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Linking Learning and Work



# The Growing Importance of Prior Learning Assessment in the Degree-Completion Toolkit

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*Central to many of the current developments in higher education is prior learning assessment (PLA). In the past several years, with new and ambitious degree completion goals for adults, the U.S. is witnessing what can only be called a surge of interest in PLA.*

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Starting in 1974, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has helped colleges and universities develop and expand their prior learning assessment (PLA) programs for adult and other nontraditional learners. PLA is the process by which an individual's learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. That learning may have been acquired through on-the-job experiences, corporate training, military training or experience, volunteer work, or self-guided study. PLA methods include exams, individual portfolios, or the formal review of a course or training program to determine whether it is at the college level. Typically, the first two methods assess the learning outcomes or what the individual knows and can do; the last method assesses inputs, what materials and learning activities a course or training program presents.

Recently, CAEL has seen a dramatic growth in interest in PLA – not just from colleges and universities, but also from federal and state governments. PLA has been gaining respect and acceptance in higher education and the public sector, largely coinciding with the emphasis on improving rates of degree completion.

Given its long history of advocating for and supporting PLA programs in higher education, CAEL could not be more pleased to see the embrace of PLA and, with it, the growing understanding that what matters most is *what* someone has learned, not how or where they learned it. But CAEL is also mindful of other changes in higher education today, particularly those that are opening up educational resources and learning opportunities in ways that PLA practitioners could not have imagined a decade ago. These changes clearly indicate that there may be much more in store for PLA assessment methods and for adult learners who use this option in their degree plans. There is, in fact, a new, expanded future for PLA.

## Background

In the past few years, many leaders in education, the public sector, and philanthropy have focused on the goal of better postsecondary degree completion. Indeed, even President Obama has addressed this as an important national goal. As noted by the National Commission on Higher Education Attainment in its January 23, 2013 open letter to college and university leaders, PLA has emerged as an important strategy for helping more people cross the finish line to degree completion. With PLA, someone with college-level learning acquired outside the classroom – on the job, in corporate training, in the military, through self-guided study – can earn credit for that learning through a variety of assessments. This is particularly true for adults who often return to school to complete a degree or credential, begin a degree, or change careers with substantial learning experiences that can be applied to their educational goals.

With credit earned through PLA, a student saves time and money in earning a degree. And perhaps buoyed by the recognition of having already mastered learning at the college level, that student is then motivated to persist and complete the degree. CAEL research on more than 62,000 adult students from 48 postsecondary institutions provides support for this supposition by showing that adult students with credit earned through PLA were two-and-a-half times more likely to complete a degree compared to adult students without such credit (Klein-Collins, 2010). This was true for students regardless of race/ethnicity, age, financial aid status, or gender.

Several observations point to the current surge of interest in PLA:

- At CAEL's annual conference, there are increasing numbers of proposals for the PLA track, more attendees at PLA sessions and workshops, and a two-fold increase in the attendance a two-day pre-conference PLA workshop.

- Amendments to federal regulations encourage the use of PLA in workforce training programs. For example, in 2010, the U.S. Department of Labor's Training and Employment Guidance Letter 15-10 (December 15, 2010) listed prior learning assessment (PLA) as a strategy "to help adults and dislocated workers obtain academic credit for independently attained knowledge and skills, thereby accelerating the process of credential attainment." In addition, the department's recent Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Programs listed "credit for prior learning assessments" as a possible implementation measure (e.g., U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).
- As they explore ways to promote greater access to PLA offerings throughout state institutions, state leaders also cite PLA. In July 2012, CAEL co-hosted a meeting at Lumina Foundation for state leaders interested in learning more about PLA and how their states can promote its use at public postsecondary institutions (see Sherman, Klein-Collins, & Palmer, 2012 on existing state policy efforts as well as model state policies).
- In addition, media are devoting increased attention to PLA in reports about higher education; and CAEL has successfully launched LearningCounts.org, a national online portfolio development service.

It is tempting to conclude that PLA's time has come. However, it is worth considering whether we may be merely scratching the surface of what can be possible with PLA's tools for assessing student learning.

