



CAEL
Linking Learning and Work

STATE SYSTEM PLA ADOPTION:

Lessons from a
Three-System Initiative

The Council for Adult and
Experiential Learning (CAEL),
in Partnership with
Montana University System,
Ohio Department of Higher Education,
and Texas A&M University System

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OVERVIEW / BACKGROUND

In states across the nation, there is an urgency to increase the educational attainment levels of citizens and the workforce. Between 1973 and 2008, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy which required postsecondary education increased from 28% to 59%, and it is projected that by 2018, that proportion will rise to 63% of all jobs. In order to meet this demand, higher education will need to reach not only students transitioning directly from high school, but also adults without a college credential (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2014).

This economic reality has led a growing number of states' postsecondary leaders to focus on adult learners. There are many adults in today's workforce who have earned some college credits but have not completed a degree due to a variety of factors, including time and cost constraints. Many of these adults without a college credential have gained significant knowledge and skills through their experiences in the workforce, military service, self-study, or other contexts. Much of this learning may be at the college level. Recognizing this college-level learning – and having it count toward a degree or other credential – is an important way to accelerate postsecondary educational attainment.

For this reason, several states and postsecondary systems have become interested in enhancing the use of prior learning assessment (PLA) as a way to promote increased adult degree completion. PLA is the process by which an individual's learning gained outside of the traditional classroom is evaluated for college credit. A study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has shown that adult students with PLA credit are two and a half times more likely to complete their degrees, compared with students who do not engage in PLA (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Historically, efforts to scale up PLA utilization have occurred at the campus level within individual institutions. A statewide approach to PLA advancement, however, offers a number of benefits, including consistency and transferability of policies and practices across institutions as well as economies of



A statewide approach can create consistency in PLA policies and practices across institutions

scale in activities like marketing or centralization of portfolio assessment.

In May 2013, Montana University System (MUS), Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE)¹, and Texas A&M University System (A&M System) were all selected to participate in a two-year, Lumina Foundation-funded *State System PLA Adoption* project, with technical assistance provided by CAEL. Throughout this project, these three systems have engaged in activities to increase levels of awareness, acceptance, consistency, and professional capacity for PLA practices across their institutions. Institutions in the participating systems were also given the opportunity to expand their ability to provide PLA through portfolio assessment by offering LearningCounts™, CAEL's online PLA portfolio development service. Select institutions in each system were supported financially in becoming Featured Network institutions within LearningCounts during the term of the project.

This report will detail the various strategies that were implemented throughout this project by the Montana, Ohio, and Texas A&M University systems – strategies that have resulted in expansion of PLA options, plans for future expansion, and changes in the way that institutions communicate with students about PLA. The lessons from this initiative are also presented to guide the work of other states and systems in their PLA initiatives.

¹ Formerly the Ohio Board of Regents

SYSTEM-WIDE APPROACH TO THE ADVANCEMENT AND ADOPTION OF PLA: EVOLUTION OF ACTIVITIES

To support the system-wide advancement of PLA policies and practices within the three participating state systems, this project focused on strategies that can be categorized as follows: initial and ongoing planning, conducting an inventory of in-place PLA offerings, raising awareness, supporting the development of guidelines for best practices in PLA policies and applications, and building institutional and professional capacity.

Initial and Ongoing Collaboration and Planning Activities

In any strategy designed to influence state- or system-wide policies and practices, a necessary first phase is a collaborative planning effort that incorporates the viewpoints of all relevant stakeholders. State systems that have engaged in efforts to advance PLA utilization have recognized the importance of ensuring that all parties involved in PLA policy and implementation are included in the process to determine the goals and strategies for their system-wide initiatives.

The approaches that the Montana, Ohio, and Texas A&M systems have taken in this project have followed a similar progression. Prior to implementing any specific project-based activities, each system engaged in a number of planning meetings among system and institutional representatives, with assistance from CAEL. These activities helped the system office communicate its reasons for wanting to advance PLA, and they provided opportunities to collaboratively identify appropriate strategies within the context of existing efforts. These joint planning sessions continued throughout the initiative.

In addition, CAEL hosted an initial convening for representatives from all three systems to come together, identify common and state-specific goals, and develop timelines for project activities. There

were three additional cross-state meetings over the course of the project, which allowed system leadership to learn from each other's successes and strategies in adopting and advancing PLA throughout their systems.

