



TO: Ohio Board of Regents  
 FROM: Public Agenda  
 DATE: April 8, 2013  
 SUBJECT: Faculty and Administrators Focus Groups on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), University of Akron

This memo summarizes the themes that emerged in three focus groups with faculty members and administrators at the University of Akron (UA) on the topic of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). In these conversations we sought to learn more about faculty and administrator attitudes toward PLA, and to get an initial sense of barriers and enablers to implementing and scaling promising PLA practices at UA and, more broadly, in Ohio. The research was conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Ohio Board of Regents with funding from the Lumina Foundation.

## THEMES AT A GLANCE – University of Akron Faculty and Administrators Discuss PLA

Broader Context	Faculty Starting Points	Next Steps
<p>PLA evokes a number of broader issues for UA, Ohio and the higher education landscape nationwide. In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The changing context at UA including greater selectivity and the relatively recent shift to faculty unionization</li> <li>- The statewide shift and national trend toward performance-based funding</li> <li>- Broader, national trends we have found in our work across the country that are likely at play, such as: faculty initiative fatigue and a general feeling that their traditional role is under attack; rising costs and student debt; declining state support; fewer jobs for graduates, greater demands for accountability; changing technology; and new competitors</li> </ul>	<p>There is real interest in PLA on the part of faculty, accompanied by areas of concern and tension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A diversity of opinion exists among faculty in different departments/disciplines.</li> <li>- PLA raises fundamental questions about the core purpose of a college education and the role of the classroom experience therein.</li> <li>- Many view PLA as part of a growing, and concerning, trend in which students are consumers and education is mainly a business.</li> <li>- PLA raises practical concerns about the skills and time required for thorough, consistent assessments.</li> <li>- Fear about the future of higher education, the value and role of faculty, and the threats around competition with lower-quality for-profit vendors.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Deeper communication between administrators and faculty</b></p> <p><b>Study of the best and most promising PLA practices</b></p> <p><b>Selective PLA implementation, starting with the most receptive departments</b></p> <p><b>Create hybrid programs where prior learning is combined with class experience</b></p> <p><b>Include student voices in the conversation</b></p>
Administrator Starting Points		
<p>Administrators were generally enthusiastic about PLA, especially as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A positive service to students, including veterans</li> <li>- A useful example of a broader shift from emphasizing seat time to thinking about student learning.</li> </ul> <p>Administrators view faculty as central to PLA implementation and were worried about opposition.</p>		

## **THEMES IN DETAIL – University of Akron Faculty and Administrators Discuss PLA**

### **THE BROADER CONTEXT**

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Akron's PLA work does not exist in a vacuum. While there are high levels of support for PLA among administrators and real interest on the part of faculty, this issue evokes a number of broader issues for UA, Ohio and the higher education landscape nationwide. Indeed, to some degree PLA can be viewed as a stand-in for much broader external issues that are impacting the campus. These issues include:

- > The changing context at UA. UA itself is going through a number of significant changes. On the one hand, its mission is changing toward greater selectivity. While this is generally regarded as a positive, it has heightened awareness and anxiety about change. Even more significant is the relatively recent shift to faculty unionization, which again has heightened anxiety among administrators about faculty resistance generally.
- > The statewide shift and national trend toward performance-based funding has further made the UA community anxious.
- > In addition to these local and regional factors, in Public Agenda's work with faculty members all over the country, we have found that this is a particularly stressful time for higher education communities in general, characterized by factors such as rising costs and student debt, declining state support, fewer jobs for graduates, greater demands for accountability, changing technology and new competitors. In virtually every higher education context we have studied, faculty members display symptoms of "initiative fatigue" and a general feeling that their traditional role is under attack from all sides.

All of this, as we say in our conclusion, suggests that it is in no way surprising or abnormal that UA is struggling with some of the issues related to PLA and that gaps exist between administrators and faculty on core questions. We see similar concerns and gaps in all of the work we are doing. At the same time, there is great enthusiasm and real commitment among administrators and some faculty to pursue and expand efforts around PLA, which is what makes Akron a "bright spot" in the PLA landscape. While we encourage an approach that deploys champions as bridge builders and takes the time to engage faculty early and often, we believe that such an approach will accelerate – not slow – progress toward improved implementation of PLA.