### Vision of Expanded Uses for PLA

Right now, dramatic transformations are occurring in how postsecondary institutions deliver education, how they award credentials, and how they structure degree programs. There is greater access to open educational resources, from free learning materials to free online courses taught by professors from elite institutions. There is also greater understanding of the connections between learning and the workplace. In many of these developments there are new uses and applications for PLA assessment methods.

**The DIY Learning Option: OER and MOOCs.** Before the technology revolution, the presumed users of PLA options were people who had acquired learning on the job, through volunteer work, through the military, or through self-guided study. Self-guided study was once only for the truly motivated, the self-starter of learning. Today, however, the lifelong learner has options for acquiring knowledge and new competencies in ways previously unimagined. Students of all ages now have access to open and free educational resources (OER), whether through YouTube videos, iTunes lectures, or the recent phenomenon of massive open online courses (MOOCs). Some of this learning is at the college level, and some is equivalent in its depth and breadth to existing college course offerings.

YouTube lectures, iTunesU, open textbooks, and other relatively new OER offerings make self-guided study a more accessible option for such do-it-yourselfers. Not only are these options readily available, online and mostly free but they provide guidance to the learner. Although they still require the student to be motivated and entrepreneurial in the approach to learning, the new options take some of the guesswork out of how to go about the learning process. And as has long been the case, PLA can then offer a way to have that learning formally recognized and applied to a degree.

The current standout among open education options is the massive open online course, or MOOC. As millions of people throughout the world sign up for these courses, many of which are led by professors from elite institutions, a frequently heard question is, “How can someone earn college credit for what is learned in a MOOC?” In answer to this question, some individual postsecondary institutions are evaluating particular MOOC offerings in order to award credit to successful completers. In addition, organizations like CAEL and the American Council on Education are developing ways to assess the learning from MOOCs for the purposes of awarding college credit or validating well-defined competencies (Lederman, 2013). In this way, do-it-yourself, or DIY, education can be as much about working towards credentials as it is about learning.

**Competency-based Degree Programs.** The emphasis on degree completion is partly about providing good career opportunities for Americans, but it is also about making sure our workforce is prepared to support the needs of the global economy. Ironically, the message about needing more college graduates comes at a time when both students and employers are beginning to question the value of a degree. Students wonder what they are getting in return for the high cost of tuition and the frequently resulting student loan debt, and employers wonder whether someone with a postsecondary degree or credential is actually ready for the workplace. Both within and outside higher education critics are asking, “What does a college graduate know? What can a college graduate do?”

In response to these concerns, educational thought leaders and individual postsecondary institutions are acknowledging that the old model of relying on the credit hour as a measure of student learning is no longer sufficient. Developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the credit hour was, in fact, never designed to be a measure of student learning. It is certainly not one today (Laitinen, 2012). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lumina Foundation (2011), among other proponents of competencies, has proposed a new competency-based framework, the Degree Qualifications Profile, to promote a greater emphasis on defining and measuring what students learn at various levels of postsecondary education. Pioneering institutions are migrating away from the model that focuses on the accumulation of credit hours and towards something different: degrees based on demonstration of a pre-defined set of competencies. (To learn more about various models of these programs, see Klein-Collins, 2012.)

Competency-based programs share a philosophy with PLA: that what individuals know is more important than where or how they acquired that knowledge. In addition, competency-based programs are a natural fit with many methods of PLA because they assess the outcomes of student learning in a rigorous way. An important model of a competency-based degree program is one in which a student progresses not by satisfying a set of course requirements, but by passing a series of competency-based assessments. With faculty guidance, the student acquires those competencies through traditional coursework, self-guided study, or from workplace training or other life experience. The competency assessments essentially have the same function as PLA.

Until now, CAEL’s PLA portfolio assessment process, through its LearningCounts.org PLA service, as well as through PLA training that CAEL offers to institutions, has taken a “course match” approach, in which a student’s demonstrated learning is compared to the expected learning outcomes of existing courses at regionally accredited institutions. If a student can align learning with the learning outcomes of a particular course, and support it with documentation, the assessor can recommend a credit award for that course.

