STATEMENT OF
DR. MERODIE HANCOCK
PRESIDENT, THOMAS EDISON STATE UNIVERSITY
FOR THE WRITTEN RECORD
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE

February 16, 2023

Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Committee, my name is Merodie Hancock, and I am president of Thomas Edison State University in New Jersey. In 1972, the state of New Jersey created Thomas Edison State University to break the mold of traditional higher education. Our vision is straightforward: Building careers. Advancing professions. Empowering lives. We meet working adults where they are in life and take them to the next level: whether starting a degree, completing a first degree, adding a graduate degree, or completing a professional certificate. We continue to create innovative pathways to education and deliver on the promise to make education accessible to nontraditional learners. We see our role as an engine to help the innovation economy by uplifting adults toward career advancement.

Today the University offers associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs as well as undergraduate and graduate certificates in more than 100 areas of study and is a nationally recognized pillar of higher education innovation with a proven track record in offering Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). CPL allows individual learners to demonstrate prior college-level learning that has occurred outside of traditional educational settings. It encompasses many credit-earning opportunities providing a highly efficient and economical approach for learners to progress toward a degree. More than half of TESU students receive credit for some form of prior learning.

In the last five years, Thomas Edison State University has awarded more than 1 million credits, equivalent to $544 million in tuition, for college-level learning outside the classroom. Under the auspice of credit for prior learning or CPL, TESU offers several pathways for students to earn credit. The most recognized credit evaluation occurs through the American Council on Education. TESU is one of the largest recipients of ACE credit in the United States, receiving, on average, more than 150,000 credits of ACE-evaluated military credit and 34,000 credits from ACE non-military learning experiences per year. Beyond ACE, there are external (DSST®, CLEP®, etc.) and internal (TECEP®) exams and TESU's individualized learning portfolios to evaluate nontraditional student learning. These are smaller, but important parts of our learning evaluation ecosystem.

In addition, Thomas Edison State University conducts our own review of noncollegiate, apprenticeship, and workplace training opportunities to determine college credit equivalency. We call this method Professional Learning Review or PLR. Students who leverage PLR credits receive, on average, 38 credits per student, valued at more than half of an associate degree. We awarded 66,000 credits of college-level learning to students for PLR in 2021 alone — a collective saving to students of more than $25 million in tuition dollars.

At the macro level, the cost savings resulting from the University's CPL efforts for the accumulated 275,000 credits awarded in FY2021 totaled more than $90 million, an unheralded investment accelerating workforce development. Further, the burden on students, federal aid, state aid, and military funding is significantly eased because enrolling students are not charged to access these credit awards.

The commitment to assessing student learning outside the traditional classroom is complex and time-consuming and demands tremendous quality control measures. Thomas Edison State University is a national leader with a strong proven track record of assessing learning in this way for undergraduate and graduate-level programs.

We are working on launching an innovative Center in New Jersey structured to address the critical need for skilled workers across industries and support the degree attainment goals of working students. The proposed Center for Career Relevant Education and Talent Evaluation (CreateNJ) will empower the individual, capturing their career-relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities stemming from their formal higher education, technical training, workplace training, and apprenticeship training into one comprehensive and transportable document that grows with their accomplishments. This will validate their time and talents and allow them to represent themselves more accurately within the workforce and to academic institutions. Documenting this training and identifying the next steps will allow workers to see and reach their full potential academically and professionally, making attainable what may otherwise have seemed out of reach. In capturing this information, Thomas Edison State University intends to translate these achievements into a language readily identifiable and understood by industry, thereby building a more robust and informed pipeline for employers. By linking skills and knowledge to the workforce and professional opportunities, employers can view current or future employees based on skills and credential attainment.

CreateNJ and the New Jersey Workforce Transcript will place us at the forefront of validated skills-based learning and solidify us as leaders in lifelong talent development. The New Jersey Workforce transcript will translate these reviews, including industry-recognized credentials, certificates, and licensures, into demonstrated knowledge and skills. Once translated into academic equivalencies and comparable industry skills, this knowledge will be mapped to create pathways to degree attainment. The talent and competency mapping will result from the collaboration between external partners and the utilization of CreateNJ and TESU resources.

A Lumina Foundation survey suggests that credit for prior learning "boosts completion rates for adult students and has the potential to close unfair, persistent equity gaps in degree and credential attainment." These completion rates particularly affect underserved populations who use CPL, showing a 14 percent increase in completion rates of Black adult students, 24 percent for Hispanic adult students, and 25 percent for community college students.[1]

TESU's model of recognizing college-level learning wherever and however it occurs is ingrained in the University's mission and permeates our service to students.

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[1] Sedlak, W. (2021, January 26). Prior learning assessment: Give higher-ed credit where credit is due. Lumina Foundation.

It is critical that we develop a mechanism to communicate and legitimize the diverse skills and knowledge acquired by the learner in a way that aligns with employer needs, that these skills are reflected in clear credentials, and, where appropriate, that they lead to validated academic achievement and degree attainment.

As we look forward to the next 50 years, I hope you will call on me as a resource on higher education issues, including non-traditional student needs and workforce development issues.

Thank you.