

# Beyond the Classroom:

## Using Prior Learning Assessment to Advance Student Success

### Introduction

Student success has and will continue to be the focus of California community colleges as is evident by the numerous statewide and local policies and initiatives focused on increasing student success outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Prior learning assessment (PLA) has been underutilized as part of the college completion agenda by California community colleges. Giving students credit for knowledge gained outside of postsecondary education not only **validates that students come to community colleges with skills and experience, but can also save them time and money.** Furthermore, as institutional leaders look to improve their college's student persistence and completion outcomes, **PLA, is an efficient, timely and cost effective strategy,** that can easily be adopted. Finally, PLA has the potential to maximize the **state's return on investment** by reducing redundant/unnecessary course taking, and by helping more students get to the finish line within a reasonable timeframe.<sup>2</sup>

Research makes a compelling case for adopting PLA. A 2010 study conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) shows that **PLA students had higher rates of degree completion than non-PLA students** regardless of size, level or type of institution. For an associate degree, PLA students were 2.1 times more likely to complete their degree than non-PLA students. The research also demonstrated that PLA students took more courses at the institution than non-PLA students; meaning that not only did the students gain credits for their prior learning, but they also continued their studies, engaged in more institutional courses and completed their degrees in less time than non-PLA students. The data also indicated that even if PLA students did not complete a degree, they had higher persistence rates and took

#### Defining Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

- Offers educators a way to evaluate learning an individual has acquired outside the traditional academic setting
- Assesses learning that may have been attained through a variety of ways (e.g., work experience, employer training programs, military training or experience, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, non-college courses, seminars)
- Can lead to the granting of college credit, advanced standing toward further education or training, or certification

<sup>1</sup> The Student Success and Support program (SSSP), a focus on equity and the state's investments in the Basic Skills, Workforce, Education Planning, Common Assessment, and Online Education Initiatives to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> Data pulled from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office data mart shows that for the 2013/14 academic term that on average, students took *seven years to obtain a degree and or certificate* and that it currently takes students about *four years to transfer to a four-year institution.*

more credits than non-PLA students. Notably, CAEL also found that **underserved populations can benefit from PLA even more so than other groups**. For example, Hispanic students participating in PLA at the bachelor’s degree level demonstrate completion rates eight times higher than non-PLA Hispanic students.<sup>3</sup>

Given the **compelling evidence behind the effectiveness of prior learning assessment on student outcomes**, California community colleges are beginning to explore ways to expand opportunities for more students to gain credits through prior learning assessment. The time is ripe for California community colleges to be at the forefront of a major change effort designed to advance PLA in California, by translating research findings into effective practice that improves the outcomes of participating students, modeling the way for other institutions, and inspiring positive policy revisions.

This research brief<sup>4</sup> is intended to contribute to the nascent efforts to expand PLA in California. It offers California community college (CCC) administrators, educators, advocates, funders, and policymakers a **high-level analysis of the PLA landscape** and provides **“low-hanging” or initial policy and practice recommendations** that may be readily adopted at the state and/or college/district levels. It is designed to support state and institutional initiatives **seeking to improve student success**—particularly **guided pathways efforts** that aim to equip students with the competencies needed to attain industry-recognized, postsecondary credentials; transition to living-wage employment; and achieve career advancement.

## California’s Prior Learning Assessment Landscape

Currently, the California community college (CCC) landscape for PLA delivery reflects that of the nation—decentralized and varied across our institutions. CCCs do not have uniform practices and policies for awarding credit for prior learning with the exception of student fees for exams associated with credit-by-exam (currently mandated to be equal to the per unit enrollment fee). Credit-by-exam appears to be the primary mechanism supported by the system to recognize prior learning; California Education Code mandates that colleges have a credit-by-exam policy.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, recent legislation directed colleges to provide students information on this option,<sup>6</sup> and the statewide Academic Senate (ASCCC) has endorsed this strategy through a number of resolutions and initiatives, including its incorporation into career technical education (CTE) pathways.<sup>7</sup> Credit for articulated high school work in career technical education programs offers one area of credit-by-exam that has gained limited traction. Additionally, most community colleges have policies that recognize some military coursework; some CCCs award credit via standardized tests (e.g., Advanced Placement (AP), exams, College-Level Examination Program (CLEP)).

