

Supporting Students in the PLA Process

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The assessment of prior experiential learning – that is, the acknowledgment that important learning occurs outside of the academy – has gained more and more legitimacy and significance over time. There are, all over the world, opportunities for students to demonstrate skills, understandings and insights they have gained at work, in their communities and in myriad other activities that are meaningful to them. This has been a significant triumph that has changed the university, changed the ways in which work itself is defined and assessed, and changed our whole understanding of what an adult knows and how that knowledge can be evaluated and credentialed.

And yet, even with these impressive strides, issues, questions and concerns remain. While the assessment of past learning is now available for more students than ever before, others still do not have such opportunities. And, even when institutions offer PLA (prior learning assessment) options, the supports that students need in order to be successful may be lacking, the skills that practitioners have to guide their students may be thin, and the institutions themselves may not have the understandings and infrastructures necessary to support effective and sustainable practices. And, too, there are instances in which PLA practices have been adopted with little attention to their connections to the broader mission, academic culture and core values of the institution. They are mere add-ons.

Without a doubt, there are many different PLA policies and there are many different practices. Indeed, in varied ways, the inclusion of the evaluation of prior experiential learning in advising, curriculum development and the credentialing process has evolved across institutions. Such diversity has only enhanced a sense of possibility and pushed all of us not only to implement PLA but to realize there are many valuable options that we may not have even considered.

We need a set of principles that encourage a flowering of diverse practices and, at the same time, frame our work around the core values of *quality, integrity and equity*. For the purposes of this issue of *PLAIO*, we need, specifically, to think about the principles that must be in place to support our students as they become aware of, participate in, and successfully complete the PLA award of credit.

Here are principles of good practice in PLA student support that we believe are emerging from conversations and debates currently within and across institutions. These principles offer our tentative efforts to articulate what we have learned from the articles in this issue, from previous materials in *PLAIO*, and from discussions with practitioners.

We hope this statement of principles will initiate further discussion about what we do, and how we need to support students through the PLA process. In fact, these principles should help us think about our responsibilities for making our institutions *student-ready*, rather than expecting our students to be *college-ready*.

- 1) **Institutional Commitment:** PLA policies and processes must be the result of institutionwide discussion and agreement; they must reflect the commitment *of* the community, not an imposition *upon* the community.
- 2) **Publicness:** Institutions are responsible for making public their commitment to recognizing learning gained outside of the academy, and students' ability to earn college credit for that learning.

- 3) **Transparency:** Institutions are responsible for developing policies and processes regarding PLA that are the result of institutionwide deliberations and agreement, and that are clear, accessible and effectively communicated within and outside of the institution.
- 4) **Equity:** PLA policies and processes should be grounded in the values of access and fairness must be attentive to *all* students learning and, in so doing, should not privilege any single group of students or one type of learning over another.
- 5) **Integrity and Quality:** Institutions need to establish agreed-upon criteria for evaluating learning that are consistently and methodically applied to ensure the integrity of the process and its outcomes; the tools and methods of evaluation must effectively and flexibly recognize and capture any college-level learning as a potential component of a credential.
- 6) **Support:** Institutions are responsible for creating policies, processes and practices, and for putting into place and sustaining a range of supports (person supports, as well as material resource supports) for students throughout every phase of the PLA process.
- 7) **Ongoing Training and Development:** All parties involved in the PLA process (from counselors/ advisors, to faculty, to academic administrators, to evaluators) need regular opportunities to learn about and critically engage in deliberations about relevant policies and processes; such PLA-focused activities should be considered essential to any institution's academic development program.
- 8) **Responsiveness:** PLA work does not exist in a vacuum: It must remain attentive and responsive to the needs of students and their life/work experiences, to institutional missions and commitments, and to the changing economic, political and cultural contexts in which our PLA activities take place.
- 9) **Experimentation:** Even our most cherished PLA ways call for critical scrutiny; like other dimensions of teaching and learning, PLA policies, processes, support systems and modes of evaluation should be considered a rich arena for imaginative, principled and thorough questioning and experimentation.

Each of these nine principles is deserving of our attention; each calls on us to scrutinize what we are doing and to examine whether our policies and processes are academically sound, reflective of our institutional missions and truly supportive of our students. Specifically in terms of student support, too often we expect students to be college-ready, even in areas in which they have had no experience and in which, sometimes, our processes and the very language we take for granted can be a burden, if not completely alienating. PLA is not only an effective recruitment tool, but as the materials in this new and previous issues of *PLAIO* have sought to announce, explore and untangle, its core values are access, equity and student success. It is imperative that our institutions take a deep dive and honestly ask themselves whether their PLA practices serve their students well. That is our responsibility.