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Moving Toward Meaningful Change: A Case Study in Implementing a Prior Learning Assessment Program

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Abstract
This action research case study explores how community college leaders in the U.S. purposefully engaged strategies to gain institutional support for implementing prior learning assessment (PLA) practices. The researcher collaborated with leaders from three community colleges to co-create interventions to support PLA implementation in order to promote adult college completion focused on three key areas: (1) faculty and staff engagement/development; (2) student outreach/support, and; (3) infrastructure, policies/processes. This study used Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory to better understand campus-based PLA implementation. Findings show that community college leaders used the following strategies to gain institutional support to implement PLA: (1) engaging cross-functional stakeholders; (2) disseminating knowledge to solidify institutionalization; (3) aligning the innovation to the college's mission and vision, and; (4) implementing more structure and simplifying processes. Conclusions drawn from this study suggest that a diffusion of an innovation theory model aids in the implementation of PLA. Moreover, the study demonstrates that positionality and creating a reflective, supportive and consistent holding space supports successful PLA implementation.

Keywords: prior learning assessment, community colleges, action research, diffusion of innovations, adult learners

Introduction

Community colleges (two-year institutions in the United States) are challenged with reevaluating and envisioning degree completion strategies including shortening time to degree. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development recommended that community colleges systematically develop and support PLA as a means of encouraging adults to return to postsecondary education (OECD, 2013; Kuczera & Field, 2013). The purpose of this action research case study was to understand how stakeholders from three community colleges could gain institutional support to implement prior learning assessment (PLA) as a strategy for degree completion. The American Council on Education (ACE) (2019) defined PLA as "… learning gained outside the college classroom in a variety of settings and through formal and non-formal means, including: workplace training, military training and service, independent study, professional certifications, examination … civic activities [and] volunteer service" (Credit for Prior Learning section, para. 1). "PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives " (Klein-Collins, 2010, p. 6). However, higher education faces important challenges if it truly wishes to realign its mission and environment in support of PLA and the adult learner, characterized as those students 25 and older (Kasworm, 2010).

Hence, the following research question guided this study: How can community college leaders purposefully engage strategies to gain institutional support for implementing PLA?

Embedded in this study are three focus areas taken from both theoretical and empirical literature: (a) the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003); (b) research in prior learning assessment (e.g., Lakin, Seymour, Nellum, & Crandall, 2015; Klein-Collins, 2010), and; (c) research on the mission and practices of community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). These focus areas serve as the foundation for this action research case study to provide strategies around how PLA can be implemented as a student completion strategy.

Research (e.g., Klein-Collins, 2010) indicates that PLA can serve as an effective tool to attract and retain adult students. The community college has become a critical player in responding to the social and economic demands of the day and engaging the adult learner (National Conference of State Legislators, 2014; American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). Given this context, imagining PLA opportunities within the community college setting makes perfect sense.

Research (e.g. Anderson, 2010) has shown that making decisions within educational organizations to implement an innovation can be complex; using the diffusion of innovations model can further help align ideas, information and social forces (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). In this study, Rogers' (2003) theory provided a framework to determine opportunities and obstacles that impact the adoption of PLA policies and practices, and that can accelerate the adoption of prior learning practices by using the five attributes of innovation: (a) documenting the advantages of the policies/practices; (b) showing the compatibility of the policies/practices with existing campus environments; (c) providing examples to reduce the complexity of adoption implementation; (d) allowing trialability through examples from other campuses' experience, and; (e) illustrating the benefits by making effects observable to potential adopters (Lee et al., 2010).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative action research case study approach to understand stakeholders' perspectives on issues around implementing a PLA program. The reflection that ensued from the action research process helped to develop sustainable strategies to increase the capacities of three American community colleges to successfully implement PLA.

This action research case study focused on the activities of and processes used by those seeking to implement PLA on their respective campuses The action research (AR) team was comprised of the author as the lead researcher, along with six community college stakeholders consisting of two representatives from each of the three campuses, including a chief academic officer (CAO) and program manager. In addition, two members of the AR team were consultants from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). All research participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate in this AR case study while simultaneously executing their regular job responsibilities with no additional compensation.

The AR team engaged in a multi-phased inquiry process for over one year by participating in 13 team meetings and implementing several interventions. The AR team was involved in three cycles of AR, including constructing the problem, planning action, taking action and evaluating action. Data were collected from various sources including interviews, casual conversations, meeting notes and organization documents. Data were analyzed and triangulated to ensure trustworthiness in the study. The qualitative data generated revealed initial beliefs, attitudes and behaviors to inform the problem statement. The three AR cycles are described below.

