

**Out-of-class learning equals college credit
Ga. hopes to speed up degree route for older students; critics worry.**

By Laura Diamond ldiamond@ajc.com

Tracy Martin long considered going to college but worried about the time and cost.

The 52-year-old decided to enroll after hearing about “prior learning,” which lets adults earn free credits toward a degree for college-level learning that occurred outside a traditional classroom, such as on the job, in the military or through corporate training.

Colleges in Georgia and across the country are awarding prior-learning credits to help older students earn degrees more quickly and more cheaply.

The state is working to increase the number of degree holders because about 60 percent of future jobs will require a post-secondary education, while only 42 percent of Georgians have one.

Not everyone has welcomed this change. Critics say prior learning works better for vocational programs in which the goal is to certify people with specific skills.

Trish Paterson, executive director for college access initiatives for the University System of Georgia, said prior learning isn’t just giving students credit for life experience. Colleges that choose to offer the credit measure what students know, review how that corresponds with courses they are required to take and determine whether their knowledge merits college credit, she said.

“We are honoring what a student knows even if we are not the reason why they know it,” Paterson said. “This is some radical change for the world of higher education.”

Johann Neem, an associate professor of history at Western Washington University, said students who receive prior-learning credits miss out on the knowledge gained in the classroom by interacting with professors and classmates.

Class discussions are just as important as tests, papers and reading assignments because they expose students to new perspectives and challenge them to think differently, he said.

“At the end of the day, we want students to leave not just with new knowledge and skills, but with a sense of curiosity and wonder,” Neem said. “That means that the class experience is vital to cultivating the intellectual character that ultimately defines what it means to be a college graduate.”

Students will be required to take college classes, Georgia officials say. They can receive up to 30 credits through prior learning, and most degrees require at least 120.

Students typically earn three to eight credits for prior learning, said **Jerry Merwin**, director of adult academic degree completion at Valdosta State University.

That’s as much as \$1,262 in saved tuition at Valdosta State.

Students who want prior-learning credit take a course, now offered at 13 colleges in the University System. It teaches how to prepare a portfolio to show why they deserve credit.

Merwin was the first professor to teach it, in 2008. Colleges developed learning goals for about 30 courses ranging from nursing to criminal justice to American Sign Language. Students review the goals and syllabi to see if their skills and knowledge match up, he said.

So far, 83 students have earned 312 credits hours through prior-learning assessment, according to university system data. The system enrolls about 318,000 students.

Faculty trained to assess the portfolios review them and recommend whether students deserve credit. Faculty assessors do the bulk of the work, but recommendations are reviewed by others, Merwin said.

The University System has trained 245 faculty and staff in prior-learning assessments, and Paterson said more colleges will soon participate.

Martin, who is working toward a degree in media studies at Gainesville State College, earned credit for introduction to film by turning in a DVD of her short films and other professional work. She's hoping to receive credit for theater appreciation because of her experience acting on stage.

"It's painful to sit in class and sit through something you could teach," Martin said. "It's expensive, too."

Cynthia Wilson hopes prior learning will help her avoid redundancy as she works toward a degree in organizational leadership from Valdosta State University. Mentors told her she'd have trouble advancing in nonprofit work without a college degree.

She hopes to get credit for five courses. She recently completed leadership training offered by her local chamber of commerce and through her jobs learned how to write grants and manage budgets.

"This makes getting a degree seem possible," said Wilson, 38. "It recognizes that we want a degree but that we're a different type of student."

The University System has long used prior learning as a way to award college credit to veterans and those serving in the military.

It works with the American Council of Education, which reviews military training and experiences and makes credit recommendations.

More than 2,300 colleges recognize the transcripts the group produces.

Timothy Brown, 23, is studying criminal justice at Gainesville State College and received six credits for his experience in the U.S. Army.

Brown, who is now serving in the Georgia Army National Guard, estimated the credits saved him \$800.

"That's almost half a semester for free," Brown said.

Brown said it was hard at first to get the help he needed, but added colleges have recently put more focus on veterans.

Other adult learners said it can be difficult to decipher the prior-learning process. Advisers don't always have all the information, forcing students to rely on one another and information posted on websites, Martin said.

Some faculty have a difficult time accepting that students can learn material from someone other than them, Merwin said.

"It is hard to say there is one best way of learning information," Merwin said. "There was a lot of skepticism with online learning, but now there is comfort with it and we see the advantages and benefits of different types of learning for different types of students."



Cynthia Wilson, who helps organize Relay For Life events for the American Cancer Society, hopes to get prior learning credit for five courses for her degree from Valdosta State. PHIL SKINNER / PSKINNER@AJC.COM