CAEL

PLA DATA TRACKING

Proposing a Model for Institutional Tracking and Reporting of Credit Earned through Prior Learning Assessment

By Rebecca Klein-Collins

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Proposing a Model for Institutional Tracking and Reporting of Credit

OVERVIEW

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is the evaluation and assessment of learning gained outside a traditional academic environment for college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. The term PLA encompasses a wide spectrum of assessment methods, including, but not limited to, credit by examination, challenge exams, portfolio assessment and evaluation of non-college education and training. As PLA is now more widely accepted, the need to accurately track its use and evaluate its effect on student outcomes is vital. Institutions need guidance about what to track and how, as well as how the institution can benefit from tracking and analyzing PLA data.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) consulted several postsecondary institutions with long histories in PLA, state systems engaged with advancing PLA, the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) to examine various approaches to tracking PLA-related data. This brief presents a proposed approach to PLA data tracking based on these initial conversations. CAEL's goals in developing this brief are to 1) provide guidance to institutions wanting to measure and understand the value of their PLA programs to students, and 2) lay the groundwork for what could become standard data collection/tracking practices for PLA credit with the larger higher education community. These recommendations align closely with data tracking needs for other assessment-driven programs like competency-based education (CBE) programs and so could be integrated with related efforts to redesign information systems.

Following some background information on PLA, this brief provides recommendations for specific PLA-related variables that postsecondary institutions should track in their student information systems (SIS), as well as suggestions for internal reports on PLA.

BACKGROUND

As the proportion of adults seeking a higher education degree continues to increase, many institutions are establishing or expanding PLA offerings as one tool to accelerate and increase degree completion. In addition, several states and state systems have launched initiatives to promote PLA offerings and usage.

What is PLA? And Why Is It Important?

Prior learning is a term educators use to describe learning that a person acquires outside a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, military training or experience, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars, many of which are offered online. Some of this learning is equivalent to college-level learning. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is the process by which an individual's experiential and other extra-institutional learning is assessed and evaluated for the purpose of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.

PLA methods have been used in U.S. colleges and universities for more than forty years. So while PLA itself is not a *new* innovation, it is a tool that is growing in importance as other innovations in higher education have emerged.

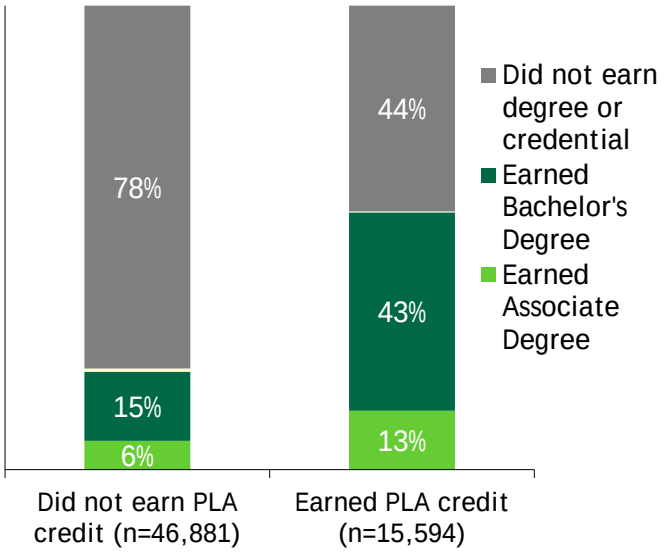
PLA is not "giving away credit" based on a cursory examination of a student's resume. PLA involves evaluation of the learning that a student has and determining the equivalence of that learning to learning outcomes in college coursework. The amount of credit (or other recognition) students can earn for their prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA:

1. **Standardized exams** such as:
    - Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams)
    - College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams)
    - Excelsior College Exams (UExcel)
    - The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams
2. **Individualized assessments.** In this method, students prepare a portfolio of their learning from a variety of experiences and non-credit learning such as online courses. Then, faculty with appropriate subject matter expertise evaluate the student's portfolio to determine a credit award.
3. **College faculty-developed exams**, also called institutional or departmental or "challenge exams," allow students to earn credit by taking final examinations faculty create for courses offered at a given institution.
4. **Evaluated non-college programs**. The National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) conduct evaluations, for a fee, of training that is offered by employers or other non-accredited providers. Many employers also work directly with their local postsecondary institutions to evaluate their companies' training. The result of these evaluations is credit recommendations for anyone successfully completing that training. This category also includes ACE credit recommendations for military training and occupations as part of a contract with the U.S. Department of Defense.

