Linking Public Workforce Systems and Community Colleges through Prior Learning Assessment:
Learnings from a National Pilot Project

CAEL
Linking Learning and Work

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INTRODUCTION

The new economy has and will continue to demand higher level skills and credentials than we've seen in previous generations. Within the next few years the majority of jobs in the U.S. will require some type of postsecondary credential. However, less than half of adults in this country currently possess a credential beyond high school. Though they may not have a college degree to show for it, most adults have likely gained significant and valuable learning through their lifetime. Fortunately, there is a tool that accelerates adults' entry into and through postsecondary education by building on what they already know.

Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, is the process through which non-collegiate learning (such as knowledge and skills gained on the job or in the military) is evaluated for college credit. Recognizing what adults already know by awarding credit for this learning can lead them to a postsecondary credential more quickly and in a less costly way. Unfortunately, PLA has historically been a construct of higher education with little connection to other entities, such as the public workforce system, that engage adults in skill development.

Creating stronger connections between workforce development boards (WDBs), workforce system partners at American Jobs Centers (AJCs), and their local community colleges by developing cross-system PLA strategies is a win for all involved. In early 2017 CAEL (the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), through a grant from the ECMC Foundation, undertook a pilot project to do just that. The project, launched in four communities across the county, established local strategies and processes to increase the pipeline of adult learners and support college credential completion by leveraging shorter-term, non-credit training provided by the public workforce system.

This paper provides an overview of why PLA-related partnerships between the workforce system and community colleges are important when it comes to increasing credential attainment and provides considerations—surfaced through the pilot project—for other communities interested in undertaking similar work.

THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Today's knowledge-based economy demands skill development and credentials beyond high school—a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 18 of the 30 fastest growing occupations between 2016 and 2026 will require some type of postsecondary education for entry. By most estimates, within the next several years 60 – 65% of jobs will require a high-quality postsecondary credential. However, less than half of the U.S. population between the ages of 25 and 64 hold a credential beyond high school. Increasing credential and degree attainment is critical to sustaining and growing the economy at local, state, and national levels.

Though most adults have gained knowledge through work and/or life experience, many do not have a credential to show for it. To meet the projected demand, we must create more opportunities for adult learners to earn postsecondary credentials that provide the skills employers need. This means developing strategies, processes, and pathways that allow adults to obtain these credentials as efficiently as possible, removing potential roadblocks and leveraging prior learning along the way.

Recognizing what adults already know by awarding college credit for that learning moves them toward completion of a certificate or degree more quickly and in a less costly manner. Although most colleges and universities have mechanisms in place for assessing learning gained outside the classroom—a process commonly known as Prior Learning Assessment or PLA—this is not always well-known within the institution, much less beyond its walls.

In any given community, there are likely several entities such as the public workforce system that provide workforce skill development for adult learners and workers. Despite this, PLA typically exists solely within the higher education arena with limited connection to these other efforts, which represents a missed opportunity. In some cases, those workforce trainings and certifications may have already been evaluated for college credit, but partners in the community and even students may be completely unaware.

With its emphasis on postsecondary credentials and career pathways, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides a venue in which partnerships between community colleges and the public workforce system can and should promote and facilitate PLA. This can ultimately address both workforce development and college completion goals, not to mention provide a critical leverage point for working adults. Cross-system PLA strategies can help move individuals onto more efficient pathways toward postsecondary credentials, increasing the skills of the current and prospective workforce. Key components of such strategies include: 1) increasing awareness of and knowledge about PLA, 2) developing and documenting referral processes between the workforce system and higher education, and 3) mapping (or "crosswalking") non-credit training to credit-bearing courses and programs.

About Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

Prior Learning Assessment, commonly referred to as PLA or credit for prior learning, is the process through which college-level learning acquired from sources such as work and life experience, non-credit or professional training and industry certifications, on-the-job training, military training, or open source learning is evaluated for college credit.

PLA helps adults understand the value of their experience, which boosts their confidence to complete their degrees. Students with PLA credit are two-and-a-half times more likely to graduate than their peers without PLA credit— regardless of race/ethnicity, age, financial aid status, or gender . Those students also tend to higher GPA's, higher persistence rates and a shorter time to degree completion.

