

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Measuring What Students Learn Outside the Classroom

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PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND THE COMPLETION AGENDA

Prior Learning Assessments, or PLAs, measure what a student has learned outside of the college classroom, evaluate whether that learning is college level and then determine the equivalent number of college credits. Credits earned through PLA are closely tied to learning outcomes rather than measures of seat time.

*Center for American Progress
June 2011*

Many students come to postsecondary education with learning acquired outside the traditional classroom. They may have learning that was acquired in the military or from workplace experience. It may be from a corporate training program or extensive volunteer activity. And, it may be from independent study or one or more college-level noncredit courses.

Colleges and universities have been giving these students an opportunity to “earn” credit for this kind of experiential learning for a long time. Interest in the practice grew with the G.I. Bill and World War II veterans who earned credits for military training. But in most cases, the granting of credit for prior learning has not attracted a lot of attention, and the numbers in terms of students and credits awarded have not been high.

In recent years, the practice of evaluating whether learning acquired outside the classroom is college level, and then determining the equivalent number of college credits has received added attention as educators and education policy leaders have joined in a push for college completion – a quest to attract and graduate a larger portion of the nation’s population.

It might be hyperbole to suggest that the practice of granting credit for learning outside the classroom – commonly known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) – has achieved mainstream status. But PLA is alive and well, gaining momentum and giving students new opportunities to earn credits that are tied to learning outcomes rather than traditional measures of seat time.

Students who earn PLA credits can save time and money by not having to take courses in subject areas where their competence can be documented. Further, their postsecondary success can contribute to broader initiatives designed to raise education attainment levels throughout the nation. For example, the Lumina Foundation has challenged the nation’s institutions of higher education to increase the number of degree and certificate holders to 60 percent of the population by 2025.¹ Its action plan for achieving this goal includes the expanded use of PLA.

In this regard, a recent Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) study found that the availability of PLA may motivate adult learners to persist in their courses and degree/certificate programs. A study examining the academic records of more than 62,000 students

¹ Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education*, March 2012.



from 48 institutions found that 56 percent of adult PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, compared to only 21 percent of non-PLA students.²

Historically, PLA has not been universally available. In most states, it is a matter of local practice and PLA credits frequently not accepted in transfer. As Pamela Tate and her colleagues at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) report:

“Most institutions offer some form of prior learning assessment for college credit – if only acceptance of advanced placement or AP credit – but considerable variation exists in terms of which assessment methods are available, how many PLA credits may apply toward a degree, which degree programs will accept those credits, and whether students even receive information from the institutions about PLA options. And PLA credits earned at one institution are sometimes not transferrable to another institution.”³

As suggested above, however, things are changing. A recent issue of INSIDE HIGHER ED reported that CAEL and the American Council of Education (ACE) have joined forces to meet the demand for an expanded adult student market. Presently, they are mapping out an adult learning agenda, with prior learning assessment at its center.

Yet, the newsletter continues, “Prior learning assessment still makes people nervous. When done right, the process is a far cry from taking money to offer credit for ‘life experience.’ But that notion persists. And perhaps more fairly, some in higher education worry that the ‘completion agenda’ is putting pressure on colleges to lower the bar for a degree or credential, including through prior learning.”⁴

Lumina Foundation adopts “Big Goal”: 60% of Americans will obtain a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential by 2025

PLA advanced as needed innovation

To be counted under Lumina’s definition of high-quality degrees or credentials (those with clear and transparent learning outcomes leading to further education and employment), these certificates should be recognized in terms of learning outcomes and have clear pathways to further degrees. Once this is accomplished, counting these certificate holders would add 10.3 million degrees to the total.

Even more innovative approaches are possible in the drive to reach the Big Goal, such as taking advantage of the burgeoning expansion of open courseware to create new pathways to degrees. Another innovative effort could be to significantly expand the availability of prior learning assessment (PLA), including granting degrees based on PLA. If made widely available, these approaches might produce more than 2 million new degrees by 2025.

² Cited in Pamela Tate, Rebecca Klein-Collins, and Karen Steinberg “Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner,” *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2011.

³ Pamela Tate, Rebecca Klein-Collins, and Karen Steinberg “Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner,” *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2011.

⁴ Ibid.

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ACE and CAEL are working to address these concerns. For this purpose, a relatively new portfolio assessment service has been developed to complement ongoing consultant work with individual colleges and companies. This portfolio assessment service – Learning Counts.org – has signed up scores of participating institutions of higher education that have agreed to send students through the process and then accept the credit recommendations that are generated.

This is not meant to suggest that PLA is now universally accepted. To the contrary:

“Not everyone in higher education is ready to shower prior learning with roses. The practice remains controversial in many circles, particularly at more selective colleges that are unwilling to accept credits for experiential learning, sometimes even when ACE (the association to which virtually all of them belong) makes those credit recommendations. More than half of colleges accept some form of prior learning credit, however.”⁵

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How is PLA being applied in Ohio and across the country? To what extent is it available to adults who want to begin, or resume, postsecondary learning? Are selective universities less likely to award PLA credit than are other colleges and universities? What kinds of learning are accepted for PLA credit? How is PLA learning evaluated; what assessment methods are available and what documentation is required? Are their limitations on the number of PLA credits a student can be awarded? Can those credits be applied toward a degree? Can PLA credit awarded by one college or university be transferred to another two- or four-year institution?

