Prior Learning Assessment – A summary of research projects, findings and definitions from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

What is Prior Learning Assessment?

Prior learning is learning that a person acquires outside a traditional academic environment. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is the process by which an individual’s experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. According to CAEL (2010) Prior Learning Assessment is not just one method or tool. It includes methods such as:

- Individualized student portfolios or Portfolio Assessments.
- Evaluation of corporate and military training by the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies. ACE credit evaluations are established by external review teams of college and university faculty in the area of specialization, or by using ACE guides.
- Evaluation of Local Training: Programs of non-collegiate instructional programs done by individual colleges to award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies.
- Challenge Exams: Customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement. These may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill.
- Transcripted credits from other institutions (including international institutions, post-secondary training)
- Association or industry-recognized certifications (Six Sigma, LEED, IFMA, SHRM)
- Standardized exams such as:
  - Advanced Placement Examination Program, or AP Exams, offered by the College Board
  - College Level Examination Program, or CLEP Exams, also offered by the College Board
  - Excelsior College Exams (formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams)
  - The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams, conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric.

A Rise in Interest and Policy Development for Prior Learning Assessment

Prior learning assessment, first defined and pursued in the 1970s, is gaining more mainstream attention. A 2014 CAEL study of six regional accrediting bodies found evidence of PLA in their policies or guidelines. The six accrediting bodies included:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSACS)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- North Central Association of College and Schools (NCA) under which the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accredits degree-granting colleges and universities
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)

CAEL found that the common criterion was that prior experiential learning be comparable to the results of institutionally-provided learning experiences. Differences were found in the locus of control of the assessment. Some of the policies leave most of the decisions on PLA up to the institution. Other bodies were more prescriptive.
The 2010 CAEL Study - Why is this study significant?

Historically, studies done on prior learning assessment were completed at single institutions, which made the generalizability of the study results questionable. The 2010 CAEL study is a large-scale study that includes data from 62,475 students at 48 postsecondary institutions (46 US and 1 Canadian). Participating institutions included both public and private schools and a diversity of ethnicities and a balance regarding gender among the students.

Students and Prior Learning Assessment

PLA students in this study had much higher degree-earning rates than non-PLA students.

- More than half (56%) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so.
- In terms of the specific degrees earned.
  - 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 in this study had better graduation rates than non-PLA students regardless of:
  - Institutional size, level (two-year or four-year) or control (private for-profit, nonprofit, or public)
  - The individual student’s academic ability or grade point average
  - The individual student’s age, gender, or race/ethnicity
  - Whether or not the individual student received financial aid

Persistence in Credit Accumulation of Students Who Received Prior Learning Credit

- By the end of 2008, 56 percent of PLA Students had accumulated 80 percent or more of the credits towards a degree between 2001-2002 and the end of 2008; only 22 percent of non-PLA students with no degree had made similar progress towards their degrees.
- PLA students (both degree-earners and non-degree earners) earned an average of 53.7 credits in institutional coursework (separate from prior credit accumulation from PLA credits or transfer credits), compared to an average of 43.8 credits by non-PLA students.
- Sixty percent of non-PLA students without degrees did not earn credit beyond one year of study, while higher percentages of PLA students without degrees re-enrolled and earned credits in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth years.

PLA and Time to Degree

- PLA students earning bachelor’s degrees saved an average between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning degrees.
- PLA students earning 13-24 PLA credits saved an average of 6.6 months, and those earning 49 or more PLA credits saved an average of 10.1 months.
- PLA earners with associate’s degrees saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning associate’s degrees.

Options for Awarding PLA Credit

Four types of PLA credit were identified:

- PLA credit used to obtain advanced standing at the institution
- PLA credit used to waive course prerequisites
PLA credit used to meet general education requirements
PLA credit used to meet program/major requirements

On average, the best student outcomes in terms of both degree-earning and reduced time to degree occur when all four options for applying PLA credit are available to students. In other words, the greater the flexibility the student has for using the PLA credit, the better the academic outcomes.

Ways That PLA Credit Were Used
The study identified the frequency each option for awarding PLA credit was used by the institutions surveyed:

- Meet elective requirements (94% of the institutions reported using this option)
- Meet general education requirements (88%)
- Meet program/major requirements (79%).
- Obtain advanced standing (69%)
- Waive course prerequisites (67%).
- Meet prerequisites for graduate programs or to fulfill residency requirements (25%)
- To fulfill residency requirements (19%)

Institutional Policies Supporting or Limiting PLA Credit

- All participating institutions applied PLA credit as “lower division credit.”
- At four year institutions:
  - Seventy-five percent reported that PLA credit may, if appropriate, apply as “upper division credit.”
  - Thirty-eight percent of the participating institutions limit PLA credit to specific departments or programs. This largely occurs in institutions where there is resistance to PLA.
  - Eighty percent of the participating institutions limit the number of PLA credits that can apply towards a degree. This often indicated programs where PLA was limited to half of the credits needed for a degree.