Graduation and Completion

2X

Baccalaureate students are 2.5X more likely to persist to graduation

Associates students are 2X more likely to persist to graduation

[1] Klein-Collins, Rebecca. "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes." Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010.

For the full report and more details about the benefits of PLA for students and institutions, please see: http://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/617695/premium_content_resources/pla/PDF/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf

Connecting Systems through PLA Strategies Benefits All

Strong connections between community colleges, WDBs, and workforce system partners at AJCs are necessary to establish postsecondary pathways aligned with regional industry demand. Though they tend to work together frequently, the relationship between local public workforce systems and community colleges is often transactional in nature. Even in instances where the degree of partnership is substantial and strategic, it typically involves non-credit or workforce/professional development departments of the college rather than the academic side of the institution. Consequently, creating valuable learning experiences for the worker, but falling short of connecting that learning to a certificate or degree pathway.

Strengthening relationships between the public workforce system and their community college counterparts through intentional PLA strategies creates a win-win scenario—it provides greater opportunity to students and jobseekers, addresses performance metrics, and benefits employers struggling to find individuals who possess the skills and credentials they need. Additionally, it makes worker trainings and experiences even more valuable by adding the possibility of building an accelerated postsecondary pathway on the knowledge and skills they impart. Connecting these two systems through the development of PLA strategies bridges the gap between workforce training and college credit in high-demand occupational areas, leading to a talented labor pool with the credentials demanded by employers.

Through such efforts, local workforce systems and colleges are better positioned to help adult, dislocated, and incumbent workers substantially accelerate their postsecondary credential attainment by leveraging their work-based learning, military experience, and skills and credentials earned through shorter-term training for college credit. This pathways approach can help workforce system participants obtain credentials leading to higher-wage, high-demand jobs in a faster and less costly way, as well as facilitate better alignment between workforce boards and colleges in developing more comprehensive career pathways in the long run.

By engaging with colleges around PLA, workforce system and AJC partners will be better positioned and prepared to:

- ✓ Communicate the value (in wage opportunities, available positions, and job security) of postsecondary credentials in attainment of employment goals,

- ✓ Identify WIOA-supported training and other job seeker experiences (e.g. on-the-job training) that provide college-level learning and can be assessed for college credit,

- ✓ Facilitate the connection between customers with such learning and colleges that are poised to offer college credits for it, and

- ✓ Serve employer customers by increasing the number of workers with high-quality credentials as well as validating employer-provided training and industry certifications by linking them to college credit.

How do PLA strategies benefit the workforce system and workforce system customers?

Assessment of prior learning has been highlighted by the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration as an effective strategy for increasing post-secondary credential attainment, even prior the advent of WIOA. For example, TEGL 33-11 references PLA as a strategy for improving the effectiveness of workforce programs, providing guidance to "assess prior learning experiences to help adults and dislocated workers obtain academic credit for independently attained knowledge and skills, thereby accelerating the process for credential attainment."

WIOA sec. 101(d)(6) directs State WDBs to assist in the identification and dissemination of best practices including "the development of effective training programs that support efficient placement of individuals into employment or career pathways and that respond to real-time labor market analysis; that effectively use direct assessment and prior learning assessment to measure an individual's prior knowledge, skills, competencies, and experiences; and that evaluate such skills and competencies for adaptability."

In summary:

Prior Learning Assessment:

- Saves time and money
- Leads to post-secondary credential attainment more quickly and cost-effectively
- Boosts self-confidence by valuing learning gained outside the classroom
- Increases persistence to graduation
- Provides seamless pathways to upskill the workforce
- Adds value to non-credit workforce system and employer-supported training

⊘ PLA supports performance indicators such as credential attainment, measurable skill gains, and employer satisfaction.

⊘ Having WIOA training participants' prior learning—gained through work experience, on-the-job training, classroom training, volunteering, and beyond—assessed for credit can result in cost-savings by reducing tuition expenses and avoids allocating resources to pay for learning that the training participant already knows.

