Office of Operations Review and Audit

Program Review

CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Wisconsin (UW) System Office of Operations Review and Audit reviewed UW institutions' practices related to evaluating and providing credit for non-traditional students' prior learning outside the classroom, known as prior learning assessment (PLA). Formal programs for evaluating prior learning began in the United States during World War II and have grown such that national research indicates that approximately 50 percent of all colleges and universities now offer some form of PLA. As part of UW System's strategic framework, Advantage Wisconsin, a cross-campus team known as "Think Tank #2" recommended in March 2008 that UW institutions "adopt uniform policies that encourage the awarding of credit for prior experience for older returning students" as a way of increasing the number of graduates and expanding educational opportunities.

Objectives of Prior Learning Assessment in the UW System

PLA can be used to meet various objectives for both students and UW institutions. PLA can reduce the time and cost for students to earn a degree, provide an incentive for non-traditional students to begin or finish a degree, and provide more flexibility and control to students. At the same time, PLA can serve as a tool for institutions to attract students consistent with their academic missions and help institutions meet enrollment goals. Whereas the number of high school graduates in Wisconsin is expected to decrease by 14 percent between 2008 and 2015, the number of adults ages 22 through 65 in Wisconsin is expected to grow over the next five years by approximately 100,000. Offering PLA is seen as a way to increase enrollment among this growing segment of the population.

Prior Learning Assessment Methods

Although we requested data on the extent to which PLA options were used at UW institutions, it was difficult to make comparisons among the institutions that responded due to differing definitions of the different types of PLA, inconsistent record keeping or a lack of reporting to the registrar, an inability to track PLA usage at all levels of the institution, and a general lack of prioritization of tracking PLA usage due to its limited use at many institutions.

PLA methods generally fall into three categories: credit by examination, portfolio-based assessment, and other non-examination options. Credit by examination includes tests created and offered by individual academic departments, as well as nationally recognized examinations offered by third parties, such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). Students who score at or above a minimum level on these tests are deemed to have already obtained academic knowledge in the subject area and receive credit.

Through portfolio-based assessment, students document evidence of prior learning in order to make a convincing case to faculty that knowledge intended to be imparted through certain course requirements and/or electives has already been gained. Faculty then has full discretion to decide whether to award credit for the prior learning demonstrated through the portfolio. Eight UW institutions currently allow some form of portfolio-based assessment, and UW Colleges is

considering the use of portfolios as a model for assessing prior learning at its 13 campuses. Before the use of portfolio-based assessment can be expanded, faculty and student perceptions and potential accreditation issues will need to be taken into consideration. For example, faculty may perceive that portfolios lack academic rigor, whereas students may perceive that the effort to compile a portfolio is too significant without a guarantee of receiving credit.

Other non-examination options include such things as the evaluation of military transcripts and informal assessment of a student's work experience or professional certifications.

Administrative and Programmatic Challenges

Several factors influence the successful implementation of PLA at UW institutions. First, students may have difficulty transferring PLA credits among UW institutions. UW-Superior is the only UW institution that accepts transfer credit for prior learning earned through portfolio-based assessment. Likewise, credits received from a standardized examination may not transfer among UW institutions as each sets its own minimum score requirements. Transferability is also affected by the lack of consistent transcript notation standards for PLA, which may vary even within an institution.

If PLA activities increase at UW institutions, the cost of implementing them may become an issue as both faculty and administrative staff devote effort to evaluating or facilitating requests for PLA. Although some institutions charge students fees, such as for evaluating portfolios, these fees may not reflect the amount of time involved in processing PLA requests. In addition to these implementation costs, training for faculty in PLA methods may also be necessary if institutions desire to increase the use and acceptance of PLA.

Finally, promoting PLA among students and prospective students would be necessary to increase its utilization. Targeting special populations, such as veterans, minorities, or adults working in local businesses, may be the best use of limited promotional resources. All administrative and programmatic challenges will need to be considered in the context of the UW System faculty governance structure, funding constraints, and each institution's unique mission and demographics.

