Draft of Policy Paper

Goal
To create a network of Illinois higher education institutions that would integrate individual providers’ policies of prior learning assessment into pathways between institutions (IPLAN (Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Network)) that honor each other’s assessment outcomes so that adult learners could transition seamlessly from one level to the next, stacking their credentials as their career and personal goals require.

Introduction: Facilitating Adult Learners’ Success in Earning a Degree
The Regional P20 Network Adult Learner Work Group determined that its most critical issue was the creation of a prior learning assessment policy that would transcend institutional or community college district borders. There were several reasons for the pre-eminence of this goal.

Adult Learners are Essential to Illinois’ Economy
For the purposes of this paper, adult learners are those individuals who meet one of the criteria in a widely used list developed by Penn State. Adult learners in this definition demonstrate the following traits:

- 24 years of age or older; or,
- A veteran or actively serving member of the armed services; or,
- Returning to school after four or more years of employment, homemaking, or other activity; or,
- Assuming multiple adult roles, such as parent, spouse/partner, employee, and student.

It should be noted that the Penn State definition requires that learners meet only one of the bulleted items to be considered an adult learner. The P20 Adult Learner Committee uses this definition for the purpose of a focused discourse, although some member institutions’ definitions of adult learner vary in elements, such as the age range of the adult learner.

Illinois higher educational institutions must focus on becoming more supportive of adult learners for the following reasons:

- Illinois must compete with other states for companies seeking skilled workforce. By 2020, over 67% of jobs in Illinois will require some postsecondary education or training (Carnevale, A., Smith, N. & Strohl, J., 2013)
- Among Illinois residents of working age (ages 25-64), 1.5 million have some college but no degree (22.01%) compared to those with an associate degree (550,984; 8%) and those with a baccalaureate degree (1,446,000; 21.1%) (Carnevale, A., Smith, N. & Strohl, J., 2013)
• Illinoisans with a college degree will earn over $900,000 more during their lifetimes than those with only a high school diploma. (Daly, M. & Bengali, L., 2014)

• Adults with a college degree set a model for their children fostering higher college-going rates in the next generation.

• In Illinois, there are over 3,100,000 adults without a college degree (Women Employed, 2015).

• Illinois’ goal of 60X25 (60% of the state’s adults will have a high-quality college credential by 2025) can only be met by inviting and supporting adults (ages 25 to 64) to complete college. “To meet the college completion goals of tomorrow, we must include the adults of today.” (Women Employed, 2015).

The Importance of Prior Learning Assessment

As described in a recent paper by Berglund (2014), recognition of prior learning has become a widely used method for visualizing and assessing learning and experiences that have generally been achieved outside the formal educational system. The term “prior learning assessment” or PLA, as used here, describes broadly the assessment of post-secondary learning in non-collegiate settings for the purpose of awarding credit. PLA includes a wide range of methods such as standardized tests (eg. CLEP), industry credentials (e.g. A+ certification or SHRM certifications), departmental challenge exams, ACE-evaluated military training and student-prepared portfolios documenting learning tied to course objectives.

The PLA “movement” to assess knowledge and skills gained in non-collegiate settings is the result of recently-changed perspectives on learning. This change is largely due to the concept of lifelong learning, which sees extended and prolonged opportunities for knowledge and skill development all throughout the life cycle (Berglund, 2014).

Additionally, PLA has been identified as a social justice issue that recognizes that some adults have received extensive educational opportunities through military service and through employment when their college attendance was precluded due to life circumstances. PLA permits adults to move more quickly to graduation based on the depth of their prior learning.

Finally, PLA acknowledges that instruction in a variety of formats and using different modalities delivers high level skills and learning for an increasingly high-skilled and mobile workforce. Simply put, many adult learners approach higher education having already acquired high-level knowledge.

