PLAIO
Prior Learning Assessment Inside Out

Volume 2, Number 2 (2014)

The Prior Learning Assessment Expansion Initiative of the University of Wisconsin System: A System Approach to Delivering a Culture in Which PLA Can Thrive

Diane Treis Rusk, University of Wisconsin System and Lauren Smith, University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Wisconsin, USA

Introduction

Between 2009 and 2011, a number of institutions within the University of Wisconsin (UW) System identified nontraditional-aged student populations as an important population of opportunity to advance institutional college completion goals. Yet UW System data revealed second-year retention rates for adult students lagged behind rates for all UW degree seekers. National research suggesting adult students who earn credit through prior learning assessment (PLA) graduate at higher rates and progress more quickly toward a degree than those students who do not receive such credit supported the advancement of PLA as a strategy to promote retention and completion of nontraditional-aged students (Kline-Collins, 2010).

Many institutions of higher education (IHEs) and university systems are similarly exploring the recognition and award of credit for prior learning as a strategy to recruit, retain and graduate a greater number of nontraditional-aged students. Such efforts have focused on establishing shared policies and practices, transferability of credit awarded for prior learning and faculty engagement – at the state, system or institution level. A common challenge across efforts may be how to impact local institutional change through a state system initiative. This review will discuss three elements of learning acquired in the first years of the UW System PLA Expansion Initiative: building systemwide capacity to achieve local outcomes; establishing shared principles and climate in which a culture of PLA can thrive; and establishing metrics for tracking program success.

Project Goals and Objectives

The UW System is comprised of 15 institutions that include two doctoral institutions, eleven comprehensive institutions, UW Extension and the UW Colleges. UW Colleges is a multi-campus institution that offers a single Associate Degree of Arts and Sciences and a single Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences degree. The Prior Learning Assessment Expansion Initiative (PLAE Initiative) serves as the UW System's primary strategy to expand the availability and utilization of prior learning assessment opportunities. Initiated in October 2010, the program is funded, in part, by the Lumina Foundation for Education. The PLAE Initiative connects to and supports University of Wisconsin System's Growth Agenda goal to develop the state's human potential by increasing the number of citizens with a college credential.

Prior to the launch of the PLAE Initiative, there was a piecemeal approach to PLA practices and utilization within the UW System. UW System institutions utilized prior learning assessment methods in a limited number of formats and to varied degrees. With the exception of credits earned through Advanced Placement, a relatively small number of Wisconsin students earned credits through PLA. Some UW System institutions accepted standardized exams, such as CLEP (College Level Examination Program), and/or allowed students to demonstrate prior learning through course-based departmental exams. Only three of the 14 degree-granting institutions offered portfolio-based assessment options to students. Furthermore, there was no system policy to support the transfer of credit awarded for prior learning. Only one UW System institution accepted transfer

of credit for prior learning. Most institutions required reevaluation of the learning, while others required students to take the college course equivalent. Given the retention patterns of nontraditional-aged students, coupled with the proportion of transfer students within the UW System, this lack of transferability could adversely impact student use of PLA opportunities.

The primary aim of the PLAE Initiative is to expand the utilization of PLA at the UW institution level while coordinating policy and practices at the UW System level to ensure quality and support transferability of the credit for prior learning that is awarded by UW institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the project goals as well as primary, intermediate and long-term objectives:

Figure 1: UW System PLA Initiative Objectives

Primary

- S1 examine existing institutional PLA policies; develop recommendations to coordinate PLA policy, practices and procedures.
- S2 increase institution and faculty engagement in PLA policy development and expansion.
- S3 increase faculty and staff awareness and ability to implement PLA practices and programming.
- S4 establish processes that support development of PLA methods and programming.
- S5 establish sustainable methods to operate PLA assessment, administration and student advising.

Intermediate

- M6 assess and increase the availability of PLA programming and utilization of PLA programming.
- M7 increase partnerships between the campuses and local businesses to support PLA utilization.
- M8 engage departmental leaders and faculty to develop practices and policies that coordinate with UW System principles and guidelines.
- M9 establish external communication initiatives to increase student and public awareness and use of PLA.

Long-term

- L10 increase the utilization of PLA credit.
- L11 increase percentage of PLA students re-enrolling and earning credits beyond the first year when compared to non-PLA students.
- L12 increase adult student persistence by PLA students when compared to non-PLA students.
- L13 increase adult student degree completion rates and reduce time-to-degree for PLA student populations.
- L14 assess award of PLA credit and the impact that award may have on persistence and completion.

Building Systemwide Capacity to Achieve Local Outcomes

The UW PLA Initiative is a systemwide undertaking, the success of which is dependent on the achievement of institutional outcomes and systemwide capacity to support these outcomes. One challenge to creating a coordinated approach to PLA policy and practices is the varied governing authority and operational frameworks that exist across and within UW System institutions. Differences in operational frameworks can produce a different logic and different strategic models to advance similar student success goals. This dualism of control, which exists when units or organizations adopt similar goals or outcomes but function differently, can impact attainment of student-level outcomes. The strength of the relationship between these parallel operations may predict the likelihood that the two organizations will identify and implement strategies that interact to support attainment of intended outcomes (Birnbaum, 1991). Strong relationships can facilitate, and weak relationships can impede the attainment of desired outcomes.