SCOPE

The University of Wisconsin (UW) System Office of Operations Review and Audit reviewed UW institutions' practices related to evaluating and providing credit for students' prior learning outside the classroom, known as prior learning assessment (PLA). As part of UW System's strategic framework, Advantage Wisconsin, a cross-campus team known as "Think Tank #2" recommended in March 2008 that UW institutions "adopt uniform policies that encourage the awarding of credit for prior experience for older returning students" as a way of increasing the number of graduates and expanding educational opportunities.[1] In 2009, the statewide Making Opportunity Affordable initiative also identified credit for prior learning as a strategy for non-traditional students to reduce the amount of time for degree completion as well as increase the number of students who receive degrees.[2]

Consistent with these recommendations, the primary scope of this review focused on PLA for non-traditional students. Consequently, PLA methods that typically apply to traditional or high school students—such as Advanced Placement (AP) exams, International Baccalaureate (IB) exams, and retroactive credits at the high school level—were considered beyond the scope of this review. These methods were the subject of a previous report issued by our office in March 2002 entitled *High School Special Programs*.

In completing this review, we worked with the UW System Office of Academic Affairs to identify system-wide issues related to PLA; reviewed UW System and institution PLA policies; and interviewed faculty, department chairs, staff in admissions offices, students who were awarded credit through PLA, and representatives of other institutions of higher learning. We also spoke with representatives from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and other national non-profit organizations involved in the research or implementation of PLA programs.

BACKGROUND

CAEL defines PLA as "the evaluation for college credit of the knowledge and skills one gains from life experiences (or from non-college instructional programs) including employment, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service."[3] Although definitional differences regarding PLA may exist within academia, the definition provided by CAEL is the most commonly accepted among institutions of higher education and within the research literature. While traditional students are not precluded from using PLA methods, the nature of PLA results in it primarily impacting non-traditional students.

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[1] University of Wisconsin System Administration. "Think Tank #2: More Graduates Report." The UW System's Strategic Framework to Advantage Wisconsin. Madison: University of Wisconsin System, 2008.
[2] University of Wisconsin System Administration. *Making Opportunity Affordable-Wisconsin: Planning Year Update*. Madison: University of Wisconsin System, 2009. <http://moawisconsin.org/docs/MOA-WI_Spring_09_Summary.pdf>
[3] Wertheim, Judith. *Advancing towards a College Degree through Prior Learning Assessment*. Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2007. <http://www.cael.org/powerpoints/CAEL%20PLA%20Webinar%20112707.ppt>

PLA is not typically characterized by one method but rather consists of an array of methods that fall into three broad categories:

- *Credit by Examination*: This includes exams created and offered by individual academic departments, as well as nationally recognized exams offered by third parties.

- *Portfolio-based Assessment*: This method allows students to develop summaries of their out-of-classroom experience that can then be assessed to determine if academic knowledge has been acquired.

- *Other Non-examination Options*: These include both formal and informal assessment of a student's military, work, and other life experience.

The use of these tools has changed over time in accordance with the needs of students and institutions of higher learning.

History and Development of Prior Learning Assessment

In the United States, formal programs for assessing prior learning began during World War II. During this time, the General Educational Development (GED) examination was introduced to assess and recognize learning equivalent to a high school degree. Following the war, the federal government significantly increased educational assistance to veterans resulting in a dramatic increase in adult learners at institutions of higher learning. In response, the American Council on Education (ACE) provided guidelines and recommendations to higher education institutions on how to assess prior learning that students had acquired through their military service.

As the number of non-traditional students continues to expand, institutions have responded by offering new degree programs targeted to this population and developing testing options and other forms of assessment to determine academic equivalencies. In March 2010, CAEL estimated that approximately 50 percent of all colleges and universities offered some form of PLA. However, CAEL also noted that many students were not aware of these options due to the extent to which their availability was communicated.[4]

As students become more aware of PLA options, interest is expected to increase. For example, a survey conducted by the College Board indicated that non-traditional students rated credit for prior learning as more important than small class sizes or the availability of financial aid.[5] In addition, recent market research shows that students are more likely to choose an institution if it offers PLA.[6]

CAEL research also indicates that use of PLA may be an indicator of future academic success. After controlling for a number of demographic and institutional factors, 56 percent of students in CAEL's study who earned credit through PLA received a postsecondary degree as compared to

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[4] Lederman, Doug. "The Prior Learning Edge." *Inside Higher Ed.* March 1, 2010.

