

## **PLA Policies: A Commitment to Principles in a Time of Change**

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Policies are not neutral. They never are. They are rooted in principles that accentuate or diminish particular ideas, worldviews and approaches that are often hidden or misunderstood. Indeed, our practices are shaped by how these principles manifest themselves in policies and how policies are interpreted. Even when we try to be attentive to the value ladenness of our principles, we cannot escape from the need to reflect continually on what we believe and how we act on those beliefs.

For example, a cherished institutional principle could be that all students are treated equally. Reflecting this spirit, the resulting policy might state that the assessment of prior learning (PLA /RPL [prior learning assessment/recognition of prior learning]) is available to all students. However, departmental PLA practices might vary significantly, and individuals within those departments might encourage or discourage students from pursuing PLA based on their assumptions about legitimate knowledge within their field, thus creating inequitable access across the institution – even though the institution claims to champion equality. Clearly, no part of any PLA process is free from value judgments. Always, the question of power looms: Who has the authority to make what kinds of judgments about legitimate learning, how it is assessed, who assesses and who can be assessed? And, importantly for us here, how do the responses to these kinds of questions emerge in the policies that institutions put in place?

These considerations and questions are especially relevant today. As PLA becomes more widespread, new policies are being developed to contain, define and determine practices. Whether at the international, national, regional (state/province), accrediting body, professional or individual institution-level, policies are proliferating and, depending on their weight and authority, are driving the shaping of the future of PLA. Indeed, a policy hierarchy is emerging and shifting the PLA landscape from one long-nourished by grassroots initiatives to one systematized and centralized.

What are the drivers behind this shift?

First, the economic: In a world of significant economic reconfiguration and workforce transformation, PLA becomes a recognized mechanism for professional experts to identify and verify competencies, to train workers and to issue credentials. This direction has gained momentum as a result of a severe shortage of those deemed qualified to fill specific work roles, and as part of a wider effort to develop and make transparent global job classification systems. In this context, then, PLA policies play a role in providing access for individuals with knowledge and skills, and recognizing these in relationship to job markets and classification systems.

Second, the academic: In a world of fierce competition for students and dollars, economic realities also drive academic decisions. More and more institutions of higher education, once skeptical or completely dismissive of PLA, have, to various extents, either accepted or embraced PLA in response to the goals of increased

enrollment and better retention and completion rates. And, in response to this opening up to the recognition of noncollegiate learning, we see volumes of policies trying to keep up: Administrators are trying to save their institutions; professors are worried about the weakening of academic integrity and the thinning out of their institution's degrees. And those who have championed PLA worry that these new policies will undercut the critical voice for social justice and access that the PLA movement embraced from the start.

In all of these political landscapes, the tensions are very apparent. Job classifications and PLA serve as mechanisms for an individual to show her or his skills, and thus provide more access to and more equal opportunities for employment. As colleges increase PLA opportunities to those who had no access or who were forced to start from scratch, students can now more readily demonstrate their knowledge and skills and more easily progress to meet their goals. However, at the same time that higher education is on this precipice of change, institutions across the globe accepting PLA tend to adopt existing policies and practices that do not acknowledge key changes that are already taking place. That is, when one looks at MOOCs (massive open online course), micro-credentials, competency-based education, and other alternative educational pathways and their intersections with PLA, we see that we need fresh thinking. Just at the point when we can celebrate our successes (and they are many), our policies and processes – our very ways of thinking about prior and new learning – have to shift.

From our perspective, there are four principles that all of us involved with PLA have to consider:

First, in whatever policies and processes we develop, we need to ensure that peoples' learning and skills are evaluated, and documented accurately and expeditiously. Institutions, whether academic or professional, need to shift from a single emphasis on credentialed instruction to a broader and more systematic attention to credentialed assessment. We need to determine what people know and what they can do – whatever the source of that learning – so as to respond to workforce needs, as well as to peoples' personal, academic and professional goals. We need to imagine a significant transformation of the university, whereby assessment becomes one of its key domains.

Second, under current academic curricular structures, there often is no place for PLA. Our policies and procedures need to provide meaningful space for PLA credit in those curricula. Thus, we need a shift in the way we think about curricula: learning and skills gained outside of academia, or even outside of conventional training, should no longer be judged as second rate, or inherently limited, or an afterthought that has no true place in typical curricular pathways. Rather, meaningful curricula should be understood as integrations of learning taken from different settings and different situations.

Third, our policies must recognize that people have gained skills and knowledge that the experts (in and out of the university) may not yet have recognized as legitimate learning. Thus, PLA policy must find ways to identify and affirm such outsider knowledge and perspectives – new ways of thinking and learning – that are valuable and critical for pushing the conventional boundaries of a field. In this way, our policies need to acknowledge the potential of students as co-creators of knowledge, not solely as receivers of that which is already known by the experts.

And finally, at the very root of our work has been the call to access, fairness and justice. When we seriously engage the first three considerations above, our perspectives must – and will – shift regarding who may participate in PLA and how their learning is judged. This moment provides an occasion for deep critical reflection on our ideas and assumptions about the role of age, race, social class and ethnicity; about place, gender and past experiences in our evaluation of prior learning. We must continue to re-examine our policies and

procedures to ensure that no group is explicitly or implicitly disadvantaged, even when we believe we have it right.

Identifying these four principles is meant to open the conversation. Indeed, as some of the materials in this current issue of *PLAIO* attest, we are beginning to see initial steps to move us in newer directions. The invited essay (by Brewer and Lakin) sets out to provide overall criteria for institutions to consider as they develop and revise PLA policies. The issue also includes pieces that give us a glimpse of trends in PLA policy development and practices across the world (Greece, Italy, Sweden, South Africa, the West Indies and the United States). The interview (with Klein-Collins and Sherman) describes findings in policy development and practices at the state level in the U.S. We hope that each contribution provides new perspectives and ways of thinking about next stages in the PLA world, and about the kinds of questions and challenges that we have to consider as we critically reflect on and develop new policies.

Overall, our task is two-fold: to rethink higher education, job classification and acquisition in light of prior learning assessment; and, at the same time, to rethink PLA policy and practices in light of ongoing changes at work and in the academy. There is much to do, and what we do must be carried out in a rigorous and principled way.