

Mentor Support in the Individualized Prior Learning Assessment Process at SUNY Empire State College

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SUNY Empire State College (ESC) recognizes that learning can take many forms, that it can be gained in many places, and that students can acquire college-level knowledge prior to engaging in their formal studies at ESC. Prior learning assessment (PLA) can be evaluated in many different ways, including standardized exams such as the College Board's Advanced Placement examinations and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), New York University Foreign Language Proficiency Examinations (FLPE), and many more, including credit recommendations from the American Council on Education (ACE), the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), as well as what ESC describes as "individualized prior learning assessment" (iPLA), which is linked to a portfolio review process.

The ways in which a student is connected to the entire prior learning assessment process can be central to that student's academic success. Effective engagement and completion require the availability of meaningful supports, guidance and feedback, as well as clear expectations. The relationship between students and mentors (or advisors) needs to be close and built on a basis of trust, honesty, respect and understanding. Students depend on their mentors' expertise, knowledge and experience in the process. Particularly, students need mentors' support and guidance in identifying prior college-level knowledge during the iPLA process. That is, mentors need to have honest conversations with students, listen carefully with an open mind to identify any college-level knowledge, and review all materials (documentation of their learning) provided by students.

In the iPLA process at Empire State College, students are expected to submit a written description of their learning for each individual prior learning assessment request. The learning description usually takes the form of an essay, though other formats can be appropriate. This essay identifies and describes the student's college-level learning and how s/he acquired it. The creation of the learning description helps the student to reflect upon, organize and articulate her/his knowledge. And, a well-written learning description helps the assessment specialist identify a qualified evaluator. This description also introduces the student's learning to the evaluator and helps the evaluator select appropriate methods of evaluation. Once the student completes his or her learning description, and before the essay is submitted to an evaluator, it is submitted to the faculty mentor for approval. The mentor reviews the request and offers feedback to the mentee. The mentor then submits the request to the Office of Prior Learning, which assigns an expert evaluator. Students are notified by email about the evaluator assignment with contact information for the evaluator. The evaluator, after reviewing the essay and any supporting material, interviews the student (either face-to-face or on the phone) and then submits a written recommendation regarding academic credit. This recommendation is added to the student's portfolio for final review and approval by a faculty committee.

The responsibilities of all participants involved in the iPLA process are well defined. According to ESC's process: "Students seeking credit through the iPLA process are expected to:

- create a college-level learning description/essay for each separate iPLA request, with guidance from the primary mentor
- provide supporting materials if relevant to the request
- submit a draft degree program plan (DP) reviewed by their mentor, so that the request can be placed in the context of a full degree program
- contact the evaluator upon notification of assignment by the [Office of Prior Learning]

- participate in an interview or interviews with the evaluator to discuss their learning
- provide any additional information or further demonstration of learning upon the evaluator's request
- adhere to Empire State College's academic integrity expectations” (SUNY Empire State College, n.d., Students section, para. 2).

“...Primary mentors work with students to:

- design the degree program
- identify prior college/university-level learning relevant to the degree program
- develop prior learning requests that meet college expectations
- review each iPLA request prior to submission for evaluation
- reconcile any discrepancies between the student’s original iPLA request and the final version” (SUNY Empire State College, n.d., Mentors section, para. 1).

It is essential that students have a very clear understanding of the PLA process at their institution. An introduction to the process should begin as early as possible, preferably at a new student orientation, as well as at their first advisement meeting with their mentor/advisor. The PLA process at SUNY Empire State College involves mining the college-level learning within the student’s knowledge and experience, whether or not that knowledge matches any course in the college’s catalog. Most importantly, students need to concentrate on what they *know*, rather than on what they *did*. Mentors therefore are not only helping students identify their prior knowledge and fitting prior learning into students’ degree programs, but also helping students to communicate this knowledge in an essay form in a clear and concise way.

Since at ESC mentors are typically the ones helping students identify their prior learning and working with them through the process (frequently one-on-one and face-to-face; sometimes in small groups; sometimes online), to convey this learning in a convincing and professional way, they, too, need support, and this is provided by the Office of Prior Learning. First, it is crucial that faculty working with students are trained very well. The initial mentor’s training can take many forms. New mentors can participate in workshops organized by the Office of Prior Learning, participate in one-on-one training with PLA specialists, review previously submitted PLA essays and evaluation reports, and participate in PLA discussions led by other mentors. (Indeed, institutions have many additional options to support mentors in the PLA process.) As has been documented, well-trained mentors are able to help students recognize prior college learning knowledge as well as gain college-level credits, and consequently finish their degrees faster (Starr-Glass, 2016). ESC’s mentoring model also increases student retention, increases college efficiency and enhances the institution’s image.

