

USING PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLA) TO ADVANCE INDIVIDUALS AND MEET EMPLOYER NEEDS ON MASSACHUSETTS' NORTH SHORE

The need for higher education and a well-trained workforce has never been more apparent than in these challenging days of the coronavirus pandemic. Unemployment is rampant, employers desperately seek staff with industry specific credentials, and people are realizing they are underemployed or need to change careers.

On the North Shore of Massachusetts, a collection of colleges, universities, workforce investment boards and community-based organizations have joined together to create the Northeast Regional Prior Learning Assessment Consortium (NERPLAC). NERPLAC promotes and increases the use of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) as a strategy to boost college completion, strengthen professional skills for higher paying jobs in regional growth industries, and engender engagement in lifelong learning.

PLA is used to determine if an individual already knows the information that would be taught in a college course. If they do, they are awarded the credit without having to register, take or pay for the entire course, making the prospect of receiving a degree much less daunting. PLA can be awarded through multiple modalities. From passing an exam focused on a specific topic, to documenting one's learning through an essay, or by submitting a portfolio, each college and university in the Consortium has pathways for students to earn credit. NERPLAC's unique model identifies a clear path for residents to use work and life experience to earn college or university credit for a nominal cost, thus reducing the number of courses they may have to take in a degree or certificate program. Research from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) shows that students who leverage Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) are two and one-half times more likely to complete a college degree, regardless of race, income, age or the type of institution in which the learner enrolls.

The consortium is made possible through funding from the Essex County Community Foundation and is being led by North Shore Community College, which has a 40-plus year history of PLA leadership success. Participating institutions of higher education include Endicott College, Gordon College, Middlesex Community College, Northern Essex Community College, Salem State University, the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, and Merrimack College. Partners promoting PLA and engaging employers include the North Shore Workforce Investment Board (WIB) & MAHire Career Center (CC), Merrimack Valley WIB/Valley Works CC and Greater Lowell WIB/CC. Employers and community-based organization partners include Behavioral Concepts (BCI), Wellspring, Inc., LEO, Inc., and Action, Inc.

Within this group, the colleges and universities collaborate to identify the existing PLA programs and conduct research to track student progress and successes. From associate to doctoral degrees, advanced programs are lifting up smaller programs, with all of them providing greater opportunities for people in the region.

Accessibility

There are plenty of good reasons why a PLA strategy is timely now. Credit for prior learning and prior learning assessment began in the 1940s when the American Council on Education created services to assist colleges in granting credit to veterans for skills they learned and knowledge they gained during their military service. Yet it has rarely been implemented in a geographical consortium program that includes such diverse partners. Now, with the cost of higher education increasing, causing gaps in accessibility and

equity, forcing many Essex and Middlesex county residents out of the higher education marketplace, new strategies are needed. The Consortium is striving to: increase economic opportunity for a large segment of the population; make a strong regional impact; and address the credentials needed to reduce the educational disparities and income inequality faced by certain populations in Essex County and the region.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, the state has more than 600,000 working-age adults with some college credit but no degree, many of whom are low wage earners. As a knowledge-based economy, Massachusetts employers increasingly require a minimum of a college-level degree to both enter and progress in most career pathways. Regionally, 90,000 adult residents have some college but no degree, including incumbent and underprepared workers and underserved populations (U.S. Census American Fact Finder 2017). Customer data from the North Shore Career Center shows that a high percentage of job seekers including older adults, veterans, and the underemployed have some college, but no degree.

Increasing access to and use of PLA will provide underrepresented populations a means of accumulating college credit based on prior knowledge, skills and abilities gained outside of the classroom to advance in their careers and increase earnings, and will help close the significant wage gap between workers with a college degree versus those without.

Benefits of PLA

Extensive research documents the benefits of PLA participation. For example, data collected by CAEL shows that students who receive PLA credits have higher completion rates than those without PLA credits (58% and 27%, respectively). Among Hispanic and Black, non-Hispanic populations, the difference in completion rates between PLA participants and non-PLA participants is significantly higher (Hispanic 47% and 6%, respectively, and Black, non-Hispanic 40% and 17%, respectively). For community colleges, research indicates that students who earned PLA credits complete more credits than those who do not (53.7% versus 43.8%, respectively). Regional demographics are shifting with a significant increase in people of color, especially Latino/Hispanic, and speakers of other languages residing in the region. These nontraditional students often face barriers to college entry and completion due to external commitments such as work/life demands, scheduling conflicts, financial and other issues.

Closing Achievement Gaps

Increased access to and use of PLA can help close the equity gap for Latino and other underserved students. A 2014 Policy Brief by CAEL and Excelencia in Education notes that Latinos, on average, have lower educational attainment and degree completion rates than other underserved populations and can benefit from PLA. The report found that Latino students were six times more likely to earn PLA credit for foreign language than non-Latino students were, and about 50% of those who earned PLA credit for foreign language earned additional PLA credit in a second or third area of study. Furthermore, as previously referenced, Latino students with PLA credit earned degrees at a rate nearly eight times higher than Latinos without PLA credit. The 2010 CAEL study found that graduation rates for PLA students for Black, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian and other populations were higher than non-PLA students' rates.

Boosting College Completion

Providing students with the opportunity to secure college credit for prior learning through military service, industry credentials, nationally normed exams, departmental challenge exams, and other options will encourage non-completers to return to college and existing students, including underrepresented groups, to persist and complete college. A 2010 study by CAEL found that adult students with credit earned through PLA are 2.5 times more likely to complete a degree compared to adult students without such credit. According to a 2017 study commissioned by MA DHE, "Both Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) and Competency-Based Education (CBE) programs appear to boost interest in pursuing college coursework among adults who live in the Commonwealth."

Affordability

CAEL studies show that students save significant tuition dollars through PLA. North Shore Community College estimates that NSCC students who access PLA and earn an average of eight credits save an average of \$1,600. However, there is significant variety

across institutions in terms of fees charged for assessments. The capacity building and business plan components of NERPLAC will capture the fee structures and program costs of consortium members in an effort to streamline and develop consistency so target populations have access to affordable PLA options.

Work to Date

Through the leadership of NSCC's Center for Alternative Studies, educational partner PLA capacity has been assessed, with plans made for building the capacity of each. A marketing plan was created and implemented to educate the North Shore region about PLA and to entice those who can benefit from it to learn more and take advantage of CPL. Trainings have been conducted with workforce centers to educate front line staff on PLA and give them the tools needed to make referrals to appropriate higher education institutions. Grants have been distributed to partners to help them enhance their PLA capacity. A third year of funding for the project is currently being considered which will focus efforts on employer education and outreach. Thanks to the marketing and advertising, responses are flowing in and are being tracked so that the success of the efforts can be monitored and outcomes assessed.

In Conclusion

The primary target population for this project includes underserved adult learners between the ages of 23-44 who have not completed a college degree.

The overarching goal of this initiative is for NERPLAC to become a model for replication within the Commonwealth and across the nation.

The next steps in the project will involve employer engagement and inclusion for employee education, and continued program growth including adding new partners.

Additional PLA resources/articles:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/07/prior-learning-assessment-catches-quietly>;
<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Adult-Learners-Guide-to-PLA.aspx>