As the UW System considered policy and practice options to advance expansion of PLA, staff recognized a need to balance systemwide coordination with institutional autonomy to implement programming. Such an approach was supported by the literature. Whereas policy change at the system level can influence networks across institutions, policy change within the dimension of the institution best affects true institutional change (van Vught, 1997). Within a state system of higher education in which students demonstrate a high degree of transfer, the value of PLA and award is substantially greater if processes can be coordinated across all institutions. Transparent and comparable policy may increase the predictability of institutional practices by students and thereby their ability to cope with and navigate bureaucratic structures (Godwin & Markham, 1996). System-level credit for prior learning policy can help produce consistency and transferability across institutions,

thus reducing the risk that students will duplicate course work and learning for outcomes in which they have already demonstrated competency.

While a top-down approach to policy development may appear to provide a swift response to support PLA, the method might actually lack efficiency, effectiveness and long-term sustainability (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). The larger the organization, the more time it will take for top-down policy to permeate into different areas of the organization. Also, a top-down approach may not offer an opportunity for institutions to share information or create feedback loops to evaluate policy and processes. Such an evaluation is critical to conducting an impact analysis that identifies unintended outcomes or unproductive processes. Finally, state-level policy and practices are often loosely coupled with the day-to-day operations and governance of the institution. Therefore, even though the state or system holds key authority to create policy, it is disconnected from actual campus practices that are most likely to impact the utilization of PLA and subsequent student outcomes.

The UW System PLAE Initiative project model incorporated a three-part strategy to ensure participation and interaction at multiple levels of the system and institutions. The strategy included the formation of two systemwide committees as well as the implementation of the PLA Institutional Pilot Program (Pilot Program). The PLA Academic Planning and Policy Task Force (PLA Task Force) and the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee (PLA Advisory Committee) provide leadership to develop academic principles and guidelines as well as operational oversight of PLA programs. The PLA Task Force (2010-2011) included faculty representation from all degree-granting institutions and produced the PLA Task Force Findings and Recommendations.[1] The Task Force reviewed current PLA practices, policies and guidelines within the UWS and at peer institutions/systems across the U.S. The recommendations provided principles to guide institutions as they establish and review prior learning assessment practices. The Task Force also identified a number of administrative and programmatic challenges that impact utilization of PLA opportunities within the UW System, such as the documentation of PLA credits on transcripts, transfer of PLA credits between institutions, increasing faculty and staff capacity to utilize PLA methodologies, utilization of standardized testing, administrative practices and sustainability, advising and promoting PLA opportunities to nontraditional students.

The PLA Institutional Pilot Program supports UW System institutions' implementation and testing of specific PLA expansion strategies based on the findings and learning of the PLA Task Force. Of the 14 UW System degree-granting institutions, nine institutions are participating in the Pilot Program, and one is actively working to identify opportunities for expansion. Together, these 10 institutions serve 80 percent of the UW System nontraditional-aged student population.[2] One additional institution is utilizing LearningCounts[3] to outsource the assessment of prior learning for one degree program. The remaining two are active in systemwide PLA discussions regarding assessment practices, transfer and transcription. No matter the UW institution's level of PLA interest, each representative offers a unique perspective and expertise based on their institution type, functional unit or discipline. Data and information provided by the Pilot Program institutions can be synthesized to provide learning that will advise systemwide decisions regarding policy and practice. Also, the collaborative approach provides faculty and staff at peer institutions the opportunity to share learning and practices, and can serve to increase awareness and confidence regarding competency-based assessment, thereby promoting credit transfer.

Utilizing the PLA Task Force findings and learning from Pilot Program institutions, the PLA Advisory Committee (2011 to present) continues to advise UW System Administration as to application, impact and implementation of PLA Task Force findings. The committee was charged to develop and coordinate systemwide policies and activities to support institutional implementation of PLA expansion strategies. The committee's work focuses on priorities that will have the greatest impact on student completion outcomes, particularly for nontraditional adult students. The committee also sets work priorities to establish shared PLA resources and identifies and supports effective administrative and advising practices. To date, the committee advanced policy recommendations for the transcription and transfer of credit for prior learning; established methods to

create and disseminate valid and reliable assessment tool through the formation of a faculty consulting consortium; and coordinated methods to improve internal and external communication about available PLA opportunities.

Establishing Shared Principles and a Climate in Which PLA Can Thrive

The PLA Task Force Findings and Recommendations identified principles and best practices to ensure quality assessment of learning outcomes. The findings also recommended policy in the areas of transcription, transfer, and systemwide acceptance of standardized tests; and offered observations, questions, and recommendations regarding administrative issues related to PLA, including advising, financial aid, fees, and marketing. The Task Force emphasized a set of quality principles that, when implemented, could produce a greater acceptance and utilization of PLA. UW Pilot Program institutions and the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee applied these principles and analyzed them in practice. This section will consider preliminary learning.