[5] Tate, Pamela. *Recognizing Prior Learning in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*. Chicago: Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000.

[6] Harms, Brenda. *2009 Stamats Adult StudentsTALK Study*. Cedar Rapids: Stamats, 2009.

21 percent of students who did not receive PLA credit. CAEL found that students who received credits through PLA needed less time to earn their degrees than students without PLA credits.[7]

Standards for Guiding Prior Learning Assessment

In 1989, adult learning educator Urban Whitaker established 10 quality standards that dealt with academic policies and administrative procedures for institutions involved in PLA activities. These standards were modified by CAEL in 2006 and are now used as benchmarks for PLA programs nationally.[8] The first five standards focus on academic policies:

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.

The last five standards address administrative procedures intended to ensure quality in granting credit for PLA:

6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

While these standards are non-binding on the UW System, they are frequently cited as guiding principles for implementing and evaluating PLA within the adult learning community at UW institutions.

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

[8] Whitaker, Urban. *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures for Good Practice*. Philadelphia: Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 1989.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific issues identified and discussed in this review include: (1) objectives of prior learning assessment in the UW System; (2) PLA methods used at UW System institutions; and (3) administrative and programmatic challenges in the development and delivery of PLA, including possible strategies for coordination and collaboration throughout the UW System.

OBJECTIVES OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT IN THE UW SYSTEM

Earning credit for prior learning is not a new concept in the UW System. Recent research conducted for UW-Whitewater indicates that different forms of PLA have been available to students at some UW institutions since at least the 1970s.[9] Institutions that have a higher proportion of non-traditional students tend to emphasize the prominence of credit for prior learning as compared to institutions that primarily serve traditional students. Officials at UW institutions indicated that providing credits to non-traditional students to recognize their prior learning gives them an incentive to begin or finish a degree. In addition, campus officials noted that PLA can help to reduce time and cost for the student by eliminating the need to take a lower division course, meet certain professional credentials for advancement in a profession, free up classroom space for other students, and give more flexibility and control to the student.

Depending upon the institution's use of PLA, credit can be used to meet elective requirements, program/major requirements, and course prerequisites, as well as to qualify students for advanced standing. To a lesser extent, PLA is also used as a prerequisite for graduate or other special academic programs.

In terms of broader, strategic objectives, UW officials noted that PLA can be used to attract students based on the institution's overall academic mission. For example, at UW-Superior, PLA is used as a tool to attract students from Minnesota to the university. At UW-Stout, PLA is intended to help attract students and support the institution's focus on technical disciplines by awarding credit in the computer sciences, engineering, and other technology-oriented areas.

PLA can also be used to help stabilize or meet enrollment goals. As part of the UW System's strategic framework, Advantage Wisconsin, credit for prior learning was identified in March 2008 among the methods to address enrollment concerns related to the decreasing numbers of high school graduates in Wisconsin, which could have an impact on enrollment at UW institutions. The number of high school graduates is expected to decrease by 14 percent between 2008 and 2015.[10] In contrast to this trend, the number of adults ages 22 through 65 in Wisconsin is expected to grow over the next five years by approximately 100,000, representing an enrollment opportunity for this segment of the population. After 2015, this cohort is expected to remain stable through year 2020 with a total population of 3.5 million people.[11]

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[9] Smith, Lauren. *Credit for Prior Learning: Approaches and Best Practices to Portfolio Assessment.* Whitewater: 2009.
[10] Applied Population Laboratory. *Wisconsin High School Graduate Projections 2008-2019.* Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008.
[11] Egan-Robertson, David. *State Age-Sex Population Projections by Single Years, 2005-2020.* State of Wisconsin, Department of Administration, Demographic Services Center, 2008. <http://www.doa.state.wi.us/docview.asp?docid=7436&locid=9>

The number of non-traditional students throughout the UW System currently represents about 18.7 percent of the total student population. Although this percentage has remained fairly constant throughout the previous ten years, it has fluctuated within each institution. Appendix A provides more detail on this trend by UW institution.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT METHODS

The assessment tools used within the UW System are reflective of longstanding methods used by institutions of higher learning throughout the United States. These methods can be separated into three categories: (1) credit by examination, (2) portfolio-based assessment, and (3) other non-examination options. Appendix B summarizes the current use of PLA at each UW institution.

