Availability, Use and Value of Prior Learning Assessment within Community Colleges

By Cathy Brigham, Ph.D. and Rebecca Klein-Collins

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CAEL
The Council For Adult & Experiential Learning

Lumina Foundation for Education is an Indianapolis-based private foundation dedicated to expanding access to and success in education beyond high school.

For more information about this study, or for more information about PLA, contact CAEL at: ***cael@cael.org***.

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The national imperative to improve postsecondary degree completion has led to various innovations within colleges and universities to improve student retention and academic success, particularly of non-traditional learners. One innovation that has been in use since the 1970s, but is often under-promoted and under-utilized within institutions, is Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA.

What is PLA?

PLA is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the **college-level knowledge and skills** an individual has gained outside of the classroom, including from employment (e.g., on-the-job training, employer-developed training), military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service.

Many students with work experience, for example, have technical and work-related competencies that have been acquired in the workplace. Colleges that recognize that prior learning and offer ways to evaluate it for college credit can help those students progress more quickly towards a postsecondary degree or credential, saving the student (and in many cases, the employer) both time and tuition dollars.

There are many different methods of offering PLA, including standardized exams (e.g., Advanced Placement-AP, College Level Examination Program-CLEP), challenge exams, evaluation of non-collegiate instruction, and portfolio assessments. These methods, when carried out according to nationally-established standards, can establish whether the student has college-level skills and competencies that are worthy of college credit.

Benefits of PLA

In addition to PLA saving students time and money, student advisors have told CAEL that earning PLA credit can motivate students to persist in their studies and complete their degrees. It can be quite powerful for students to hear that not only can they learn at the college level, but they *already* have learned at the college level. A recent CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning) study of more than 62,000 adult students at 48 institutions nationwide supports this claim with results showing that **students with PLA credit had higher graduation rates, better persistence and lower time to degree, compared to students without PLA credit**. These results were true at institutions of all sizes, controls and levels, and for students of different age, gender, race/ethnicity, and academic ability.

Study of PLA in Community Colleges

In 2010, CAEL conducted an exploratory study of PLA in community colleges. Subjects included community colleges involved in postsecondary success initiatives such as the Applied Baccalaureate program and the Achieving the Dream initiative, as well as community colleges in states with robust career pathways initiatives. CAEL supplemented the survey responses with phone interviews with 15 institutional representatives. The purpose of this study was to learn more about the availability and use of PLA within these colleges.

This research was not defined by a specific geographic location. The online survey was distributed nationally in Spring 2010 and was completed by 88 respondents, 81 of whom identified themselves by institutional name, and for whom we could therefore discern a physical location. The respondents for whom we have names represent 20 different states: Arkansas, Arizona, Connecticut, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Vermont, and Washington.

Summary of Findings

From 88 individual respondents, CAEL learned the following about PLA in community colleges:

- **Community colleges are largely familiar with PLA and most of the respondents said that their institution offers it already. In particular:**
  - 64% offer portfolio assessments
  - 90% accept CLEP exam credit
  - 93% accept AP exam credit
  - 85% offer challenge exams
  - 82% use the ACE Guides to award credit to students with military transcripts

- **Although PLA is an official offering in most respondents' institutions, it is not used by large numbers of students at these institutions.**

  When asked about the low PLA usage rates, respondents explained that PLA offerings within the two-year institutions were often inconsistent across colleges and departments, were officially available for students to use but not promoted or advocated by advisors or faculty, or were simply not broad enough in scope or availability to meet the needs of students.

- **Community colleges see a lot of potential demand for PLA yet do not have plans to expand their offerings.**
  - **Most respondents serve students who come to the college with training they received on the job:** Over half of the respondents (52%) know that they have student populations who come to their institutions with technical skills and knowledge learned on the job that could be assessed for college-level credit. An additional 39% reported that they probably have students in this category. A follow-up question asked respondents to assess the utility of PLA as a way to evaluate this learning for credit towards applied technical degrees at the institution; slightly under half of the respondents indicated that there would be opportunity at their campuses for the use of PLA in this area.