Shared principle #1

As a means to support quality assessment methods, all personnel involved in Prior Learning Assessment should receive training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.

In order to increase the number of PLA opportunities for students, UW institutions will need to increase the number of faculty that engage in assessments of student learning. PLA Pilot Program managers and PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee members found the degree to which faculty and academic instructional staff participate in the assessment of prior learning may be dependent on faculty perceptions regarding the reliability and validity of prior learning assessment tools and processes. Committee members observed that faculty are often more receptive to Prior Learning Assessment practices if they are aware of existing PLA principles and practices; can recognize how the assessment practices are developed within their institution and how to apply the practices to assessment of learning outcomes for their academic program; and are confident that tools accurately and reliably measure the appropriate set of learning competencies so as to set the student up for success in the next sequence of course work.

Project and Pilot Program faculty and staff found the first step to creating a shared understanding of PLA and improving confidence in PLA methods is by attending to the language used to define PLA to faculty and staff. Organizational development scholars theorize that systems and institutions of higher education function within a set of multiple operational frameworks: bureaucratic, collegial, human resource and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Birnbaum, 1991). Academic departments often function within collegial and symbolic frameworks. Faculty governance and peer review processes are framed within collaborative collegial modes, while the academic environment supports a process of creating meaning and order of new ideas and processes. Therefore the use of language and perceived meaning, the process of linking new knowledge to existing knowledge, and the development of new meaning are critical factors to engaging faculty and transferring the content we present about PLA into practice.

Verbiage can have a powerful impact on how faculty and staff create meaning and understanding of prior learning assessment. For example, the use of expressions such as "credit for experience" or "course challenge" produced opinions that reduced the credibility of the PLA process or created perceptions of a litigious process. In order to ensure initiative partners are using common language, the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee created and continuously update a glossary of terms[4] and a set of responses to frequently asked questions about PLA. In addition, a subcommittee was formed to review and recommend revisions to Web and publication content to ensure verbiage is consistent across PLA programs and publications.

Dispelling the myths of PLA

When communicating with faculty and staff, project and Pilot Program managers identified a common set of false assumptions regarding the practice of PLA and credit awarding. These myths often undermined

communication and training efforts. To dispel myths, UW System staff and Pilot Program managers created a set of shared learning outcomes around a set of accurate assumptions. These outcomes can serve as a foundation for PLA communication and training, and are described below. In application, trainers found connecting new knowledge regarding PLA to conventionally accepted knowledge that faculty and staff held regarding learning assessment eased anxiety and reduced inaccurate assumptions regarding the validity of the PLA process.

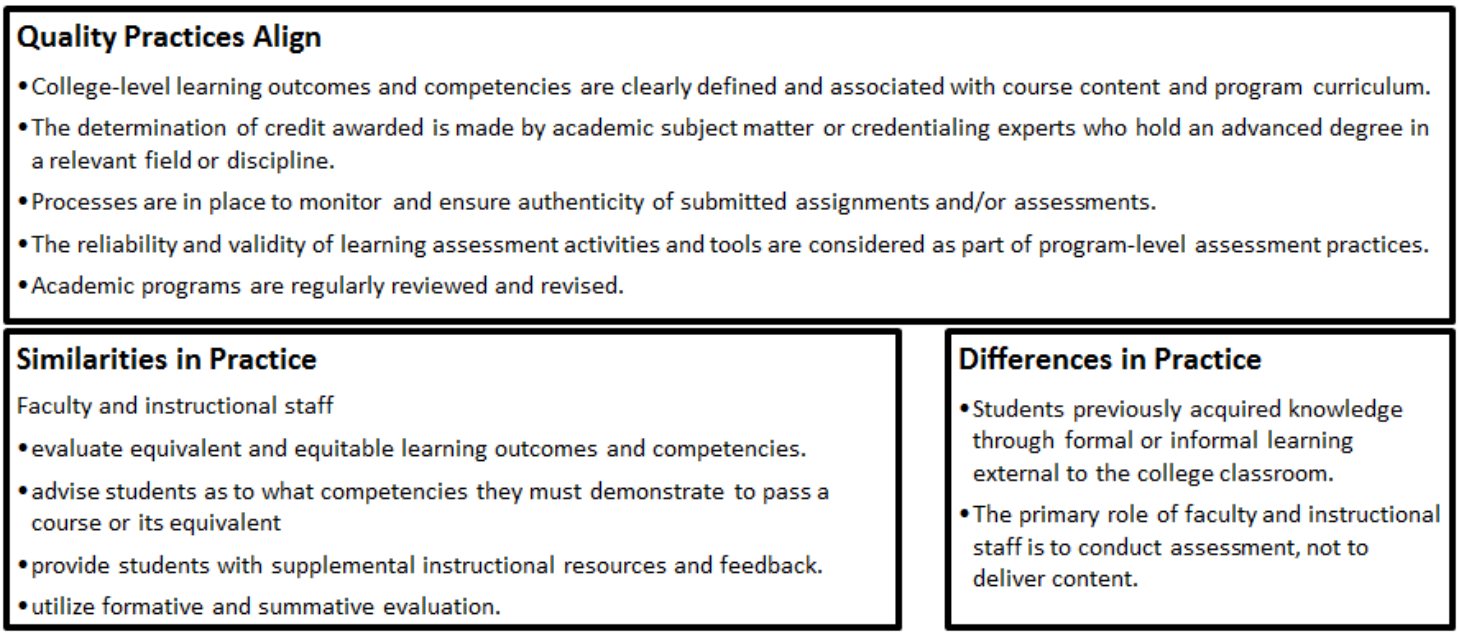
PLA supports enrollment
Outcome: Recognize how PLA supports enrollment at institutions of higher education and operationalize methods of inquiry.