With the emergence of new competency-based degree programs across the country, CAEL sees the need for a portfolio assessment process that results in a transcript of both recommended course credits *and* demonstrated competencies. In some cases, this may require going beyond a

student's written narrative and supporting documents to include video demonstrations, work products, and simulations. Students can currently take advantage of new technologies to provide supporting evidence of what they know, and CAEL plans to test additional new forms of performance assessment and assessor interviews.

As demonstrations of learning gain currency, CAEL recognizes the word “prior” in “prior learning assessment” may no longer be relevant. The learning that is assessed could have been acquired years ago or minutes ago. Yet regardless of when the learning occurred, evaluating competencies can offer significant help in addressing the quality concerns about college degrees raised by employers and education consumers.

**Student Mobility and Credit Transfer.** In order to support degree completion, many state leaders have recognized the reality of, and challenges posed by, increased student mobility. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center recently reported that one-third of all students changed institutions at some time before earning a degree (Hossler et al, 2012).

Today more students than ever before have acquired learning that at more than one postsecondary institution, and these students often face institutional resistance when trying to apply all of their credits from various institutions towards their degrees. The solutions can involve articulation agreements between and among schools. These agreements spell out the courses that will transfer. However, when there is not a perfect match – when a course at college A does not perfectly match a course at college B – there can be problems. And although the course credits may be accepted, they may not necessarily apply to the degree, often requiring the student to study the same material again. In such cases, PLA can provide an alternate route. Imagine, for example, a student who has mastered four of the five required learning outcomes for a course. That student can independently learn the remaining required competencies and use PLA to demonstrate the new learning. By using the PLA option, students will not need to retake entire courses to have their previous learning fully recognized by the transfer institution.

**Badges or Micro-credentials.** The online development organization Mozilla has joined forces with HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to explore the concept of “badges,” or micro-credentials. This initiative is based on the idea that traditional measures of achievement – associate and bachelor's degrees, for example – may be too large a credentialing unit for some needs. Given the rapidly changing workplace, a micro-credentialing system would provide greater flexibility for employers to specify exactly what skills and competencies are needed and would allow individuals the ability to customize their education and training to meet those specific needs (The Mozilla Foundation and Peer 2 Peer University, 2012).

Should a system for micro-credentials develop, perhaps in conjunction with a strong move towards competencies within postsecondary education more generally, the metadata specs associated with a badge (see <https://wiki.mozilla.org/Badges/Onboarding-Issuer#E>) would specify the competencies needed, and PLA could provide ways for learners to demonstrate their skills and competencies to earn those badges, no matter where the learner acquired those skills and competencies.

**Workforce Development.** The public workforce system could similarly incorporate PLA methods into its short- and long-term training initiatives in order to determine what the participants already know and can do. PLA could help identify both acquired learning and whatever additional training participants still need. Such an approach would require a transformation of many current training programs so that they are more modular and competency-based.

For jobseekers with some previous experience or training, these changes in the workforce system could mean a shortened time to employability. For the public sector, this could mean a more efficient use of limited training resources. These benefits may underlie the rationale for the 2010 U.S. Department of Labor's Training and Employment Guidance Letter 15-10 (2010), referenced earlier in this paper. Some states, such as Indiana, already encourage consideration of PLA when awarding a jobseeker any public workforce training dollars through an Individual Training Account.

**Worker-to-Workplace Connection.** The prior learning portfolio has shown additional utility for jobseekers and incumbent workers. For example, the workforce system might consider the assessment of an individual's learning portfolio as the foundation for helping to connect jobseekers to employers in new ways. The learning portfolio, once developed, could be expanded to include future training interests, previous work-related accomplishments, and otherwise "packaging" the jobseeker for the labor market. In other words, the portfolio could be a new kind of resume that conveys more concrete information about a jobseeker's competencies, skills, previous experience, and potential for growth.

Portfolios, specifically e-portfolios, are currently used by many college students, not only to demonstrate learning outcomes of the complement of their degree studies but also to market themselves to prospective employers. The portfolios package learning that takes place in all environments, with evidence such as student achievements, highlights of coursework, videos of music performances, presentation slides, and other digital content produced by the student independently or as part of the student's formal education. Portfolios are then used by the graduating students in their job search. The workforce system could encourage its job-seeking clients to similarly showcase their skills, competencies, and achievements to prospective employers in an e-portfolio, either alongside a more traditional resume or as a substitute for one. The portfolio has the potential to provide valuable additional information to the prospective employer, not just on job-specific skills and competencies but also the "softer" skills that employers care so much about, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, working in teams, and skills, along with knowledge of a specific discipline.

