Chapter 8
Enhancing Educational Attainment Through Prior Learning Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a path to greater educational attainment for adult learners re-entering higher education. This innovative approach provides academic credit for college-level and credit-worthy learning that happened outside the confines of the college walls. The growth in adoption of PLA at many institutions is in concert with the need for more of America's workforce to earn more postsecondary credentials. This chapter explores the nature of PLA and its evolution into the mainstream of higher education policy and practice. The authors examine two institutions' relevant and rigorous approaches to validating learning via PLA. The authors believe that credit for prior learning will become more standardized with time and awareness of this innovative approach to acknowledging experiential learning external to the academic setting.

INTRODUCTION

Enhancing Educational Attainment Through Prior Learning Assessment

Challenges with pandemic have only exacerbated the changes necessary to make higher education increasingly relevant and innovative in the 21st Century. Colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad are experiencing negative enrollment trends and growing skepticism about the quality and need of a college degree. Decreasing state funding, coupled with lower birth rates of the recent past (Grawe, 2018), are forcing colleges and universities to rethink enrollment and retention strategies. Both students

and faculty have been thrust into massive changes in learning modalities due to the global pandemic. Whether they were interested in expanding their exposure to online learning, many students and faculty are grappling with a delivery format that they may not have chosen if given the option. Consequently, many universities have begun to focus on innovative approaches to recruit, retain, and graduate more adult learners as a lifeline to maintain healthy enrollment at their respective institutions (Bergman, 2019). Furthermore, business and industry are interested in efficient pathways to graduation for their incumbent workers. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is one empirically proven pathway to greater pace to rate of graduation (Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., Bransberger, P., Lane, P., & Leibrandt, S., 2020). PLA is also gaining broader acceptance in traditionally focused colleges and universities leading to broader implementation across the United States (Bergman & Herd, 2017; Ohio Board of Regents, 2018). The PLA process acknowledges and honors the college-level knowledge that accrued outside the confines of the college walls (Bergman, 2019). It has the opportunity to acclimate learners who have been separated from academic course work, last year or long ago. The self-reflective writing process in the Portfolio version of PLA changes students' thinking not only about their pasts but also about the present and their futures (McGinley, 1995). Travers (2011) reports that students who earn PLA credit also have increased "self-awareness and self-regulation; problem-solving, study, and reflection skills; use of tacit knowledge; and a better understanding of the role of faculty and mentors" (p. 45). Students who complete the portfolio report feelings of satisfaction, pride, and accomplishment, as well as the appreciation for saving time and money (Rust & Ikard, 2016). Programs that offer PLA are designed to encourage persistence to graduation for adult learners in higher education (Bergman & Herd, 2017). A national study by the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (2020) found that graduation rates for students not earning credits from PLA were around 15% while graduation rates for students who earned college credit from PLA were 43%. As the economy continues to recover from the Global Pandemic, higher education needs to advance new thinking to recruit, retain, and graduate more of those 36 million adult aged Americans with some college and no degree. Unfortunately, this process is much more challenging than just asking adults to plug in and finish what they started last year or long ago. Many have lingering anxiety and unhappy feelings about their previous experience with college. For one reason or another, they left higher education without a credential. Oftentimes, they felt that the content wasn't relevant, they were spending too much money, and/or it wasn't worth the effort to get to the finish line. The authors of this chapter believe that PLA provides a value proposition that alerts returning adults that their experiential learning is valuable and worthy of credit and that policy and practice have changed making the entry, effort, and cost worthy of their time and focus. In other words, we believe PLA changes the value proposition for many adult learners who are on the sidelines wishing they had finished their degrees. We just need to expand the awareness and standardize the process for PLA and many will re-engage to advance their educational attainment.

PLA Participation and Practice

Credit for prior learning has been in place in United States higher education since World War I to provide increased employment access to veterans (Lakin, Nellum, Seymour, & Crandall, 2015). Colleges and universities have expanded PLA offerings, including course-specific PLA over the past 70+ years (Bergman & Herd, 2017). Course-specific PLA includes credit by examination, such as CLEP and DSST. Students demonstrating mastery and proficiency can earn valuable college credit and obtain advanced standing in their program of study (Bergman & McCaskey, 2019). The second major PLA

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