One common concern articulated by faculty and staff was that utilization of PLA will negatively impact enrollment or reduce the number of students in their traditional classes. To mitigate these concerns, trainers shared institutional, statewide and national data to support evidence-based conclusions. For example, system and institutional data revealed retention and completion gaps exist between the nontraditional-aged and the general undergraduate student populations. Given the system's equity goals, system-level data also was useful to highlight diversity in the nontraditional student populations. These data can be triangulated with national data, illustrating that students whose academic record includes credit awarded for prior learning enroll in a greater number of course-based credits, are more likely to persist in their studies and are more likely to complete a degree than students who do not received recognition for prior learning. Such findings held across both underrepresented minority (URM) and non-URM student populations (Kline-Collins, 2010). Armed with data, faculty and staff can recognize how PLA serves as a potential high-impact practice for diverse sets of student populations. Institutions can then apply findings and methodology to demonstrate how improved retention rates for nontraditional students yield higher enrollment and completion rates.

PLA is comparable to assessment that takes place in the college classroom
Outcomes: Identify commonly accepted assessment principles and how quality conventional and PLA practices align. Distinguish similarities and differences between assessment practices.

Project and Pilot Program managers commonly observed that one barrier to PLA utilization was that faculty and instructional staff did not always understand how PLA practices align with assessment practices in relation to classroom learning. Figure 2 illustrates a comparison of PLA practices with classroom assessment practices. When faculty and instructional staff understand that both kinds of assessment attend to the same quality principles, they are better able to identify methods for the creation of valid and reliable assessment frameworks, linked largely to what they already know and practice in the classroom.

Figure 2: A comparison of prior learning assessment practices to classroom assessment practices

