

Chapter 9

PLA as a Tool: Lessons From Florida

Michelle Horton

University of West Florida, USA

Monica E. Vandenberg

Independent Researcher, USA

Ann Dziadon

University of West Florida, USA

Allison Romer

University of West Florida, USA

Karen Rasmussen

University of West Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

Prior learning assessments provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their competence related to knowledge, skills, and abilities that might lead to the awarding of college credit, documenting a pathway to alternative credentials, or earning credit for what they know. Complete Florida, an innovation project in the state of Florida, sought to help adults with some college but no academic credentials, working with students and institutions to identify opportunities for earning non-traditional credit based on an individual's prior knowledge and experience. PLA opportunities help jumpstart an individual's CBE journey and can help to accelerate a student's progress toward completion. Complete Florida, established in 2013 and defunded in 2019, leveraged a discussion to help institutions and students proactively consider how PLA can be used to leverage prior education, knowledge, skills, and abilities for earning college credit.

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INTRODUCTION

There are strong calls to improve the number of earned post-secondary credentials at national and state levels to meet the challenges of a complex world and changing workforce. Goal 2025, a strategic goal of the Lumina Foundation (2009, 2013), focuses attention on the workforce of 2025 needing some type of high-quality post-secondary credential to be able to meet workplace challenges. In 2019, the Florida legislature passed House Bill 7071, which established the SAIL to 60 attainment goal of 60% of adults having a postsecondary credential by 2030 (FCAN, 2019). Prior learning assessment (PLA) and Competency-Based Education (CBE) have been offered as solutions to support student progress to degree, especially for the adult, nontraditional student (Tate & Klein-Collins, 2015).

Learning that occurs outside of the classroom can be used to accelerate the acquisition of credit, help the student reach graduation requirements and reduce student costs; there are multiple ways of implementing such initiatives. PLA and CBE validate “real” world learning with an underlying philosophy that students can demonstrate competence through a high-fidelity assessment as a measure of learning. This assessment is then used to create an equivalency to number of credit hours based on either time (clock hours) or performance (points through class assessments) and is especially useful for supporting nontraditional students in meeting their academic goals (Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017). The relationship between PLA and CBE is complementary and both strategies play a part in accelerating to completion and reducing costs.

In 2013, the Florida Legislature established the Complete Florida Degree Program (FS1006.735) for supporting Florida’s adult learners in the completion of associate or baccalaureate degrees that were aligned to high-wage, high-skill workforce needs, with priority given to veterans and active duty members of the U.S. Armed Forces. Florida College System institutions, State University System institutions, and private postsecondary institutions (Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida [ICUF]) collaborated to facilitate adult student access to and completion of post-secondary certificates or degrees. As part of the broad initiative, competency-based instructional and evaluation tools that assess prior performance, experience, and education for the awarding of college credit became part of the initiative framework, involving both institutions and students. The Complete Florida initiative (Appendix A) provided the opportunity to actively engage in a statewide discussion about how nontraditional students could be served through the use of prior learning assessment. Although funding for the Complete Florida Initiative was cut in the 2020 Florida Legislative Session, much was learned during the time of experimentation and innovation toward new models and approaches to reduce the skills gap, while at the same time serving Florida’s 2.2 million adult degree completer population.

PLA and CBE

Prior learning assessment is defined as the “process of evaluating a student’s prior workplace learning and other experiential learning for academic credit” (Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017, p. 1). The process is individualized, student-focused and specifically relates to the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) that a student brings to the academic environment. In CBE, students demonstrate their mastery of subjects through assessment and, naturally, use their previously developed KSA to reduce the amount of time to complete a course (Tate & Klein-Collins, 2015).

Tate and Klein-Collins (2015) identify three commonalities between PLA and CBE that provide a framework for the investigation of the two strategies. Those commonalities are shared philosophy, a

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