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ABSTRACT

This publication contains two papers from the 1993 National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning. "In Support of Prior Learning Assessment" (Rebecca C. Hull) highlights arguments in opposition to the acceptance of prior learning assessment and the responses that might best counter these arguments. "Outcomes Assessment of Prior Learning Assessment Programs" (Debra A. Dagavarian, William M. Walters) identifies program objectives useful to all prior learning assessment programs and lists five generic, desired outcomes for each of three constituencies. Desired outcomes for students are as follows: to give them the forum to investigate the structure of college-level learning; to engage them in setting educational objectives; to enable them to gain a new sense of self; to ensure prior learning assessment certifies readiness to move on to further education; and to ensure prior learning assessment expedites attainment of a college degree. Desired outcomes for faculty are as follows: to enhance faculty's typical mode of interaction with a subject area; to broaden faculty's perspective on the subject matter; to encourage cross disciplinary awareness; to heighten faculty's sense of professional self-esteem; and to provide faculty with the opportunity for a qualitatively different type of communication with students. Desired outcomes for the institution are as follows: to enhance institutional image as caring and committed; to demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to adult students; to create a culture of self-examination; to attract greater numbers and diversity of adult students; and to attract a greater diversity of faculty.

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# IN SUPPORT OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND OUTCOMES

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# ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS

*The Proceedings of the*

*National Institute*

*on the Assessment of*

*Experiential Learning, 1993*

June 12-15, 1993

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*Proceedings edited by  
Debra A. Dagavarian*

# IN SUPPORT OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

*Rebecca C. Hull*

Over the past two decades, prior learning assessment programs on college campuses have met with a great deal of opposition. Stalwarts of traditional, classroom-based learning have tried to roadblock the efforts of PLA advocates to create such programs. What are some of the arguments in opposition to the acceptance of prior learning assessment? More importantly, what responses might best counter these arguments?

This was the topic for the second annual electronic conference, held in conjunction with the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning, June 12-15, 1993. Most participants were familiar with opposition to the acceptance of prior learning assessment. Views of PLA and approaches to countering arguments against its acceptance varied greatly, allowing for an interesting collection of responses from individuals with widely varied backgrounds in the field.

Responses were based on arguments with which participants had dealt, both within their individual institutions, and in the academic community as a whole. It is generally agreed that PLA can be more rigorous than classroom learning. Students who feel that constructing a portfolio is too difficult should opt for a different means of earning credit.

Prior learning assessment is one component of a system which offers many alternatives to adult learners. In the progressive institution, each student is provided with information about options for methods of earning credit, and advisors help the student select the combination which is most appropriate for his or her needs. Many students select a variety of methods for earning credit, depending on their capacity for learning and prior knowledge of each particular subject area.

Critics of prior learning assessment question how learning can take place without classroom interaction and teacher input. Skeptics should be given the opportunity to read portfolios, and to meet and talk with students before rendering judgment about the validity of PLA. Faculty who become engaged in evaluating portfolios usually are favorably impressed with the quality of learning represented in each portfolio. Also, PLA is a good drawing card for an institution, providing an initial attraction for students who might otherwise choose a different college.

Reliability and validity studies should be conducted periodically, both to support the institution's claim that prior learning assessment is an appropriate method of earning credit and to provide empirical data, reinforcing PLA as an academically

sound means of demonstrating knowledge. It is important to hold regular training and development sessions for faculty who evaluate portfolios. These sessions provide a supportive atmosphere in which policies, difficulties, successes and new approaches can be discussed.

Prior learning assessment, when balanced with adequate safeguards and attention to students' individual needs and abilities, is an extremely effective tool to help students reach

their career goals. Demonstration of learning through PLA can be compared favorably to learning which takes place in the classroom. As criticisms of the PLA process are met, challenged and countered, more and more faculty, students and administrators are realizing the tremendous value such programs can bring, both to the institution and to the individual student as he or she journeys toward educational fulfillment.

# OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS

*Debra A. Dagavarian*  
*William M. Walters*

Seeking excellence in higher education programs for adults gives administrators good cause to employ an ongoing system of outcomes assessment. A key step of the multi-faceted process is the identification of program goals and objectives. This paper begins to consider not only process goals, but desired outcomes for three discrete constituencies: students, faculty and the institution.