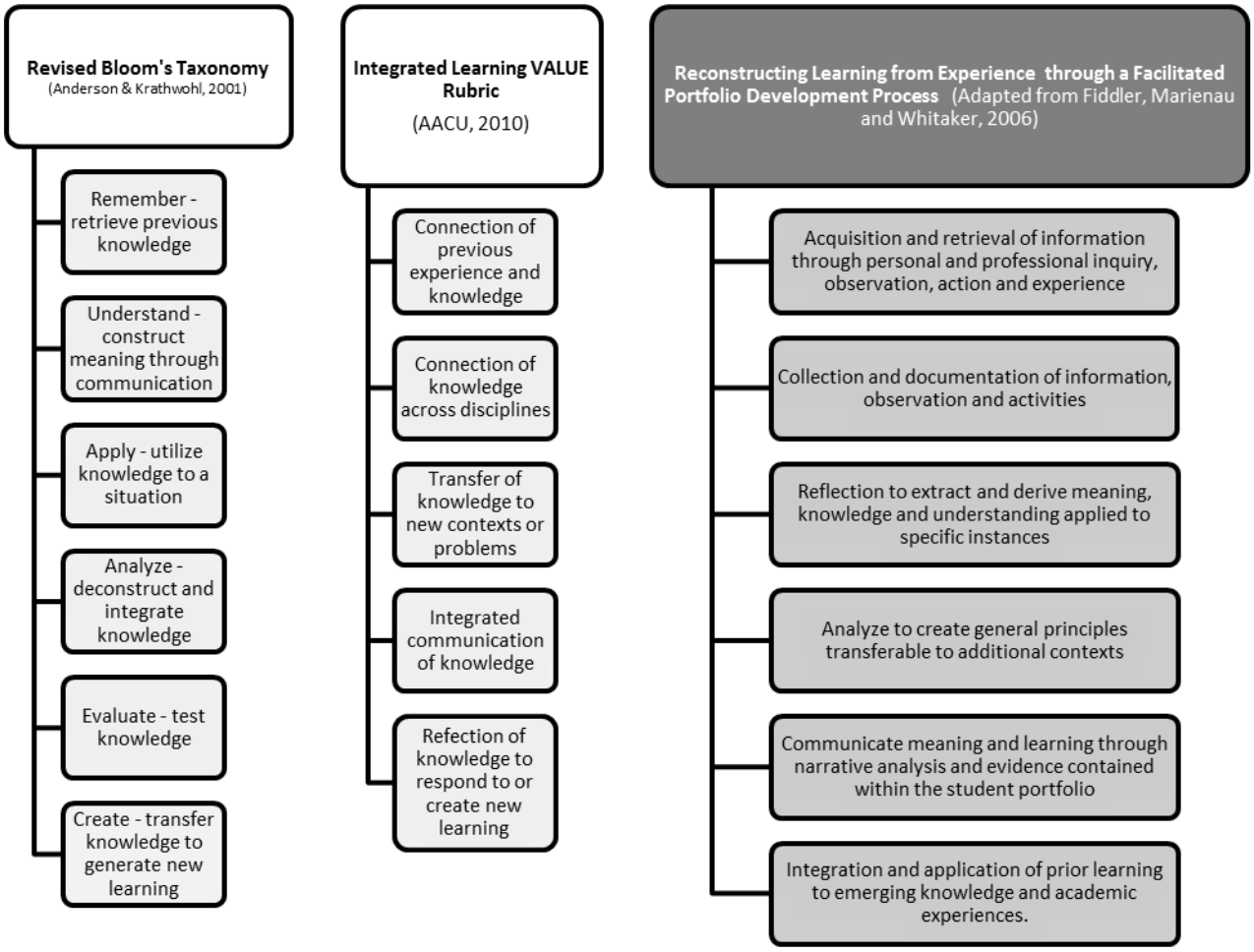


PLA evaluates multiple levels of learning

Outcome: Compare widely accepted learning process theories and apply these processes to prior learning assessment practices.

Just as many faculty and staff misperceive PLA as a practice that does not align with traditional assessment practices, there also exists a misunderstanding about how classroom versus experiential learning processes align and can be evaluated across progressive levels of learning. This misunderstanding may be predicated on a lack of familiarity of PLA formats beyond standardized exams, since such exams are more likely to measure content knowledge. PLA training curricula can highlight how prior learning assessments, especially portfolio assessment, provide opportunities to measure both breadth and depth of learning. Figure 3 compares how two learning frameworks, the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy: Cognitive Process Dimension (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education Integrated Learning Rubric (AACU, 2010), align with a progressive framework to assess prior learning as described and synthesized by experiential learning theorists (Kolb, 1984; Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006).

Figure 3: Comparison of commonly referenced learning frameworks to a reconstructive experiential learning process



Prior learning assessment methods can be utilized across fields

Outcome: Identify the types of program-level assessment practices most often used within a discipline at the program level. Consider how these assessment practices may transfer to the development of PLA evaluation tools and processes.

Some faculty recognize the value in utilizing prior learning in many disciplines, but not their own disciplines. Project and pilot managers considered approaches to classifying and describing the kinds of learning assessment tools that are currently being used within a variety of academic disciplines. Project staff framed discussion regarding PLA utilization across disciplines by highlighting research findings produced by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment that provides national assessment data at the academic discipline level (Ewell, Paulson, & Kinzie, 2011; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). While data was collected at the program level, the report findings clarify for faculty and staff the assessment methods most commonly used within their disciplines to comprehensively assess program-level learning outcomes. Such data may be used to launch discussion as to what prior learning assessment formats are most appropriate for particular course work or for a particular discipline.

Shared principle #2

UW System should establish and maintain a systemwide repository of UW institution department assessment tools.

PLA pilot managers indicated relevant and comprehensive quality prior learning assessment tools are not easily accessible. In particular, managers had difficulty identifying tools to assess learning outcomes across the general education curriculum. Managers reiterated the importance of establishing a shared repository of valid and reliable PLA tools and resources if PLA is to be taken to scale. Because the process of evaluating existing materials and creating new tools is time intensive, creating a repository of valid and reliable tools might promote efficiencies across the UW System. The shared file system will be available to all Pilot Program managers and faculty, staff and administrators as needed. The filing system will contain UW and peer institution policies, records of the PLA Initiative, shared training resources for both students and faculty/staff, and a growing repository of PLA assessment tools and rubrics.

Shared principle #3

Credit for prior learning granted by one UW institution should be accepted and transferred by all UW institutions, and the receiving institution should determine how the credit will apply to the major and degree.

UW System data indicated that there is a significant level of student mobility between UW institutions, and almost one-quarter of these students are over the age of 25. UW System Undergraduate Transfer Policy clearly articulated a set of credit transfer principles for the transfer of conventional credit between UW System institutions. However, such policies primarily addressed only conventional course credit. Experiences of the PLA pilot managers indicated that the degree to which expansion of competency-based learning assessment programs, such as PLA, can be taken to scale may be dependent on whether or not learning competencies demonstrated at one institution of higher education (IHE) will be accepted for credit at another institution. In other words, students may be less likely to partake in a competency-based assessment process if they are unsure whether awarded credits will be accepted at another IHE, should they transfer. In 2012, The PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee examined current practices across the UW System and found the following:

- PLA falls into three categories: internal assessments that are administered within the IHE, internal review of external credit recommendations and external assessment by standardized exam.
- Receiving institutions require transcripts from the original source of assessment.
- Acceptance of transfer credit for prior learning might depend on the source of the assessment, what information is available on the transcript or elsewhere in the student records, and information regarding learning assessed and the assessment methodology.
- Decision making regarding transfer of prior learning credit or inter-institutional agreements must take place at the department and provost level within established governance structures; however, participation of registrars in the PLA process is critical to ensure transcription policies are feasible and appropriately capture the demonstrated learning or course work competencies.