⊘ Assessment of prior learning expediates attainment of high-value credentials that can lead to higher-wage jobs.

⊘ PLA is especially valuable for adult learners, dislocated workers, and veterans—allowing them to earn credit for what they already know and recognizing the skills, knowledge, and experience they bring to the table. This builds confidence, increases positive outcomes, and enhances their ability to connect time spent in the classroom with their professional worlds.

How do PLA strategies benefit community colleges and students?

PLA is helpful to colleges in that it increases persistence to graduation and the number of credits students take at the institution. Developing cross-system PLA strategies is an excellent complement to recruitment and retention strategies, providing a source of new students with career-oriented attainment goals. Beyond that, establishing crosswalks between WDB-supported training and college courses makes the process of awarding PLA credit to students who have completed these trainings far less burdensome for both the college and for those individuals seeking credit.

Generally, assessing prior learning provides numerous benefits to both colleges and students, for example:

✓ PLA can play a significant role in enrollment and retention strategies – students who undertake prior learning assessment are much more likely to stay enrolled and persist to graduation.

✓ Students who utilize PLA complete more tuition-bearing, faculty-taught courses at the college than their non-PLA peers.

✓ PLA moves students towards graduation much more quickly than if students needed to take courses for knowledge they already possess.

✓ While federal financial aid often does not pay for assessment fees, the potential utilization of WIOA funds could offset both tuition costs and assessment fees.

✓ Such strategies allow colleges to demonstrate to potential employers in the area that a steady, reliable stream of graduates can be produced through this program with expertise in specific industry sectors. Training and on-the-job experiences already provided by those employers can be directly evaluated for credit as well.

LINKING WORKFORCE BOARDS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES THROUGH PLA STRATEGIES: A PILOT PROJECT

In February 2017 CAEL selected, through a competitive application process, four workforce board and community college partnerships to participate in this ECMC Foundation-funded pilot project. These partnerships—in Philadelphia, Hampton Roads (VA), Miami, and Seattle—worked with CAEL to create, and implement PLA strategies designed to accelerate attainment of postsecondary credits leading to college credentials relevant to the local economy.

Over an 18-month period, CAEL provided strategy guidance, training, and process development and improvement support around referring current workforce system customers/prospective students to the colleges' PLA processes. One of the key foundational efforts was to generate broader system-wide knowledge of, support for, and policies to promote PLA as a method for increasing post-secondary credential attainment for workforce system participants.

Pilot sites engaged in PLA professional development opportunities for frontline staff, unit supervisors, and high-level leaders from both the workforce system and colleges; process mapping of workforce system customer flow and college PLA processes; the creation and documentation of new PLA referral processes (from the workforce system centers to the college); and the development of crosswalks from workforce system-provided non-credit training offered through Individual Training Accounts (ITAs) and other WDB-supported training to credit-bearing college courses/programs.

Project outcomes included:

✓ A greater understanding of PLA among WDBs, AJC operators, WIOA providers, community college staff, and other community organizations

✓ Established frameworks for analysis of ITA activity for assessment of college-level learning

✓ Greater collaboration among key stakeholders at institutions and the regions' workforce system

✓ Increased promotion of PLA as a tool to facilitate postsecondary attainment

✓ Established processes for identifying creditable learning and connecting AJC customers to the colleges' PLA process

About the Pilot Site Partners

Hampton Roads, VA

The Hampton Roads Workforce Development Board is responsible for developing workforce policy and administering workforce development initiatives in Virginia's Workforce Investment Area 16, which includes these localities: Chesapeake, Franklin, Isle of Wight, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Southampton, Suffolk, and Virginia Beach. The Board conducts its operations through the "Opportunity Inc." organization.