- **Most respondents see the potential for greater PLA usage in the future:** 68% think the institution should be expanding PLA options in the future, and 72% think they will be seeing increased demand for PLA in the future. Respondents in both the online survey and the follow-up phone interviews selected a few specific areas in which PLA may benefit individuals advancing through a career pathway. One respondent indicated that their college has an apprenticeship program that could benefit from PLA. Similarly, another respondent indicated that PLA was of greater use in their technical fields than in their liberal arts or general studies areas because "assessing a skill is easier than [assessing] theoretical knowledge."

  Follow-up phone interviews with select institutions yielded impressive consistency about which disciplines would benefit the most from an enhanced PLA program at the participating two-year institutions. Near the top of everyone's lists were occupational and public service areas. Also common were the fields of criminal justice, early childhood education, business, and computer science. A common theme was the potential use of PLA to help evaluate the learning acquired by students who were returning to college after completing military training.

- **Most community colleges do not have plans to expand their PLA offerings:** Despite the belief that the college should expand PLA, and despite an anticipated growth in demand for PLA, follow-up interviews with individual respondents suggested that while PLA options should be expanded, most institutions were not currently making plans in that direction.

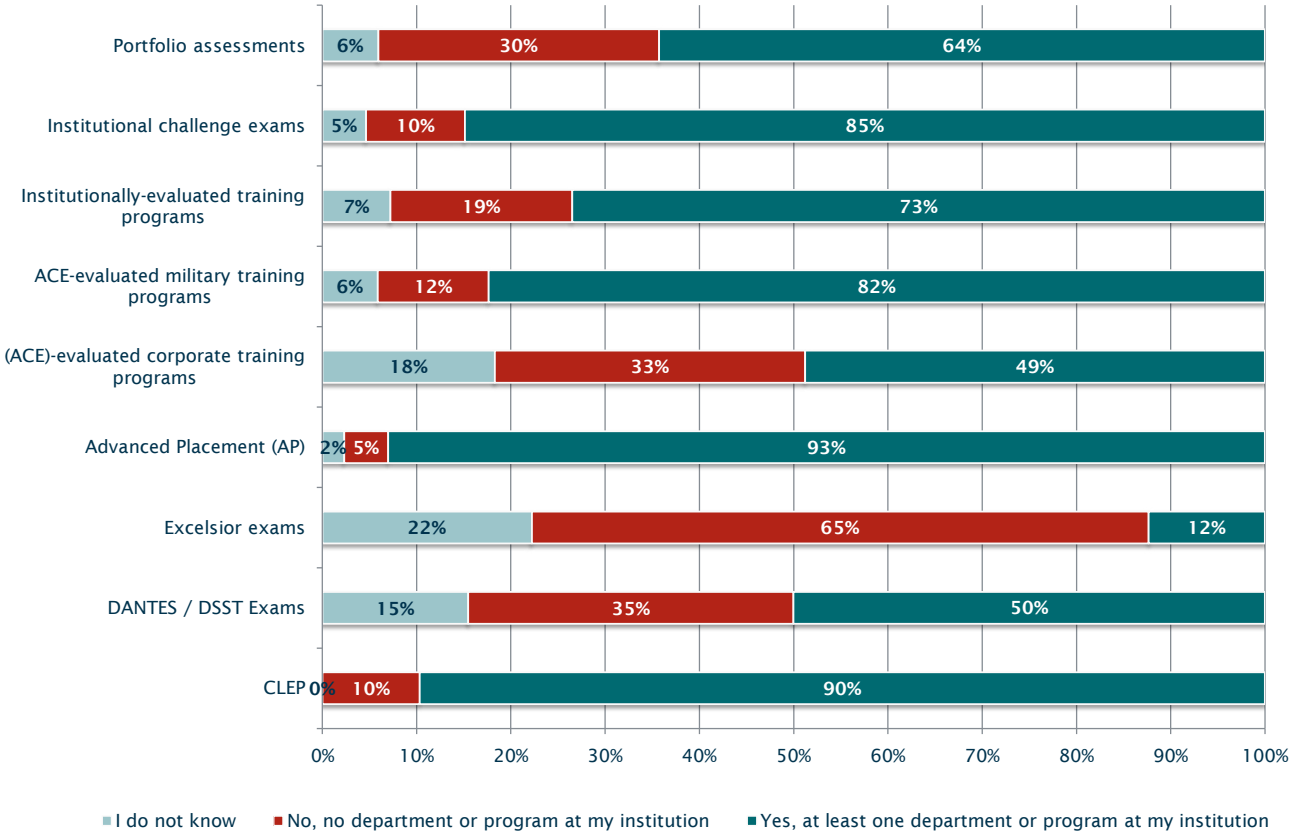
Implications

The findings of this exploratory study of PLA at select community colleges suggest that even when PLA is widely available in these institutions, it may not be used for all populations that could be taking advantage of it. In particular, the many non-traditional students who come to community colleges with prior learning – such as technical skills learned in the workplace – may not be receiving credit for the college-level learning that they already have.

