certainly tells us that our effort in this regard is important and it's making a difference for students. So, it was good use of time and something that we're very proud to continue working on ACT with. Our students find the value. Our faculty find the value. It's a win-win for everyone.

Jasen: The journey to PLA at CVTC started with the hope of boosting student retention, as Lynette explains.

Lynette: Happy to share some of the credit for prior learning efforts that we are embarking on at CVTC. So, let's start with why this became important work for us. Like many other institutes of higher education, we started focusing in on retention of students. In addition to enrollment, we wanted students to remain at the college and complete the credentials that they were seeking. Another important piece that came to be in the state of Wisconsin, within our Wisconsin technical college system, is something called performance-based funding. So, part of the funding that we received from the state is measured through performance-based indicators. And one of those metrics is credit for prior learning. So, of course that helped to increase attention and effort as well.

Jasen: Lynette notes the importance of early college linkages and partnerships with K12 districts throughout the region.

Lynette: Approximately 20% of our enrollment comes from dual credit. So that's a significant part of our population and one that we pay close attention to. So, we have also ensured that students who participate in associate-degree-seeking high school academies, are taking the ACT WorkKeys as part of their curriculum with us. And we have also found, that the information that comes back to students following taking the ACT WorkKeys, is an excellent tool for them in their career planning as part of their work with academic and career planning that our K-12 schools do focus on as well.

The ACE framework empowered CVTC to move ahead and WorkKeys filled the gaps for all elements to come together for the college.

Lynette: So, the reason why we opted in for looking at WorkKeys as one of our industry-recognized credentials, is because there were the ACE recommendations for how that credit for prior learning could be accompanied. So ACE is something that we use when we consider military training, as an example, for how we bring credit in, so we have experience within that. We also consider the WorkKeys assessment to be like a third party standardized assessment. So, we treat it similar to AP® or CLEP®, or Dante®, so something that we were familiar with.

As I mentioned previously, verified experience does not always transfer, so we wanted to make sure that we were treating WorkKeys as one of those other elements that met for better transferability. At our college, our benchmark for bringing in a CPL is that we have an 80% match with our course competencies.

Jasen: Let's bring back Cindy for some context on the NCRC outcomes important to ACE and beneficial for each region's workforce ecosystem.

Cindy: You know. We are research. And so, one of the research studies that we did, and that we actually presented to ACE during their review, was just showing how the correlation between GPA and how people score on the NCRC that it really is a statistically-significant correlation. Basically, non-qualifiers generally had a GPA of about 2.81, but then looking at platinum, 3.63. So, a pretty good indicator with that correlation that these things do go hand-in-hand, and this particular study was in Arkansas, but I believe we had a similar study done in Missouri that found similar results. So, it's replicable in terms of the results.

Jasen: Armed with the ACE report and skill benchmarks through WorkKeys, Lynette shows us how CVTC focused their PLA framework to boost math outcomes.

Lynette: So as far as what we did, we gathered our faculty of course - our faculty, our subject matter experts - and they really delved into determining specifically what students were able to demonstrate with certain achievement on the ACT WorkKeys and they cross reference that with our mathematical reasoning curriculum and they were able to identify the score that would be required in each of those three subsections of the NCRC in order to award credit for our mathematical reasoning course.

Jingle/Bumper and Segment Music

Jasen: WorkKeys Estimator is a solution to help align competencies with WorkKeys benchmarks. Cindy shares how Estimator helped CVTC and how the process can be replicated.

Cindy: So, I have to admit, I love hearing Lynette's real-applied NCRC data and seeing those numbers. I think that's wonderful. They had previously been giving credit and then we came out with WorkKeys Estimator, and Cheri (Hughes) was wonderful and connected Lynette, and I walked her through how her faculty could use WorkKeys Estimator to go in and do a review - to figure out the amount of credit that should be given - and the match and everything. The feedback that Lynette gave Cheri and I was, basically, the faculty really liked Estimator because it gave them the standardized procedure to go through for making that determination of the prior learning. And I believe there was actually an increase in what they were willing to give as a result of it so that was pretty great.

Jasen: It's not just about the academics. Lynette explains the importance of employer engagement as a participating ACT Work Ready Community.

Lynette: Within the state of Wisconsin, we in Eau Claire County are the first county in the state that is focusing in on becoming a Work Ready Community, so we are over 90% in achieving that effort. But, in Eau Claire County we found that we had employers who supported this effort and we have invested further in training our own profiler as an example. And then, sustaining the effort of administering the WorkKeys now at our college

Jingle/Bumper and Segment Music

Jasen: In our final segment, we'll share some tips for implementing a PLA framework with WorkKeys. The CAEL-WICHE report has advice on equity, scalability, engagement of educators, and continuous improvement. We'll also hear from Lynette on different forms of credit for prior learning.

Cindy: There's actually a short version that's like a couple of pages and then there's the hundred-page report. The recommendations from all of that work that they did, was one, we need to promote equity and educational attainment, and this is a wonderful way to do it. Scaling. We need to scale the use of PLA by looking at institutional policies and practices. And, like Jason was saying, partnerships. Build support at the institution level, and I think that's a lot of educating people that it's not taking money out of their pocket. It really is boosting our accountability numbers all of, you know, what we're measured on, and then improving, you know, just looking at the bigger picture of improving system state and federal policies. So, they got a lot of support and some really good recommendations so hopefully we can spread the word on that.

Lynette: How CVTC goes about awarding Credit for Prior Learning comes in a couple of different forms. One can be verified experience where we can see that someone has earned experience that we can award credit for that can come from a prior training effort; it can come from work experience. We can bring that bring that in as credit that we would code as verified experience. That's good for students who are completing their credentials at CVTC. But, if they do later choose to advance, and let's say, earn a bachelor's degree, that credit does not transfer with them. So, in that case, a different option, coming through prior learning assessment, through a certification or an industry-recognized credential, may make more sense for them where we actually award that credit on the transcript and it does become transferrable as well.

As far as how we go about awarding this credit, different methods that we may use, can come from interviews, or a student putting together a portfolio; doing competency type of exam, such as a CLEP® exam; or through a recognized industry credential.

Jasen: ACT stands ready to assist educators with WorkKeys Estimator.

Cindy: The ACT, we say, Industrial organizational psychologists, the people who help the job profilers train them and help and everything – Carol, Helen, Cindy. We're more than happy to help walk people through using Estimator, the process, anything to help. We really do believe in this and it making a difference in people's lives. So, I know that sounds kind of corny, but I mean you saw the data. It really does work.

Resource and Closing Segment

Jasen: We appreciate Lynette Livingston at Chippewa Valley Technical College, along with my ACT colleagues, Jenna Cohen and Cindy Hill. In our show notes for Episode 37, you'll find a slide deck on WorkKeys for PLA from the recent ACT Workforce Summit. Other important links you'll want to check out include the CAEL-WICHE report on PLA, the WorkKeys Estimator Solution, and much more.

Closing and Jingle