In its analysis, the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee also observed the significance of the AACRAO-ACE (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers – American Council on Education) (2001) joint transfer standards, noting two guidelines particularly relevant to the transcription and transfer of PLA:

- *The sending institution has a responsibility to furnish sufficient information for the receiving institution to judge the quality and the quantity of the student's work.*
- *Transfer decisions should be student centered, striving for appropriate balance among fairness, consistency, flexibility, good educational practice and academic program integrity.*

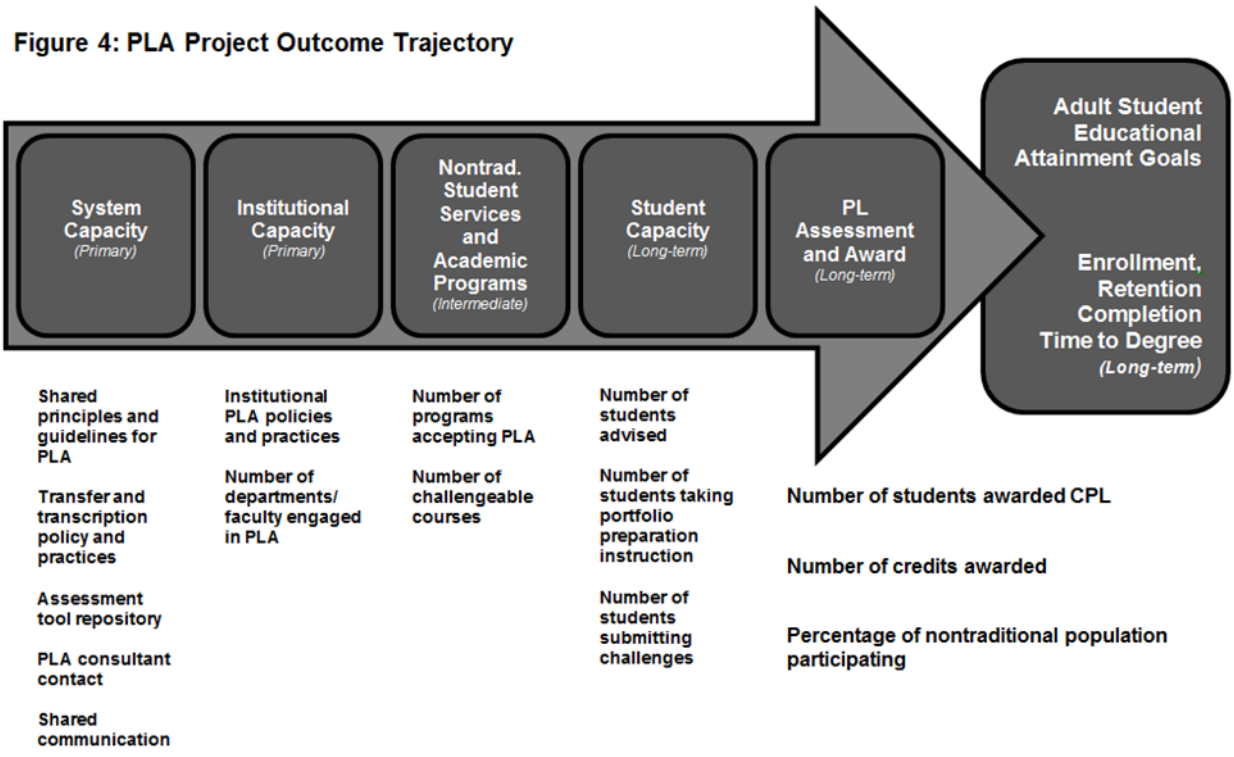
In summary, the PLA Task Force and the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee concurred that credit awarded for prior learning that is assessed internally by an institution within the UW System should be consider equal to credit awarded based on the classroom learning assessment; that credit should be transcribed as a course equivalent; and transfer credit for prior learning should be accepted in accordance with the same principles of accommodation as other institutional credit.[5]

Establishing Metrics and Processes to Tracking Program Success

The UW PLAE Initiative is a systemwide undertaking whose success is dependent on the achievement of institutional outcomes and systemwide capacity to support these outcomes. In order to assess progress, project staff built two models. One serves to benchmark quantitative progress. The other qualitatively tracks initiative progress and process performance. This section will provide an overview of each model as well as a discussion of three institutional case studies to which these models can be applied.

Figure 4 illustrates the trajectory of primary, intermediate and long-term outcomes. The trajectory maps the expected flow of project outcomes and the specific metrics that are being used to measure these outcomes.