CAEL was not surprised by the overall findings of this research — that community colleges do not use PLA as much as they would like or as much as they could. But the scope of this disparity was surprising to us. Although the actual number of students being served with PLA is very small, over 90% of the community colleges reported that they have students who likely have technical training that could be assessed for college-level credit, and nearly 70% of the respondents suggested that their institutions should expand their PLA options in the future. Yet, follow-up interviews with individual respondents suggested that most institutions were not currently making plans in that direction.

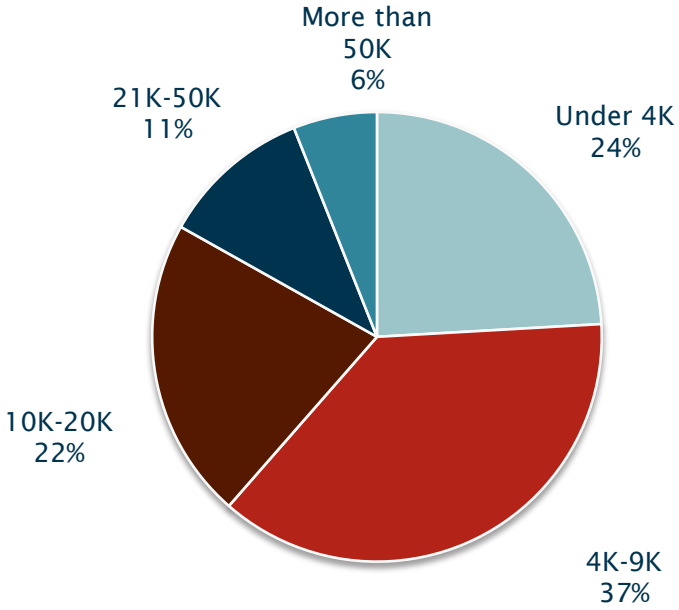
Current Use of PLA

Does your institution offer the opportunity to earn prior learning credit from the following (please indicate an answer for each PLA option):



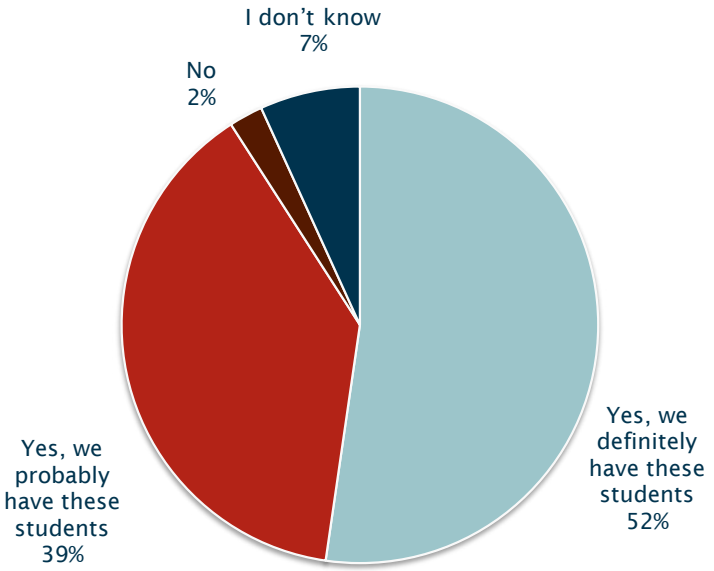
Scale of PLA Program

How many students (or an estimate) attended your institution in 2008-2009?