These and other questions are the focus on this study, undertaken for and with the financial support of the Ohio Board of Regents. Based on a survey of the state’s two- and four-year public colleges and universities, as well as a scan of PLA practices throughout the nation, the information reported here should be examined with caution. The data from Ohio institutions have been self-reported by the state’s public universities and college, and none of the data reported here reflect any systemic review of student records. Similarly, comments about PLA practices nationally are based on data gathered from a selective sample of states.

The study’s purpose is three-fold: (1) to generate a status update on PLA practices in Ohio and across the nation; (2) to assess Ohio’s performance in the context of national practices; and (3) to provide state policymakers and institutional leaders with empirical guidance as they consider changes either in state policy or local practice.

⁵ Ibid.



WHY PLA?

There are two answers to this question – the first deals with *talent*, while the second speaks to *opportunity*.

Over the last decade there has been a growing understanding among policy makers, economists, education leaders and others that America’s economic competitiveness in the 21st century will depend on increasing our workforce’s skill levels and education to meet the needs of a changing worldwide economy. In the coming years more and more jobs will depend on workers who are able to learn and adapt quickly to new challenges.

To be truly competitive in the talent-driven 21st Century economy, states and the nation must have a skilled workforce, with workers who are critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, effective communicators and collaborators. Unfortunately, Ohio is not ready to meet this talent challenge. Consider these facts:

- One out of every four Ohio students drops out of high school without earning a diploma.⁶
- Too few high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, and far too many of the students who do go on to higher education fail to earn a degree or certificate.
- More than 1.3 million Ohioans, or nearly 22 percent of the state’s adult population, have accumulated some college credits but lack a college degree or occupational certificate to show for their efforts.⁷
- Just over one-third of Ohioans aged 25 to 64 have earned a college degree or some other postsecondary credential.⁸

These facts put Ohio at a serious economic disadvantage, given that for increasing numbers of jobs education must go beyond high school. This is confirmed by research conducted by Georgetown University’s Center for Education and the Workforce, which reports that by 2018, 57 percent of jobs in Ohio will require postsecondary education (compared to 63 percent for the nation). *What is most important here is the gap between the 57 percent of jobs that will require postsecondary education by 2018 and the 35.9 percent of Ohio’s nearly 6.1 million working-age adults who have earned at least a two-year degree, according to 2010 Census data.*

Ohio’s New Jobs Will Require Some Postsecondary Education by 2018

New Jobs in Ohio, 2008 – 2018

Requiring postsecondary education and training	153,000
For high school graduates and dropouts	29,000

New Jobs & Vacancies in Ohio Due to Retirement, 2008 – 2018

Requiring postsecondary education and training	967,000
For high school graduates	600,000
For high school dropouts	142,000

SOURCE: Anthony Carnevale, Nicole Smith and Jeff Strohl, HELP WANTED: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018, Center for Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, 2010.

⁶ Alliance for Excellent Education, “Understanding High School Graduation Rates in Ohio,” July 2009.

⁷ Lumina Foundation, A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education

⁸ Ibid.



If success in the 21st Century economy increasingly is going to require postsecondary education credentials of value in the marketplace, Ohio's institutions of higher education need to find ways to better serve adults already in the workplace. The state's education attainment levels must be raised and the interests of the state's adult population need to be taken into account.

Yet, adults face significant obstacles to coming back, staying in school and then earning their postsecondary credentials. Given their years away from the classroom, they often need help through innovative academic programming, increased and creative financial aid opportunities, and support services that may include remediation.

In this context, PLA should be part of a comprehensive strategy for helping adult learners progress towards a degree or certificate. By recognizing and legitimizing the significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives, colleges and universities can make students' education more affordable. And, they can help students earn credits faster.

This also has implications for the "mature" learner" as the U.S. population continues to age between 2010 and 2020. The labor force participation of these older Americans has been rising in recent years, and it can only be expected to increase further in response to the economic declines experienced by older citizens during the current recession.

Many of these older workers can be expected to turn to educational institutions to help them improve their skills or prepare them for new jobs, or perhaps even new careers. And for them, PLA offers unique opportunities. PLA can give them a way to earn college credit for what they already know, helping them complete their degree or certificate programs more quickly and at less cost.

Adults: key to nation's 21st century workforce

Researchers at Georgetown University's Center for Education and the Workforce say that between 2008 and 2018 the number of jobs nationally requiring some postsecondary education will grow by 13.9 million, meaning that 97 percent of job growth will occur in positions requiring education or skills beyond a high school diploma.

The pipeline of young college graduates is not sufficient to meet the future workforce needs. To meet this shortfall and address the increasing workforce skill demands, institutions of higher education will need to tap into the population of adults who never completed high school, never went to college or never graduated from college.

Adult learners do not necessarily fit the model around which many higher education systems are built. Educating adult learners requires a re-conceptualization of a range of credit, transfer and attendance policies within and among higher education institutions to meet the needs of these non-traditional learners.

SOURCE: Center for American Progress, *Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments: Tools to Help 21st Century Students Achieve Their Postsecondary Education Goals and Keep America Competitive* (Center for American Progress, June 2011).

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But, does PLA really help? And if so, how?

Research and experience provide at least three answers.

1. The opportunity for adult students to earn PLA credits helps them realize that they have already been successful in college-equivalent work and *provides motivation to enroll and persist in a degree or certificate program*. It recognizes the value and level of past learning experiences that are applicable while providing a psychological edge in the knowledge that they can be successful.
2. PLA options *provide a jump-start for returning adults*, much like other accelerated learning experiences for traditional students. They also save the cost of tuition for the credits actually earned.
3. PLA *lessens the time-to-degree for the adult learner* to complete the career pathway by earning a degree or certificate.