### **CONVERSATIONS WITH ADMINISTRATORS**

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The UA administrators were generally enthusiastic about PLA for at least two reasons. On the one hand, they see it as a positive service to students, including veterans, who bring valuable previous training and knowledge to their college experience. At the same time, they see it as a useful example of a broader shift from emphasizing seat time to thinking about student learning. From their perspective, initiatives such as PLA are seen as a win-win. They allow the institution to serve the needs of students by helping them move through faster with less debt,

while also allowing the university to meet the demands of legislation to find more efficient ways to increase completion without sacrificing quality.

From this perspective, however, faculty concerns can lessen the horizon of this bright future. Although administrators acknowledge that faculty will be essential to successful implementation of PLA, they are worried about faculty opposition. While some recognize PLA raises legitimate concerns, they also see faculty resistance as ill informed and reactive.

## **CONVERSATIONS WITH FACULTY MEMBERS**

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There appear to be many open questions about how PLA works and concerns based both on misconceptions and deep values. Some faculty members seem to believe that this initiative will be a sweeping change to the whole curriculum in which students who never set foot in a classroom could simply test their way to a degree. While this is a misconception that might be easily addressed through good communication and dialogue, faculty have deeper concerns that need deeper engagement. Many fear PLA as a harbinger of what they see as the possible gutting of quality in higher education and a potential betrayal of the fundamental purposes of education. Many also feel battered by the changes sweeping the nation and this exacerbates concerns and strengthens common misconceptions.

Successful implementation of PLA (or of any other reforms) will involve bridging gaps in understanding by engaging the faculty in constructive dialogue in which both they and administrators are seen as holding legitimate concerns. It will also entail elevating the voices of faculty who have first-hand experience with PLA while highlighting national promising practices for faculty and administrators to consider together.

Below are specific themes that we recommend receive special consideration:

### **Diversity of opinion among faculty**

Perhaps the first thing to notice is that faculty are by no means monolithic in their views toward PLA. Several of our respondents endorsed the concept.

*I got credit myself by PLA in my own education. It made a lot of sense.*

*I hate the idea of wasting people's time. We have a huge retention problem and if we can help students meet their goals without wasting their time, I think we have to do that.*

*I don't care how much time a student spends here, I care about what they learn while they are here.*

There is also recognition that PLA makes more sense for some disciplines than for others, as one faculty member put it: "some disciplines lend themselves to PLA, others don't."

## **The purpose of education**

We also found deeply held faculty concerns about the thinking that drives PLA and other similar initiatives. For these professors, this approach raises fundamental questions about the core purpose of a college education. While many understand that students (and parents) connect higher education primarily to job preparation, they see higher education as having a much more profound purpose – to transform students to help them become more thoughtful and reflective individuals, who not only have skills, but also have a deeper awareness of themselves and the world around them. The idea that students can bypass college courses because of experiences they have acquired in other arenas seems to some of these faculty members to translate higher education into mere job certification, which cheats students out of the most valuable aspect of the college experience.

*Students worry too much about getting a job instead of an education. That's not going to serve them when they are out in the world.*

Veterans provide a good example. We expected that faculty would be most open to the idea of veterans receiving college credit for prior learning, yet we were surprised to hear that this is not the case. While veterans certainly have skills and life experiences, faculty view this accumulated knowledge as a supplement rather than a substitute for what they would receive in higher education. Several faculty members complained, for example, that the veterans they had worked with had acquired specific skills and applications of knowledge, but insufficient understanding of the theory behind those applications. Substituting military training for higher education would deprive them of an understanding of basic principles that would help them adapt their skills to new situations and contexts.

*I see it all the time. Military training in electronics does not necessarily equip a person for success in an electronics program here. In the military they developed a troubleshooting skill, but they never got the critical thinking. The student I'm thinking of knows how to get a job done but he doesn't know the theory, so he doesn't really know why he's able to get the job done. Should he get credit for having learned to trouble shoot without really learning the basics? I don't think so.*

Other faculty members talked about the function that classroom education can play in helping veterans acclimate to civilian life.

