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## Work Experience for College Credit

Pennsylvania's governor, seeking to bolster the number of adults in the state who are enrolled in college, has urged all of its postsecondary institutions to agree to give adult and working students academic credit for their previous experience in the work place.

“In today’s global economy, more jobs than ever require some postsecondary education,” [Gov. Edward G. Rendell said](#). “Many Pennsylvanians have a wealth of hands-on experience and workforce skills, but they lack the educational credentials to advance. With this initiative, it will now be possible for people to get ahead based on the real-life skills and knowledge they’ve demonstrated and developed on the job.”

Under the plan pushed by Rendell and the commonwealth’s Departments of Education and Labor and Industry, colleges would adopt standards promoted by accrediting agencies and national college associations aimed at increasing the amount of prior work experience for which students could earn postsecondary academic credit.

The proposal also said Pennsylvania officials would explore the creation of a centralized body that would try to commonly assess and define what kinds of work experience should qualify for credit, to ease the transfer of credit for such work among colleges in the commonwealth.

“We’re trying to raise the awareness that we in Pennsylvania need to increase the number of people in postsecondary education and to increase their skills,” said Barry Ciccocioppo, press secretary for the Department of Labor and Industry. “One way to do that’s been proven in other places is to adopt policies on prior learning assessments.”

Experts on adult education said the proposal represented an exceptional statewide effort to focus on the needs of workers in postsecondary education. “To our knowledge, this is first time that the issue of assessing learning achieved through work experience has reached a governor’s level,” said Pamela Tate, president and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, whose [study of Pennsylvania’s approach to educating workers](#) influenced Rendell’s plan. “There haven’t been very many states that have taken any leadership at all on this. Most have left it up to individual institutions.”

The survey by Tate’s group found that most institutions in Pennsylvania gave credit for prior work experience in some way, but that only with an infrastructure that improves cooperation among institutions can the practice “be taken to a much greater scale.”

Peter Stokes, executive vice president at Eduventures, an education research firm, agreed that policies that make it easier for workers to translate their previous work experience into academic credit can go a long way in encouraging mid-career workers who might be daunted by the prospect of entering college for the first time. “For someone who’s been in the work force for 10 or 15 years, it can be a lot less scary if the college or university you’re enrolling in can tell you that you’re already halfway there, or a third of the way there,” Stokes said.

But he also warned that efforts like the one being explored in Pennsylvania can collapse in a hurry if they overreach and try to require rather than encourage. “Mandating it in a uniform blanket manner across a state that has as much variety in types and quality of institution as any other state, from Ivies on down, could cause a problem,” said Stokes. “You can’t tell institutions that they have to accept professional experience as credit for their courses without encroaching on an institution’s right to determine what qualifies as credit.”

Ciccocioppo, the state spokesman, said the plan at this point does not “include anything specific that says, ‘Do this, do that.’ We’re not trying to tell anybody that they have to do anything.”

Even without a mandate, said Tate of the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning, Rendell’s proposal is “a strong message that the governor and the department expect higher education to respond in a proactive way to this.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)

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