Some of the evidence supporting these answers has already been presented – the examination of the records of 62,475 students at 18 colleges and universities, primarily in the United States but also in two Canadian institutions – that found that the availability of PLA motivated adult learners to persist in their courses and degree/certificate programs.⁹ Here are some additional findings from that study:

- More than half (56 percent) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so. PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students.
 - 43 percent of PLA students earned a bachelor's degree compared to only 15 percent of non-PLA students
 - 13 percent of PLA students earned an associate's degree compared to 6 percent of non-PLA students
 - PLA students had better graduation rates than non-PLA students regardless of institutional size, level (2- or 4-year), control (public, private, non-profit), student's academic ability or GPA, student's age/race/gender or financial aid status
- PLA students who did not earn degrees were more persistent in terms of credit accumulation than the non-PLA students. PLA students earned an average of 53.7 credits in institutional coursework (as opposed to credit accumulation from PLA credits or transfer credits), compared to an average of 43.8 credits by non-PLA students.

Many PLA students shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. PLA students saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees compared to non-PLA students earning degrees

⁹ Fueling the Race for Postsecondary Success: A 48-State Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes, The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, March 2010



TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

Prior Learning Assessment can be approached in a wide variety of ways. Nationally, some institutions evaluate noncredit instruction, awarding credit for recognized proficiencies that equate to specific courses offered at their institutions. Similarly, many institutions evaluate both corporate and apprenticeship training for college credit, working with business and trade associations to evaluate prior training for credit.

Our Ohio survey focused on several of the most common methods used to assess and award credit for prior learning. Asking colleges and universities about the processes they employ, four primary methods of assessing learning outside the classroom as the basis for awarding credit emerged.

College-Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP)

The series of CLEP exams test mastery of college-level materials acquired in a variety of ways. CLEP exam-takers include adults just entering or returning to school, military service members as well as traditional college students. While most universities and many two-year schools in Ohio offer CLEP, the number of subject exams available at each institution, as well as the qualifying scores, varies greatly.

Portfolio-Based Assessment

The evaluation of student portfolios is another method used to evaluate what a student has learned outside the traditional classroom, assess whether the learning is college level and assign an equivalent number of college credits. This occurs through a structured, individualized student portfolio that documents a student's experiences and learning. Faculty members with appropriate content expertise evaluate the portfolio to determine college-credit equivalencies. There are a number of permutations on the methodology used to develop and evaluate portfolios.

Evaluation of Military or Corporate Training/Experience

Many postsecondary institutions award credit for learning acquired through military service or corporate training. In Ohio, since the introduction of Ohio GI Promise,

National scan identifies six PLA methods

- Individualized student portfolios
- Evaluation of corporate or military training using credit recommendations developed by the American Council on Education (ACE)
- Evaluation of apprenticeship training (in collaboration with trade associations)
- Program evaluations of noncredit instruction (credit for proficiencies that equate to specific courses offered at the institution)
- Standard exams such as Advanced Placement, DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), Excelsior College, College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- Customized exams or “challenge exams” that are developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill

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all 36 public colleges and universities are members of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Consortium. As members, all institutions accept college credit for military training and experience as long as it has been approved by the American Council on Education or a regional accrediting body, such as the Higher Learning Commission. Giving more support to this initiative, the Chancellor issued a directive to the state's public institutions of higher education in March 2011 requiring them to award college credit for military training and experience consistent with SOC guidelines and in compliance with Ohio's transfer policy.

Departmental or Other Exams

Colleges and universities often provide the opportunity for students to challenge or “test out” of a course through a departmental or specific program exam. This provides flexibility in assessing a student's knowledge base for a specific course(s) and provides assurance that the student is successfully prepared for the next level in the discipline/profession. A variety of such assessments exist on campuses and provides another means of equating past learning to course work and credit for adult students returning to the classroom.

PLA FROM A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Students are easily frustrated when they find themselves required to take courses that address knowledge and skills that they have already acquired. This frustration can lead students to drop out, or they can find themselves without the financial wherewithal to continue their academic pursuit. An emerging national emphasis on increasing the number of individuals holding high quality, workforce valued postsecondary credentials and degrees is causing the broader higher education community to examine strategies for accelerating learning and supporting students to credential or degree completion – while at the same time not compromising on issues of academic quality or rigor.

Across the nation, PLA is emerging as one way address to this issue. However, structures and regulations governing PLA credit granting and transfers are not standardized across states or institutions, making it difficult for students to understand the availability of credit for prior learning and the mechanisms for acquiring such credit. The lack of standardization also negatively impacts students who find themselves needing to change institutions or states during their academic careers.

PLA credits are not always accepted if students transfer to another institution.¹⁰ Quality also differs across PLA programs at different institutions and very little attention has been paid to date to PLA program evaluation.¹¹ PLA options are not universally available or only limited options (rather than the whole range) are available or accepted in a particular state or institution.¹² And

¹⁰ Center for American Progress, *Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments*, June 2011.

¹¹ Center for American Progress, *Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments*, June 2011.

¹² Center for American Progress, *Articulation Agreements and Prior Learning Assessments*, June 2011.