Cycle 1: Identifying and convening relevant stakeholders

During Cycle 1, the AR team created a project charter. The purpose of the charter was to define the collaborative efforts of the three participating institutions. Additionally, the goals of the charter were to:

- Sustain and expand prior learning assessment options at three community colleges.
- Develop a high-level, consistent PLA process that allows for institutional prerogative.
- Develop a PLA model with possible application statewide.

The charter included a statement of the project purpose, deliverables, scope, plan and milestones, assumptions, constraints and dependencies, and team members. One AR team member reported on the importance of the charter in moving the work forward:

> *Across all three of the colleges, I think it was the collaborative way that we developed the charter so that everyone understood what the outcomes were. Once that happened it seemed like the work began to occur, and the work gained traction. Until that occurred it was like an abstract idea. As soon as everybody agreed on the outcomes in one of the initial meetings that we had where we were finalizing the charter and we made a commitment to achieve those, then I think there was some traction.*
> (Anonymous, personal communication, November 14, 2016)

Next, was the creation of the "Healthy PLA Survey" to assess the extent to which PLA was currently being institutionalized at each of the three campuses. The Healthy PLA Survey was based on six categories including: (a) PLA policies and procedures; (b) academic criteria; (c) assessment; (d) student support; (e) infrastructure, and; (f) oversight and research. To frame the PLA challenges at each institution, the AR team used the Healthy PLA Survey to collect data to document the scope of the problem and how it varies at each institution. Data were gathered by engaging various stakeholders such as registrars, admissions personnel and deans. Challenge areas that were apparent from the survey results from the three campuses included the following:

- PLA was not an integral part of the college's outreach and marketing.
- Students did not receive help in understanding PLA in making decisions.
- A program of professional development was not implemented, especially for new staff.
- Faculty and other staff did not understand PLA policies and processes.
- Internal players did not know their roles and responsibilities, or have the knowledge and resources to support PLA.
- PLA information was not regularly shared with faculty and staff.

These limitations and inconsistences showed that work was needed to ensure each institution develops practices and policies that promote a successful PLA program. From the results of the data, the AR team selected interventions relevant to perceived institutional readiness to take a systematic approach to implementing PLA. Anderson (2010) stated that intervention strategies are more effective when the client system has the time, energy and motivation to implement the change. In Cycle 1, the AR team identified five interventions: (a) form and convene a campus advisory team; (b) plan a Professional Development Day; (c) host a webinar series; (d) create a process map, and; (e) create a PLA marketing plan. Lakin et al. (2015) claimed that PLA implementation must be staged in order to make strategic connections across the college. Such staging was crucial to our ongoing planning.

Cycle 2: Creating a framework to measure goals and identify outcomes

During Cycle 2, the AR team agreed that reengaging the PLA campus advisory teams on a consistent basis would be beneficial to their PLA implementation goals. Thus, the AR team agreed upon a schedule to meet regularly with its respective campus teams in order to refine the process map and work toward initial steps to implement a marketing plan. This work was consistent with Lakin et al. (2015), who argued that "building a sustainable infrastructure involves multiple areas, from information sharing, integration of services, and faculty engagement to policy review and data collection" (p. 25). The campus teams also solicited measures to be included in the assessment plan to measure project success.

By identifying success measures early in the implementation process, the AR team realized an assessment plan was needed. The AR team decided on the following first-level measures to determine progress toward success:

- Number of students served.
- Number of students creating a PLA profile.
- Number of students enrolled in a program in which a PLA profile was created.
- Number of PLA credits awarded.

The assessment plan helped to define performance measures clearly to show PLA implementation success.

Cycle 3: Collaborating to understand progress

During Cycle 3, three of the AR team members attended a chief academic officer's board meeting with peer institutions of other public community and technical colleges throughout the state. To prepare, the AR team created the "Assessing Stages of PLA Implementation Survey" (see Appendix A) based on the PLA implementation framework by Lakin et al. (2015) to understand the progress on PLA implementation better and to benchmark against peer colleges not participating in this study. The measures on the survey examined: (a) faculty engagement and development; (b) student outreach and support, and; (c) infrastructure, policies and processes. Once the assessment was developed, each AR team member completed the survey to see if it accurately captured these elements based on their own self-assessment of their respective institution.

