Center for American Progress

CAEL
The Council For Adult & Experiential Learning

Prior Learning Assessments

Tools to Help 21st Century Students Achieve Their Postsecondary Education Goals and Keep America Competitive

September 2011

Introduction

Adult learners, mobile learners, and other nontraditional students often come to postsecondary education with learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom. They have learning that comes from noncredit programs, corporate or military training, workplace-based learning, volunteering, and other activities. These students often end up paying for and taking courses in subjects that they already know—wasting both their money and time.

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, therefore, are closely tied to learning outcomes rather than measures of seat time.

PLA's value

Students who earn credits through PLAs often save time by not having to take courses in subjects they've already mastered. Additionally, PLAs are typically carried out at a lower cost compared to tuition charged by the credit hour.

PLA advocates and administrators have long professed that PLAs can also motivate students to persist in their studies and earn their degrees—particularly students who haven't had the best academic experiences. Awarding PLA credit sends the student a message that not only can they learn at the college level, but also that they already have learned at the college level, as demonstrated by the measurable learning the assessment documents show.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, or CAEL, completed a study in 2010 of more than 62,000 students at 48 postsecondary institutions that offered PLA as an option to students. More than half or 56 percent of adult PLA students earned a post-secondary degree within seven years while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so.[1]

Types of PLA

The amount of credit students can earn for prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. PLA includes methods such as:

- **Individualized student portfolios.** The student typically takes a specifically designed portfolio development course that helps them identify their learning from a variety of experiences, prepares portfolios equating prior learning to college courses, develops educational plans, and integrates prior and new learning to achieve academic goals. Faculty with appropriate subject-matter expertise evaluate the student's portfolio to determine the equivalent level of college credit.

- **Evaluation of corporate and military training for college credit.** The American Council on Education, or ACE, often conducts these evaluations for a fee. ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs noncollegiate agencies offer (particularly military training) in its ACE Guides. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate the company's training for college credit.

- **Evaluation of apprenticeship training for college credit.** Many institutions are also working with trade associations to evaluate prior apprenticeship training for college credit as well as offer part of the training through the community college for credit. This type of agreement could prove particularly valuable for workers who need to make a career transition from declining industries such as manufacturing and automotive.

- **Program evaluations of noncredit instruction.** Some institutions award credit for recognized proficiencies that equate to specific courses offered at their institutions. At some community colleges, for example, police officers can receive some credit for police academy training, and they can apply this credit to degree programs in criminal justice. Similarly, firefighters who receive emergency medical technician training can earn credit that they can then apply toward a fire science degree.

The Ohio Board of Regents and the Ohio Department of Education, for example, have been working since 2007 on an initiative called **Career Technical Credit Transfer**, or (CT)2. Faculty panels identify the industry-defined learning outcomes of noncredit courses and follow a formal process to map those learning outcomes to the equivalent for-credit courses offered at Ohio colleges.[2] Technical areas of focus for (CT)2 now include nursing, engineering technology, information technology, medical assisting, automotive technology, emergency medical technician, and firefighting.[3] Students taking noncredit courses in these areas can access charts showing how the noncredit courses they are taking automatically articulate to for-credit programs.

- **Customized and standard exams.** Some colleges offer transfer students the opportunity to verify learning through customized exams, or "challenge exams." These may be current

course final exams or other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill. In addition, many colleges offer course credit for passing scores in established exams such as Advanced Placement, College Level Examination Program, Excelsior College, and the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests.

A good example of a robust PLA program within an institution can be found at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. Undergraduate students can combine transfer, testing (PLA standardized exams and challenge exams), and PLA portfolio credits for up to 98 of the 128 credit hours required for their degrees. Forty-five of the 128 credits required for graduation can be earned through the portfolio process. Students can use the portfolio credits to satisfy any part of their degree but PLA is only available to students in Regis's College of Professional Studies—the area of the college that offers degree and certificate programs to adults. Two hundred seventy-five of the university's 5,300 PLA-eligible students participated in its portfolio program in school year 2006-07, earning a total of 810 credits.[4]

The challenge for students, however, is that PLA is not universally available; such credits are often accepted in limited ways, and the PLA credits are not often accepted if the student transfers to another institution.

Systemwide PLA

One promising approach is to encourage statewide adoption of PLA. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system, for example, requires all system colleges and universities to provide students with opportunities to demonstrate prior learning and earn undergraduate credit for that learning. And the Vermont State Colleges administers PLA for its five public colleges through a centralized Office of External Programs. The Office of External Programs oversees portfolio assessment and standardized tests and awards credits that are transferable to any school in the state system.

Presentations on September 28

The presentations sponsored by the Center for American Progress and CAEL on September 28 will showcase innovative approaches to promoting PLA within postsecondary institutions and systems, as well as the ways in which federal policymakers can support and encourage more of these kinds of programs.

For the complete version of this policy brief, please see: Rebecca Klein-Collins, Amy Sherman, and Louis Soares, "Degree Completion Beyond Institutional Borders" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2010), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/10/degree_completion_beyond_borders.html.

Endnotes

1 Rebecca Klein-Collins, "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes" (Chicago: CAEL, 2010).

2 Alisha Hyslop, "Ensure Portability and Transferability of Credits and Skills Attained," Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers 83 (2) (2008): 41–43.

3 "Career-Technical Credit Transfer (CT)2," available at http://regents.ohio.gov/careertechtransfer/index.php (last accessed April 2010).

4 Denise M. Hart and Jerry H. Hickerson, Prior Learning Portfolios: A Representative Collection (Chicago: CAEL and Kendall Hunt, 2009).