### Understanding PLA Options

Colleges offer a range of options through a variety of offices or departments on campus. Options include (but are not limited to):

- Standardized exams (e.g., Advanced Placement (AP), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP));
- Individualized assessments (e.g., student portfolios evaluated by faculty);
- Exams, termed “credit-by-exam” in California and “challenge exams” in other states; and
- External programs (e.g., National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), American Council on Education (ACE)).

<sup>3</sup> Council for Adult and Experiential Education. (2010).

<sup>4</sup> This brief draws on a 2015 study conducted by the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges in collaboration with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the Moran Technology Group. The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and Los Angeles Trade Technical College commissioned this report. Full report forthcoming. Visit <http://www.lachamber.com/> or <http://rpgroup.org/> for updates.

<sup>5</sup> Title 5, Section 55050, Credit by Examination

<sup>6</sup> AB1025, Public Postsecondary Education: Credit by Examination

<sup>7</sup> ASCCC resolutions #09.05 (fall 2008), #09.08 (fall 2010), #14.01 (spring 2014)

# Advancing Prior Learning Assessment in California

The Credit for Prior Learning workgroups established in spring 2016 by the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) could indicate the beginning of a statewide movement in California, focused on expanding prior learning assessment beyond credit by exam and/or standardized tests. For example, efforts are underway to provide students the opportunity to gain credit for learning garnered through their military service. Two pieces of legislation<sup>8</sup> calling for the awarding of credit for prior learning for veteran, military, and nursing students are being leveraged to create these opportunities for military personnel. Moreover, prior learning assessment opportunities are also being explored by Doing What Matters for Jobs and the Economy, CCCCCO Division of Workforce and Economic Development, in the area of workforce development and career and technical training.<sup>9</sup>

## Recommendations

Below we outline a series of recommendations the CCC system and/or individual colleges can address in the near term to facilitate the broader adoption and scaling of PLA. These recommendations are meant to contribute to the current efforts to expand PLA in California.

### *1. EXPAND STATE POLICY TO INCLUDE MULTIPLE METHODS FOR AWARDING PLA CREDIT*

While California Education Code currently mandates that colleges have a clear credit-by-exam policy, expanding this policy to include other sources and measures of prior learning may encourage broader adoption of PLA across colleges and be in alignment with the CCCs' commitment to open access and service to adult learners. A recent resolution adopted by the ASCCC states that "colleges should seek to maximize the opportunities for credit-by-exam as is appropriate to meet the needs for their student populations, while maintaining academic excellence."<sup>10</sup> In addition to students' successful passage of PLA examinations, faculty may use other methods for PLA such as the assessment of a portfolio or demonstration of competencies via a rubric.

### *2. REVISE THE FUNDING FORMULA TO SUPPORT FACULTY INVOLVEMENT IN PLA*

Currently, student fees represent the only funding a college receives for credit-by-exam. Faculty are not compensated for their time in developing and/or proctoring an assessment—a disincentive for instructors to develop credit-by-exam options. Moreover, faculty can have misperceptions about the adoption of alternative PLA approaches, including concerns about academic rigor and the potential for reduced enrollments. Yet, effective PLA demands significant faculty involvement. If faculty are to actively engage in PLA (as is required by California Education Code) they need to be compensated.<sup>11</sup> Policy solutions include changing the funding formula to

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<sup>8</sup> AB 2462, Public postsecondary education: academic credit for prior military academic experience and SB 466, Registered nurses: Board of Registered Nursing

<sup>9</sup> <http://doingwhatmatters.cccco.edu/>

<sup>10</sup> ASCCC resolution #14.01 (spring 2014)

<sup>11</sup> California Education Code (Division 7, Part 43)

provide apportionment for courses taken via the credit-by-exam process or funding these courses based on units (similar to the funding of independent study).