As part of our review, we requested data from each UW institution on the number of students awarded credit, including the number of credits awarded, by assessment method, from 2006-07 through 2008-09. Nine institutions responded to our request by providing data that was readily available to them. However, it was difficult to make comparisons among the institutions due to the ways they categorized the different types of PLA, inconsistent record keeping or a lack of reporting to the registrar, an inability to track PLA usage at all levels of the institution, and a general lack of prioritization of tracking PLA usage due to its limited use at many institutions. Officials noted that there was no purpose in tracking the information unless it would be used with some well-defined end in mind.

However, several registrars noted that because of the increased interest in PLA within the UW System, they would be reexamining the need to collect and document PLA activity by method over time. Institutions may also need to collect this data due to new federal rules that require institutions to demonstrate to accrediting organizations how PLA activity meets the definition of credit hour. [12] ***We recommend that all UW institutions document the awarding of credit by PLA method, and that a uniform process and format be developed by the UW System Office of Academic Affairs for collecting, recording, and reporting this data.*** As interest in using PLA increases, the success of any new initiatives cannot be measured, nor program modifications made, without basic data collection procedures in place.

Credit by Examination

Testing options are typically considered the most straightforward method of assessing prior learning, and all UW System degree-granting institutions award college credit through some form of examination. Table 1 summarizes the various characteristics of PLA examination programs offered within the UW System. The four examination options are all intended to assess learning and knowledge gained outside the classroom. Three of these options are national examinations, and one is developed at each institution's departmental level.

[12] "Program Integrity Issues, Final Rule." *Federal Register* 75:209 (October 29, 2010): pp. 66832-66975.

Table 1: Credit by Examination Options at UW System Institutions

PROGRAM	College Level Examination Program (CLEP)	DANTES* Subject Standardized Tests (DSST)	Excelsior Exams	Departmental Exams
Content	33 examinations in 5 subject areas, including composition and literature, foreign languages, history and the social sciences, natural sciences and math, and business	37 examinations in social science, business, mathematics, applied technology, humanities, and physical science	51 examinations in arts and sciences, business, nursing, and education	Specific to an individual department or course within a department
Prevalence	Offered at more than 2,900 colleges and universities nationwide. Credits accepted at all UW degree-granting institutions.	Offered at more than 1,900 colleges and universities nationwide. Credits accepted at six UW institutions.	Limited use at UW institutions. Utilized primarily by nursing programs.	Occurs, but usage has not been consistently documented by UW institutions.
Cost per Exam	$77	$80	$235 to $335	Typically very minimal or no cost

* Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES)

These examination options are used to varying degrees within the UW System:

- *College Level Examination Program (CLEP)*: Within the UW System, each institution decides which CLEP tests it will allow to substitute for which of its courses, as well as the score needed to receive the credits. Each institution also specifies when the credits may be earned, such as within the first 16 credits of college coursework, and the maximum number of credits that can be granted. Some institutions, such as UW-Milwaukee, do not restrict when credits can be earned or the maximum number of credits. The use of CLEP among UW institutions varies significantly. For example, UW-Oshkosh reported awarding 180 credits under CLEP to 45 non-traditional students in 2008-09. By contrast, UW-Madison reported awarding 7 CLEP credits to 2 students.

- *DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST)*: DSST examinations were developed by an organization within the Department of Defense known as Defense Activity for Non-

Traditional Education and Support (DANTES), which supports off-duty educational achievement among military personnel. Although these tests are mostly targeted toward military personnel, anyone may take these examinations. According to the DANTES website, six UW campuses currently award credit to students under the DSST program. These campuses include UW-Eau Claire, Green Bay, Parkside, Platteville, Superior, and Whitewater. Each campus sets its own policies on the acceptance of these credits.