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finally, PLA programs have not been well-publicized, promoted or advocated by advisors or faculty so students are not always aware of this option.¹³

These constraints have led some states to consider the development of a statewide or system-wide approach to PLA. Currently, examples of statewide implementation of PLA methods are in varying stages of development.

- Some states have recently passed legislation requiring the development of an assessment or articulation process (see figure on page 12).
- Some states have begun to develop systemic approaches to PLA opportunities within a community college system (WA) or across a consortium of community colleges and state universities (FL).
- Some states are taking action to better publicize the availability of PLA opportunities and help students identify institutions that have PLA opportunities.
- Some of these efforts include agreement on a set of general principles that participating community colleges and universities agree to support that provide students with opportunities to demonstrate prior learning, earn undergraduate credit for that learning and maintain those credits whether the student stays in one institution or moves to another.

Systemic approaches to PLA are relatively new, often only set into policy within the last five years. The next section of this review highlights examples from PA, WA and FL that may provide ideas or increase understanding of the process required and challenges inherent in creating and maintaining a PLA system that will serve all students.

APPROACHES TO SYSTEM WIDE PLA PROGRAMS

Florida Credit by Examination

Florida does not have a statewide PLA program, per se, but the state's credit-by-exam process has been in place since 2000. Legislation enacted in 2011 (1007.27(2)) requires an Articulation Coordinating Committee (established by the Commissioner of Education and made up of stakeholders from higher education, DOE, K-12 and public workforce education) to establish passing scores and course and credit equivalents for specifically enumerated PLA exams (CLEP, AP, IB, AICE).

Institutions are not required to award credit for DANTES/DSST or Excelsior exams but must accept these credits if they have been awarded to a student by another institution. All institutions of higher education must abide by these guidelines. In addition, individual institutions are free to award "experiential credit" to students as long as it corresponds to an already established exam or course number. These credits are usually awarded by individual academic departments. Articulation among institutions is based on common

¹³ Cathy Brigham and Rebecca Klein-Collins, *Availability, Use and Value of Prior Learning Assessment Within Community Colleges* (CAEL, July 2010)



course numbering although interviews revealed that there is “no specific quality control” although accrediting bodies may be asked to review courses in a dispute.¹⁴

State Bill	Summary of Legislation
Prior learning bills that specify an assessment or articulation process:	
Oregon HB 4059 (2012)	Directs the Higher Education Coordinating Commission to develop policies and practices for awarding credit for prior learning. Calls on same body to improve assessment practices, adoption of articulation agreements for accepting and validating PLA credit.
Colorado HB 1072 (2012)	Requires the commission on higher education and postsecondary institutions to develop criteria for awarding credit for students’ prior learning through work experience, military service, community involvement or independent study and to define a process to assess prior learning.
Hawaii HB 2639 (2012)	Requires the college-credit equivalency program to provide for the awarding of credit for service in the armed forces. Requires development of a learning assessment or other criteria to determine college-level learning gained during military service.
Bills related to prior learning that do NOT detail an assessment instrument or process:	
Wisconsin EO 56 (2012)	Charges College and Career Readiness Council to consider how to ease transitions between systems and institutions, specifically through the transfer of credits and the awarding of credit for prior learning.
Washington HB 6539 (2010)	Requires the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges to develop policies for awarding academic credit for learning from work and military experience, military law enforcement training, career college training, internships and externships, and apprenticeships.

Source: Bruce Vandal, Education Commission of the States

There is no comprehensive statewide approach to promoting PLA options in Florida and interviewees noted that while credit by exam data for high school students is tracked (as a result of NCLB requirements to track acceleration mechanisms), there are little data that would inform policy makers or others about the overall use of PLA credits. Florida still faces “cross-sector issues” in implementing its PLA programs. Community colleges are

¹⁴ Interview with Julie Alexander, FL DOE May 23, 2012;
http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=1000-1099/1007/Sections/1007.27.html; Articulation Coordinating Committee legislation



much more likely to extend “experiential credit” to students and state universities are much less receptive and can sometimes take issue with transferring PLA credits.¹⁵

Pennsylvania Consortium on Prior Learning Assessment

The Pennsylvania PLA Consortium is a group of higher education institutions that have agreed to abide by, fully implement, and oversee a set of PLA General Guidelines developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education with cooperation from over 30 higher education institutions, non-profit groups and the Department of Labor and Industry. Over 65 Pennsylvania colleges and universities participate in the consortium.¹⁶

Pennsylvania’s PLA program was initiated by former Governor Rendell in 2008. The Governor invited the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to conduct a preliminary assessment and evaluation of PLAs in Pennsylvania. As a result of that work, a task force with representation from all postsecondary education sectors, professional education associations, workforce investment boards and non-profit groups was formed to promote PLA. CAEL’s surveys and research supported these efforts. The task force developed the set of general guidelines and an agreement of compliance for institutions that voluntarily join the PLA consortium. The Department of Education developed and maintains a PLA website that lists the active consortium members, the PLA guidelines and includes information on best practices and links to PLA initiatives in other states.¹⁷

The PLA principles include some direction about articulation and transfer of credits but individual institutions maintain decision making authority over granting and accepting credits from other institutions. Generally credits transfer to any institutions in the consortium. Pennsylvania has not collected data on how extensively PLAs are being used.¹⁸