Opportunity Inc. oversees federally funded workforce development programs, which assist businesses in accessing qualified workers and jobseekers in finding suitable job openings and bolstering their earning power through training.

opp-inc.org

Founded in 1968 as a part of the Virginia Community College System, Tidewater Community College (TCC) serves South Hampton Roads with 4 campuses in Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach and 7 regional centers. TCC is the largest provider of higher education and workforce services in Hampton Roads, enrolling more than 34,000 students in 2016-17, and the 14th largest public 2-year community college in the entire nation.

www.tcc.edu

Miami, FL

CareerSource South Florida is responsible for initiating state and federally funded workforce development programs in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. CareerSource South Florida assists employers and job seekers with employment services, labor market information, and provide training for economically disadvantaged adults, youth, dislocated workers, and other individuals transitioning from welfare to work, and refugees.

www.careersourcesfl.com

Founded in 1960, Miami Dade College is now the largest institution of higher education in the country – with eight campuses offering more than 300 educational pathways to a career and more than 165,000 enrollments. Miami Dade College changes lives through accessible, high-quality teaching and learning experiences. The College embraces its responsibility to serve as an economic, cultural, and civic leader for the advancement of a diverse global community.

www.mdc.edu

Philadelphia, PA

Philadelphia Works serves employers and career seekers in Philadelphia. As a non-profit organization, it funds and oversees employment and training services to help Philadelphia employers access the talent they need to be competitive. Investments in training and employment readiness solutions are informed by relationships with businesses and an understanding of their needs. These solutions enable youth and adults to find and qualify for work. Through its service delivery partners, Philadelphia Works connects employers to workforce talent and career seekers to jobs while maintaining the highest standards and accountability for these investments.

www.philaworks.org

Community College of Philadelphia is an open-admission, associate-degree-granting institution which provides access to higher education for all who may benefit. Its programs of study in the liberal arts and sciences, career technologies, and basic academic skills provide a coherent foundation for college transfer, employment, and lifelong learning. As the largest public institution of higher education in the city, the college serves Philadelphia by preparing its students to be informed and concerned citizens, active participants in the cultural life of the city, and enabled to meet the changing needs of business, industry, and the professions.

www.ccp.edu

Seattle, WA

The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County is a nonprofit workforce, grant-making organization that oversees employment-related programs for youth, the adult workforce, and employers in Seattle and King County, with the goal of a strong economy and self-sufficiency for every resident.

www.seakingwdc.org

Seattle Colleges offer workforce education and training, professional-technical programs, bachelor's degrees in career areas and transfer degree programs to nearly 50,000 students each year. We are committed to endless possibilities and strong support for student success because we all benefit when everyone has a lifetime of opportunity. South Seattle College overlooks downtown Seattle and Elliott Bay from an 87-acre wooded campus in West Seattle. The college is home to the Northwest Wine Academy and pioneered the nationally-recognized I-BEST curriculum for non-native speakers.

www.southseattle.edu/

Considerations and Recommendations for Partnerships Interested in Replicating Pilot Activities

Pilot sites engaged in numerous activities throughout the duration of this project, all intended to enhance the existing partnership between the local workforce system and community college, increase awareness of PLA, streamline current and develop new processes and policies, build more educational pathways, and increase opportunities for residents. These efforts—process mapping being a prime example—are inherently valuable to individual entities, but the greatest benefits for pilot sites were realized because the work facilitated meaningful systems change and built a new bridge between the partner organizations.

This is no small task, to be sure. Undertaking such work requires time and dedication from leadership, staff, and faculty, which can be difficult in the face of competing priorities. Beyond that, it is complicated to make changes within one system, let alone two—but it can be done. Learnings from the pilot project have informed the recommendations and considerations presented below to help other communities move toward developing and implementing cross-system PLA strategies.

I. Develop Processes and Policies that Make PLA Accessible

Not only do processes and policies that support adult credential attainment need to be seamless and effective, they also need to be clearly communicated to the customers, prospective students, and staff who engage with them. All too often colleges have either complicated and restrictive PLA processes and policies, which ultimately discourage utilization, or excellent and cohesive processes that largely exist under the radar for students whom they would benefit. Here are some actions college and workforce system partners can take to navigate from an incomplete or nebulous process to something more streamlined and consistent.