Task Force Approach

Many states that have undertaken a system-wide effort to advance PLA adoption have organized a dedicated group or task force of stakeholders to lead the effort in developing recommendations for consistent institutional PLA policies and practices and to promote PLA statewide.

For example, prior to this State System PLA Adoption project, the state of Tennessee established a PLA task force, facilitated by CAEL, that developed and released a set of statewide policy standards in 2012. Although cultivating these policy standards was the primary motivation for launching the task force, as the network progressed and evolved, its institutional representatives began utilizing the regular meetings and communications as a resource for knowledge-sharing, for ongoing discussion, and for addressing specific questions about

Strategies and Activities in Statewide PLA Efforts

Collaboration and Planning. Convening of key stakeholders for introducing the initiative; dedicated task forces for ongoing joint policy development.

Inventory of PLA Policies and Practices. Institutional surveys to identify common practices and inconsistent policies across institutions.

Raising Awareness. Summits; peer-to-peer education.

Guidelines for Policy and Practices. Development of manuals to guide ongoing PLA implementation.

Building Institutional and Professional Capacity. Professional development; outsourcing of some assessment activities.

their experiences implementing the new strategies to advance PLA within their institutions.

Similarly, prior to the launch of the State System PLA Adoption project, Ohio had initiated a statewide effort called *PLA with Purpose*, which established a similar PLA task force. Led by ODHE, the network works collaboratively with campuses across the state to identify and promote best practices for PLA in Ohio. The designated group of stakeholders has been a key feature of continued efforts in Ohio to advance PLA adoption; the groundwork established by this overall statewide strategy provided a useful framework for continuing the momentum and integrating additional activities.

Montana also spearheaded the formation of a statewide PLA task force, which was leveraged through additional grant funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and formalized during the course of the State System PLA Adoption project in Summer 2014. The MUS task force is composed of diverse postsecondary leaders from across the state of Montana. MUS system leaders noted the importance of including individuals on the task force who could speak from a faculty perspective in order to address the concerns and skepticism among this group of stakeholders. The task force has lead efforts to compose a set of recommendations for consistent policies and practices to be considered by the Board of Regents and has also worked to raise statewide awareness by facilitating conversations about PLA among a broader range of stakeholders in the state. System leaders believe that, through the task force approach, faculty and staff have become much more educated and engaged in the efficacy and implementation of PLA.

Inventory of PLA Policies and Practices

In any given state system, PLA practices can vary significantly from institution to institution in a number of ways, including the methods of PLA that are offered, the degree programs for which PLA credit can be used, and the procedures for student access. Given these potential inconsistencies, state systems that are interested in advancing PLA system-wide benefit from having a clear picture of PLA practices at individual institutions and establishing where there are differences and commonalities.


As a way to gain this overall level of understanding, CAEL designed an online survey and then assisted the participating systems in administering the survey so that each institution would provide details about its PLA policies and practices. Categories of data collected through the survey included:

- The extent to which each different method of PLA is offered at the institution
- The institution's activities in administering PLA, such as staffing, location of PLA services, and marketing
- Specific PLA policies on credit limits and how PLA credit can be applied to a student's degree plan
- Specific implementation practices for each PLA method, such as the offering of a portfolio development workshop
- Pricing of PLA offerings
- Whether student PLA data is tracked, and in what way

Survey results can help to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for advancing consistent and enhanced use of PLA, which can then help to inform particular training and intervention strategies. For example, one system learned from the results of its survey that there were discrepancies among institutions, such as in the awarding of credit based on cut scores for standardized testing. These discrepancies led the system's PLA task force to work on developing common standards for PLA policies and practices.

As initiatives progress, initial survey data can also serve as a benchmark for measuring continued progress in specific areas through the use of follow-up surveys and data collection activities.

One challenge in the administration of such a survey, however, is that information about PLA policies and practices may not be centralized, and so it may not be clear who is the right survey respondent to provide the comprehensive picture of PLA on any one campus. This challenge might be mitigated by having preliminary conversations with each institution first in order to ensure that the right person receives the survey.



Create a forum for voicing and addressing any questions or concerns

Raising Awareness

Activities designed to promote awareness and address widespread concerns and misunderstandings about PLA among a broad audience of stakeholders are critical for increasing momentum and buy-in at all levels of influence and implementation in a given state system. This fact is particularly important given that there is often some degree of faculty resistance to PLA within colleges and universities. Faculty may be under the impression that PLA is about giving away college credits, or that PLA is tantamount to reducing the number of students taking the courses the faculty are teaching.