## **The importance of the classroom experience**

A closely related concern is the worry that the classroom experience itself is an essential element of higher education, and that allowing students to bypass this experience deprives them of that which will be even more important than the practical skills and application that they have learned in other contexts. A number of our respondents stressed that the interaction between a faculty member and a group of students in a classroom is precisely what makes the differences between applied knowledge and the ability to understand the basis of that knowledge and the ability to adapt it to new and changing contexts:

*My son just got back from Afghanistan and I think he needs the academic experience of the university. I wouldn't want to let him off the hook with PLA.*

### **Benefit to other students**

Interestingly, faculty members see losses not only to the students who receive PLA, but also to the rest of the academic community. Some faculty members believe that the interchange between more traditional college students just out of high school and those who have more life experience is an enormously fruitful experience that benefits all students.

*If you take veterans and those with work experience out of the classrooms, we all lose out. Prior learning should be recognized, but creating more space for the recognition of experience in the context of existing classes would be valuable to everyone.*

*Nobody wants students taking classes they don't need, but it's such a huge asset to the classroom to have people with lots of life experience.*

The point is not that these more experienced students should take classes purely for the benefit of other students, but that their presence is a mutually reinforcing experience from which everyone benefits.

### **Concerns about consumerism**

For many faculty members, PLA is not just an isolated program that might serve a small group of students. Instead, they see it as symptomatic of a larger trend that they find deeply troubling. For these individuals, giving people credit for experience is another example of what they see as a growing trend to see education as a product and students as consumers. One faculty member interviewed at another institution characterized this trend with a single image: "When students register for a course online in our system, they click on the image of a shopping cart, just like on Amazon." If students are consumers and education is a business, the logical outcome is that consumers should be satisfied or they will take their business elsewhere. They see PLA, then, as part of a larger shift associated with dumbing down courses, giving higher grades and focusing on student satisfaction as measured by student surveys.

*Student demand for getting through quickly is matched by external pressure to accelerate pathways to a degree, but this isn't necessarily good for students, because it doesn't give them depth or breadth and the space for reflection and integration of ideas.*

*That's the kind of language that really scares me. This focus on students as consumers and on higher education as a business is scary. I want to focus on pedagogy and student learning.*

### **Practical concerns**

While there are a host of concerns driven by real and perceived value conflicts and a host of misconceptions, a number of core faculty concerns also address practical details. Developing rubrics for assessing learning may sound simple to people who do not have to do them, but

many faculty are worried that this will be extremely challenging, partly because it is new and unfamiliar territory.

*I wonder if part of the problem here is our training. I came out of a really nice Ph.D. program and I never heard the word “assessment” or “learning outcome.”*

There are also questions about how the assessments will be done. Some worried that the test-for-credit approach, in which competencies are reduced to answers to multiple choice questions, would only measure the lowest level of learning without really assessing whether the students have mastered what they really need to know. Alternatively, while the portfolio approach allays some of the concerns that come with “simple testing,” many worried that doing a portfolio approach well would be prohibitively time consuming.

*Rubric development is hard to do, but implementation is even harder. It is slow, time consuming and complex work. Learning outcomes are good in principle but we tend to gravitate toward whatever is easy to measure instead of focusing on the harder stuff – that worries me.*

*Even if you knew how to do it right, how would we ever find this time? And what does it mean for compensation?*

In other words, these faculty were concerned that PLA might be an unfunded mandate that meant that they would be spending a great deal of time over and above their normal teaching loads.

### **Fear and anxiety**

At a more basic level, PLA evokes deeper fears among faculty members. If students can test out of college courses, what is the point of having faculty members at all? These faculty members worry that the services and skills that they have spent years acquiring may lose their value in a new market-driven environment that focuses only on credentialing students for a specific job. Many faculty members (and administrators) are deeply concerned with the approach they see emerging from new competitors to traditional education, such as for-profit vendors, who provide fully online degrees. With the PLA initiative, they see their own institutions competing with for-profit vendors by adopting the same approaches.