In addition to the above methods, institutions may also offer credit based on performance assessments or a formal review of apprenticeship training, certifications, or licenses.

Studies have found that students who earn PLA credit have higher graduation rates than their peers who do not earn PLA credit. A 2010 Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) study of more than 60,000 students at 48 institutions found that more than half (56%) of students with PLA credit earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21% of non-PLA students did so – at the associate degree level, PLA students completed degrees at twice the rate of students with no PLA credit (Klein-Collins, 2010) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Degree earning for PLA and non-PLA students



This trend held true across institutional size, level, and control, and regardless of student demographic characteristics, GPA, or socio-economic status. The same study found that even among students that did not earn a degree during the seven-year period, students with PLA credit were faring better than those without. Over half of non-graduating PLA students had 80% or more of the credits needed to graduate, while only 22% of non-PLA students had made similar progress.

Other studies have had similar findings. In one study, researchers analyzed data from four community colleges and found that the degree completion rate for students with PLA was more than twice that of students with no PLA credit: 28% compared to 12% (Hayward & Williams, 2015). Also, a study of undergraduates by the Tennessee Board of Regents and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission found that students with any PLA credits had significantly higher retention, GPAs and credit accumulation (Schutz & Gibson, 2012).

Growing Need for PLA Data

As more institutions make the connection between PLA and academic outcomes, and as more institutions start to expand their PLA offerings in response, they are also very interested in understanding student use of PLA, as well as the relationship between PLA credit-earning and educational outcomes at their own institutions. At the same time, a number of states are moving toward performance-based funding, which would require that institutions demonstrate the value of PLA through its relationship to student persistence, degree completion, and time to degree.

However, there is currently no established protocol within higher education to categorize and track PLA data. Without such a standard, institutions and systems are spending time and resources to determine their own methods for tracking data, if they track it at all.

For example, in CAEL's experience conducting research on PLA with more than 50 postsecondary institutions, researchers learned that PLA data is sometimes housed outside of the main student information system, in a separate spreadsheet or in hard files; many institutions have no system in place that allows them to regularly examine how their students are using PLA. Further, CAEL researchers found that when institutions have a system in place, there is considerable institutional variation in how PLA is defined.

There is further evidence of the lack of attention to PLA data in institutional data systems: In a fall 2013 survey of its members, the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) determined that only 11 percent of respondents reported regularly tracking PLA credit, and 85 percent said that they were either uninformed about PLA or were unsure as to how PLA could be incorporated into student data (AIR, 2013) [Note, the survey also received a lower than typical response rate, which could support a conclusion that PLA was not well understood or recognized by institutional researchers.] In 2015, an AACRAO survey of college registrars found wide variations in PLA policies – such as whether PLA credit is counted in a student's GPA or can be counted as residential credit – which have an impact on an institution's data tracking processes (AACRAO, 2015).

Tracking a similar set of variables would help institutions to speak in the same language about PLA. It would make standard reporting on PLA possible, and allow for cross-institutional comparisons and research, whether at the system, state, or national level.

Tracking PLA data is also important to fully capture a student's academic record on the student transcript. Credit earned through PLA is part of that academic record. While some institutions treat all PLA credit the same on the transcript and give it special designation as "assessed credit" or "experiential credit," other institutions treat credits earned through certain PLA methods the same as native or residential credit. Tracking PLA credits more explicitly by method gives these institutions flexibility, which can greatly benefit the student, particularly in accrediting regions where or states with limits on the number of "experiential credit" that can count towards a degree. So, for example, if credit from challenge exams can count as residential credit, a student has an opportunity to earn and apply more credits from standardized exams or portfolio.

To move towards a more standardized approach to institutional tracking of PLA data, CAEL initiated conversations with some of the country's leading PLA institutions that have established robust systems to track PLA credits: Excelsior College, Thomas Edison State University, Charter Oak State College, Miami Dade College, and University of Maryland University College. While these institutions are not representative of all postsecondary institutions — they have missions to serve non-traditional students, particularly adults — many of them have long track records with PLA and have probably done the most thinking about how to track and report PLA data. Also

consulted were representatives from state systems working on PLA data tracking: Tennessee, Washington State, and Oregon.