In order to move forward with a comprehensive strategy, it is important to create a forum for voicing and addressing these concerns, as well as opportunities to educate all the relevant stakeholders about PLA, its various methods and assessment procedures, and its benefits to adult students.

The Montana, Ohio, and Texas A&M University systems worked to raise awareness through web-based and face-to-face trainings (described in the capacity building section later in this report) as well as through special PLA summits and peer-to-peer strategies:

- **PLA Awareness Meetings and Summits.** All three states held convenings to bring together stakeholder groups to discuss issues related to PLA and degree completion. Texas A&M convened academic advisors for a day and a half session to learn about PLA. The other two systems held larger summits. In Ohio, during the fifth *Central Ohio Compact Summit on a Regional Strategy for College Completion and Career Success*, matters related to prior learning assessment, and particularly Ohio's PLA with a Purpose strategy, were discussed. CAEL offered an on-site workshop, which trained academic advisors on integrating PLA into their practice with adult students. Similarly, MUS and its PLA task force hosted a statewide PLA summit, attended by approximately 85 representatives from diverse institutions across the state, including several tribal colleges. Participants included chancellors, presidents, deans, registrars, and advisors. The summit included an overview of PLA and a session featuring leaders from Tennessee and Ohio, who discussed efforts to expand PLA in their states. MUS leadership felt that the summit helped to advance greater acceptance of PLA among postsecondary professionals in the state.



- **Peer-to-peer Awareness Strategies.** The state systems also implemented several peer-to-peer activities to advance progress toward widespread understanding and awareness of PLA. For example, the Montana PLA task force initiated a *Lunch and Learn* series, at which active members of the task force presented an overview of PLA to other practitioners at campuses throughout the system. The A&M system has initiated a “buddy system” in which a selection of campuses that have made significant progress in developing robust PLA programs will each coach another A&M institution, provide in-depth consultations about PLA, and make recommendations for implementation strategies. The buddy system approach relies on a few institutions embracing PLA early in the process. As explained by an Texas A&M system leader, “Two years ago, we would not have had any schools that are actively pursuing this; but now we have three that have really dived in, and the others are following them.”

The emergence of the peer-to-peer approach highlights an important lesson of the project overall: although subject-matter experts like CAEL play an important role in launching efforts for system-wide change by equipping internal leaders with adequate knowledge and tools, internal champions may ultimately be the most effective in carrying the movement forward.

Guidelines for Consistent PLA Policies and Practices

Across all three systems, a major finding from the survey of institutional PLA policies and practices was that although individual campuses were engaging in

a number of PLA activities, there was no consistency in the specific policies and practices. Inconsistency in PLA procedures across campuses creates confusion for prospective students (particularly those who transfer between institutions in a given system), as well as lead to individual institutions recreating strategies and tools that may already be in use elsewhere.

As a response to these findings, the systems each identified consistent PLA policies and practices as a major goal in their project strategies. A Montana system leader noted that with regard to their policy development efforts, “One of the things we wanted to ensure is that students will have a clear place to go and the ability to walk through the PLA process seamlessly.” Many states and systems that have undertaken similar PLA initiatives – including Tennessee, Washington, and Oregon – have employed strategies that typically engaged an established task force or network of stakeholders to develop a set of standard guidelines or recommendations for distribution across campuses in their state.

Each of the systems involved in this PLA Adoption project has explored a somewhat similar approach to this issue. Prior to the start of this project, Ohio had already identified a collection of general best practices in PLA through its PLA with a Purpose initiative. Building on this work, the project team developed a draft of a cross-cutting “design to delivery” guidebook, which included a series of recommendations for consistent PLA policies and implementation strategies for Ohio’s campuses. ODHE is now leading the effort to finalize and distribute this guidebook. An important goal for Ohio is achieving some degree of transferability of PLA credits between institutions; for portfolio assessment, this will mean establishing

“Two years ago, we would not have had any schools that are actively pursuing this; but now we have three that have really dived in, and the others are following them.” – Texas A&M System leader

PLA Policy Guidebook Examples

Ohio: PLA with a Purpose: Prior Learning Assessment & Ohio's College Completion Agenda https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/ohiohighered.org/files/uploads/PLA/PLA-with-a-Purpose_Report_FINAL_041614_0.pdf

Oregon: Oregon Credit for Prior Learning Standards <http://education.oregon.gov/Documents/HECC/Reports%20and%20Presentations/CPLStandardsFINALDRAFT.pdf>

Tennessee: Recommended Standards in Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Policy and Practice for Tennessee Public Colleges and Universities https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/Recommendations%20for%20Standards%20in%20PLA%20-%20Final%20Version%201-1.pdf

Washington: Accessing Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning: A Handbook for Faculty and Staff http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/education/pla_handbook_oct2013.pdf

clear and common definitions for what portfolios should look like and how they are to be evaluated.