How PLA Benefits Students

Research is emerging showing that PLA yields positive college success for the students who participate. As a sample of the accruing evidence, a survey of more than 62,000 adult learners at 48 institutions of higher learning conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
(CAEL, 2010) demonstrated that, in comparison to traditional students, adult learners yield the following outcomes:

- They are more persistent
- They have higher graduation rates
- They have a decreased time to degree completion
- They take more college courses

In addition, when adult learners are awarded credit for prior learning they have degree completion rates 2.5 times that of traditional students. Most compelling is the improvement in the completion rates of minority students. Minority adult learners awarded PLA credits have degree completion rates 8 times higher than that of traditional minority students.

Several impacts of PLA were identified.

**Impact on Completion**

- 43 percent of PLA students in 4-year higher education systems 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”

**Impact on Persistence**

- “PLA students (both degree-earners and non-degree earners) earned an average of 53.7 credits in institutional coursework (separate from credit accumulation from PLA credits or transfer credits), compared to an average of 43.8 credits by non-PLA students”
- “PLA students in this study who did not earn degrees had stronger patterns of annual enrollment and credit earning than non-PLA students who did not earn degrees”

**Reduction of Time to Degree**

- “PLA students earning bachelor’s degrees saved an average of 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.”

**Specific Positive Benefits for Specific Student Cohorts**

- Veterans: “Two-thirds (67%) of the students with military service histories earned PLA credit compared with two-fifths (40%) of students who are coded as non-military.”
- Gender: “Both male and female students showed similar patterns of degree-earning, with PLA students of both genders earning degrees at a rate that was almost three times higher than the rate of non-PLA students.”
• Age: “PLA earners in every age group had higher graduation rates than non-PLA students. The difference in graduation rates was highest for those aged 55 and older… but even the youngest learners (aged 25-34) with PLA credit had graduation rates that were more than twice those of non-PLA students in the same age group.”

• Race/Ethnicity: “…graduation rates for PLA students [of color] were higher than non-PLA students.

• The most dramatic difference was for Hispanic students at the bachelor’s degree level: Hispanic PLA students earned bachelor’s degrees at a rate that was almost eight times higher than that of Hispanic non-PLA students. Decreases in average time to degree were apparent for [black, Hispanic and white students]… with the most dramatic decreases for black PLA students.”

• Financial Aid: “Financial aid recipients earning PLA had dramatically higher graduation rates than their non-PLA counterparts (72% compared to 16%), and their graduation rates were also higher than students who did not receive financial aid.”

In another study (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014) that focuses of Hispanic students’ experiences with PLA, the authors describe how PLA can accelerate degree completion for adult Hispanic students. The authors state, “Hispanic students were more likely to earn PLA credit in the area of foreign language” (p. 2) and “Both institutional representatives and Hispanic students discussed PLA as a practice that empowers [them] and validates [their experience]” (p. 4).

**PLA Benefits to Institutions**
The combination of the raw numbers of potential adult learners in the general population and the evidence that these students actually persist, take more courses and graduate all indicate that institutions need to consider adult learners in planning for marketing, course and program development, and student services. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) researched the benefits of PLA on institutions and cited the following from the CAEL study. Higher education administrators mention these benefits in interviews (p.23):

• “…PLA can be a tool for recruiting adult students”

• “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”

• “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 [can] talk about what you know, you have been valued in a different way. We have healthy alumni giving”

• “The PLA process gives faculty a chance to see how higher-level learners think about topics and course materials”
State-Mandated Prior Learning Assessment Initiatives

There are growing efforts to institute policies on PLA on a statewide basis. This is easiest in those states where the public higher education institutions are well-integrated in a system. Generally, such states have done extensive research and then mandated that public institutions develop and institute methods for students to document prior learning to be assessed by faculty (see Tennessee, Colorado, Minnesota, Oklahoma and other states cited in “State Policy Approaches to Support Prior Learning Assessment). These mandates also require that institutions accept the PLA credits awarded by their system’s members. Such plans have been mandated by legislative actions, the governor or by a state’s higher education oversight body.