*Is it hypothetically possible that a person could get a degree without ever taking a class? This whole issue makes me think about what is the real value of what I do? I believe that what I have to offer is valuable.*

## **THE NATURE OF THE DEBATE**

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The picture we have painted of the competing perceptions of PLA at the University of Akron may sound a bit bleak, but in our research this is not atypical of what we find in many institutions and does not necessarily lead to a destructive process of implementation or a stalemate. What we often see is that, in the early stages of implementation, each side sees the

issue as a clash of fundamental values. Often each side believes implicitly that the conflict is a clash between their own good values versus the ignorance or bad will of the other side. When the issue is conceived this way, there is no easy resolution. Each side believes that the other side must change, either by coming to understand the true facts or by giving up their inappropriate positions. As long as the opposition is characterized this way there is unlikely to be a mutually satisfying solution, since each side believes that the only real resolution is for the other side to change their basic viewpoint.

As we study these issues, however, we often find that a different picture emerges where the two sides actually share similar values, but they prioritize them in different ways. Coming to see the conflict in these terms offers a much more optimistic resolution, since it suggests considerable common ground, which, in turn allows for the opportunity to build consensus or compromise. But compromise or consensus cannot be reached without taking the time for authentic, inclusive dialogue and deliberation that recognizes each other's concerns as legitimate and that understands that many of the values are held in common.

In our conversations with faculty and administrators at the University of Akron, we see more shared values among the participants than the stakeholders themselves may realize. At the most fundamental level, for example, everyone is talking about serving student learning. Their disagreements are not so much about the goal, but about what approaches will best satisfy that goal.

## **NEXT STEPS**

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Based on this analysis, we suggest a number of steps that can assist the most productive implementation of PLA, including the following:

- > **Deepening communication between administrators and faculty members.** Often administrators, who themselves have taken a while to work through a new idea, think they can communicate it to faculty with a meeting or two and a few e-mails. In a diverse community such as the University of Akron, communication needs to be a multi-stage process that also involves listening as well as talking. Faculty need to understand that implementation will be gradual and selective. Furthermore, a number of potential champions of PLA exist among the faculty and they should be empowered to help shape the conversation for their peers. Administrators will not be well served by being dismissive of faculty concerns or bereft of hope for a better quality conversation with faculty.
- > **Greater study of best practices in other institutions.** There are many other institutions where PLA has been successfully implemented, serving the needs of students but without diminishing academic standards. These examples should be injected into the conversation, and the more they can be done so by faculty from other institutions the better. This will accomplish several goals. It will make the process more objective and less a clash of wills. Successful implementation can give faculty and administrators confidence that the institution is not plunging into uncharted waters. It will give administration a clearer idea of

what to do next, while reassuring faculty members that this is not a catastrophic “thin edge of the wedge.”

- > **Selective implementation.** This also suggests a gradual implementation, starting with departments and programs that are more receptive to PLA, with the goal of building experience, confidence and local champions (assuming the program is implemented successfully). Summit College, for example, might be an especially interesting place to begin. Both administrators and faculty there seemed particularly flexible and receptive to innovation.
- > **Hybrid programs.** One approach that may respect the concerns of both groups is to elevate those approaches where certification of prior learning is combined with some class experience. This will require, obviously, creative approaches to compensation.
- > **Student voices.** In addition to expanding the conversation between faculty and administrators, it may also be wise to include student voices in the conversation. A thoughtful dialogue with students can substitute for the current standoff where faculty members accuse administrators of pandering to students and administrators see faculty members as ignoring their needs.

## **THE BIGGER PICTURE**

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American higher education is currently undergoing major changes. These issues are by no means unique to the University of Akron. In virtually every public system in the country, legislators, administrators, faculty and students are wrestling with the same set of challenges. The ultimate task is to provide a new generation of students with an even better education than what we have seen in the past, in an environment where the public support for higher education is severely restrained and unlikely to improve anytime soon. Moving away from seat time to trying to measure student learning directly is clearly going to be a part of that effort. However, this is still in the beginning stages and everyone needs to recognize that this approach is not the “no brainer” it may seem to be to some of its advocates.