We discussed the following issues with these expert practitioners:

- Definitions of the PLA methods to be tracked
- Specific PLA-related variables to track
- Regular internal reporting on PLA credit-earning
- Using existing student information systems (SIS) to track PLA-related data

Definitions of Individual PLA Methods and Larger Categories

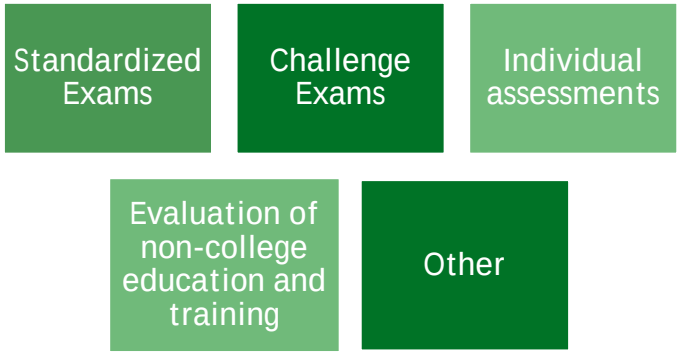
Perhaps the greatest need for standardization in the tracking of PLA data is in the defining of the individual PLA methods that are tracked. The critical unit of measure is the *method* of PLA, which we define here as the specific assessment tool to be used. There are many different methods of PLA. Examples of specific methods include CLEP exams, ACE-recommended credit for military training, locally-evaluated training, UExcel exams, AP exams, portfolio assessment, etc. Individual *methods* of PLA can then be grouped into larger *categories* of PLA to simplify data analysis. For example, the PLA methods of CLEP and UExcel can be seen as part of the larger category of standardized exams.

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), in its work to advance PLA throughout all public postsecondary institutions in the state, identified and defined 22 individual methods of PLA for its institutions to track. Oregon and Washington State are both proposing tracking fewer than 10 PLA fields (some fields are individual PLA methods, while others are larger categories). Meanwhile, some individuals institutions have developed their own tracking systems based on the methods they offer to students. For example, Empire State College tracks 14 methods, Thomas Edison State College tracks 17, Charter Oak State College tracks 12, Miami Dade tracks 14, and UMUC tracks 18.

A standard system for tracking PLA would track credit-earning by each individual method of PLA, with each individual method of PLA clearly defined. These can then be grouped into larger PLA categories to simplify reporting within and across institutions.

A standard approach to tracking PLA methods might, therefore, be a list of PLA methods for which credit-earning is tracked within the student information system. These individual methods could be grouped into categories for the purpose of reporting and other analysis. The PLA categories would be: standardized exams, challenge exams, individual assessment (e.g., portfolio assessment), challenge exams, evaluated non-college education and training, and other (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Larger PLA Categories



The methods an institution would track would be drawn from a standard list of individual PLA methods as defined below (Table 1). Institutions may vary in terms of the number of methods tracked, based on the specific PLA methods offered (or accepted in transfer) at that institution. However, all institutions would adhere to the same list of defined methods to ensure consistency. For some reporting and analysis needs, the individual methods could be grouped into the above categories as shown in Figure 1. Institutions offering PLA methods not listed in the standard table could add them under the appropriate category, or in the "Other" category.

Table 1. Individual PLA Methods, Defined and Grouped by Category

Larger Category	PLA Method or Tool	Method definition
Standardized Exams	AP	College credit awarded based on scores earned on the Advanced Placement Program.
	CLEP	College credit awarded based on scores earned on the College Level Exam Program (CLEP).
	DSST	College credit awarded based on scores earned on the DSST Examination Program or its predecessor, the DANTES Examination Program.
	UExcel	College credit awarded based on scores earned on Excelsior College Examination or UExcel exams, and their predecessors, the Regents College Examination and the ACT Proficiency Exam Program.
	International Baccalaureate Exam (IB)	College credit obtained under International Baccalaureate Credit.
continued on next page	Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (TECEP)	College credit awarded based on scores earned on the Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (TECEP).