Washington Prior Learning Assessment

Legislation in 2010 (SSB 6357) set up a work group to develop policies for awarding academic credit for learning from work and military experience, law enforcement training, internships, apprenticeships and other experiential pathways. The bill provided a specific definition of “prior learning experience” and directed that policies provide for consistent application by all institutions of higher education and develop a basis for accurate and complete academic counseling.¹⁹

When the task force convened, they found that while Washington had adequate policies in place to support PLA, these policies were interpreted differently and resulted in divergent practices across higher education institutions in the state. The task force worked to provide concrete examples of PLAs and expose higher education faculty to CAEL’s research on PLAs and adult learning. In the past few years the task force continued to

¹⁵ Interview with Julie Alexander, FL DOE May 23, 2012

¹⁶ PA Department of Education
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/prior_learning_assessment/13463/pla_resources_for_administrators/598105

¹⁷ Interview with Rod Niner, Division of Higher and Career Education, PA DOE May 24, 2012;
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/prior_learning_assessment/13463/pla_resources_for_administrators/598105

¹⁸ Interview with Rod Niner, Division of Higher and Career Education, PA DOE May 24, 2012

¹⁹ http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/trustees/2010_academic_credit_for_prior_learning.pdf



meet under the auspices of the Higher Education Coordinator (HEC) Board and has created a set of guidelines for PLAs, a cost model, a system for coding and tracking PLA credits and has just produced a reciprocity agreement for institutions to use. The task force is also planning a one-day workshop for faculty administrators and registrars to share examples of student work and outcomes from PLA programs, and examples of course cross-walks. They also plan to conduct training for advisors/counseling staff with the help of community colleges who have been using PLAs for a long time and have experience to share.²⁰

The task force is still working to reconcile articulation and credit transfers among institutions. The goal is for credits to apply as fully as possible toward a certificate or degree. The state allows up to 25 percent of credits toward a degree to come from PLA, but not all institutions' policies are aligned with this allowance. Costs for PLAs and earned credits also vary across institutions. Currently, the task force is working to code and collect data on how the PLA system is being used so that it can track demographics and there are plans for a statewide PLA presence on the Washington OSPI (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction) website.²¹

Minnesota Prior Learning Assessment

Minnesota's policy around PLA provides statewide treatment only of the AP, IB and CLEP exams. Otherwise, the state's policy is to require that each campus have a credit for prior learning policy for (1) Thomas Edison College Examination Program (TECEP); (2) Excelsior examinations, New York University Foreign Language Proficiency (NYUFLP); (3) National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI); (4) DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST); (5) course-specific examinations; (6) portfolio review; (7) competence demonstration; and (7) ACE credit recommendations around military training.

While this appears very supportive to the concept of a consistent, statewide PLA approach, the high degree of variability of policies among institutions likely creates more confusion and challenges than was envisioned. The case of Minnesota may serve as a good illustration of some of the problems that exist when state policy leads to highly variable implementation from campus to campus. Transferability is often not smooth, as receiving campuses may not accept credit granted via PLAs (beyond the three sanctioned by the state) at other institutions. There is also variability in terms of which colleges and universities will consider providing various types of PLA credit. There is no consistent data maintained about PLA utilization.

Colorado Community College System Credit for Prior Learning

Colorado does not have a statewide PLA policy. However, the policy of the Colorado Community College System is a good example of a system-wide policy that crosses multiple institutions.²² Most notable about the Colorado approach is a very comprehensive

²⁰ Interview with Noreen Light, State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), WA May 31, 2012

²¹ Interview with Noreen Light, State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), WA May 31, 2012

²² The Colorado Community college System Policy can be found at <http://www.cccs.edu/SBCCOE/Policies/SP/PDF/SP942.pdf>.



student handbook that spells out all the details of the approach and includes and extensive matrix of assessments, cut scores, course equivalencies and credits granted. The handbook can be found at <http://www.cccs.edu/Docs/EdServices/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Handbook.pdf>.

Another interesting feature of the Community College System policy is the awarding of credit for career and technical training provided by the Colorado Department of Corrections.

Vermont Assessment of Prior Learning Program

Notable in Vermont is the state's Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) program. The Vermont State Colleges system recognizes CLEP, ACE and other similar testing and third-party recommendation programs. But the state distinguishes itself through APL. The program is administered by the Office of External Programs (OEP) within the Vermont State Colleges system. However, the Community Colleges of Vermont actually implements the program – even though credit is universally accepted throughout the Vermont State Colleges system. (The University of Vermont is not part of the state college system and does not take experiential credit directly.)²³

The APL involves a student enrolling in a three credit Assessment of Prior Learning course. During the course, the student undertakes a self-assessment, writes an essay about their prior learning, and then compiles a portfolio. At the conclusion of the course, the essay and portfolio are sent to the Office of External Programs. OEP convenes a three member panel of faculty members that evaluate each student's portfolio and assigns credit based on whether what the student provides meets the learning outcomes of the appropriate course. Students can identify the course for which they seek credit – which can include any course offered in the system. The credit is actually transcribed by the Vermont State Colleges office. They do not use a course number, but just the number of credits. The receiving institution decides what courses to relate the credit to.

About 80 students each semester take the course. Some students gain a few credits, and others have been known to be awarded upwards of 20. The process takes a whole year – so it is recognized as fairly slow. Vermont recently received a U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training grant that will be used to construct an alternative version of the course that can result in credit being granted in a shorter time. This work will be targeted to students with significant previous industrial experience.