Among these plans, there are varying degrees of standardization imposed on all the institutions. Some states permit a greater variety of methods to document PLA as well as a range of awards given for PLA credits from credits for specific courses within majors to general elective credits used to move towards degree completion but not eligible for application to a major. There is also a variety of methods used to transcribe the credits. Often they appear noted as a group of PLA credits. In other institutions, such credits are listed as transfer credits since they were brought into the institution from external sources.

The critical point is that PLA is focused on acknowledging, assessing and awarding credit for prior learning and attaining this goal requires a higher education system, or at minimum, a voluntary network of institutions to agree on policies and processes so that learners can transition from level to level without renegotiating PLA. In most models, PLA policies and processes are created and made on a program or departmental level within an institutional support system. Once awarded, the network of institutions agree to accept the credits.

Common Considerations for a PLA Network

A scan of statewide initiatives reveal the following common concerns in developing a PLA policy that will be of most benefit to adult learners:

- *Establishment of PLA policy* articulated within a network, region or a state to provide consistency across a system in how the same experiences are evaluated in the member institutions (as an example, how are specific training programs offered by the military evaluated?)
- *Transparent institutional policies* so that faculty and staff have a consistent understanding of PLA within their organizations
- *Assessment processes and methods* clearly defined with trained personnel to assist students in determining if the process will benefit them and how they can maximize their chances of being evaluated positively
• *Fees* that reflect the policies of higher learning accreditors and best practices which generally preclude tuition charges for PLA but permit fees to cover the costs of the institutional infrastructure that supports the process including stipends to faculty to evaluate PLA portfolios

• *Transfer of PLA credit within the network or state* so that students do not find barriers when they continue their education or move between institutions

• *Transcription and credit recognition* that assists member institutions and students to identify PLA credits and maximizes their benefits to the students

• *Strategies to raise awareness* and encourage student participation in PLA but also to help students determine if PLA is a good strategy for them

• *Training of staff and faculty* to provide support to students applying for PLA, to create consistency in assessment of prior learning and to participate in process improvement in a PLA system

The research done on behalf of the Adult Learner Subgroup has provided a foundation for the following recommendations. We believe that credible, high-level learning occurs in multiple settings, many of them non-collegiate. We are committed to the state’s goal of 60x25 and to assisting adult learners in gaining the credentials that can build their careers and bolster their families’ well-being. We believe we can launch a pilot of a network of institutions working together to institute prior learning assessments in ways to benefit our citizens and to serve as a model for a statewide initiative that would preempt legislative actions that might make our system more complex.

**Recommendations for a Prior Learning Assessment Regional Pilot (need name)**

The members of the Regional P20 Network Adult Learner Work Group make the following recommendations:

Presidents of network’s participating institutions will be asked to endorse the development of a regional network to propose and implement a regional PLA initiative. They will commit support and resources to this initiative, including representatives to work on the development of PLA policies across the network and PLA policies within their institutions. They will further commit their institution’s resources to operationalize PLA strategies appropriate to their institution’s mission and governance plan. This commitment will be documented in a memo of understanding signed by the presidents of the participating institutions.

Using a process proposed by Travers (2015), the (need name) team will propose strategies to accomplish the following:

Develop a process that encourages faculty in specific disciplines to take the following steps:

• Institute and describe PLA policies across institutions within their disciplines
• Identify the methods of demonstrating learning acceptable within their discipline
• Agree on how credits will be awarded for PL within their disciplines and how they will be transcribed
• Accept PL credits from network members within the agreed upon process

Work together to inform the relevant staff and faculty of the member institutions about PLA, its benefits to students and institutions, and the network plan as it emerges. This work will include these steps:

• Write statements of agreement that will inform learners of the relevant PLA processes and how the credits will be accepted across institutions
• Create a standing work group that will meet periodically to refine and update policies as issues emerge
• Identify common metrics to track institutional PLA implementation as well as longitudinal data on how PLA has impacted students as they move across the network institutions

Each representative will work within his/her home institution to identify an appropriate team to develop the institutional PLA policies to be included within the network and report back to the network on the work of the institutional team.

References