The AR team presented its work at the board meeting to peers in the same leadership capacity at the other

community colleges across the state. The AR team also assessed other peer institutions' implementation of PLA by administering the Assessing Stages of PLA Implementation Survey. Participants of the survey self-assessed their institution based on the following criteria in regard to PLA implementation: (a) not really descriptive of our institution; (b) sometimes true of our institution; (c) somewhat true of our institution, and; (d) very true of our institution. Once participants assessed their institution's level of PLA implementation, means were calculated for each of the measures on the survey and then tallied to get an overall score. These scores fell into the following three stages of implementation:

- **Emerging** – Has general understanding and information on prior learning, with demonstrated institutional interest.
- **Developing** – Acknowledges the role of prior learning in postsecondary pathways. Begins to develop standard policies and procedures.
- **Effective** – Has broad and deep understanding of credit for prior learning policies and uses that knowledge to integrate and sustain systematic and accessible PLA practices.

The means for the institutions that participated in this study were compared to those of the peer institutions that did not participate. Results in Table 1 show that at each stage, the means for participating institutions were consistently higher; that is, they were further along in PLA implementation. AR team members reported satisfaction with the progress they had made over the course of this study in comparison to the progress made at other institutions.

Table 1: Assessing Stages of PLA Implementation Survey: Resulting Scores

	Emerging	Developing	Effective
Participating Colleges in this Study	6.00	6.55	4.42
Non-Participating Colleges in this Study	3.15	3.50	3.00

Debriefs of the chief academic officer's meeting and critical incident interviews were conducted with members of the AR team to evaluate progress made throughout this study. The AR team members continued to work with their campus teams to refine the strategies for PLA implementation. The charge for continued work included: (a) implementing the action plans; (b) defining sustainable practices and policies for a scalable PLA model; (c) integrating marketing; (d) encouraging continued professional development, and; (e) building champions across campus for the work.

Results

The aim of the research was to explore how community college leaders could purposefully engage strategies to gain institutional support for implementing PLA. Using the data from this research, the AR team created interventions to improve processes and spread awareness of the purpose and benefits of implementing PLA. The action research was situated in a higher education context and offered a unique look at PLA implementation in three different community colleges by using the diffusion of innovations theory.

Rogers' (2003) attributes of an innovation including relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability supported the diffusion of PLA on each campus that participated in this study. Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes and shows an overall benefit. Compatibility is defined as the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the values, past experiences and needs of potential adopters. Complexity refers to the perceived ease of use of an innovation in relationship to its benefits and value. Trialability is the degree to which an innovation can be experimented with on a limited basis, including test demonstrations and simulations, to see how the innovation might work without fully committing to adopting it. Observability implies that the easier it is to see the results of an innovation, the more likely it will be adopted.

Relative advantage was evident in the basic assumption made by all three colleges that PLA is a best practice that provides benefits to adult learners. In effect, by agreeing to participate in this study, leaders of the three community colleges realized that an investment in PLA would eventually lead to improved outcomes and

increased adult college completion rates. Compatibility was evident from the community college leaders' intentionality and focus on aligning the purpose of PLA with the mission and vision of each college. This alignment helped to foster a sense of like-mindedness and ambition across a common purpose with various stakeholders. The community college leaders were purposeful in improving the systems and processes to encourage implementation of a robust PLA system. They recognized that PLA was compatible with their institutional missions.

The results support Rogers' (2003) concept of complexity. At the beginning of this study, the community colleges realized that the existing PLA processes were complicated and not easy to use on campus. Ongoing actions throughout this study included the community college leaders taking the time to work with other stakeholders to unravel and understand the complexities of implementing PLA in order to lead to better integration across various systems. Trialability was apparent from the beginning of this study as reflected in the colleges agreeing to implement PLA with institutional autonomy and prerogative. Each college decided that while the AR team would decide the strategies collaboratively, each AR team member would take the practices back to the individual campuses and see what worked well. Lastly, observability supported the diffusion of PLA by allowing the colleges to learn from each other. Sharing information and knowledge, and observing the challenges and barriers at each college, helped the other colleges to learn lessons to improve PLA implementation. Additionally, by observing the progress of non-participating peer institutions in comparison to their own progress, the community colleges in this study were able to evaluate their own relative advantage of PLA implementation.

Looking even more deeply into these attributes of the diffusion of innovations, our research uncovered overarching themes related to how the community college leaders purposefully engaged strategies to gain institutional support for PLA implementation (Layne, 2017). These themes included:

- Community college leaders engaged cross-functional stakeholders.
- Community college leaders disseminated knowledge to solidify institutionalization of PLA practices.
- Community college leaders strategically aligned the innovation to the mission and vision of the college.
- Community college leaders implemented more structure and systems to simplify the process.