Initially, we identified several program objectives which can be useful to virtually all prior learning assessment programs. Next, we listed five generic, desired outcomes for each of the three constituencies. These objectives are, by no means, exhaustive, but are intended to provide a framework for further elaboration by individual institutions.

## **Process Goals and Objectives**

Prior to determining a program's desired outcomes for each of its parties, the administrator should examine the program's goals in terms of the institutional mission. Does the institutional mission stress community service? Does it support and foster research? What type of student is the institution committed to recruiting and serving? Can adult students be served adequately? Is the institutional mission based on religious or philosophical imperative? Is the institution exclusive or does it

have open admissions? To what extent is quality emphasized in the mission? Diversity? What are the most important characteristics of an institution as derived from its mission? Questions such as these must be considered before elaborating program goals.

Process objectives are connected to desired outcomes for the three constituencies of students, faculty and the institution. (See Urban Whitaker's *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures*, 1989, The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.) The five goals and objectives stated below are basic and general enough to be applicable to most programs in prior learning assessment.

It is necessary that process goals be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis, and that this evaluation be integrated into the larger outcomes assessment plan. Measurement of these general objectives is accomplished simply: for example, the evaluation process could be reviewed in light of the stated objectives; students can be surveyed at different points in the process; and faculty and staff can be queried.

The first objective is that the program have well-defined and easily understood procedures which can be conveyed clearly by staff. The second objective, derived from the first, is

that all print materials be clear and easily understood. As discussed in Whitaker's book, it is essential that information about the program be disclosed readily, truthfully and openly. Students should always have access to information from both oral and written sources. Staff need to be trained so that they are helpful, knowledgeable, supportive and courteous. In like manner, print materials need to be well-written, accurate and informative. This extends even to advertising about the program; ethical issues arise when false information is promoted.

Corollary to the objectives above is the third process goal: that feedback from assessors, if shared with the student, be reasonably extensive, appropriate and useful. Prior learning assessment programs differ in how the assessment itself appears. Some institutions provide a narrative description of the student's assessed knowledge. Others may offer a questionnaire which is filled out by the assessor, and still others may provide a check-off sheet. Some programs do not disclose the contents of the assessment, but those that do should design a way to give their students the most descriptive feedback possible within the constraints of the particular program. If the quality of demonstrated learning is not adequate, students need to know where they fell short. If the quality of the demonstrated knowledge is strong, students will appreciate the positive commentary.

The fourth process objective is that the requirements be neither too difficult nor without challenge. Prior learning assessment programs that are

deemed too "easy" are not perceived as being valid by others in the academic community. It is important to reiterate that prior learning assessment is valid only when credit is granted for demonstrated **knowledge**, not merely for experience. Therefore, whatever procedures are used to assess knowledge, it is critical that evidence of that knowledge exists. (If the method used to assess knowledge is an oral interview, or oral examination, there must be a complete elaboration of the parameters of that knowledge. In some institutions, this is written by the assessor, in others, by the student as an adjunct to the oral assessment.)

The fifth process objective is that the prior learning assessment be appropriately priced. Consistency is most important; any fees for such assessments should be consistent with the general approach to other institutional fees and tuition. This objective can be measured simply by reviewing the current fee structure, comparing the structure to that of other institutions and surveying students.

### **Desired Outcomes for Students**

The first objective and desired outcome of a prior learning assessment program for its students is to give students the forum to investigate the structure of college-level learning. The portfolio process involves many skills and the ability to place learning in the context of academic structures. Students acquire insight into the educational system and knowledge of creditable college-level learning.

Related to that is the desired outcome of engaging students in setting educational objectives. Prior

learning assessment is an invaluable learning experience in itself; it enables the student to look at learning through work or community experience to reflect on the role of learning in life. Students discover how further education will help them develop the necessary skills and knowledge for career and educational advancement.

A third outcome, then, is to enable students to gain a new sense of self. In the course of developing the portfolio, the student discovers what he/she knows about the chosen area of learning and usually acquires a new sense of accomplishment in this field. The granting of credit equates students' informally-acquired learning to that which is acquired in the classroom, so students view themselves not merely as a sort of "collegiate tabula rasa," but as knowledgeable and well on the way to achieving the degree.