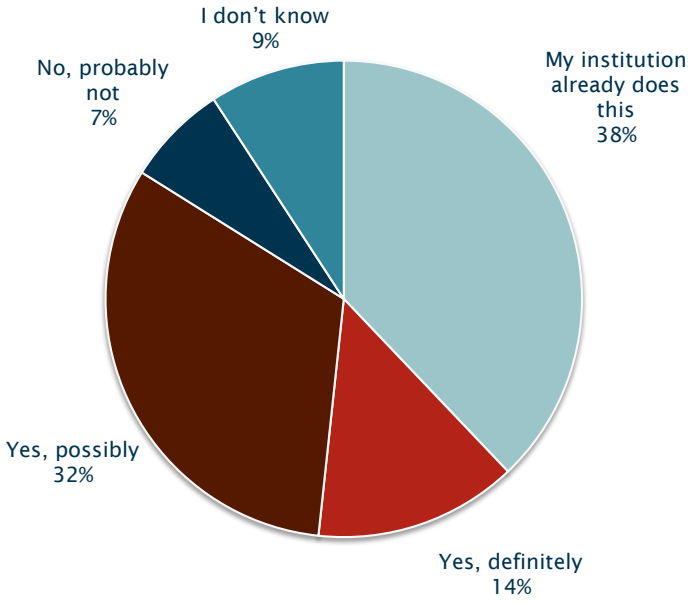


Number of Students Earning PLA Credit in 2008-2009	# of Respondents (Not all respondents answered this question)
None	1
10 or fewer	5
11-25	5
26-60	5
61-100	2
101-500	4
More than 500	4

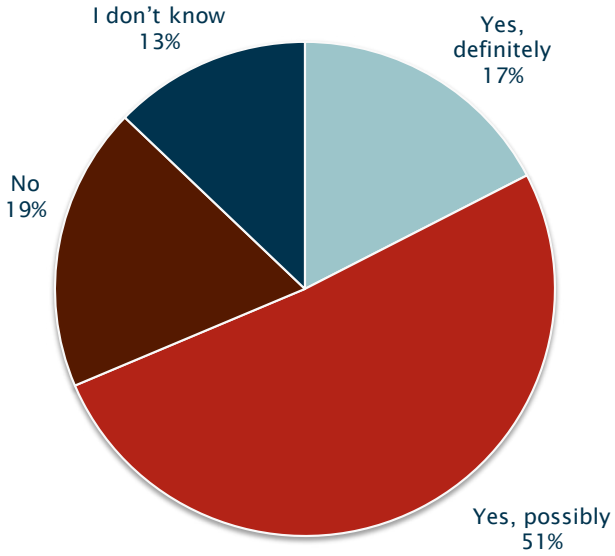
Do you have younger adults (i.e., under age 27) who come to your institution with some technical training that they have learned on the job?



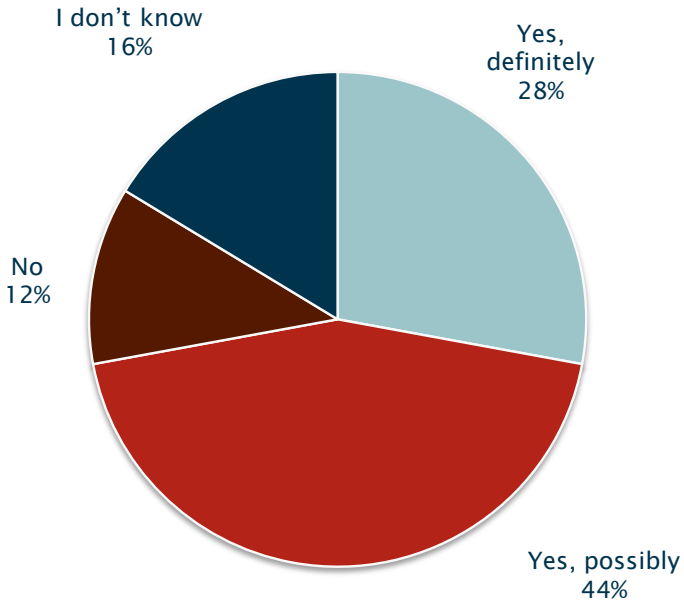
If you could evaluate this prior learning (from technical training gained on the job) and tie it to courses within your applied technical degrees, could there be greater use of PLA for this younger cohort at your institution?



Do you think your institution should be expanding PLA options in the future?



Do you think your institution will be seeing increased demand for PLA options in the future?



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For more information, please contact Becky Klein-Collins at bklein@cael.org.