Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)
An Introduction

Reach Higher Faculty Retreat
June 18, 2010
What Is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)?

The evaluation for college credit of the knowledge and skills one gains from life experiences (or from non-college instructional programs) including employment, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service.
Prior Learning Assessment

CAEL’s History with PLA:

- 1974 – Research Project at ETS
  - 54 reports in first 3 years

  - Reissued endorsement in 2001

- 1985 – 1st Ed. “Earn College Credit for What you Know”
Prior Learning Assessment


- 2000 – Launched On-line PLA Certification Program in collaboration with DePaul University

- 2006 – 4th Edition of “Earn College Credit for What You Know”
Prior Learning Assessment


- 2006 – National Survey of PLA Policies and Practices

- 2009 – Prior Learning Assessment Portfolios: A Representative Collection
  - Chapter 1 – Historical Perspective 35 years of PLA
Four Approaches to PLA
All Ensure Academic Quality:

- Nationally standardized exams in specified disciplines
- ‘Challenge’ exams for local courses
- Evaluated non-college programs
- Individualized assessments
Prior Learning Assessment

Types of Standardized Exams:

- AP Exams
- CLEP Tests
- Excelsior College Exams
- DSST
2006 CAEL National Survey of U.S. Institutions regarding PLA policies and practices

- Statistics which follow are from 2006 survey
Advanced Placement (AP) Exams:

- Exams in specific subject areas
- Common for high school students
- Run by the College Board
- 84% within 2006 CAEL national survey use them
Prior Learning Assessment

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Tests:
- Tests of “101”-level material
- 3 to 12 credits for each exam taken
- 5 million users since 1967
- 87% within 2006 CAEL national survey use them
Prior Learning Assessment

- Excelsior College Exams (aka Regents College; ACT/PEP)
  - Proficiency-based exams
  - About 40 exams in many areas
  - Excelsior College (New York)
  - 28% within 2006 CAEL national survey use them
Prior Learning Assessment

Defense Activity for Non-traditional Support (DANTES):

- Developed for the military, available to civilians
- Nearly 40 exams in many areas
- Administered by Chauncey Group Int’l of ETS
- 48% within 2006 CAEL national survey use them
Prior Learning Assessment

“Challenge” exams of local courses:

- At institutional discretion, using locally-developed tests/exams
- May be final exams of courses
- 57% within 2006 CAEL national survey use them
INDIVIDUALIZED ASSESSMENTS

- Portfolio process
- 66% within 2006 CAEL national survey use this approach
Prior Learning Assessment

- Does your institution have an established PLA program?
  - How long has the institution had the program?
- What PLA formats do you use?
- Which departments/colleges accept PLA?
- Do you accept PLA as transfer credit?
- Do you do research on the use of PLA?
Prior Learning Assessment

If you do NOT have a PLA program

Do you have plans to develop and implement a PLA program?

• In the coming year
• In the future – not certain of timing
• No plans at present time to develop/implement PLA
Lifelong Learning Is Essential

- Learning and credentials are key to success in the new economy.
  - States with more postsecondary degree holders have more competitive and innovative economies.
Prior Learning Assessment

- 2008 Research on Adult Learners available through CAEL
  - Study conducted in partnership with NCHEMS
- Adult Learning in Focus: National and State-by-State Data
- http://www.cael.org/adultlearninginfocus.htm
Adult Learning in Focus

- National report on current size and shape of adult learning, barriers to adult participation
  - State measures and comparisons among 50 states
  - State-by-state profiles
  - Policy Framework for assessment and improvement
Adult Learning in Focus

- A strong and growing argument for higher educational attainment in the United States population and workforce.
- Jobs that are expected to support the economy in the coming years will depend on a skilled workforce that is able to learn and adapt quickly to new challenges.
BUT...

A significant portion of the adult U.S. population has never taken a single college class toward a degree.

Of the population aged 25-64, approximately 43% (over 67 Million) have only a high school diploma or less.
Other nations are overcoming the historic lead that the United States has enjoyed in educational attainment levels.

This is not because the U.S. has declined, but because other nations have caught up with and surpassed us.
As baby boomers ‘retire’ from current jobs, knowledge and skills gaps grow.