At Empire State College, we have identified two important ways in which mentors can be supported. These are: (1) by providing clear policies and procedures for, and recognition of the mentors’ work, and (2) by providing materials, rubrics, workshops and PLA examples that can help mentors’ efforts to enhance students’ learning experiences, as illustrated below:



The first component of mentor support helps with the overall PLA process; the second provides materials that mentors can use in their teaching or studies.

The communication of expectations and policies about any college learning, and prior learning in particular, is the responsibility of every institution. Well-defined and well-written college policies help normalize the process and make everyone's work more effective and easier to follow. The policies should provide information about applicable federal, state and local-level legislation and regulations that are relevant to the PLA process, define "prior learning," identify all parties involved in the evaluation process, articulate students' rights and responsibilities, as well as discuss procedures, deadlines, and the appeals process (the latter is crucial). At SUNY Empire State College (2007), these items are discussed within its Individualized Prior Learning Assessment Policy and Procedures. Such institutional policies need to be reviewed regularly to ensure consistency, fairness, and the highest academic standards and quality of services provided to students.

In addition, quality guidance provided by mentors requires astute exploration and significant engagement. Thus, recognition of both the effort and time that mentors dedicate to their work with students in PLA activities is a very important part of the assessment process. Institutions need to recognize that work with each student is different depending on the student's academic and writing abilities, and the extent and depth of any particular student's knowledge and skills gained through experiential learning. Mentors therefore should be compensated based on PLA credits awarded to students, or based on time they spend with students. Such compensation reflects institutional acknowledgement of the effort mentors put into helping students to prepare for prior learning evaluation. Making sure that our institutions have policies and procedures in place that respond to these time and compensation realities is one of the most important factors contributing to organizational effectiveness, efficiency and fairness.

Another noteworthy source of support that should be provided to mentors are materials that can be used during the PLA preparation process. Live workshops or webinars organized by an institution's prior learning office can be a valuable resource for both students and mentors. Through such opportunities, that office can communicate best practices and procedures, answer questions, discuss cases, and create more effective and engaging learning experiences for students and faculty.

Regarding students involved in the PLA process, another added benefit of live workshops is the opportunity for students to network. Often students exchange contacts, work together and give constructive critique and support to each other. But such workshops can also be designed for mentors and PLA evaluators. Another form of this support could be prerecorded webinars to which mentors have access and can use in their work with their students. Professionally done, prerecorded webinars diversify and facilitate the learning experience and writing process for many students and help mentors, as well. They answer many questions that students and mentors may have and are accessible at any time, any place.

Likewise, written materials created to support the PLA process are very useful for both mentors and students. Written guidelines, tutorials, templates, and rubrics are important resources for any mentors and students. One example of such support would be SUNY Empire State College's (2013) publication *Individualized Prior Learning Assessment: A Guide for Students*. It summarizes the PLA process, helps students identify and describe college-level knowledge, outlines possible sources of prior college-level learning, and explains how to title the learning and assess the number of credits and credit designation (introductory versus advanced; liberal arts and sciences versus applied/professional/technical learning). Tutorials (written and/or online) enable learning on-demand and can be easily emailed to students. These tutorials save mentors' time and unify the message that is provided to all students. Another benefit of using such tutorials is that, without difficulty, mentors can modify tutorials depending on students' needs and area of study.

Furthermore, templates and rubrics can be very useful for mentors during the PLA advisement process. For example, each PLA essay should have a similar structure. Students should elaborate on the ways they have gained their knowledge and skills, and articulate what they have learned. Providing a general or area-specific template(s) can be an excellent starting point for students that saves time for both mentors and students, and provides consistency and clarity in the process. Moreover, well-designed templates can provide reassurance

that all parts of the student's PLA essay are discussed. Templates can include general points that should be included in the essay, such as how a student gained his/her knowledge, how the student would apply that learning to a new situation, and the nature of the college-level learning characteristics relevant to the learning. Importantly, too, rubrics can be very useful when mentors have to talk with students on topics that are not in their area of expertise. Rubrics often list topics that students should discuss in their essays. Mentors advising students can use them to help assess and discuss student's prior knowledge in different areas. The rubrics should be created by experts in the subject area and should clarify expectations for students. Finally, providing mentors with good PLA essay examples can be an excellent source of information and a useful resource for their work with students.

As noted earlier, the message to students engaged in the PLA portfolio process is simple: tell (write) what you know, not what you did. When mentors are sufficiently engaged in the process, and when they have the experience, the training and the resources they need to work with their students, they can ensure that their mentees understand what is expected of them, and help their students succeed in obtaining college credit through a clear, fair and academically sound PLA process.

References

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