Standardized Exams (cont.)	*Additional methods added as needed*	Colleges consulted for this report tracked credit awarded for several other exams, such as: • University of Cambridge International Exam • ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview • NYU Foreign Language Proficiency Exam • Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination Program • Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) (British AS-Level and A-Level) • SAT/ACT* **Some institutions have policies for awarding college credit for high scores on the SAT and ACT college readiness exams. Other institutions use the scores for placement or waiving course prerequisites.*
Challenge Exams	Challenge Exams	College credit awarded based on challenge exam (or departmental exam), defined as an institutional exam designed to assess learning outcomes related to a specific course and which is developed by faculty who teach the course. (Existing final exams or comprehensive exams may provide the basis for developing a challenge exam but are not appropriate for use as challenge exams without evaluation and revision to ensure that they accurately and fairly assess all course learning outcomes.)
Individual Assessments	Portfolio Assessment	College credit awarded based on a student portfolio (based on an interview, a performance assessment, a product assessment and/or a written narrative, along with related documentation) which has been evaluated by the institution or an external portfolio evaluation service for college level credit.
	Skill Simulation or Demonstration	College credit awarded based on a student's performance or demonstration of a specific skill or competency.
	Interview-based Assessment	College credit awarded based upon evaluation of responses given during a structured interview on the subject matter.

Evaluation of Non-College Education and Training	NCCRS Workplace and Volunteer Training	College credit awarded based on recommendations by the National College Credit Recommendation Service-Workplace and Volunteer Training.
	NCCRS-Other Assessed Credit	College credit awarded based on recommendations by the National College Credit Recommendation Service- Other Assessed Credit. Include all other credits that do not fall into the above NCCRS Training category or any of the others with in the PLA definitions, but have been evaluated by NCCRS for credit.
	ACE Military-Training	College credit awarded based on recommendations by the American Council on Education-Military Credit. Include all military training evaluated by ACE for college credit utilizing the ACE Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Forces.
	ACE Military-Occupations	College credit awarded based on recommendations by the American Council on Education-Military Credit. Include all military occupations and experiences evaluated by ACE for college credit utilizing the ACE Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Forces.
	ACE CREDIT- Education, Workplace and Training	College credit awarded based on recommendations by the American Council on Education-Education, Workplace and Training. Include non-accredited general education, corporate, workplace and (non-military) training evaluated by ACE for college credit. The resource for these credit recommendations is the ACE National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training.
continued on next page	Other Credit for Locally Assessed Training (Internally Assessed, Not by External Party)	College credit awarded based on local evaluations of training programs. Include credit for local business, nonprofit, volunteer, government, or other such training that has been evaluated by institutional faculty for college level credit but which is not as comprehensive as an apprenticeship, certification, or licensure program.

Evaluation of Non-College Education and Training (cont.)	Other Military Credit	College credit awarded based on local evaluation of military training or experience. Include any credit that is awarded based on the local institution's evaluation of the Joint Services Transcript. This should not include any military credit evaluated by ACE.
	Technical or Professional Certification	College credit awarded based on review of technical or professional certification.
	Technical or Professional Apprenticeship	College credit awarded based on review of apprenticeship programs. Include credit for combination of comprehensive on-the-job training and related instruction of theoretical and practical aspects for highly skilled occupations.
	Technical or Professional Licensure	College credit awarded based on review of technical or professional licensure programs.
	Badges	College credit awarded based on the evaluation of individually-earned badges.
Other	*Additional methods added as needed*	Other nontraditional course credit for the assessment of prior learning awarded that does not fit within the other categories.

Specific PLA-related Variables to Track

Determining which methods to track is the first step in developing a system for tracking PLA data. It is also important to know the areas of study for which students are earning PLA credits, the equivalent course for which a student is earning the credit, when the credit was earned, and how the credit applies to the degree. Some of the data would be ideal to have available for the purposes of student advising or for including on the student transcript, while other data may be valuable for internal research and analysis.

The consulted practitioners considered the value and use of a range of variables related to PLA credit-earning. Table 2 shows their recommendations for what variables are needed for transcription and research purposes. Some variables are designated as "required" for a well-functioning data system, while others are categorized as optional or "nice to have."

