MAKING PLA COUNT IN THE DEGREE PLAN:
What Happens When Students Have Flexibility in Applying Their "Prior Learning" to All Types of Degree Requirements

INTRODUCTION

Prior learning assessment (PLA) offers students a way to earn college credit for what they have learned outside the classroom through work, military, and life experiences. PLA can be an important offering at colleges and universities because adult students with extra-institutional learning can save time and money while persisting towards their degree. However, some institutions dampen the potential impact of PLA by placing limits on the number of allowable credits earned through PLA or by placing limits on the types of degree requirements that PLA can fulfill.

This research brief focuses on what happens when students *do* have the ability to apply PLA credits to the different parts of their degree, and not just limited to elective credits. Data from students and partner colleges of CAEL's LearningCounts™ program, an online portfolio assessment service, show that opening the door to flexible use of PLA credits is not a meaningless policy change. Adult learners often have acquired a wide range of learning, including the kind of specialized knowledge or skills that can even fulfill major requirements. Flexible institutional policies that allow students to apply PLA credit more broadly can therefore help to maximize the impact of PLA on student academic success.
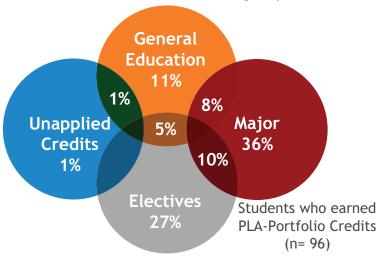
LEARNINGCOUNTS STUDENTS, PLA, AND DEGREE PLANS

To find out how students use their PLA credits, CAEL examined the experiences of students participating in our LearningCounts program. CAEL surveyed the students who earned PLA credit through the program's portfolio assessment process to learn how their PLA credits were applied to their degree program. Responding students were enrolled at sixteen different institutions at the time of their engagement with LearningCounts. We supplemented this self-reported student data with an examination of the actual student records provided by six of the participating LearningCounts institutions.
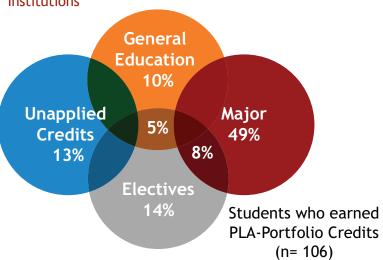
Among the surveyed LearningCounts students responding to the survey, about one-quarter (27%) reported using their portfolio credits for satisfying only elective credits, but more than half (54%) said that they applied at least some of their portfolio credits to major requirements, and 23% said that they applied PLA credits in multiple ways (8% used credits for both general education and major requirements, 10% applied credits to major requirements and electives, 5% applied credits to general education requirements and electives). Only one respondent (1%) reported not being able to use any of the PLA-portfolio credits for their degrees (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How Surveyed LearningCounts Students Report Applying Their Portfolio Credits by Degree Plan Requirement, with Representation of Sixteen Different Partner Institutions Among Respondents

General Education 11%
Unapplied Credits 1%
1%
5%
8%
Major 36%
10%
Electives 27%
Students who earned PLA-Portfolio Credits (n= 96)

When we examined actual student records provided by a subset of six LearningCounts partner institutions, we see a similar pattern in how students applied their PLA-portfolio credits to their degree plans. Again, more than half (54%) of LearningCounts students used at least some of their portfolio credits to satisfy major requirements, while 14% of students applied their portfolio credit to only electives. Similar to the student self-reports, 23% of students in the sample applied their portfolio credits to multiple types of degree requirements (5% applied them to both general education requirements and electives, 8% applied them to general education and major requirements, and 10% applied them to electives and major requirements) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: LearningCounts Students' Actual Application of Portfolio Credits by Degree Plan Requirement, Using Student Record Data from Six Participating Institutions

General Education 10%

Unapplied Credits 13%

Major 49%

5%

8%

Electives 14%

Students who earned PLA-Portfolio Credits (n= 106)

CONCLUSION

This research brief shows that when students have the freedom to apply their PLA credit in many ways, they do. We also see evidence that adult students often have specialized learning from their life and work that is equivalent to the learning required for their majors. By ensuring that PLA credits allow for this flexibility in how degree requirements can be met, colleges and universities unlock the full impact of PLA for adult students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHAT IS PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

Prior learning is a term used by educators to describe learning that a person acquires outside of a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a term used to describe the process by which an individual's experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA and, when properly conducted, all ensure academic quality: (1) national standardized exams in specified disciplines, e.g., Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Excelsior College Exams (UExcel), Dantes Subject Standardized Tests (DSST); (2) challenge exams for institutional courses; (3) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments such as those conducted by colleges and CAEL's LearningCounts national on-line service; and (4) evaluated non-college programs, e.g., the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or American Council on Education's ACECREDIT service and evaluations of corporate training and military training.