The fourth desired outcome is that prior learning assessment should, through the use of a valuable assessment tool, certify the student's readiness to move on to further education. It is expected that the student will demonstrate excellent analytical, critical thinking and communication skills in producing the final product. The portfolio provides many indications of cognitive and affective growth, with documentation from supervisors, peers, trainers, faculty and staff. It is a current acknowledgment of past success, and tangible evidence of the student's ability to achieve continued success in academia.

These four desired outcomes might, perhaps, be measured qualitatively through the academic advise-

ment process. The appropriately-trained academic advisor or mentor, through directed discussions with the student, can determine the extent to which the student has achieved the level of critical thinking intrinsic to and required for the above outcomes.

The final desired outcome for students, and often the most important from the student's perspective, is that prior learning assessment expedites the student's attainment of a college degree. Most adults enter higher education with college level knowledge, and if such knowledge is appropriate to the chosen degree program, students can come that much closer to completion of the program; prior learning assessment affords them that opportunity. This goal is easily measured by a simple, structured review of student files.

### **Desired Outcomes for Faculty**

Benefits of prior learning assessment for the faculty who conduct assessments have been rarely identified. Yet the process can prove enriching for them, much as it does for students. In terms of faculty's relationship with students, and their subject matter, several desired outcomes can be noted.

One such objective of prior learning assessment is to enhance faculty's typical mode of interaction with a subject area. Instruction involves the imparting of knowledge about a particular content area, and the development of skills to further extract such knowledge from varied sources. Prior learning assessment runs somewhat counter to the pedagogical process, in that the parameters of the knowledge unit (in terms



of content, applications, theory and process) are initially defined by the student, and then evaluated (or, in a sense, sanctioned) by faculty. The exercise of assessing a student's prior learning, then, necessarily disposes faculty to interact differently with the subject matter.

So, too, follows the desired outcome of broadening faculty's perspective on the subject matter. Often, the student's prior knowledge is predominantly practical rather than theoretical, and might, therefore, offer a fresh, more current perspective on the topic. Conducting such assessments has the potential for providing faculty with insights ordinarily unavailable to the classroom instructor or scholar.

A third objective for faculty is to encourage cross disciplinary awareness. Depending on the process of prior learning assessment utilized, the faculty might be involved in prior learning assessment advising. In advising the student to identify experiences and to extract college level knowledge from those experiences, faculty are encouraged to look beyond their own disciplines.

Another desired outcome is to heighten faculty's sense of professional self-esteem within an institution. Faculty who possess a sensitivity to the needs of adult learners, and who are able to apply the appropriate criteria to the assessment of experiential learning, are highly valued in progressive institutions. They should know that their academic expertise is essential to the task of assessment. Faculty are valued not only for their content area expertise, but also for their expertise in the assessment of

experiential learning.

Finally, prior learning assessment should provide faculty with the opportunity for a qualitatively different type of communication with students. In assessing experiential learning, faculty should be encouraged to communicate (whether in person, over the telephone, through the mail or electronically) with the student, particularly if they believe it might help either the assessment or the student. To an extent, the student becomes closer to being the faculty member's intellectual peer in the subject area. Faculty have even expressed feeling "honored" to be privy to the essays and materials students prepare for assessment.

Measuring each of these outcomes may best be accomplished using self-reported data. To measure the enhancement of faculty's typical mode of interaction with their subject area, for example, one might ask how the assessment of prior learning allows the professor to view his/her academic field in a substantively different way, and whether or not that exercise enhances his/her interaction with the subject area. In assessing the remaining outcomes, the researcher might ask the extent to which prior learning assessment has given the professor a broadened perspective on the applications of knowledge in the field; whether the professor has become more conversant in other disciplines through assessing prior learning or advising students preparing for prior learning assessment; whether the professor feels his/her value to the institution has been enhanced through prior learning assessment; the extent to which the

quality of communication between faculty and student is different from that which takes place in the classroom; and, finally, whether the difference has affected the way in which faculty view students or experiential learning itself.