²³ While the University of Vermont does not assign credit for experiential learning, if a student uses such credit to acquire an associate's degree at the Vermont Community College, and then transfers to the University, the University must accept the degree in transfer.



Also of note is the state's Education Training Evaluation Services. This program allows any employer with a significant training program to have the program evaluated for the extent to which it provides college level learning. A training program can be approved for credit. The approval is effective for three years, at which time it can be renewed. Employers like being able to offer this feature to their employees who go through their training programs.

QUALITY ASSURANCE PRINCIPLES

Interviewees suggested that involving postsecondary faculty from the beginning of the initiative is crucial. As one interviewee put it, "Faculty do a lot of advising so for them to know about [PLA] and promote it, is very important."

CAEL has produced a set of ten quality assurance principles that some states have used as guidelines for their statewide PLA initiatives.²⁴ It also suggests that states interested in creating a statewide PLA initiative consider the following policy development approaches and considerations:²⁵

CAEL guidelines for statewide PLA initiatives

- Consider the institutional stakeholders involved
- Identify steps necessary to approve and implement PLA
- Clearly articulate purpose of PLA
- Identify criteria for awarding PLA credit
- Develop articulation among institutions so PLA credits can transfer widely
- Which courses, if any, should be exempt from PLA? Rationale?
- How will student PLAs be evaluated?
- How will assessors be trained and evaluated?
- When is a student eligible for PLA credit?
- How will students be prepared to participate in the PLA process?
- How will students be advised? How will advisors be trained?
- What will institutions of higher education charge for PLA credits?
- How will IHEs/states track PLA utilization and outcomes and evaluate PLA programs?

²⁴ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Presentation to Oklahoma Reach Higher Program Faculty June 18, 2010
<http://www.okhighered.org/reachhigher/docs/cael-pla-intro-61810.pdf>

²⁵ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Presentation to Oklahoma Reach Higher Program Faculty June 18, 2010
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OHIO'S PLA EXPERIENCE

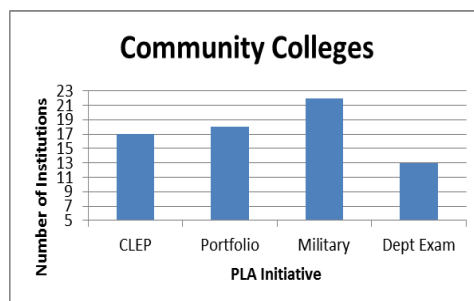
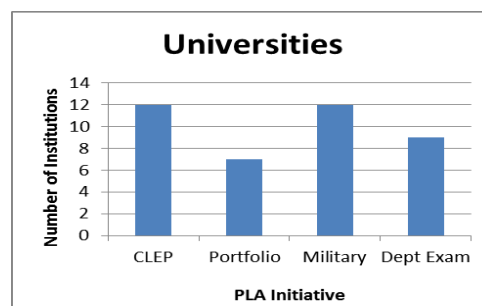
A survey of all Ohio public colleges and universities was conducted in April – June 2012 to find out what methods they use to evaluate and grant PLA credit. The survey was comprised of an e-mailed questionnaire, with Web site visits and follow-up calls both to secure a larger number of responses and to clarify some of the answers given. In addition, the survey was sent to the state's non-public colleges and universities, as well as the state's adult career centers. The questionnaire can be found in the appendix.²⁶

In all, responses were received from 12 of the state's 13 public universities and from 22 of the state's 23 two-year colleges. A handful of responses were received from non-public postsecondary institutions.

Given the nature of the questionnaire, it was sometimes difficult to “separate” alternative methods. For example, one of the assessment options was “standardized tests (CLEP, ACE, DANTE, etc.)” With a positive response, it was not possible to distinguish among the test options. The only conclusion to be drawn was that the institution was using one or more of the options.

Based on the survey responses, here is what we know about Ohio's PLA experience:

- While not fully standardized, there is a set of methods for evaluating and granting Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credits that is common to most public institutions in Ohio, both at the university and college level. The patterns of use differ in subject matter and level (score cut-offs), but as the charts to the right suggest there is a common set of mechanisms in most institutions.
- The consistency in the availability of military credit across the state can be attributed in large part to a directive from the Ohio Board of Regents concerning military training, experiences and coursework that created the SOC Consortium.
- This common denominator of PLA could be expanded through voluntary agreement of all institutions to cover more subjects, with greater consensus around test cut scores.
- It appears that institutions are doing little or no evaluation of current PLA practices to determine if they are working and to ascertain what impact they are having on the attraction of adult workers and veterans.
- In most cases, PLA activities are housed in the Registrar's Office, the Admission's Office or an academic affairs unit.



²⁶ A spreadsheet with a summary of institutions' responses can be found on the Ohio Board of Regents' Web site at: http://www.ohiohighered.org/files/uploads/Link/PLA_spreadsheet.pdf



- There is a wide variation among institutions in the number of students served and credits awarded through PLA. However, the awarding of PLA credit is not dictated by institutions' selectivity.
- A significant number of institutions will grant PLA credit, but they will not accept such credits from other colleges and universities.
- Among a number of institutions, there appears to be a willingness to address PLA issues on a statewide level, both to examine exemplars of best practice and to scale up existing practices.
- The expansion of Ohio's Articulation & Transfer system was driven, in part, by a state legislator who served as a "champion" for reform. Currently, PLA does not appear to have such a champion.
- There are opportunities to tie PLA more directly to the state's Articulation & Transfer agenda, which would increase credit mobility and guarantee.
- Institutions have found ingenious ways to evaluate equivalency for students' prior learning experiences – and then to award credit

Even with a small response from non-public institutions, it appears that the profile of PLA use is the same as for public institutions.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT



GOING FORWARD: PLA With A Purpose

Guidance for Policymakers

It is clear that a number of states are working at the leading edge of strategically deploying PLA policies in the interest of student success and improved credential and degree completion. This work is emerging because of the realization that students are increasingly acquiring knowledge and skills through avenues that extend beyond the college classroom. It also recognizes that adult learners returning to academe can bring with them knowledge and skills gained through a variety of lifelong learning opportunities.