- *Excelsior Exams*: Excelsior Exams are offered through Excelsior College, a private, non-profit higher education institution in Albany, New York (formerly Regents College). The College offers 51 exams in the arts and sciences, business, nursing, and education, many offering upper-level credit. However, UW institution officials report use of the exams is limited with most exams taken in nursing.

- *Departmental Exams*: Departmental exams allow students to obtain credit for a course at the departmental level with a minimum score that is set by the academic department or instructor. These exams typically represent, or mirror, the final exam that the student would ordinarily take at the end of the course. At some campuses, they are also known as "challenge exams" or "experiential exams."

  According to a recent national study by CAEL, 57 percent of the surveyed institutions reported utilizing some form of departmental exams.[13] Due to record keeping issues, information on the extent to which departmental exams are utilized within the UW System is not readily available. However, data did exist at some UW institutions. For example, UW-Stout awarded 332 credits to 97 students in the four academic years ending in 2008-2009.

  Our review of institutions outside of the UW System yielded several examples of websites at the college or departmental level that make students aware of specific courses that can be challenged through exam. Within the UW System, one example of such a website was found at UW-Milwaukee. This website included exams for the College of Health Sciences and the Biological Sciences Department within the College of Letters and Science. Typically, at institutions throughout the UW System, students who are interested in finding out about departmental exam opportunities likely contact the department directly because the awarding of credits occurs at the instructor's discretion.

Portfolio-based Assessment

Through portfolio-based assessment, students develop a portfolio either in hard copy or digital format (known as an "e-portfolio") documenting evidence of prior learning in order to make a convincing case to faculty that knowledge intended to be imparted through certain course requirements and/or electives has already been gained. Faculty then has full discretion to decide whether to award credit for the prior learning demonstrated through the portfolio.

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

A report developed for UW-Whitewater in 2009 noted that portfolio-based assessment has been used in the UW System since at least the 1970s.[14] The report suggested that since this PLA method is more relevant to non-traditional students, institutions having a higher proportion of adult-learners will tend to use the method more. For example, many of the eight UW institutions currently offering portfolio-based assessments—UW-Green Bay, Oshkosh, Parkside, Platteville, River Falls, Stevens Point, Stout, and Superior—have a higher proportion of non-traditional students and/or distance learners than other UW institutions. Some UW institutions having a higher proportion of traditional students, such as UW-Eau Claire, La Crosse, and Madison, do not currently use this method.

UW Colleges, which has the highest proportion of non-traditional students within the UW System, is currently considering the use of portfolio-based assessment as a model for assessing prior learning at its 13 campuses. As a result, a UW Colleges task force met in 2010 to consider ways to improve the use of PLA on its campuses and establish a consistent policy.

The variation in the use of portfolio-based assessment is consistent with CAEL's research, which indicates that it may be more appropriate for some institutions or certain academic departments while being less relevant for others. For example, it may be easier to demonstrate prior learning through a portfolio for art, business, mathematics, and more technical disciplines as compared to disciplines that are based more in theory or require a practicum such as psychology, sociology, or medicine. Likewise, some institutions and academic departments, such as those that teach social work, need to determine whether restrictions from accrediting organizations exist before considering utilization of portfolio-based assessment.

Although portfolio-based assessment has been used infrequently system-wide, its use is increasing at certain UW institutions. For example, UW-Stout reported that 15 students had been awarded a total of 246 credits in 2008-09 through portfolio-based assessment, compared to 4 students earning a total of 66 credits in 2006-07.

Portfolio Development Process

A portfolio can be developed in consultation with faculty and advising staff or as part of a class dedicated to portfolio development. At UW-Parkside, officials indicated students work directly with faculty and spend between three and six months developing a portfolio. Three UW institutions—UW-Oshkosh, Platteville, and Superior—require a formalized course in portfolio development for students who wish to utilize this option. At UW-Superior, students register for a one-credit, semester-long online course that provides step-by-step guidance in developing a portfolio by the end of the semester and includes numerous objectives, including:

- to prepare and document a portfolio;
- to identify all prior learning experiences;

[14] Smith, Lauren. *Credit for Prior Learning: Approaches and Best Practices to Portfolio Assessment.* Whitewater: 2009.