We also realized the importance of the AR team being intentional about ensuring that cross-functional representatives served on each of the PLA campus advisory teams. In effect, this PLA advisory team was the first thread of the social system the AR team sought to gain support of adopting the innovation. Rogers (2003) defined a social system as "a set of interrelated units engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal" (p. 23). The social system formed between the AR team and the campus advisory teams was critical to promote the diffusion of PLA on each campus in this study because it allowed for different perspectives and input on challenges and opportunities. Moreover, the AR team thoroughly planned opportunities to share information on PLA, including hosting webinars and participating on various advisory committees. In order to focus on people's beliefs about the importance of PLA, the AR team leveraged opportunities to shift attitudes and behaviors by aligning the purpose of the innovation to the mission of each college. These actions were all critical to the outcome.

A key determinant of the likely success in diffusion of an innovation is the ability of organizational leaders to influence others (Dearing, 2009). AR team members' positions within these organizations enabled them to influence others by clearly articulating the needs and goals for successfully implementing PLA to all stakeholders. Themes that emerged were:

- Community college leaders understood how to empower others to lead change.
- Community college leaders were intentional about benchmarking progress in order to recognize gaps and opportunities.
- Community college leaders recognized the importance of outreach and marketing for successful implementation.

The AR team members clearly understood their role as leaders and used their own leadership positions to sustain momentum throughout this study. Specifically, having the CAO from each of the three campuses participate in this study was a key factor in keeping the work moving forward.

Lastly, evidence indicated that the community college leaders were committed to implementing prior learning assessment practices. A key dimension of this project was the holding space that was created for continuous reflection and shared accountability, including these themes:

- Community college leaders set clear goals and timelines.
- Community college leaders met consistently to achieve goals.
- Community college leaders created a reflective and supportive space.

In addition to outlining clear goals, the AR team met once a month for nearly a year, where inquiry, dialogue and reflection occurred to help understand next steps to PLA implementation. Murray (2009) suggested that implementers must work together to translate research to practice and have professional dialogue and reflection. Additionally, members of the AR team were intentional about creating a reflective and supportive space to test and take strategies back to each campus, which supported intentional efforts throughout this study.

Conclusions

To develop a consistent program that is truly supportive of adult learners' goals to complete degrees can be a challenge for colleges and universities. This study effectively used Rogers' (2003) theory of diffusion of innovations to understand how best to develop and implement PLA practices in community colleges, which have been shown to improve the chances of adult learner degree completion. By using this framework, the community college leaders were able to shape their institution's practices and more effectively disseminate knowledge about PLA. The results of this study can be used by peer institutions to develop new PLA policies, procedures and strategies to gain institutional commitment to PLA implementation and, overall, to support their adult learners.

This study raised additional questions and issues for future research on academic leaders and their role in and approaches to implementing PLA practice at their institutions. While this work focused on the faculty and staff at only three community colleges, more research can be done on the implementation of PLA practices at additional institutions. Such research can also focus on various types of institutions, including those offering baccalaureate degrees to examine similarities and differences in the process of developing and implementing PLA practices across the higher education field.

Additionally, more research is needed to understand the student's perspective on adopting and taking advantage of PLA options. One direction of future research could be to focus on the impact of the diffusion of innovations on students' effective use of PLA toward degree completion. While the campuses in this study focused on improvements from an organizational perspective, the student's perspective of going through the process of applying for and being awarded PLA credits was not captured and needs to be researched. PLA is only one aspect of better serving adult learners in college; however, a deeper understanding of how this innovation may be successfully diffused to a wider audience within the higher education community will enable institutions to meet a larger proportion of demand that will come in the future.

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Appendix A: Assessing Stages of PLA Implementation Survey

Institution Name

_____

Please rate your institution on the following scale, selecting the number that best fits your understanding of where you are at this time in implementing prior learning assessment.

	Not really descriptive of our institution	*Sometimes true of our institution*	*Somewhat true of our institution*	*Very true of our institution*
Item	1	2	3	4
Faculty engagement and development				
1. Formed advisory group to study and craft policy and practice	1	2	3	4
2. Attended conferences to learn more	1	2	3	4
3. Invites experts to provide overviews of PLA to faculty	1	2	3	4
4. Created venues for information sharing across institutional constituencies and committees	1	2	3	4
5. Involved faculty groups in developing and vetting policies/practices, such as crosswalks, mapping, and articulations	1	2	3	4
6. Provided professional preparation for faculty and staff, including participation in conferences, research, and writing	1	2	3	4
7. Encouraged faculty to include PLA activities in annual reviews and promotion/tenure evaluations	1	2	3	4
8. Implemented incentives and areas of recognition	1	2	3	4