Pipeline of young college graduates will not be enough to meet future workforce skills demands.
Main sources will have to be tapped to rectify this shortfall and meet the benchmark:

• Adults (25-64) who never completed high school – 21 million
• Adults with high school diplomas but no college—46 million
• Adults with some college but no degree—32 million
Factors Affecting Adult Participation

- Affordability
- Accessibility
- Aspiration
PLA – Addressing Barriers

PLA opportunities address:

• Affordability
• Accessibility
• Aspiration
Source: 

Quality Assurance Principles:

#1

- Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#2

- Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#3

- Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#4

- The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#5

Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#6

- If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#7

- Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available for all parties involved in the assessment process.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#8

- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#9

- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continued professional development for the functions they perform.
Quality Assurance Principles:

#10

- Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.
Why PLA?

- PLA students show better complex problem-solving skills than classroom students.
- Portfolio PLA students tend to show higher cumulative GPAs.
- A College Board study of 1500 adults rated “credit for prior learning policy” as more important than “small class size” or “availability of financial aid.”
- A KY telephone survey indicated that the opportunity to earn credit for prior learning is one of 3 motivators for adults with some college but no degree.
Questions Students Frequently Ask

- What is a portfolio and how might it help me earn credits toward my degree?
- How can a portfolio aid me with a career transition, a career plan, or a job search?
- How much credit can I earn through a portfolio?
- Once I have my portfolio all put together how do I submit it for assessment?
- How do I pay?
- How long will I have to wait for my results?
- If I disagree with the results of the assessment, what can I do?
- What if I’m graduating soon? Can I still submit a portfolio?

* Compiled by St. Edward’s University
PLA from a “systems” view:

- Option 1: Local PLA programs & policies at each college/university
- Option 2: One statewide center for PLA decision-making; credits transferred as needed (Vermont)
- Option 3: ‘Mixed’ models of individuality with collaboration
PLA Implementation

- **Involve Stakeholders**
  (Example: Minnesota)
- **Identify the scale**
  (Examples: Minnesota, Louisiana)
- **Articulate policies and procedures**
  (Examples: Oklahoma, Kentucky)
- **Educate administrators, faculty, staff**
- **Train faculty assessors**
- **Inform students**
- **Update faculty, administrators, staff**
Sustain PLA

- Evaluate the results
  (e.g. Time to degree, retention rates, graduation rates)
- Publicize the successes
- Evaluate the program
- Make changes as necessary
College-Level Learning

College level learning typically refers to learning that is:

- other than general knowledge;
- combines practical and theoretical knowledge in ways appropriate to a given field;
- of a certain level of breadth and/or depth and complexity;
- is represented in existing college curricula.
The Limits of PLA

“Wisdom, love, and the deepest lessons of life are not often creditable learning.”
College-Level Learning

The Logic of Curriculum

The Logic of Adult Learning

Focus, Practice, Applications
Subspecialties, Topics, Methods
Introduction to Theory, General Exposure
Exposure to Theory, Broad View, Research Methods
Applied Knowledge, Deep Expertise, Focus
David Kolb’s Theory of Learning

The Learning Cycle

According to Kolb, experiential learning can begin at any of four stages, when a person:

• is actively involved in an experience (concrete experience);
• describes, examines and reflects on the experience (reflection observation);
• generalizes the experience to form concepts (abstract conceptualization); and
• applies and tests the learning in a new situation (active experimentation)
The Learning Cycle

Kolb’s Learning Cycle

- Concrete Experience
- Reflective Observation
- Abstract Conceptualization
- Active Experimentation
Athabasca University (Canada) summarizes the essentials of college-level learning. The learner:

- Must possess knowledge related to the program
- Know and be able to apply theories and concepts used in that program
- Have a capacity to analyze using data, theories and concepts
- And present knowledge clearly, concisely and at a university level
What’s a Portfolio?

• A formal, written communication describing, illustrating, and documenting what you’ve learned and requesting college credit.
• Typical components (may vary from school to school!):
  • Identification of prior learning- List and describe learning experiences
  • Essay or narrative- Describe goals and reasons for seeking credit for prior learning; demonstrate how prior learning relates to education goals
  • Documentation of knowledge and skills
Preparing Students for PLA

- **Advising**
  - Is the student a good candidate for PLA?
  - If so, what types of PLA?

