

Chapter 4

Use of Experiential Learning in Higher Education Today

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ABSTRACT

One critical avenue for supporting experiential learning and learners is the award of credit through prior learning assessment and use of career pathways that are unique and individual to meet student needs and academic goals. Institutions must build on in-place practices and policies to enhance institutional infrastructure for translating non-credit coursework to certificate and degree programs, streamline internal business processes, and increase capacity through scaling to serve larger numbers of students in an effort to impact retention and completion.

INTRODUCTION

For institutions of higher education, it is time to add a new twist to academic pathways that builds in experiential learning as a key component of the curricular design rather than an add-on or afterthought. Higher education has long recognized learning that occurs outside of a formal, classroom-based setting and it goes by many names. Competency-based education, prior learning assessment, and credit-by-examination are well-known and well-established institutional protocols that award credit based on a student's demonstration of mastery of specified skills and knowledge *and* generally accelerate program completion rates. Yet of these three alternative approaches, only credit-by-examination has become a widely known and applied practice. While Miami Dade College and thousands of colleges throughout the country, for example, award thousands of credits for successful scores on examinations such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), relatively few credits are awarded through competency-based education and prior learning assessment. This chapter posits that experiential learning and authentic assessment should become a

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standard part of many postsecondary programs and, in turn, become the bridge to development of prior learning assessment.

Developing programs with experiential learning as an integral and expected part of the curriculum requires more than simply allowing credit to be applied when and if the student presents evidence of mastery. Faculty should plan for experiential learning to be a formal and required part of a program; curriculum developers should create courses that incorporate hands-on practice, authentic assessments, and performance assessment rubrics. Yet implementing experiential learning and its often accompanying prior learning assessment, is not easy to do, especially within the current structures of higher education.

Before experiential alternatives to credit award can be widely accepted and adopted by institutions, faculty and administrators must accept that awarding credit for work experience or military training or an examination score is crucial as we forge ahead in this new era of career ready education. It is time to build the curriculum and assessments in ways that recognize that an increasing majority of non-traditional students are entering college for the first time or second or third with experiences and knowledge that can be articulated and demonstrated. Miami Dade College's approach to formally incorporating experiential learning was to create academic pathways with the understanding that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach but can vary from student-to-student. Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, MDC's commitment to the utilization and translation of experiential learning options was evident.

The Role and Use of Prior Learning Assessment

In April 2018, MDC received grant funding from the Lumina Foundation to support the enhancement of PLA. The three major objectives associated with the proposal were to bolster existing PLA infrastructures with the emphasis on translating non-credit coursework to certificate and degree programs through a faculty-led cross-walking process; streamline internal PLA business processes; and increase capacity to serve more students through PLA to positively impact retention and completion. Indeed, in their book The Current State of Higher Learning Policies, Garcia and Leibrandt (2020) state, "creating greater awareness of prior learning policies can help increase college completion among students with low incomes, students of color, immigrants, and adult learners." To accomplish these objectives, MDC utilized funds from the Lumina Foundation to initiate several activities including: 1) developing new marketing materials, which were disseminated to industry partners in effort to raise awareness of PLA; 2) establishing new procedures to award college credit for noncredit trainings/courses/programs; 3) contracting with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to develop the web-based PLA accelerator tool; 4) implementing agreements with Miami-Dade County Public Schools for career-themed coursework to translate to college credit towards workforce certificates and degrees; and 5) hosting CAEL professional development trainings.

Funding from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and the Lumina Foundation in conjunction with MDC's investment in the growth of competency-based and experiential learning have led to a series of changes beginning with the College's reorganization around workforce education with a focus on creating clearer pathways to degrees. Emphasis has been placed on intentional communication to students and creating pathways from non-credit and adult education programming to college credit. The application of stackable credentials, created for several workforce industries including Business Hospitality, Health Sciences, Education, and Computer Information Systems, was also introduced by a collegewide task force to increase student access and success. Stackable credentialing is a concept utilized at MDC to assist a student in envisioning and developing a

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