A Proposal for the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance (IPLAA)
Submitted by the Adult Learner Work Group

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
The Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance
Supporting Adult Learners in Achieving their College Goals

The overarching goal of the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance (IPLAA)
The creation of an alliance of Illinois higher education institutions 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.

Facilitating Adult Learners’ Success in Earning a Degree
The Regional P-20 Network Adult Learner Work Group, whose members include faculty and staff from community colleges and Northern Illinois University as a broad representation of public higher education in northern Illinois region¹, determined that its most critical issue was the creation of a prior learning assessment (PLA) policy that would transcend institutional or community college district borders.

Prior learning assessment focuses on postsecondary learning (differentiated from work or life “experience,” an important distinction) obtained in non-collegiate settings. PLA includes a variety of strategies to assess learning, including exams, industry-issued credentials, and faculty-evaluated student-prepared portfolios. Many higher education institutions in our region have already implemented some of these policies and procedures as created, approved and implemented by their faculty-led curricular approval bodies.

Up to now, these initiatives have been localized at individual institutions. We recognize that many students, in particular, adult learners, move for work and family reasons and seek educational credentials over their whole career span. Much as the Illinois Articulation Initiative has facilitated transfer of credits earned within Illinois’ higher education system, there should be efforts to ensure that PLA credits acquired at one institution can seamlessly transfer into the next institution without duplicating students’ efforts and undermining their forward momentum.

One current effort to note is the work of a Statewide Portfolio Initiative, headed by Harper College, to build a single PLA portfolio development and assessment system for use by the community colleges within Illinois. Using the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) system, individual colleges will facilitate their students’ registration into a CAEL-delivered portfolio development course. Students will submit their portfolios to be evaluated via a CAEL network of expert assessors with the community college’s faculty as the first choice among different assessor networks. Credits awarded through this process would be transcribed on a CAEL transcript. Through prior agreement with the community college, program faculty would accept these credits as equivalent to the specific course identified within the portfolio.

Illinois is not alone in the endeavor to create an alliance of institutions that will accept PLA credits across institutional borders. Several states have launched statewide initiatives as a result of compelling evidence from recent research into PLA benefits to individual students, higher education institutions, and their regional economies. Details will follow but a few compelling findings from a 2010 national study will begin to paint the picture.

¹ Institutions represented on the Adult Learners Work Group: College of DuPage; Elgin Community College; Harper College; Kishwaukee College; McHenry County College; Northern Illinois University
• Adult learners awarded credit for prior learning have degree completion rates 2.5 times that of traditional students.
• Minority adult learners awarded PLA credits have degree completion rates **8 times higher** than that of traditional minority students.

**What is Prior Learning Assessment?**
PLA is focused on acknowledging, assessing, and awarding credit for prior learning. Proponents of PLA hold that postsecondary quality learning occurs in many non-collegiate settings. Focusing on adults entering or returning to higher education, PLA advocates argue that such students can, if given the appropriate mechanism, demonstrate mastery of the learning outcomes of specific courses or group of courses, as assessed by expert faculty. Such demonstrated mastery should be awarded credit for prior learning.

Multiple strategies are being used nationally to assess prior learning. In general, staff and faculty working on PLA within their institutions suggest that, wherever possible, students be guided to the least time- and labor-consuming strategies to document their learning. For example, submitting ACE evaluations of suggested college credits for specific military training would be recommended over a student’s attempt to argue the college-level learning on an individual basis.

Below are strategies often used to evaluate prior learning:

- **American Council on Education (ACE) Guides**—Published credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, both civilian employers and the military
- **Advanced Placement (AP) Exams**—A series of tests developed by the College Board initially for AP High School courses, including 34 exams in 19 subject areas
- **College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams**—Tests of college material offered by the College Board
- **DSST Credit by Exam Program**—Formerly known as the DANTES Program, owned and administered by Prometric, tests knowledge of both lower-level and upper-level college material through 38 exams
- **Excelsior College Examination Program**—Formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams, offered by Excelsior College, NY
- **UExcel Credit by Exam Program**—tests knowledge of lower-level college material; awarded Excelsior College credit can be transferred to other colleges and universities
- **National College Credit Recommendation Service**—(formerly known as National PONSI) evaluates learning experiences for noncollegiate organizations
- **Evaluation of Local Training**—Program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs
- **Challenge Exams**—Local tests developed by a college to verify learning achievement
- **Portfolio-based Assessments**—Evaluations of student portfolios such as those done through CAEL’s service, LearningCounts.org

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2 http://www.cael.org/pla.htm#There Are Multiple Approaches to PLA
Why is PLA so critical?
The Adult Learners Work Group of the Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network found 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 originally developed and adopted by Penn State. Adult learners in this definition demonstrate at least one of 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.

The Northern Illinois Regional P-20 Network Adult Learner Work Group 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 a 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 degree or professional 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).

Prior Learning Assessment Reflects Current Understanding of Adult Learning within a Social Justice Context
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.

**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.

Impacts of PLA were identified in the CAEL 2010 research and are quoted below.

**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 on 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 Higher Education**

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.”

**Higher Education Must Take Leadership of PLA**

There are growing efforts to institute policies on PLA on a statewide basis, often with the involvement of legislators advocating “mandates.” We recommend that higher education in Illinois take the leadership in developing operational PLA policies instead of awaiting political action.

Obviously, instituting a state-wide system is easiest in those states where the public higher education institutions are already well-integrated. 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”(3)). These mandates also require

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that institutions accept the PLA credits awarded by their systems’ members. Such plans have been created 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, including credits for specific courses within majors, or general elective credits used to move towards degree completion but not eligible for application to a major. A variety of methods are 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.

We advocate a voluntary alliance of institutions that will work towards a system to accept PLA credits across institutional boundaries. Attaining this goal requires a higher education system, or at minimum, a voluntary alliance 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 alliance of institutions agrees to accept the credits.

Common Considerations for a PLA Alliance
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 an alliance, 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 and throughout the alliance member institutions.
- **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 for faculty who evaluate PLA portfolios.
- **Transfer of PLA credit within the alliance 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 Work Group 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 an alliance 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.
Recommendations for a Prior Learning Assessment Regional Pilot
Presidents of the alliance’s participating institutions will

- Endorse the development of a regional alliance, named IPLAA – the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance, to propose and implement an integrated PLA initiative.
- Commit support and resources to this initiative, including representatives to work on the development of PLA policies for the alliance and PLA policies within their institutions.
- Commit their institution’s resources to operationalize PLA strategies appropriate to their institution’s mission and governance plan.
- Document their commitment in a memo of understanding signed by the presidents of the participating institutions.

Proposed Work Plan for the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance (IPLAA)
The Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance will use the process proposed by Travers (2015) 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 prior learning within their disciplines and how they will be transcripted.
  - Accept PL credits from alliance 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 alliance 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 alliance institutions.
- Each representative to the standing Adult Learners Work Group of the Regional P-20 Network will work within his/her home institution to identify an appropriate team to develop the institutional PLA policies to be included within the alliance and report back to the alliance on the work of the institutional team.

References


Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). (2010). Availability, use and value of prior learning assessment within community colleges. Retrieved from...
http://www.cael.org/pdfs/123_pla_communitycolleges