Both Montana and the Texas A&M System are also working on their own guidebooks of recommendations for policy and procedural consistency in PLA for their systems. System leaders note that the process of developing these recommendations has presented an opportunity for stakeholders and task force members to really think through all of the issues involved in PLA implementation and to determine their official viewpoints on them. In this process, it has been helpful for the task forces to consult the guidebooks created by other state systems (see examples in box).

Noteworthy is that these guidebooks are typically designed to provide recommendations, not mandated policies or practices. When the system office has more of a coordinating function rather than a governing one, each institution has the freedom to

adopt its own PLA policies and practices. The hope, however, is that most institutions will see the value and importance of adhering to similar practices throughout the system.

Building Capacity

System-wide PLA initiatives must consider their institutional capacity to implement or expand PLA opportunities. Central to the endeavor are faculty and staff. In order to reach students and have an impact on their efforts to complete credentials, system-level policies and guidelines must be clearly communicated among staff and faculty. It is imperative that student-facing practitioners have a working knowledge of PLA and the institution's policies and offerings in order to effectively advise students in navigating their options successfully. It is also important to enhance staff and faculty capabilities in areas related to administering programs, such as offering portfolio development courses or performing high quality assessments.

For these reasons, an important component of this project's strategy was to enhance the institutional and professional capacity for PLA offerings in all three state systems, primarily by offering professional development opportunities and leveraging LearningCounts as one way to allow more institutions to offer portfolio development.

Professional Development: Building Faculty and Staff Understanding of PLA

As a way to increase both awareness and understanding of PLA, and to communicate effective methods among PLA practitioners, CAEL offered a number of professional development opportunities to various groups of faculty and staff from campuses in all participating systems. Certain trainings aimed to achieve both a broad-based level of understanding and awareness, whereas others attempted to communicate specific strategies and best practices for practitioners in various roles who take part in the process of PLA program implementation.

- **General PLA Training for Faculty and Staff.** Faculty and staff from all institutions in the project systems were offered a webinar series entitled

“Becoming a PLA Expert” as an over-arching professional development opportunity. This four-part series offered information on PLA generally as well as on its specific methods, including standardized testing, credit recommendations for corporate and military training, and portfolio assessment. The sessions had a combined total attendance of at least 200 (users may have had more than one person in the room for the webinars) from all three systems.

- **Advisor Training.** Each of the systems offered a face-to-face training specifically geared toward advising staff in order to better equip these staff members – who are typically the primary point of contact for all activities related to PLA – with the ability to successfully support students in navigating their PLA opportunities. These trainings introduced approximately 130 advisors to PLA and LearningCounts, reviewed key results from the system-wide institutional PLA survey, and provided participants with resources and guidance for evaluating prior learning opportunities for students.
- **Training for Marketing Staff and Enrollment Managers.** Each of the campuses in the project that piloted LearningCounts participated in an introductory webinar on marketing PLA and LearningCounts to adult students. CAEL then administered a marketing award competition, wherein the institution from each system that demonstrated the most effective use of these initial marketing recommendations received an award that included an in-person consultation with CAEL’s marketing and communications expert. These consulting sessions provided institutional marketing staff with recommendations for contextualized, adult-focused marketing activities.

CAEL hosted an additional marketing webinar series towards the end of the project for all campuses within the three state systems. This series, which was geared specifically toward enrollment managers and other external-facing communications staff, offered best practices and effective strategies for reaching the adult student audience.

Enhancing Capacity to Offer Portfolio Assessment

The institutional survey administered in the beginning of this project indicated that there was minimal usage of portfolio assessment as a method of PLA among the surveyed campuses. These results were unsurprising, given that portfolio assessment is typically one of the most underutilized methods of PLA; its implementation requires more institutional capacity than do other methods like standardized testing such as trained faculty assessors and enhanced administrative infrastructure.