Table 2. PLA Tracking for Academic Records, Transcripts, and Research

	Data for transcription		Data for internal (or external) research and analysis	
	Required	Optional	Required	Optional
PLA method and category		♦	♦	
Area of study (e.g. CIP code)		♦	♦	
Course number of equivalent course for which student received PLA credit	♦		♦	
Course level of equivalent course for which student received PLA credit	♦		♦	
Number of PLA credits attempted	♦		♦	
Number of PLA credits earned	♦		♦	
Number of PLA credits counting toward degree or credential	♦		♦	
Number of PLA credits not counting toward degree or credential	♦		♦	
How applied to degree* *(e.g., electives, general education, major requirements)*		♦	♦	
Grade or outcome	♦		♦	
Source of learning *(e.g. employer, military, institution)*	♦			♦
PLA credit counting as residential or transfer credit	♦		♦	
Link to student demographic data** (e.g., gender, age, race/ethnicity, income)	♦		♦	
Learning outcomes or equivalent competencies demonstrated through PLA***		♦		♦
Date earned	♦		♦	
Date posted to transcript	♦		♦	
Assessor identification				♦
Explanatory notes				♦

** Institutions may have customized, automated degree audit systems that follow a set of rules for determining how credits earned are ultimately applied in the student's degree plan. An ideal data system would have the ability to capture how PLA credits were applied to a degree (e.g., electives, general education, or major requirements).*

*** This should not require additional tracking if PLA data is tied to the individual students and is stored in same student information system as all other student records*

**** Some institutions are developing dual transcripts where the traditional course/credit information is on the main page, with learning outcomes or competencies listed on a second page or a second document.*

PLA Reporting

Tracking PLA data can provide insights on program usage and students outcomes that can be useful for both promoting and improving PLA. Reports can shed light on how many students use PLA, which students use PLA, which methods are used more than others, which areas of study are commonly assessed for prior learning credit, and what trends emerge over time. This information can help institutions improve program design or target outreach to specific student populations. Data can also help institutions understand which student groups are being underserved by PLA and may require a different kind of outreach.

Institutions may want to report on retention and graduation rates for students who earn PLA credits. This data can help administrators understand the value of the program to improving student success and institutional effectiveness.

Examples of regular reports (monthly, quarterly, or annually) could resemble those shown in Tables 3-5.

Table 3. Sample Table, General PLA Usage over Time

Year	Number of students earning PLA credit (or having PLA credits awarded or approved	Average number of PLA credits earned by or awarded per student	Total number of PLA credits earned/ awarded
2011-2012			
2012-2013			
2013-2014			
2014-2015			

Table 4. Sample Table, PLA Usage by Demographics

Current Year	Number of students earning PLA credit (or having PLA credits awarded or approved	Average number of PLA credits earned by or awarded to student	Total number of PLA credits earned/ awarded to student
Race/ethnicity African American Asian Caucasian etc.			
Gender Male Female			
Age range Under 25 25-34 35-44 etc.			

Table 5. Sample Table, PLA Usage by Category and Method

Current Year	Number of students earning PLA credit	Average number of PLA credits earned	Total number of PLA credits earned
Standardized Exams CLEP DSST UExcel			
Challenge Exams			
Individual Assessments Portfolio Assessment			
Evaluation of non-college training ACE military ACE corporate Internal evaluation of technical training			

Using Existing Systems for PLA Data Tracking

According to the expert practitioners, the commonly-used student information systems do not have data storage or reporting that is specific to PLA, and as a consequence, institutions must devise "workarounds" to capture PLA-related data in their systems. The following are three examples:

- With the Jenzabar SIS, Charter Oak State College records PLA as transfer credit. All transfer credits, including PLA credits, are assigned a code (FICE or OPEID) which indicates the source of credit; in the case of previous college learning, the source of credit is an institution, and in the case of PLA credit, the source can is place where the credit was earned (e.g. an employer). For each code, Charter Oak designates a "type." With previous college learning, the "type" field indicates a two-year or four-year institution, while with PLA, the "type" code is used to indicate the specific method of PLA, like "ACE recommendation."
- Tennessee uses Banner as its SIS, and it also uses transfer credit fields for its PLA work-around. The method of PLA is recorded as the source of credit (e.g. "transferred from CLEP"). The course subject and number both appear as an equivalency with a pass/fail grade. Portfolio credit can be treated as a course match, like the rest of PLA credit, or as a detailed block credit in a particular discipline.
- Miami Dade College uses PeopleSoft, which does have a system for tracking "testing credits," but all testing /PLA credits must be linked to a particular course. The "section field" is then used to indicate the method of PLA through a coding system, with each code indicating a specific PLA method.
- The colleges and universities in Washington are on various student information systems. Several use PeopleSoft, but there are several campuses using Banner and homegrown systems. Most of the Community and Technical Colleges remain on a legacy system. Data extracts were written by each campus to match a common data collection form and this data is then transmitted to and collected by the Washington Student Achievement Council. This system works in the short-term. The 34 community and technical colleges are all moving to PeopleSoft and the system is implementing a coding system, with each code indicating a specific PLA method. Other campuses are using a similar method to begin coding PLA credits the same across various systems.