Figure 4: PLA Project Outcome Trajectory



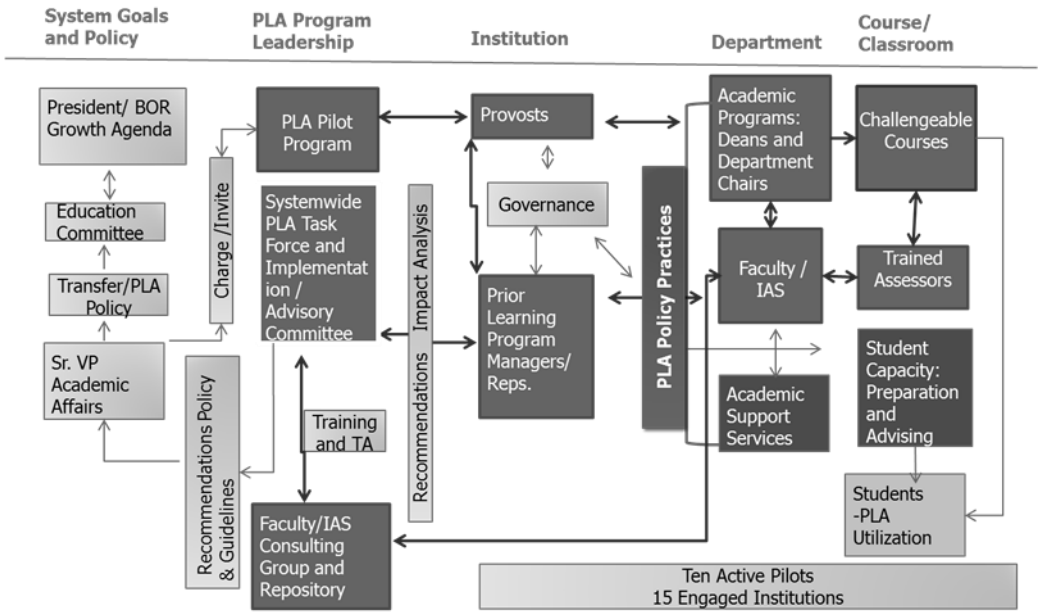
The UW System PLAE initiative model presumes that actors and activities at the system and institution will interact. The core values of the initiative highlight the importance of recognizing and engaging a broad range of constituencies and multiple levels of the organization. Such complexities of organizational structure and process may make it more difficult to explain how the actions and outcomes of one set of actors impacts decision-making, implementation and outcomes at a subsequent level within the organization. This project model incorporated routines and cycles to create feedback loops that allow for knowledge and expertise to flow between various levels and actors within the system. Therefore, it was critical to intentionally track these interactions so as to reveal what interactions and connections must occur to promote actionable and sustainable outcomes at both the UW institution and UW System level. Working with partners at the U.S. Education Delivery Institute, project staff constructed a project "delivery chain." This strategy involves mapping sets of actors at the system and institution level, the interactions and relationships between them, and the most important lines of influence (Barber, Moffit, & Kihn, 2010).

The delivery chain allowed the project to map the development of policy and practices at both levels and identify policies, practices or points within the process that impede progress. The chain also allowed the system to visualize feedback loops and track where impacts are being made and where chokepoints might occur.

For example, Figure 5 illustrates an outcome-specific chain focused on the increase of PLA opportunities, as indicated by the number of challengeable courses and trained assessors. This chain demonstrates the pathways

of engagement and interaction within institutions and across institutions and illustrates relevant feedback loops. Note, the chain is multi-directional and recognizes the role of policymaking at all levels of the system and institution. It emphasizes the importance of the PLA Pilot Program, which was launched at the system level and delivered through provosts and pilot managers in collaboration with academic departments and their faculty. The chain highlights the role of prior learning program managers and faculty to train assessors, as well as the role of academic deans and departments to determine if and how PLA will integrate into their academic programs and courses. This chain also integrated feedback loops that allowed PLA leadership to identify chokepoints and ways to support progression to and sustainability of outcomes. For example, feedback to PLA program leadership from institutions and academic departments indicated that limited resources might inhibit PLA program expansion.

Figure 5: Establishing a delivery chain to map systemwide initiatives' processes and outcomes



One critical feedback loop incorporated data and information that flowed between the system-level project work and the PLA Institutional Pilot Program. The Pilot Program originated at the system level and offers resources to UW institutions to support implementation of specific PLA expansion strategies. Program managers collaborate to share data, practices and methods with other UW institutions through their participation on the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee. Each UW institution pilot implemented PLA expansion methods that the institution identified as having the best capacity to produce increased PLA opportunities or increased utilization of current opportunities within the grant period. The variance in approaches to PLA expansion provides the project an opportunity to examine program outcomes within the context of a variety of implementation models. Described here are examples of three such models at three UW institutions that will be described as UW-A, UW-B and UW-C.

UW-A: An institutionwide approach to PLA expansion

This case exemplifies a multi-step approach that one institution, with little history in PLA, took to expand PLA opportunities to nontraditional-aged students by integrating strategies of policy development, continuous faculty training, course identification and student instructional support. The "policy first" model allowed the institution to engage its full faculty senate and all department chairs to develop and disseminate clear and comprehensive policy at the institution level. In turn, all academic departments reviewed course offerings and outcomes in order to identify courses for which a student could submit a PLA review request. Eighty percent (80%) of departments identified a set of courses for which a student could submit a PLA review request. At the same time, pilot program staff developed curriculum to deliver an experiential learning portfolio development course and procedures to process prior

learning assessment requests. While the "policy first" model was a time-intensive multiyear endeavor, the institution succeeded in establishing an organized and methodical approach to PLA that will facilitate the delivery of advising and assessment services to its first cohort of students. In addition, the process engaged faculty to anticipate and discuss potential threats to awarding credit, such as student demonstration of only partial competency. As a result, in addition to offering conventional PLA opportunities to its students, the institution is designing a competency-based academic program that is designed for students to blend prior learning with emerging learning, as a means to address competency gaps and accelerate students toward degree completion.