There are several different approaches that systems and institutions can take in addressing this need for enhanced capacity to offer PLA portfolio programs. Some institutions may choose to develop internal portfolio assessment programs and provide increased training opportunities for local faculty members to become certified assessors. Other systems have taken a more centralized consortia-based approach where institutions collaborate on a joint portfolio assessment program.

Another way that institutions or systems may choose to increase capacity for offering PLA portfolio options is to enlist a third-party provider to manage the process and conduct assessments. In the case of the three state systems involved in this project, two or three campuses from each system opted for this outsourcing method by becoming Featured Network Institutions for CAEL’s online portfolio service, LearningCounts.

Given the varying needs of individual campuses, several models of LearningCounts partnerships were developed and tested throughout the course of this project:

- **LearningCounts Featured Network Model.** In this model, Featured Network institutions offer an online portfolio development course entitled CAEL 100 in their course catalogues, which is taught and administered by CAEL instructors. Students in the course are able to develop one or more portfolios that correspond with the learning objectives of actual college courses. Portfolios are then evaluated by CAEL’s own trained faculty assessors for academic credit recommendations.

- **LearningCounts “Local Assessor First” Model.** For systems or institutions that prefer to have their own faculty conduct all assessments for credit recommendations, the project team devised a model of LearningCounts wherein CAEL 100 is offered as in the Featured Network model, but the assessment process differs. Local faculty at the institution can become trained as portfolio assessors and are given preferential consideration for evaluating the portfolios of students from their institution.

In support of this model, CAEL provided a number of on-site faculty assessor trainings and opportunities for faculty within the participating systems to become certified LearningCounts assessors. Faculty from system institutions that did not opt to outsource their portfolio programs to LearningCounts were also able to participate in these faculty assessor trainings and become certified portfolio assessors. This faculty training enhances their institutions’ capacity for potentially administering a local portfolio assessment program. It also has the added benefit, as noted by system leaders in the project, of illustrating the rigor involved in assessing experiential portfolios, which can help faculty members and others to understand the academic validity of this method and dispel skepticism.

- **Hybrid LearningCounts / Institution-Provided Model.** Community colleges face a unique challenge when implementing LearningCounts at their institutions, in that the tuition rate for CAEL 100 is often higher than the state-subsidized tuition the community colleges charge for a typical 3-credit course offerings. Given this dilemma, one community college-level Featured Network institution within this project is currently piloting a hybrid course model, which allows the institution to offer a local portfolio assessment course at its standard rate of tuition. The institution’s course borrows content from a self-paced, non-credit course offered by LearningCounts entitled Design Your Portfolio (or “DYP”). Portfolio assessment then is handled through the LearningCounts system.

Different models for portfolio assessment through LearningCounts are being tested



IMPACT OF THE STATE SYSTEM PLA ADOPTION ACTIVITIES

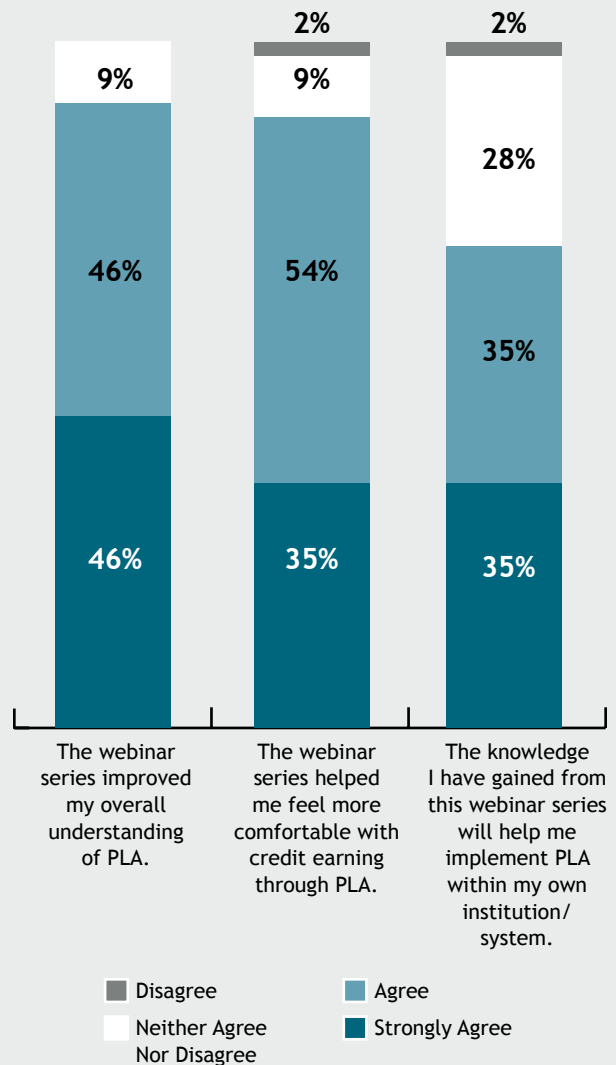
There was consensus among the various system leaders that two years may be an ambitious time-frame for achieving increased awareness about PLA along with meaningful changes in how PLA is offered throughout a higher education system. Nevertheless, it has been possible for this two-year project to make real headway on systemic PLA adoption. The individual trainings have helped to improve overall understanding of PLA, and the systems have made progress in promoting consistent policies as well as enhancing their offerings and capabilities in PLA generally and the portfolio method specifically.