The workarounds with existing systems show that there are ways to track PLA credit with imperfect data systems. However, workarounds are no substitute for solutions that make tracking easier to institutionalize. Also, these particularly workarounds do not solve all problems related to tracking PLA. For example, some workarounds require that PLA credit be matched to an existing course offering. In some cases, institutions award credit for subjects that are not offered, and therefore, the creation of dummy courses may be required to make it work. For example, a student with CLEP credit in a foreign language that is not offered at an institution (e.g., Portuguese) may still be able to count that credit towards a degree at that institution. Similarly, PLA credit coded as block credit may create barriers to applying that credit appropriately to a student's degree plan.

The need for these workarounds points to the fact that although so many institutions and systems are recognizing the need for and value of PLA as an important part of the adult student's overall degree plan, higher education business processes and systems still need to catch up. Higher education technology vendors need to develop SIS capabilities or add-ons to better store, manage, and report this data. These are challenges that are shared by other programs that support nontraditional methods of degree completion such as competency-based education (CBE), which require the tracking of assessment outcomes and student competencies. Solutions that address CBE program needs to track data outside of traditional courses and credits could easily be expanded to include or integrate data tracking needs for PLA.

NEXT STEPS

CAEL's goal in developing this brief is to lay the groundwork for sharing a proposal for a set of standard data collection/tracking practices for PLA credit with the larger higher education community. This draft document will be shared with a number of interested parties to obtain their feedback and suggestions, and, ultimately, their endorsement of a version of this proposal for wider adoption by postsecondary institutions. CAEL also hopes that leaders in the CBE community working to advance changes in student information systems will integrate PLA-related recommendations into a comprehensive set of changes to support nontraditional degree completion strategies and programs

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EXPERTS AND PRACTITIONERS CONSULTED

Postsecondary Institution Representatives

- Charter Oak State College: Michael Broderick, Director of Institutional Effectiveness
- Empire State College: Nan Travers, Director of Collegewide Academic Review; Amanda Treadwell, Senior Academic Review Specialist
- Miami Dade College: Silvio Rodriguez, Director of Assessment, Evaluation and Testing; Tiffani Malvin, College-wide Director, Prior Learning Assessment
- Roane State Community College, Brenda Rector, Director of Admissions, Records, & Registration
- Thomas Edison State College: Marc Singer, Vice Provost, Center for the Assessment of Learning
- University of Maryland University College: Joellen Shendy, Associate Vice Provost & Registrar

System Representatives

- Tennessee Higher Education Commission: Wilson Finch, Assistant Director of Postsecondary Completion Initiatives; Maryann Rainey, Director of Postsecondary Completion Initiatives
- Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission: Donna Lewelling, Education Division Director, Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development; and Laurie Roe, Interim Director, Office of Research and Data
- Washington Student Achievement Council: Jim West and Noreen Light, Associate Directors of Academic Affairs and Policy, who convene the Washington Prior Learning Assessment Workgroup

National Associations and Groups

- Association for Institutional Researchers (AIR): Amelia Parnell, Director of Research Initiatives (former)
- American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO): Michael Reilly, Executive Director; and ACCRA members: Brad Myers, Registrar, The Ohio State University; Tina Faulkner, Director, Continuity and Compliance, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
- American Council on Education: Mary Beth Lakin, Director, College and University Partnerships, Center for Education Attainment and Innovation

We advocate and innovate on behalf of adult learners to increase access to education and economic security. We provide adults with career guidance and help them earn college credit for what they already know. We equip colleges and universities to attract, retain, and graduate more adult students. We provide employers with smart strategies for employee development. We build workforce organizations' capacity to connect worker skills to employer demands.

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