Ohio's long track record of promoting strong articulation and transfer policies positions the state favorably to join this group of leading states, and to potentially emerge as a national leader in the PLA landscape.

Based on the information gathered from other states and from Ohio's institutions of higher education, the following emerge as key considerations for Ohio's work toward developing a strong statewide PLA policy and a vibrant workforce education system.

1. ***Develop and advance best practices for the assessment of prior learning and the purposeful application of prior learning credit to degrees and certificates.*** Ohio has already demonstrated a "common set" of PLA approaches evidenced in use by most Ohio public colleges and universities (although the application and criteria for awarding credit varies across the USO system). These approaches provide a building block upon which to expand offerings to returning adults and should be the first options for which a statewide policy around PLA should be developed.

The Regents' should sanction those PLA options that are widely accepted and highly regarded while establishing more statewide consistency. This includes defining the assessments that are accepted, cut off scores, credits granted, costs for credits assigned via PLA, etc. This would include ACE credit recommendations, CLEP, DANTES, and other well-established systems. At the same time, Ohio should not hesitate to put these exams through the proper scrutiny to ensure that the processes used hold to a high level of quality and integrity.

Where appropriate, build on Ohio's current articulation and transfer infrastructure in the development of a statewide PLA policy. This infrastructure could help address key policy issues such as:

- Consistent transfer policies and guarantees around credit acquired through PLAs
- Mechanisms for sharing resources among institutions, especially as they related to student portfolio evaluation
- Involvement of faculty in the training for portfolio assessors and other PLA mechanisms.

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As PLA policies are expanded, include portfolio assessment options with high quality guidelines for campuses that pursue this option. The Vermont example is a tremendous one that, if implemented and standardized in Ohio, could have significant benefits for adult students. Ohio should identify institutions in the state that are already using this approach and seek to replicate such programs, at a minimum, among all community colleges. Ensuring transferability and replicability, *with intensive advising for students and prospective students*, will be key features of a successful implementation of this approach.

In addition, implement a program to identify and certify for credit-college level learning that goes on in business training. Again, the Vermont example is an excellent one. The opportunity for businesses and non-profits to help employees by identifying certain training as being credit worthy is highly appealing. In fact, it is likely that businesses would make current training programs more rigorous if given the appropriate advice in order that credit could be granted. Workers would then be attracted to leverage credits earned toward a formal credential or degree.

Finally, the initiative should focus on ways to ensure that the credits earned through PLA can be directly applied to degrees and certificates. This would include the identification of degrees and certificates where credits can be applied efficiently (e.g., make use of the existing associate of technical studies degree available at two-year campuses; develop new degree and certificate programs designed specifically for returning adults.

2. ***Using the Ohio Board of Regents web portal, Ohio Means Success, as a base, launch a statewide campaign to communicate and promote the benefits of PLA to potential learners, particularly adults and veterans.*** Sometimes the biggest obstacle to the more pervasive use of PLAs is simply the lack of awareness. As Ohio develops a more robust statewide policy, it should be diligent in identifying multiple ways to promote it. Among these should be encouraging campuses to inform all students, especially adult students, of the opportunity to earn PLA credit, along with the processes for doing so. Partners could be engaged in this communications strategy, especially veterans' organizations, workforce boards and one-stops, and businesses. In addition, efforts should be made to:

- Leverage critical partners to promote PLA.
- Engage and involve faculty at all levels and raise awareness both to the benefits of PLA's as well as the rigorous processes that are employed to ensure quality.
- Communicate benefits of PLA with multiple audience including parents, students, legislators, businesses and the military.
- Connect with the returning workforce to increase training opportunities at Ohio's colleges, universities and career centers.

Begin a statewide conversation on Prior Learning by hosting a Regents' sponsored symposium on PLA including exemplar programs and "how to" workshops to develop additional PLA attention on campuses. This symposium should be faculty led and built on Ohio's long track record of faculty engagement in the development of policies that relate to granting credit. This statewide symposium should occur early in 2013 as the "kick off" event in promoting PLA across all campuses. This event could be followed by additional

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discussion and workshops at statewide meetings, such as conferences conducted by the Ohio Association of Community College (OACC) and the Inter-University Council (IUC) of Ohio.

3. ***Create data elements that allow for strong tracking and analysis of PLA use and student persistence and success.*** Other states regret the lack of good solid data around the use of PLAs and the likelihood of persistence and success. Ohio should work aggressively to implement a coding structure within the Regents' HEI system that allows the state to keep track of these approaches so that longitudinal research around student outcomes can be performed. The more data about student outcomes can be identified, the better able to make the case for the credibility of any PLA policy that is adopted.