Once the individual is employed, the portfolio can subsequently be used as a human resources management tool. The portfolio can be designed to capture not only existing skills, competencies, and accomplishments but also to present the employee's pathway to career and educational goals. It can track learning and skill needs, with connections to career pathways within a company or an industry. These portfolios could then be synced to the company's learning management system (LMS) for better delivery and management of company talent development, even connecting workers with new assignments that help them acquire new skills not typically associated with their incumbent position. This process opens up possibilities for lateral movement within the company as well as more traditional career pathways.

While some of this repurposing of the learning portfolio is already underway, particularly the use of e-portfolios in colleges, CAEL expects such uses to become much more common and move with the individual after graduation into the workplace. In addition, as making connections to the workplace becomes more important, the e-portfolio will, CAEL believes, evolve to more effectively meet employer needs, such as making stronger connections between the individual's portfolio and industry-defined competencies.

## Issues and Questions

The potential uses of PLA are indeed exciting for the future of higher education, workforce development, and talent management. Yet thinking about these new opportunities for repurposing PLA raises several important issues and questions. Two issues that are front and center are faculty support and financial aid.

**Faculty Support.** In the 1970s and 1980s, CAEL recognized that PLA would only gain acceptance within the academy if the faculty knew more about the rationale for the process, the learning theory that supports it, and the academic integrity and rigor of PLA methods. To address many of these issues, CAEL articulated 10 standards to ensure academic quality of the assessments, regardless of the format. Even today, these standards are accepted by the six regionally accreditors and are practiced by all reputable PLA practitioners (see Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker (2006), *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles & Procedures*.)

Since 1974 CAEL has trained thousands of faculty across the country. This training has helped PLA take root and flourish, particularly within adult learning programs. Yet the faculty members whom CAEL trained 30 years ago are now nearing, or have already reached, retirement age. The new generation of faculty often does not have the same background and training in PLA, but has the potential to bring fresh ideas to the use of PLA within institutions. Thus, a new round of faculty development would help new academics support the value PLA and put their own imprint on it.

**Financial Aid.** Currently federal financial aid through loans and grants (e.g., Pell Grants) supports traditional time-based, credit-hour-based learning, whether such learning is in the classroom or online. In addition, Section 127 employer-provided educational assistance programs, veteran education benefits (e.g., GI Bill education benefits), and Individual Training Accounts through the Workforce Investment Act either do not allow or are unclear about whether assessments of learning are an allowable expense. CAEL is working to educate the federal government about PLA and to ask for policy changes that allow Title IV funding to cover all costs associated with assessing students' college-level knowledge, skills, and abilities for the purposes of awarding college credit or granting advanced standing.

There are additional questions to consider as well:

**Terminology – What do we call this now?** The examples of expanded uses of PLA methods call into question the term “prior learning assessment.” In some cases, such as MOOCs, it is not so much “prior learning” or “experiential learning” that is to be assessed, but rather current learning that takes place through an alternative delivery system. Yet, using a more generic term like “learning assessment” does not capture the underlying message regarding the assessment and valuing of learning that happens outside a postsecondary institution. CAEL believes that finding the right terminology could be an important step in promoting greater use and acceptance of PLA.

## Conclusion

The postsecondary landscape is changing rapidly. On what seems to be a daily basis, educators, critics, and the media call attention to the urgency of degree completion and the impact of competency-based assessments, OERs, MOOCs, badges, the high cost of education, dwindling public resources, and the social and economic imperatives of expanding educational opportunities. Addressing these issues – and others that will emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – effectively will surely require many creative, sometimes complex approaches. Some of these strategies will be entirely new; others will involve new applications of approaches that have already been shown to be

effective. And one of the latter is PLA. Of course, PLA alone cannot provide an answer to all of the conundrums facing students, institutions, employers, and the public sector. Yet it is an important tool in our toolkit. Indeed, the possibilities for expanding the uses of PLA are without limit.

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