### **Desired Outcomes for the Institution**

Outcomes for the institution can be connected to its public image, its ability to recruit students or its internal commitments. One outcome of prior learning assessment programs is to enhance institutional image as caring and committed. Acknowledging that adults may have college-level experiential learning shows an institution's recognition of the value of knowledge acquired through practical, everyday life. Granting college credit for this knowledge enhances an institution's image with the adults who possess this learning, and with the public in general. To measure this, the researcher might sample students and the community. Surveying the community, to be sure, may also serve to attract adult students who otherwise would not have considered attending college.

Prior learning assessment can also demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness to adult students. Adults seeking college degrees wish to be given the credit they feel they are due. Also, their daily lives present more barriers to achieving a degree than are typical for "traditional-age" students. The opportunity to earn credit for prior learning shows an institution's flexibility and responsiveness to the special needs of adult students. This can be measured by

sampling adult students. To what extent does the institution meet their needs?

Another desired outcome may be to create a culture of self-examination within the institution. Experiential learning assessment provides an institution with qualitative data on its adult students through exploration of their areas of practical knowledge. In addition, the portfolio method can be applied to the assessment of numerous other areas in institutional research, and fosters a new approach to outcomes assessment. One method of determining this would be to study the nature and quality of institutional research of the present as compared to earlier years.

A fourth desired outcome of prior learning assessment for the institution would be to attract greater numbers and diversity of adult students. The promise of the opportunity to earn credit for experiential knowledge will attract more adult students, potentially, from a broader geographic area. They will be just that much closer to attaining their goal of a degree. They may, in fact, choose the institution which grants them credit for their experiential learning over one which is more conveniently located and does not offer this option. This can be measured quite simply by conducting an analysis of registration data.

Lastly, the institution would want to attract a greater diversity of faculty. Experiential learning assessment draws faculty from varied institutional, philosophical and experiential backgrounds. Also, the experience of conducting this type of assessment provides faculty with a

qualitatively different academic experience. To measure this outcome, self-reported data can be used to

characterize the professional experience of faculty, as well as to conduct a demographic analysis of the faculty.

## FACULTY OF THE INSTITUTE

### **Debra A. Dagavarian, Director of the Institute**

Debra A. Dagavarian is the director of Testing and Assessment at Thomas Edison State College. Throughout her years in higher education as an administrator, faculty member and consultant, she has developed a strong commitment to serving the adult learner. Formerly assistant dean for Assessment at Empire State College, she also has been director of Evening Programs and director of Academic Advising at Mercy College. She holds a Doctorate in Education from Rutgers University. Dr. Dagavarian's publications range from articles on outcomes assessment to books on children's baseball fiction.

### **Harriet W. Cabell**

Harriet W. Cabell is the associate dean and director of New College/External Degree Program, the University of Alabama. Speaker, trainer, educator and consultant, she has conducted programs nationwide and abroad for over 60 colleges, universities and professional organizations. Her training sessions focus on relevant, practical skills and techniques in a variety of areas including the philosophy and implication of prior learning programs, curricular issues and the management of adult learning programs. Dr. Cabell is certified as an Educational Specialist and holds a doctoral degree from the University of Alabama.

### **Ross Ann Craig**

Ross Ann Craig is the vice president for Student Development at Delaware County Community College. She has developed and conducted a variety of workshops in adult development and assertiveness, and is a certified trainer in the Student Potential Program of CAEL. She has trained assessors working with students in the U.S. and Great Britain, and presented papers to a number of national and local

professional groups, including the American Personnel and Guidance Association. Dr. Craig holds a master's degree in Education from the University of Florida, a doctoral degree in Education from Nova University and is a licensed psychologist.

### **Jerry Ice**

Jerry Ice assumed the position of vice president and provost at Thomas Edison State College in July 1983. As chief academic officer of the College, he is responsible for the development and review of the College's eleven degree programs and the program advising services provided to degree candidates. In addition, Dr. Ice's responsibility covers the offices of Academic Programs, Testing and Assessment, Test Development and Research, Registrar, Nursing and the Center for Directed Independent Adult Learning (DIAL). He received his doctoral degree in Administration and Supervision from Fordham University. Many of his publications have focused upon the educational needs and goals of adults returning to college.