PLA with a Purpose: Positioning Ohio as a National Leader

ACTIVITIES	RESPONSIBILITY	TIMING
<i>1 Develop and advance best practices for the assessment of prior learning and the purposeful application of prior learning credit to degrees and certificates</i> - Rollout of statewide initiative: <i>PLA with a Purpose</i> - Launch begins with statewide conference with invitations to all two- and four-year institutions, adult career centers - Presentations on best practices in Ohio and nationally for assessing prior learning and then purposefully connecting that credit to degree and certificate programs - Call for “coalition of the willing” to further develop and standardize the assessment and application of prior learning on their campuses	Lead: OBR liaison Team: OBR, IUC, OACC and AWE reps	Feb. 2013
- Facilitate development of single campus or regional centers of exemplary practices to develop uniform approaches to PLA and statewide expansion of those practices - Identify campuses or regional centers interested in providing comprehensive services to adult students using PLA and its application to degree and certificate programs (e.g., exemplary recruiting, advising and counseling; availability of multiple PLA methods for differing student profiles; and matching students to programs) - Seek uniform acceptance of CLEP, DSST and ACE credit recommendations for corporate or military training and uniform application to courses where possible - Identify degrees and certificates where credits can be applied efficiently (e.g., increase use of existing associate of technical studies degree; develop new degree programs designed specifically for adults)	Lead: OBR liaison Team: campus liaisons, OBR, IUC, OACC and AWE	Mar – Aug 2013
Create and Circulate: <i>Best Practices for the Assessment and Purposeful Connection of Prior Learning</i> and share with all public and private post-secondary institutions across the state	Lead: OBR liaison Team: campus liaisons, OBR, IUC, OACC and AWE	Sept – Dec 2013
Initiative culminates with statewide conference with invitations to all two- and four-year institutions and adult career centers	Lead: OBR liaison Team: campus liaisons, OBR, IUC, OACC and AWE	Jan 2014
Seek campus signatories acknowledging alignment with the <i>Best Practices</i> document	Campus Presidents and Adult Career Center Supts.	Jan 2014

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2 <i>Using the Board of Regents web portal Ohio Means Success as a base, create a resource for adults to learn about prior learning assessment and its use as a way to save money and enhance completion opportunities</i> ▪ Provide information on PLA, including specific student stories on how previous learning can be applied directly toward certificates and degrees ▪ Identify comprehensive centers for prior learning assessment and advising ▪ Identify certificate and degree programs that are “adult friendly” and welcome credits obtained through PLA ▪ Recognize adult workforce centers, colleges and universities that are signatories to the <i>Best Practices</i> document ▪ Produce communication materials (print and electronic) that can be used to direct individuals to the website	Leads: OBR liaison, tech, communications Team: Campus liaisons, OBR, IUC, OACC and AWE	June, 2013 - Jan, 2014
3 <i>Create data elements that allow for strong tracking and analysis of PLA use</i> ▪ Work with HEI staff to implement a coding structure for identifying students with PLA credit and to train institutions on the submission of data ▪ Begin to track students with PLA credit to determine its impact on persistence and degree/certificate completion	OBR liaison, HEI, campus HEI liaisons	Mar-Dec, 2013 Jan, 2014

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Mapping Ohio's Prior Learning Assessments

INSTRUCTIONS: Please complete the template using the most current information possible regarding the use of experiential or other of Prior Learning Assessments to award college credit for past experiences at your institution. Please focus your responses on **Prior Learning Assessments (PLA)** activities that are **large-scale and commonly in use**. You may provide more than one form of assessment---please use separate template for each.

NAME OF INSTITUTION			
NAME OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT INITIATIVE/PROGRAM			
BRIEF PROGRAM DESCRIPTION (What is the Prior Learning Assessment. How does it operate? What are the primary activities?)			
CORE FUNCTIONS OF THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (indicate all that apply)	☐ Provides College Credit for past Experience(s) ☐ Puts credits in Escrow ☐ Portfolio course/assessment	☐ Uses standardized tests (i.e., CLEP, ACE, DANTES, etc.) ☐ ☐ Uses American Council on Education (ACE) Guides ☐ Involves Internship/Apprentice Evaluations	☐ Offers Transcript Review ☐ Other (please specify) _____ _____
NUMBER OF STUDENTS IMPACTED/SERVED —Number of students AND average number of credits awarded during the past five years?			
HOW CAN PRIOR LEARNING CREDIT BE APPLIED?	☐ For elective credit AND courses specifically required for a degree ☐ For elective credit only		

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AT WHICH LEVELS CAN PRIOR LEARNING CREDIT BE EARNED?	☐ Associate Degree ☐ Bachelor's Degree ☐ Graduate Degree ☐ Certificates ☐ Continuing Education ☐ Other (please specify) _____ _____
PROGRAM EVALUATION	How are data used to determine program effectiveness? Please explain.
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Do you accept credits that have been granted via prior learning by other institutions? How are the credits applied? What is the institutional location or home for your PLA efforts? Do you offer a course/experience to students for portfolio development or other PLA opportunities?	Please explain: ☐ Academic Affairs unit ☐ Adult and Continuing Education ☐ Admission Office ☐ Registrar's Office ☐ Other: (please specify) _____ _____ Please explain:
COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY POLICY STATEMENTS AND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS	Please provide your institution's PLA-related policy statements and guidelines, including instructions, booklets or other publications that are given to interested students.
CONTACT INFORMATION (Who can give us more information and how can we contact them?)	NAME: TITLE/POSITION: TELEPHONE: E-MAIL:

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