### ***3. ELIMINATE CAMPUS-AND DISTRICT-LEVEL RESTRICTIONS ON AWARDING PLA CREDIT***

Most districts and/or colleges restrict the number of credits students can earn through credit by examination and/or the point at which they can qualify for the credit-by-exam option (e.g., after completing a specified number of units in residence). Since California Education Code does not articulate such limitations, colleges and districts need to lift these restrictions and amend their policies.

### ***4. BUILD BROAD COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT FOR PLA***

To ensure effective adoption of PLA, districts and colleges need to consider developing buy-in from all segments of their institution, given that the implementation of PLA has implications for several areas of the institution (e.g., admissions and records, advising, instruction, student services, business services). Since faculty play a central role in effective PLA implementation, colleges need to work directly with faculty to secure their investment in and support for PLA and to ensure their understanding of its academic rigor and pedagogical validity. Colleges must involve faculty in the design, development, and delivery of any PLA program. College leaders need to communicate to faculty any new expectations pertaining to the implementation of PLA, and provide the training and professional development necessary to help faculty transition to new roles.

### ***5. PILOT PLA AS PART OF A STRATEGIC WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT OR CTE INITIATIVE***

To learn about effective PLA implementation at the institutional level, colleges might consider testing this method as part of a key workforce development or career technical education (CTE) initiative. Colleges can leverage existing efforts to award credit to high school students taking articulated coursework in CTE and Regional Occupation Programs and explore ways to amend local policies and practices currently preventing this option from being fully implemented. Moreover, colleges need to involve employers throughout the design process to inform and validate the competency framework, selection of authentic assessments, and ongoing program improvements. Employers' input will also help to ensure that the PLA program is meeting business and industry needs; employers who are involved may also be more apt to consider graduates for future employment.

### ***6. DEVELOP A SPECIFIC PLAN FOR STUDENT OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT PERTAINING TO PLA OPTIONS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES***

Since students are typically unaware that they are able to receive credit for their experience outside the collegiate setting, colleges need to significantly increase campus communications with learners to share PLA options. Colleges need to pursue a communications strategy that ensures students have access to all of the information they need to understand how the program works, whether and how they will receive grades and/or credits for their work, how progress towards getting PLA credits is tracked and posted, and whom to contact for help or more information. Moreover, since PLA options are often not applicable to traditionally-aged students

(i.e., 18-24 years), colleges need to specifically establish targeted outreach plans for nontraditional learners who are typically older, working, and often supporting families.

Once outreach plans are established, colleges might consider consolidating the delivery of PLA services into one central location. Currently, PLA services are typically offered in many places on campus, which can overwhelm, confuse, and frustrate students. Centralization will also help raise the profile of PLA on campus, facilitate ease of use for students and faculty, and create more coherence and alignment between different programs utilizing PLA.

#### **7. INCREASE COLLECTION OF STUDENT OUTCOMES DATA AND PROGRAM EVALUATION RELATED TO STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN PLA**

While a growing body of evidence about the effectiveness of PLA is developing across the nation, the field in general and individual colleges in particular can benefit from more and better data about the impact of PLA on different student groups, programs, and institutions. Colleges adopting and/or expanding their PLA programming need to ensure their management information systems have the capacity to capture PLA participation and track student progress in a way that recognizes the varied pace PLA participants may take through institutions. Colleges can then use these data to reflect on program effectiveness, explore the impact on different student populations, and make improvements accordingly.

## Conclusion

Throughout the country, prior learning assessment and credit for prior learning are emerging as effective strategies to help non-traditional student populations persist in postsecondary education and accelerate progress toward the completion of certificates and degrees. Given the statewide focus on improving community college student success, California is well-positioned to pilot and then broadly adopt these strategies as part of the ongoing initiatives in the state designed to help more students access and succeed in postsecondary education and career training.

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