Executive Summary

The Regional P20 Network Adult Learner Work Group, whose members include faculty and staff from public higher education institutions across northern Illinois, determined that its most critical issue was the creation of a prior learning assessment alliance that would transcend existing institutional barriers. Several institutions in the region have developed faculty-led processes of awarding credit for postsecondary learning achieved in non-collegiate settings. The work group’s goal is to develop an alliance that would use credible assessments to honor credits earned through prior learning at one or more institutions when a student seeks transfer to another institution.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is based on the belief that individuals achieve postsecondary knowledge and skills through a variety of means outside a collegiate classroom. There are several strategies used by higher education institutions to evaluate the learning (as distinct from work “experience”) achieved, ranging from certifications granted by professional or industrial groups, to transcripts of training evaluated by expert faculty, to competencies demonstrated through local or national tests.

Research has indicated that there are many benefits of PLA for the students, for the regional economy and for higher education institutions. Briefly, adult learners granted PLA credit take more college courses and persist and graduate at higher rates than do traditional students or adult students without PLA credits. Adults using prior learning to jumpstart the achievement of postsecondary credentials enter the workforce able to compete for higher-level, family-supporting jobs and careers. Their home states become competitive for the high-skilled work needed by global organizations. Finally, adult learners with PLA credits benefit their institutions because they complete their degrees at a higher rate than either “traditional” students or adult learners without PLA credits. This completion rate is dramatically higher for minority students.

The Northern Illinois Regional P20 Network Adult Learner Work Group has the following goal.

The creation of an alliance of Illinois higher education institutions, currently called the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance, that would integrate individual providers’ policies of prior learning assessment into pathways between institutions that honor each other’s prior learning assessment outcomes so that adult learners can transition seamlessly from one level to the next, stacking their credentials as their career and personal goals require.

Presidents of the alliance’s participating institutions will

- Endorse the development of a regional alliance to implement an integrated PLA initiative
- Commit support and resources to this initiative, including representatives to work on the development of PLA policies across the alliance and PLA policies within their institutions
- Commit their institutions’ resources to operationalize PLA strategies appropriate to each institution’s mission and governance plan
- Document their commitment in a memo of understanding signed by the presidents of the participating institutions