Impact and Value of Faculty and Staff Training

Follow up surveys and targeted interviews with the trainees shed some light on the overall value of training to increase the acceptance of PLA and build internal capacity to support PLA students. Participants in the *Becoming a PLA Expert* webinar series were surveyed on the impact of the series for them. Across all three states, 92% of respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed that the series improved their overall understanding of PLA, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that the series helped them feel more comfortable with credit earning through PLA, and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that the knowledge gained from the webinar will help them implement PLA in their own institution or system (Figure 1). Very few disagreed with these statements.

While select trainees indicated that the webinars helped them gain a much better general understanding of PLA, as noted above, several interviewees specifically stated that this training was the first time they learned that PLA has numerous methods (including standardized testing, portfolio assessment, ACE credit recommendations for corporate and military training, etc.). Other interviewees expressed that the webinar series equipped them with a much

Figure 1. Participant views of *Becoming a PLA Expert* webinar training (n=57). This figure shows the percentages of respondents' answers on the survey regarding their experience during the webinar *Becoming a PLA Expert*.



more solid understanding of PLA, which they were then able to use in further conversations with staff and faculty across their institutions, outreach efforts with potential adult students, and presentations to stakeholders involved in the statewide PLA adoption effort. One Texas A&M participant noted: “I was already accepting of PLA and onboard with it. What [the webinar series] really helped me to

do was make me more comfortable talking to other people about it.”

System leaders also noted that staff and faculty trainings and professional development opportunities prompt participants to think more deeply about what is possible and to begin asking thoughtful questions about implementation.

Impact of Initiative on Overall PLA Offerings and Policies

From a final institutional survey across all three systems, CAEL learned that:

- **The project had an impact on expanding PLA offerings.** Nine (9) out of 35 responding institutions reported that new PLA methods had been added to their institutional offerings in the previous 12-18 months; and 16 said that existing PLA offerings had been expanded or enhanced during the past 12-18 months. Several respondents noted that awarding credit through ACE recommendations and portfolio assessment, in particular, was seeing some growth. One representative said, “We have always had the above PLA methods, but more departments are now interested in portfolio assessment.”

One of the most impressive examples of PLA expansion was in the LearningCounts pilot at Texas A&M-Texarkana, which saw 75 student enrollments in the portfolio course during the project period. Texarkana has taken a unique approach to the portfolio course by embedding it as one of the core requirements of its Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences degree program.

- **The project had an impact on how institutions communicate with students about PLA.** Twelve (12) of the 35 responding institutions reported that in the past 12-18 months they had changed the way they communicate to students about PLA. Several specifically mentioned having included new information about PLA on their web pages or launching new, dedicated PLA web pages.
- **The project created momentum for future expansion of PLA within the institutions.** Nearly half (17) of the responding institutions reported

that their institutions have specific plans to change their PLA policies and practices in the next 12 months. A great many respondents mentioned that they expected their PLA policy document (in development at the time of the survey) to fuel new or expanded offerings. One mentioned plans for faculty training, increased advisor awareness, review of policies, and development of a faculty network to assist with portfolio review. Another mentioned plans to migrate all portfolio assessment to LearningCounts.