UW-B: PLA at the department and college level

This case example serves as a "department based model" of how one institution, with little history in PLA, rapidly implemented PLA programming and utilization. The project was led by a well-respected faculty member and department chair who served on both systemwide committees. Consequently, the initiative leader was well connected to both system-level and institutional-level project goals and processes and directly applied findings of the systemwide committees to the institutional program. The locus of this institutional initiative occurred at the college level, within a set of departments. Faculty were provided with the autonomy to develop PLA policy and processes at the department level. The program manager worked collaboratively with advising offices to identify and interview student candidates for PLA. Over the first two years of the project, UW-B demonstrated significant progress to increase portfolio course participation, PLA application and PLA award. During academic years 2010-2011 and 2011-12, faculty across eight departments were engaged and trained to conduct portfolio assessment. Thirty-five students completed their newly designed portfolio assessment course, and all of these students submitted a course challenge. In total, students challenged 44 courses. Thirty-three of these students were successful in their challenges, producing a CPL yield rate of over 90 percent. Prior to implementation of their pilot, the institution reported minimal PLA assessment opportunities as being available to their students. This strategy succeeded in developing sound and effective PLA practices and processes at the department and course level. The project also engaged a strong cadre of faculty champions and featured a student-centered approach to academic mentoring and support. Consequently, institutional capacity to support and replicate PLA student opportunities continues to permeate and grow across the institution.

UW-C: PLA embedded into a major

This case exemplifies an embedded approach to PLA that recognizes that all nontraditional-aged students enter a university with prior learning. The pilot project impacts students who enroll in one of two interdisciplinary studies majors. Reflective learning activities are embedded into an adult learner seminar course that the institution requires all students within the major to take during their first year. In the first semesters of the pilot program, over 175 students completed the course. This program model provides all students, within the major, recognition of their prior learning through the completion of the seminar course. Consequently, UW-C is uniquely positioned to track and analyze impact of reflection and recognition of prior learning, whether or not additional credit is awarded, on nontraditional student success and completion.

Conclusion

The first years of the Prior Learning Assessment Expansion Initiative included all 14 University of Wisconsin System degree-granting institutions in conversations about a wide range of issues relevant to increasing the use of PLA, including but not limited to transfer, transcription, problems with faculty buy-in, principles of effective assessment and the creation of assessment tools. While campus approaches to PLA are highly local, with each Pilot Program manager responding to his or her own campus's institutional needs and histories differently, institutions nevertheless reached a high level of consensus about PLA principles and best practices. This consensus is important for at least two reasons. The first is the need for students who take advantage of PLA opportunities to transfer these credits, a possibility undermined by the lack of common understanding about PLA. The second is the need to create efficiencies and economies of scale by sharing such resources as assessment tools and training materials. The lack of a common understanding diminishes both the utility of engaging in PLA for students and the likelihood of institutions engaging in the process efficiently.

In addition to reaching some consensus about PLA policies and practices, six UW System institutions have already made expanded PLA opportunities available to adult students. Three additional institutions are planning to begin offering expanded PLA this year, and two additional institutions have expressed interest in being involved in the initiative. While the project has not yet realized large increases in the award of credit for prior learning, systemwide inroads have been made in the creation of processes and infrastructures that should set the stage for increased student utilization of PLA by project's end.

The expansion of PLA opportunities is obviously important partly because of its correlation with adult student success. In order to attract adult students and serve their needs effectively, campuses need to make appropriate PLA opportunities available. The discussions campuses have had because of the PLAE Initiative also have set the stage for wider conversations about the assessment of student learning. In particular, as Wisconsin campuses move from an educational model that emphasizes seat time and credit hours to one that emphasizes the assessment of student learning and competencies, we believe the PLAE Initiative will play an important role. It creates both processes and tools for assessing student learning and a cadre of faculty and staff who know how to utilize them. Also, because PLA can translate the assessment of student learning back into the language of course work, it provides our campuses with the flexibility to incorporate a more competency-based approach without the need to create purely competency-based programs. At the very least, UWS campuses will have the opportunity to build on the consensus created through the PLAE processes as they navigate developments in the education of adult students.

Notes

[1] The PLA Task Force Findings can be accessed at http://web.uwsa.edu/vpacad/prior-learning-assessment.

[2] Represents 18,426 of 23,315 students age 25 or older at UW 4-year, or age 22 or older at UW Colleges campuses who were enrolled as an undergraduate during fall 2011.

[3] For more information on LearningCounts, go to http://www.learningcounts.org/.

[4] Find the Glossary of Terms at http://web.uwsa.edu/vpacad/prior-learning-assessment.

[5] A full set of findings and recommendations can be located at http://web.uwsa.edu/vpacad/prior-learning-assessment.

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