### **Elizabeth Kasl**

Elizabeth Kasl is a member of the faculty of adult and continuing education at Columbia University's Teachers College, where she teaches learning theory in the Adult Education Guided Independent Study (AEGIS) program. This nontraditional doctoral program for experienced practitioners uses students' professional experience as a laboratory for learning, and includes a curricular unit in which students examine their life experiences for the purpose of receiving academic credit. Dr. Kasl also is a member of the Group for Collaborative Inquiry, an inquiry group with particular interests in the learning processes that enable people to transform their experiences into meaningful personal knowledge.

### **Morris T. Keeton**

Morris T. Keeton is the director of the Institute for Research on Adults in Higher Education (IRAHE), University of Maryland, University College. Formerly chief executive officer of CAEL from 1977 through 1989, he served as chair of the steering committee of the original CAEL when it was a project of the Educational Testing Service in the mid-1970s. Dr. Keeton was a member of the faculty and administrative staff of Antioch College from 1947-1977, where he served as professor of Philosophy, college pastor, dean of the Faculty, academic vice president, provost and vice president and acting president. He holds a B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy from Southern Methodist University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy from Harvard University. Dr. Keeton also has been listed in *Who's Who in America* since 1969.

### **Amy K. Lezberg**

Amy K. Lezberg is associate director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education at the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Formerly professor of English and associate dean for Academic Affairs at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences, where her responsibilities included faculty and curriculum evaluation and development, she selects and trains evaluation teams for New England's 200 institutions of higher learning. Dr. Lezberg, who holds a Ph.D. in English from Boston University, has presented and published papers on professional ethics, interpersonal/intercultural communication and ethnic literature.

### **Alan Mandell**

Alan Mandell is associate dean and director of the Metropolitan Center of Empire State College, State University of New York. For nearly 20 years, he has served as a faculty member working with adults in the social sciences and history and as an administrator in the Empire State College

program. Dr. Mandell is co-author, along with Elana Michelson, of the CAEL publication, *Portfolio Development and Adult Learning: Purposes, Contexts and Strategies*, and also edits *Kairos: A Journal of Social-Cultural Criticism*. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the City University of New York.

### **Paula Hooper Mayhew**

Paula Hooper Mayhew, vice president for Academic Affairs and dean of Faculty at Marymount Manhattan College, was associate director of Middle States Association/Commission on Higher Education until August 1992. A former academic dean at Empire State College, she served the Commission as the assessment and evaluation specialist for four-year colleges and research universities. A graduate of Barnard College, Columbia University, she received her Ph.D. in English Literature from Princeton University, where she completed a dissertation on narrative theory. Dr. Mayhew is co-author of a study on the women's college in the 1970s and has published articles in the field of women's studies administration and women's literature.

### **Barry G. Sheckley**

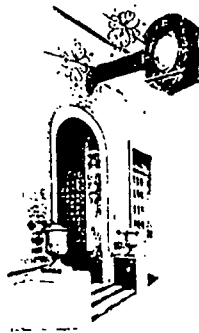
Barry G. Sheckley is associate professor at the University of Connecticut in the Adult and Vocational Education program. He serves as CAEL Research Associate, has directed four CAEL Institutes and was CAEL's regional manager in New England for 10 years. Dr. Sheckley's recent research has been in the areas of adult and experiential learning, and workplace learning. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut and conducted dissertation research on adult learning projects. Dr. Sheckley describes himself as an "aging, long-distance marathon runner."

**William M. Walters**

Bill Walters is an independent consultant who has worked with educational institutions, government agencies, community organizations and various business and industrial clients, including Fortune 500 and Corporate 1000 companies. He also has over 20 years experience as a full-time administrator and faculty member in higher education, most recently as director of Learning and Assessment Services at Cambridge College. He has demonstrated his commitment to adult learning through his own teaching as well as in designing faculty development programs. Dr. Walters has publications in social psychology and adult learning and a doctorate in Applied Behavior Analysis/Technology of Teaching from Georgia State University.

**Urban Whitaker**

Urban Whitaker has long been involved in experiential learning and career development. He has served as practitioner, teacher and administrator in cooperative education and other experiential learning programs at San Francisco State University since 1969. He has developed materials in a number of media (print, tape, slide, software) on the learning and assessment of career-transferable skills, and is the author of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures*. Dr. Whitaker, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Washington, has consulted for numerous colleges and has performed multiple roles for CAEL: author, member of the Board of Directors, Regional Manager, presenter.



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