Student outreach and support				
9. Academic advisors and program coordinators help direct students to current PLA options	1	2	3	4
10. Share some information on website and use other venues to communicate with students such as orientation and advising	1	2	3	4
11. Informed students of PLA options prior to admission as well as when they are admitted	1	2	3	4
12. Provide expert advising about prior learning assessment and uses all types of communication tools to share information with students (social media, website, orientation, and more form outreach with potential students to graduation	1	2	3	4
Infrastructure, policies, and processes				
13. Scan the landscape for current and informal institutional PLA practices	1	2	3	4
14. Seek policy and practice models among peer institutions	1	2	3	4
15. Expand current policy and practice	1	2	3	4
16. Put people and structures in place to manage programs	1	2	3	4
17. Begin to coordinate PLA-related programs and services across administrative student service, and academic spheres	1	2	3	4
18. Select appropriate PLA tools that match institutional context and curriculum and recognize diversity of learners and their experiences	1	2	3	4
19. Promote active use of PLA in all degree areas, including major requirements, General education	1	2	3	4
20. Well established policies and practices promote effective PLA program and administrative management	1	2	3	4
21. PLA is embedded within other programs, such as competency-based learning	1	2	3	4

Scoring Instructions

Place the score from each item in the appropriate category. Then compute the total for each category and the mean.

COLUMN A				COLUMN B			
Item	Score A	Score B	Score C	Item	Score A	Score B	Score C
1				12			
2				13			
3				14			
4				15			
5				16			
6				17			
7				18			
8				19			
9				20			
10				21			
11							

TOTAL [add the total for each column]	**Score A**	**Score B**	**Score C**	**TOTAL** (add the total for each column)	**Score A**	**Score B**	**Score C**
Column A # of items	**4**	**3**	**4**	**Column B # of items**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Average *Score Total ÷ # of items* [divide the total by the number or items in each category]				**Average** *Score Total ÷ # of items* [divide the total by the number of items in each category]			

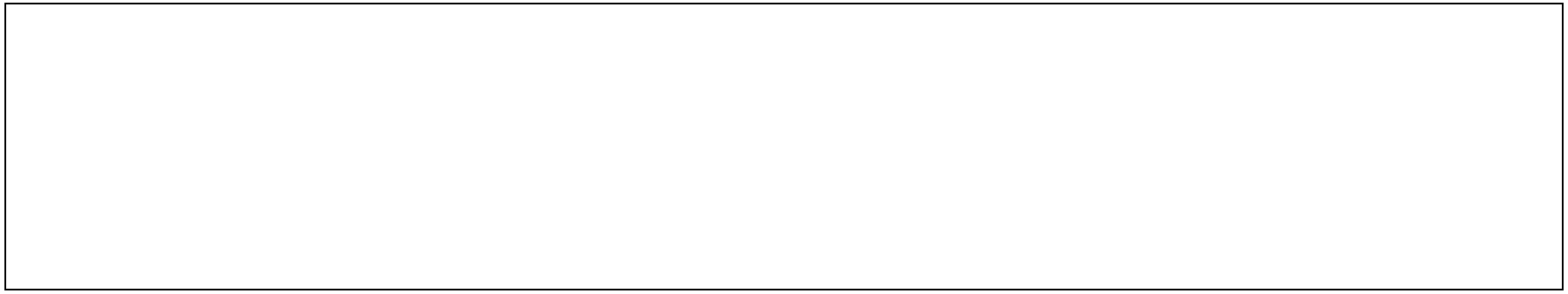
Which stage best represents where your institution is today?

	Score A	**Score B**	**Score C**
	New/Emerging Stage	***Developing Stage***	***Effective Practices Stage***
	Add the averages of **Score A** from Column A and Column B	Add the averages of **Score B** from Column A and Column B	Add the averages of **Score C** from Column A and Column B
Overall Total Means [add both column averages with the same letter above and enter the total here]			
Interpretation	Has general understanding and information on prior learning, with demonstrated institutional interest.	Acknowledges the role of prior learning in postsecondary path-ways. Begins to develop standard policies and procedures	Has broad and deep understanding of prior learning assessment policies and uses that knowledge to integrate, and sustain systematic and accessible PLA practices

Does the stage identified by this assessment accurately match your perception of where you believe your institution is in implementing PLA?

Please Circle **Yes** or **No**

Please explain



Note. Adapted from “Credit for Prior Learning” by M. B. Lakin, C. J. Nellum, D. Seymour, J. R. Crandall, p.9. Copyright 2015 by American Council on Education.