- **Preparing for the Portfolio**
  - Seminars and workshops
  - Credit course (face-to-face or on-line)
  - Student handbook
Faculty and PLA

Typically, portfolios are assessed by:

- Faculty (either full-time or adjunct) approved to teach the identified course
- An internal assessment committee of two or three faculty members
- A team (four or five) faculty members representing a consortium (the Vermont State Colleges)
Rubrics for Assessing PLA

Charter Oak State College
Course Knowledge Component Summary

- Review of the narrative
- Review of documentation: Is it direct, authentic, college-level, broad
- Assessor answers a series of questions, such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The student’s presentation shows achievement at a grade level of C or higher in that course.</th>
<th>____Yes</th>
<th>____No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics in the course have been addressed sufficiently.</td>
<td>____Yes</td>
<td>____No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PLA Policy Development

Points to consider when developing Principles and Practices for PLA

First step:
- In addressing the following, consider involving institutional stakeholders who will be involved in the PLA process (e.g. faculty, administrators, advisors, registrar, bursar).
- Identify the steps necessary to approve and implement PLA in your institution.
PLA Policy Development

The context:

- How does the institution define PLA?
- Within the mission of the institution, articulate the purpose of PLA.
- Define college-level learning.
- Identify the criteria for awarding credit for prior learning.
- Identify the specific ways to earn credit for prior learning.
PLA Policy Development

- **Applicability:**
  - In which programs will students be eligible to receive PLA credit?
  - Are there specific courses that are exempt from PLA?
  - What is the rationale for this decision?
PLA Policy Development

- **Credit awards:**
  - Is there a limit to the number of credit hours a student may earn through PLA? Rationale?
  - Does the limit apply to the total number of PLA credits or only portfolio credit?
  - Does PLA credit apply as residency credit?
  - How will PLA credit be reflected on the transcript?
  - Will PLA credit from other institutions be accepted?
  - 100% of the credits above accepted? A limit on the number of transfer PLA credits accepted?
  - How will this transfer of PLA credits be reflected on the transcript?
PLA Policy Development

- **Assessment Criteria:**
  - Will the criteria for portfolio assessment be uniform and consistent?
  - How will the criteria be written?
  - What are the criteria for challenge exams?
  - Who will write the exams?
PLA Policy Development

- **Assessment:**
  - Who will assess portfolios and/or challenge exams?
  - How many assessors will evaluate each portfolio/challenge exam?
  - How will the assessors be trained?
  - How will the assessors be evaluated?
  - What are the expectations and provisions for ongoing training?
PLA Policy Development

- **Student Eligibility:**

- When is a student eligible for PLA credit (e.g., upon applying, upon matriculating, after/before completing a specific number of credit hours, after earning a minimum GPA, after completion of a required course)?
PLA Portfolio Development

Preparing Students:

- How will students be trained in portfolio preparation?
- Will the institution develop a course?
- Will the course be credit or non-credit?
- Which department will offer the course?
- What are the specific learning outcomes of the course?
- Who will teach this course?
- Who will advise students about PLA?
- How will the advisors be trained?
PLA Policy Development

Financial considerations:

- What are the fees for assessment?
- CAEL maintains that fees “should be charged independent of the assessment outcome” (Fiddler, M.). What services are provided for an assessment fee?
- Will a different fee structure apply to different types of PLA credit (e.g. CLEP, challenge exams, portfolio)?
- How will fees for PLA be assessed?
- At which point in the process?
- Where do students pay the assessment fee?
- How will assessment fees be credited within the institution?
PLA Policy Development

- Faculty:
  - How will faculty assessors be paid?
  - Is assessment a part of faculty load?
  - Is work as a faculty assessor rewarded in promotion and tenure decisions?
Scaling Up The Use of PLA

CAEL Virtual PLA Center

- VPLA Center will use on-line platform
- Credit recommendations from CAEL VPLA Center faculty experts will be sent on ACE transcript to colleges, as ACE already does today with military and corporate training
Who Will it Serve?

- Unaffiliated individuals not yet in college or having started but never finished college
- Individuals already enrolled in community colleges or four-year institutions
- Active duty military and veterans
- Workers in transition or lower-income workers
- Employers and industry groups
Why Colleges Are Interested

- Lack of a PLA program at their institution
- Existing program cannot keep up with high volume of portfolio submissions
- Lack of personnel to adequately staff their PLA program
- Lack of credentialed faculty to review submitted portfolios in certain fields
- Interest in streamlining their process through increased capacity and speed
- Reliance on VPLA Center as an interim resource while the institution prepares to launch or expand its own PLA program on campus
CAEL is seeking involvement from two- and four-year institutions for pilot launch of VPLA Center.

CAEL has already received letters of interest from 60 institutions, statewide educational consortia, and employers.
Pilot Institutions

Criteria for selection of pilot colleges or systems:

- Colleges will agree to treat PLA credit recommendations as they do other transfer credit
- Colleges will agree to send CAEL a group of adults to participate in the VPLA Center process
- Colleges are adult-serving and adult learner-friendly
For Additional Information/Questions

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