Reasons for Offering PLA
Institutions chose from a list of 18 reasons why PLA is offered at their institution. The reasons chosen included to:

- Provide a time-saving avenue for degree completion.
- Fulfill our mission to serve adult learners,” and to “encourage greater student persistence towards a degree.”
- Recognize the value of learning that happens outside of the classroom.
- Provide a cost-effective avenue for degree completion.

PLA administrators, when asked to share their own words, indicated they value PLA because:

- “Our students are ones who have attended other institutions, have work and life experiences, many are career changers, many were never successful in higher education, and they have been working for a while. Our students tend to have experiences that will be significant enough that they are equivalent to higher learning. They have received training and certifications related to work... [PLA] gives them recognition for the learning they already acquired.”
- “It is a validation that what they know is important and relevant. I think that it is almost insulting to say that what they learn is not similar to what we teach them.”
- Another observed that before PLA there was no way to earn credit for the learning that was
achieved from experience, and so “I cannot imagine a serious undergrad program for adult learners that would not do PLA. It’s essential to having full academic integrity.”

- “In the current economic climate, people are in a hurry to get back in the workplace with upgraded qualifications. I just talked with a student who had just been laid off and was able to suggest that she could challenge some introductory accounting courses, computers and history. It was exciting to her that she could potentially get credit for four courses in a matter of weeks.”

- “To encourage self-esteem and self-confidence in our students.”

- “A transformation that the student goes through in analyzing their prior learning – the student is able to prove to himself and to the faculty that he has come to the school with prior learning. It’s a validation. It strengthens the academic character, strengthens the self-confidence. They learn more about what they have learned, what they have achieved – probably more so than in the classroom.”

- Mastery of a native/second language - “This is only fair since native students [in mandatory composition courses] get credit for their writing ability in their own language.”

**Institutional Benefits of Offering PLA**

Study respondents provided the following narrative comments on the benefits of offering prior learning assessments. Their comments represented a set of themes.

**Marketing/Enrollment Strategy**

- “With the adult market, students that are savvy customers are asking for these policies. For them it’s an indication of how adult friendly you are.”

- A “magnet for enrollment;” another called it “a competitive benefit.” Some institutions are able to promote specific methods of PLA for recruiting students; one administrator noted that her institution is a CLEP testing center and also that the institution has the largest portfolio program in the state. Both of these offerings help with student recruitment.

- Similarly, student retention was cited: “If a student feels they are being heard, and they are getting good advice on PLA, loyalty to the school could be impacted.”

**Service to the Community/Society**

- One administrator from a large public university said that when an institution offers PLA, it can say that it is serving its citizens better.

- “It’s improving the routes in which a student can pursue college credits. That’s a service that the university can say that it extends to its citizenry: that it acknowledges different types of learning.”

- Administrators also explained that PLA helps them fulfill their missions. One interviewee from a competency-based institution said that with PLA, it’s “walking the talk.”

- “At the heart of the college is the goal of reaching populations that would otherwise not be educated. It’s important to our mission to acknowledge what they’ve done, what they know, their life experience.”

**Power of Alternative Assessment/Portfolio Development**

- When you offer PLA, the result is that you graduate people who are grateful to you. Said one, “You leave as friends. You have alums who are more friendly to you. In particular, the portfolio method makes the best friends. There is something magical about that method.”

- “Alumni who do [portfolio] PLA feel closer ties to the college. They’ve had more conversations
with their mentor. [...] The student ends up having a lot more contact with individuals in an intimate way. When you talk about what you know, you have been valued in a different way. We have healthy alumni giving.”

**Faculty Engagement**

- “The PLA process gives faculty a chance to see how higher-level learners think about topics and course materials.”

**Becoming an Adult Learner Supportive Institution**

In its 2010 study, CAEL identified a range of programs and services that make an institution supportive of its adult learners. CAEL asked respondent institutions to identify which of the services or programs in the list below were offered at their sites:

1. Special outreach to adults
2. Career advising
3. Educational advising
4. Student services offered in the evening
5. Student services offered on weekends
6. Courses offered in the evening
7. Courses offered on weekends
8. Flexible course schedules (e.g. modular course formats of varying lengths)
9. Accelerated course options
10. Child care
11. Online and other distance learning opportunities
12. Financial assistance for part-time learners
13. Ability to drop out and reenroll in same course without penalty due to unforeseen emergencies
14. Use of individual learning plans
15. Veteran/military support services

The results were as follows:

- Two-thirds of the participating institutions said that they offered ten or more of those services/programs.
- Three-fourths of the institutions with 10,000 or more students reported that they offered 10 or more services, compared to 63 percent of institutions with fewer than 10,000 students.
- Eighty-six percent of the two-year institutions reported that they offered 10 or more services, compared to only 63 percent of the four-year institutions.