In addition, there is progress at the system level in terms of policies and practices:

- **The project spurred all three systems to develop written recommendations/guidelines for system-wide PLA policies and practices.** Ohio has built upon its PLA with a Purpose publication with a “Design to Delivery” document to provide specific guidance for institutional PLA practices; this document is currently being piloted with a subset of institutions. Texas A&M system leadership is presenting a draft of recommended PLA policies and practices to a system-wide group of academic officers for their review and approval. This draft was developed using a bottom-up approach to policy-development where those campuses engaging most heavily in PLA through the project activities developed a first draft of policy recommendations with system leadership. Montana similarly identified consistent policies as a first step toward promoting more robust institutional offerings of PLA, including portfolio assessment, and it is on a similar schedule for presenting policy recommendation for the system’s consideration.

These results demonstrate that progress has been made during the duration of this project but also – and perhaps more importantly – they demonstrate the momentum that these state systems have built, which will likely result in continued expansion of PLA offerings and more students using PLA in the years to come.

LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project's participating state systems and the CAEL technical assistance staff have expressed a number of key lessons learned through their efforts to promote statewide PLA adoption that could be useful for other states seeking to engage in similar initiatives. The primary lessons that stakeholders have identified fall within the following general categories: timing and sequence considerations, the importance of planning and leveraging external resources, and the need to actively involve all key stakeholders.

Timing and Sequencing

- **Acknowledge that the process takes time.** The first step in encouraging greater adoption of PLA is one of education, and that can take some time. As noted by one of the Ohio system leaders, “You have to spend a lot of time de-mythologizing PLA.” One of Texas A&M’s system leaders similarly noted that “it takes time to build trust in the idea that the role of granting credit is done by someone else.” It may take as long as 18-24 months just to get all of the institutions and individual stakeholders on board and to develop common policies. The educational needs will vary by institution, since some institutions may have strong PLA program already in place while others may not have much of a PLA history. But before system-wide policy discussion can happen, every campus needs to have a basic awareness and understanding of PLA practices.
- **Address PLA in general first, before any specific methods or tools.** Efforts to promote awareness and acceptance of PLA benefit greatly from an approach that first introduces the concept of PLA generally, before delving into its particular components or methods. Making sure that everyone has a base level of understanding of PLA, and addressing any questions or concerns, is an important step for fostering understanding and acceptance of specific methods, such as portfolio assessment.
- **Acknowledge the various levels of professional development that are needed.** It can be helpful to offer introductory awareness-level trainings and information sessions as a primer for faculty and staff who are unfamiliar with PLA. Additionally, it is important to recognize the need for ongoing access to training and professional development as new stakeholders are incorporated into the process. Creating recorded and re-usable training materials is one way to make sure that these opportunities remain available.

Planning and Building

- **Understand the landscape first.** Lead staff from each state noted that having data on what each college currently offers in terms of PLA provided a useful starting point from which to develop a comprehensive strategy. However, surveying institutions on PLA did have some challenges in that PLA is often implemented in a decentralized way; it may not always be clear who should complete the survey at any given institution. It may be useful to start with general discussions about PLA with representatives of individual institutions to get a better sense of who might be the best person to report on specific practices.
- **Offer a starting point, use existing resources, and provide concrete examples.** As systems work to develop recommendations for consistency in PLA policies and practices, they can benefit from a wide range of existing frameworks, templates, and tools that other states and systems have developed as well as recommendations from organizations that have significant expertise in these areas, such as CAEL, American Council on Education (ACE), and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). An Ohio system leader, for example, emphasized the value of learning about concrete examples for expanding PLA within traditional institutions. Similarly, one of the system leaders in Montana noted that other states’ policy manuals helped to inform the system’s efforts to develop their own policy guidebook.

- **Tie PLA (and solutions like LearningCounts) to existing programs or initiatives.** The success of the A&M-Texarkana LearningCounts pilot suggests that embedding PLA within an existing degree program can be an effective way to advance PLA. Similarly, Montana is exploring how to link PLA to special student success initiatives as a way to help advance understanding of what PLA is and how it might benefit various student populations. It can be challenging for an institution to make PLA a priority if it is an isolated strategy or offering. Connecting PLA to something larger may be a good way to get PLA launched.
- **Enlist expertise and devote resources to data tracking.** The progress of these three state systems' PLA adoption efforts have highlighted the increasing need that many institutions and systems have for assistance with issues related to tracking student and institutional PLA data. Knowing how many students are using PLA, how many credits they are earning, and what methods they are using can help institutions and systems better understand how to focus internal resources.