- **Map Existing Processes:** Mapping both the workforce system customer flow and the college PLA process is extremely valuable, as it clearly lays out all steps the individual must go through and highlights process inefficiencies or disconnects. It also shows where referral or connection points most naturally occur. This exercise is best conducted by engaging representatives from each department, office, or level that plays a role in supporting or interacting with the customer or student. Generating theses process maps also allows representatives of each entity to better understand the other and come together to create and map a referral process from the workforce system to the college's PLA process.

Process Mapping in Action

This is a draft map of the PLA referral process developed between Opportunity, Inc. and Tidewater Community College. Mapping the process as it was initially envisioned allowed them to identify potential and exisiting disconnects and create process improvements. Process maps are living, breathing documents that should be revisited and updated over time.
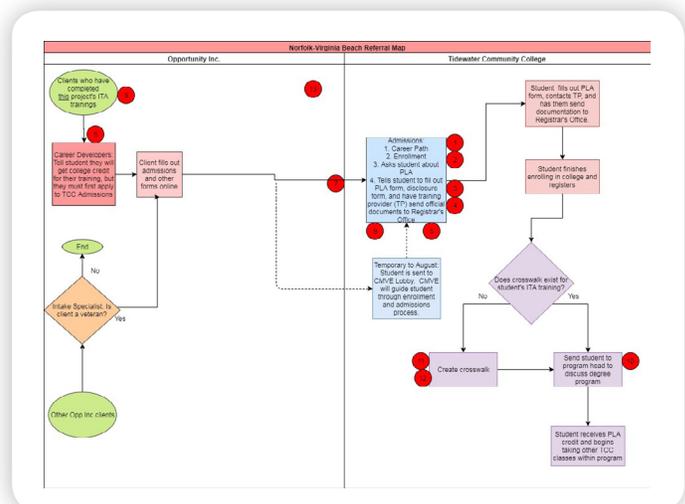
- **Review and Enhance Existing Policies:** Review existing PLA polces at the college as well as training and/or supportive services policies at the WDB, looking for opportunities to enhance existing or create new policies that better support adult attainment, increase user-friendliness, and reduce restrictiveness. For example, since federal financial aid typically does not cover the cost of PLA, a WDB might amend their supportive services policy to include PLA fees for eligible customers. Put policy changes in place and communicate them readily.

II. Develop and Promote Crosswalks from Non-Credit Training to For-Credit College Courses

WDB Eligible Training Provider Lists (ETPL) may contain both non-credit and credit-bearing offerings; the mix can vary widely from one WDB to another. Developing crosswalks in high-demand occupational areas and, beyond that, ensuring that workforce system staff are aware of existing crosswalks provides additional opportunities to customers. Crosswalks are based on the evaluation of training content itself rather than on an individual's learning, so these opportunities to earn credit are easier to promote in that there is more of a "guarantee".

- **Work Together to Identify Non-Credit to Credit Crosswalk Opportunities:** Build more comprehensive regional career pathways by identifying non-credit WDB-supported training that aligns with credit-bearing courses and programs at the college. For example, a non-credit IT training may map to one or more courses inside an associate degree program. This helps create a seamless transition from a shorter-term non-credit training to a college certificate or degree, allowing students to avoid taking classes that cover what they already know.

- **Promote Existing Crosswalks:** Many colleges have already gone through the process of mapping short-term non-credit training and, even more likely, industry certifications to college credit. However, students and partner organizations are not necessarily aware that these crosswalks already exist. Colleges should regularly communicate and promote this information to workforce system partners and students. The workforce system may provide and/or work with customers that hold certifications that have already been mapped to credit.

PLA-Friendly WIOA Policy Changes

The Workforce Development Council of Seattle-King County made a minor amendment to its Supportive Services policy to include assessment costs, which applies to PLA fees (see 4.A.xii.8."Assistance with work and training related costs and fees, including licenses, permits, certifications, and assessments.")

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53c04ba6e4b0012ad48d079e/t/5b05ee44562fa7b63cd5d176/1527115337193/Policy+04-2001_SupportiveServices_V9_0524-2018_EC-Final.pdf

Sample Crosswalk Framework

Here is a snapshot of a framework colleges can use for verifying and documenting mapping between an industry certification or non-credit training and credit-bearing courses. In this case, a retired IT certification was being crosswalked to the learning outcomes of a 200-level CIS course at the Community College of Philadelphia. (Please note that this example is for instructional purposes only and is not an official document. Contact the College for further information on existing approved crosswalks.)