**Samples of Adult Learner Programs (divide into two groups: with PLA and without PLA): AHEA (network for higher education, adult completion)—separate document**

The Northern Illinois University Regional P-20 Network's Adult Learner Workgroup identified exemplary programs for the adult learner. These programs are listed in page the following pages.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Web Site</th>
<th>Rationale for Inclusion</th>
<th>Program Elements/Attributes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Community Colleges</td>
<td><a href="https://www.ccfasttrack.org/">https://www.ccfasttrack.org/</a></td>
<td>• College Credit FastTrack provides a website and e-portfolio platform that allows for a single point of entry for potential</td>
<td>Highlighted in AACC Community College Daily - <a href="http://ccdaily.com/Pages/Campus-Issues/Pa-creates-a-faster-track-to-completion.aspx">http://ccdaily.com/Pages/Campus-Issues/Pa-creates-a-faster-track-to-completion.aspx</a>.</td>
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| DePaul University-School of New Learning | [snl.depaul.edu/about/Page/default.aspx](http://snl.depaul.edu/about/Page/default.aspx) | • Adult completion program that has competence based student learning outcomes.  
• Course syllabi list competence and maps course level student outcomes and demonstration metric to the competence(s)  
• Designed specifically for a cohort of working adults with associate degrees.  
• Offered online.  
• Program design includes support for submission of a prior learning assessment in the context of adult learning theory.  
• Focuses on leading the students to applying theory to a capstone project which must reflect a need or problem at work. |
| Adult Higher Education professional organizations | [ahea.org/](http://ahea.org/) | • Networking of higher education institutions with adult completion programs. |
| El Camino College Adult Reentry Program | [elcamino.edu/beta/studentservices/co/adult-re-entry.as](https://www.elcamino.edu/beta/studentservices/co/adult-re-entry.as) | • Ranked number six nationally in total enrollment.  
• Has an Adult Reentry Program to assist adults 30 and older with transitioning back into college life.  
• Program meets adult students exactly where they are at in their educational process (new, first-time; coming back having earned credits but want to continue)  
• Students are supported in developing plans tailored to student needs.  
• Other services include personal counseling, career exploration and book voucher assistance. |
| University of Louisville - BS in Organizational Leadership (College of Education) | http://louisville.edu/education/degrees/bs-wl | • Designed specifically for a cohort of working adults with associate degrees Offered online.  
  • Program design includes support for submission of a prior learning assessment in the context of adult learning theory.  
  • Focuses on leading the students to applying theory to a capstone project which must reflect a need or problem at work. | • Cohort of peers (working adults with a specific number of years in the workforce)  
  • Structures both the orientation to online learning and the construction of a prior learning assessment portfolio very systematically in the first required course.  
  • Once accepted into the program, all students must take all courses making it a cohesive cohort model and making program organization simpler.  
  • Lumina recognized it as an outstanding program for adults |
| Harper College Fast Track Program | http://goforward.harpercollege.edu/academics/fasttrack/ | • High Graduation Rate | Graduation Rates  
• Associates in Applied Science – Business Administration (69%)  
• Associates in Applied Science - Management (47%)  
• Supply Chain Management Certificate (47%)  
• Human Resource Management Certificate (56%)  
• General Management Certificate (79%) |
| Central New Mexico Community College | http://www.cnm.edu/student-resources/get-help | • Student centered program.  
  • Focuses on helping individuals with difficulties that are often non-academic.  
  • Services and supports are available to students in one location. | • Achievement coaches  
• Community partnerships  
• Financial planning  
• Life coaching. |

NEXT STEPS?????
Assignments for group: (1) Integrate with ePortfolio (NIU) to add PLA components (2) Harper’s initiative to other community colleges to join a CAEL-process for PLA (SAO): check level of discussions and CAEL’s model—cost? Would it benefit as opposed to training and developing our own processes? (John) (3) Adult learner paper (John); (4) look for more samples; (5) link to CBE as definition in learning  
Craft a statement, send that and this document redone around the work group for feedback, finalize a statement that can accepted by work group and then discussed individual campuses, (edit it more); brought to the leadership group (September)  
Building rubric among disciplines and feedback methods to the candidate—what will faculty need to do this? What will the support staff need to do this?  
Note: get relevant presentations from Wisconsin Technical Colleges – process maps of PLA  
Target April 15 for draft of policy statement
Position: In order to increase the college degree attainment of adult learners and self-efficacy (being a successful learner), the members of work group..... policy statements....and ability to move between institutional levels:
(develop a process, working with academic affairs, get a group together to work on this, send to other subgroups (articulation subgroup—using competency-based outcomes as a basis of IAI)

Next meeting: week of May 18th
Elgin and COD—Fridays off

References


Georgia Adult Learning Coalition (CAEL webinar—March 25)—Angela send link?

Thomas Edison State College (NJ)

Empire State College (NY)

Look for peer institutions

ePortfolios: John working on linking efforts of NIU departments and other institutions to create a more seamless tool for adult learners; who’s the person at your institution who should respond to a survey on the use of ePortfolios?