Engaging Key Stakeholders

- **Engage key stakeholders at all levels.** A comprehensive PLA strategy must incorporate the unique viewpoints from a wide range of stakeholders, including faculty, advising staff, registrars, and other administrators. This not only ensures buy-in throughout the institution but also makes certain that recommendations for policies and practices are informed by a broad range of institutional expertise. Having everyone on board with PLA will also help support greater student use of PLA since more students will learn about these options throughout their academic life cycle.
- **Train academic advisors well.** Advisors need to know about PLA partly to be able to promote it to students. In addition, students need to have confidence that the credit they earn through PLA will count towards their degree. Advisors play an important role in making sure that the PLA credit

pursued is not an excess credit the student's degree program will allow the PLA credit to count towards that particular degree.

- **Make sure to prioritize faculty buy-in at all stages.** It is important to establish an early and continual channel of communication with faculty in order to keep them apprised of new developments and ensure their buy-in as initiatives take shape. As a Montana system leader noted, "If the faculty resist, the initiative will fail." Working to involve the faculty has been an important strategy in that state. Now, in Montana, the faculty are engaged in discussions for drafting system-wide PLA guidelines and are asking for even more time to work together to provide input to the process. Other project participants observed that when faculty see examples of students who have produced high-quality work to demonstrate their prior learning, they will become more engaged.
- **Start with external experts to launch an initiative, but begin from day one to identify internal champions who can lead from within.** When first launching a system-wide PLA initiative, it will be important to draw on PLA resources that are available online and, if funding permits, outside PLA experts and process facilitators. The three systems in this project found it valuable to access the expertise of CAEL as part of the overall strategy to advance PLA. Eventually, however, successful implementation may depend on finding PLA champions within each institution.

Given that PLA practices often vary significantly between individual institutions in any state system, the most appropriate person to lead a PLA initiative may have varying job titles from institution to institution or come from different departments depending on the institutional context. In the Texas A&M system, for example, the PLA champion at A&M Texarkana was a faculty member/program coordinator; her enthusiasm for PLA resulted in the development of a degree-based portfolio assessment strategy through LearningCounts and a high degree of student engagement. Similarly, in Montana, one



faculty leader was an important advocate; originally somewhat skeptical of PLA, after learning more about it, he became the biggest advocate and helped to bring other faculty members on board. The internal champion, says one Texas A&M system leader, is probably not going to be the chancellor, president, or provost, but rather is more likely to be someone “closer to the ground.”

- **Facilitate change from the top-down and from the bottom-up.** The PLA adoption effort must establish a comfortable balance between system-wide consistency and institutional academic autonomy. Visible and active leadership at the system level sends a message that PLA is valued and important, yet policy is and put into practice at the institutional level. The Texas A&M System has emphasized the bottom-up approach in its policy development activities, where select campuses are leading the effort to refine the draft recommendations that will then be presented to system leadership.
- **Leverage peer learning strategies.** One strategy that has proven effective in ensuring that stakeholder’s views and concerns are addressed

is the development of a learning community or peer mentoring system. For example, Texas A&M System is establishing peer mentoring relationships among system institutions, which they hope will help institutions share effective strategies for expanding PLA practices. Similarly, Montana task force members are using CAEL-developed PowerPoint presentations to support Lunch and Learn discussions about PLA at their home institutions.

- **Prioritize outreach and messaging strategies.** Efforts to implement PLA activities and enhance staff and faculty capacity to administer programs must be paired with effective student outreach strategies; otherwise, the programs will not be used. As was demonstrated in CAEL and *Excelencia in Education’s* 2014 publication *Random Access: The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment*, institutions often invest time and resources to offer PLA but do little to make sure that students know about it (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). A successful system-wide PLA initiative needs to make sure that students do not just hear about PLA through word of mouth.

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CONCLUSION

The efforts of Montana University System, Ohio Department of Higher Education, and the Texas A&M University System – as well as other state systems – to advance PLA adoption system-wide are representative of a larger national movement toward systemic transformations in higher education. As issues related to degree and credential completion continue to be a major national focus, shifts and innovations, such as PLA, will become an increasing

priority in states across the nation. The progress and enhancements that these three systems have made in policies, practices, awareness, and acceptance of PLA within institutions throughout their systems are indicative of the direction in which many states, systems, and postsecondary institutions are moving. It is likely that in the next several years, we can expect to see replications and enhancements of this model and continued transformations across the nation.

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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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