III. Invest in Cross-Organizational Professional Development and PLA Awareness Materials

PLA is often a best-kept secret within institutions of higher education, so it's no wonder that external partners may not be aware of what it is or how to access it. Staff, faculty, customers, and students (or prospective students) need to be made aware of PLA opportunities and how they can benefit them. Promotion is critical. Don't assume that because you've developed a process customers, students, staff, or partners will know about and be able to benefit from it. Make sure information is documented and shared.

- **Provide Cross-Organizational Professional Development:** Engaging individuals across multiple levels from both the workforce system—WDB staff, providers, and AJC operators—and the college in shared professional development about PLA offers a host of benefits. It allows partners to develop a shared and common understanding of what PLA is and how to identify potential PLA candidates. It also provides them an opportunity to get to know one another better.

- **Develop Co-Branded Outreach Materials:** Developing co-branded external-facing outreach materials about PLA opportunities and processes helps memorialize this information and spread consistent messaging. Such collateral materials are useful to workforce center staff, serving as a quick reference for general information and are a helpful takeaway for customers.

Co-Branded Outreach Materials

Miami Dade College and CareerSource South Florida put together an informative tri-fold borchure to serve as a resoruce for both workforce system customers and staff. Not only does the brochure provide a good overview of PLA and why it could be a good option for customers, it directs them to a contact at the college.

- **Create Internal-Facing Informational Materials and Tools:** Create guidance and supporting documents like "cheat sheets", Desk Aids, and forms regarding PLA, the referral process, and ideal candidates for frontline workforce system and college staff. These reference materials can and should be reinforced with continued professional development opportunities, in staff meetings, and organizational communications.

Resources for the Field

All sites created some internal guidance regarding PLA and the referral process; some also created PLA referral forms designed to gather information at the workforce system center that could be transmitted to the college. The examples provided here come from Seattle and Miami. Seattle created a Referral for PLA Credit Desk Aid that was communicated to the field through staff meetings and their WorkSource System Bulletin. Miami created a PLA methods "cheat sheet" and intake form along with the referral guide you see here.

IV. Don't Underestimate the Value of Partnership and the Work Required for Systems Change

It is critical to give time and attention to relationship building between the organizations, which itself is among the biggest payoffs—this was true even for project pilot sites, which already had good working relationships. Even in the best circumstances, local public workforce systems and community colleges are two very different systems with different cultures, structures, hierarchies, missions, priorities, and processes; it takes time for each side to learn these differences, let alone to coordinate with them.

- **Engage and Get Buy-in from All Levels:** Changing policies and process is no easy task. And change often comes slowly. Engage individuals from the leadership level all the way to frontline customer/student-facing staff. Support from the leadership level will help institutionalize these changes and engaging staff who are impacted by these changes will help ensure that they are put into practice.

- **Relationship Building is Valuable Work:** Emphasis on the word work! Create opportunities to work together to solve problems, create and improve processes, and participate in interactive professional development. This type of engagement may take people away from their regular work duties, but it's much more impactful than the occasional email or phone call.

ABOUT CAEL

CAEL is a national non-profit organization, headquartered in Chicago, that links learning and work. CAEL's workforce and economic development endeavors are grounded in the belief that economic prosperity and inclusive growth occurs when the full range of community members have opportunity and access to learning and meaningful employment; when employers can expand unencumbered by the availability of talent; and when the public education and workforce development systems are proactive and additive to the efforts of both.

www.cael.org

ABOUT ECMC FOUNDATION

Based in Los Angeles, ECMC Foundation is a national foundation that makes investments in postsecondary programs and initiatives. It is one of several affiliates under the ECMC Group Enterprise based in Minneapolis, which together work to help students succeed. The Foundation's mission is to inspire and to facilitate improvements that affect educational outcomes —especially among underserved populations—through evidence-based innovation.

www.ecmcfoundation.org