PLA Practice at Wilmington University and West Hills Community College District, USA

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First Mile Portfolio Implementation (Vin Favoroso)

Retention and graduation rates have always been key measures for higher education institutions. Knowing how many students stay and how many leave with a degree are good gauges of practices and student service options that exist at a given institution. In fact, one of the reasons the credit for prior learning (CPL) office was created was to work with Wilmington University's adult population to find ways to research, evaluate, collaborate with faculty and align industry credentials, licenses, and prior learning to credit. When the CPL office began in 2013, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) "LearningCounts" service was identified as the best avenue for Wilmington University students to leverage portfolio assessment. Though it did work for a time, the CPL team began to reassess this PLA (prior learning assessment) route in early 2018, realizing that students felt deterred by this "third-party" company.

From this assessment, the CPL team decided to bring PLA completely in-house using the existing relationships the CPL team had with faculty, department chairs, and deans. In particular, the CPL team had worked closely with one chair, Dr. Jim Warwick, who would help lay the foundation and template for PLAs at Wilmington University. As the criminal justice bachelor's program chair, Dr. Warwick had extensive experience not only as a state trooper but also in the K-9 unit, as a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) sniper, and a licensed firearms instructor. Dr. Warwick understood that prior learning was not only prevalent but also ongoing in the social and behavioral science field. With that and the assistance of Wilmington University's Institutional Research office, the CPL team and CRJ (criminal justice) chair began reviewing data related to PLA modalities within the previous five years and identified CRJ 350-Computer Operations in Criminal Justice as a course most commonly requested to "challenge" via PLA. This course concentrated on computer systems common to law enforcement, as well as on the legal and ethical considerations related to its access. Dr. Warwick also felt that only students with a minimum of five years of law enforcement experience would be approved for credit since (with certain exceptions) the content of the course only applied to those trained in most of those computer systems.

Once the course was chosen, Dr. Warwick then reviewed and identified key learning objectives he thought were integral to the course competencies, while the CPL team began working with an instructional designer to create a generic template for the university's learning management system, Canvas. That work completed, the CPL team had, in effect, created a type of hybrid PLA. This PLA combines space for portfolio reflection, sections where students can upload relevant and supporting documentation and training, as well as room to complete small assignments related to the content. This particular form made sense because the CRJ chair felt it was important to have a healthy mix of theory and practice in hopes of giving the students an opportunity to recognize their prior learning while also learning something they may have missed in their current work role. To date, the CPL team has had 13 students successfully complete and pass the CRJ 350 PLA course since its inception in the fall of 2018. Since then, the CPL team has continued to work with Dr. Warwick in his now expanded role as director of CRJ programs and

chair of the master's in administration of justice (MAJ) program. The goal is to create the same modality for its graduate course, MAJ 6604-Technology in Modern Policing, which focuses on the broader topic of technology in policing geared toward police executives and the implementation process of new tools. Going through the same process as we did with CRJ 350, the MAJ 6604 PLA went live in summer 2020 and again has had huge success.

Since the creation of the generic template in Canvas, the CPL team, while collaborating with other chairs, has been able to implement this template to meet the needs of the learning objectives and competencies of certain program requirements. The new tool has allowed us to streamline our in-house PLA process and opens new doors to opportunities in prior learning in other degree programs that previously weren't there. Faculty buy-in is paramount when introducing and implementing new ways to recognize and assess prior learning, but with the right tools, processes, and collaboration efforts, we can forever change the rhetoric when it comes to awarding credit for college-level learning.

Testimonial from CRJ 350 and MAJ 6604 Instructor and Prior Learning Specialist Greg Postle

I have had the privilege of successfully piloting two separate portfolio assessments for active law enforcement professionals enrolled in the undergraduate criminal justice program and the Master of Science in Administration of Justice program at Wilmington University. The format for these portfolio assessments takes into account the years of training, experience, and professional knowledge these students bring to the classroom, while formally assessing their comprehension and critical application of the major learning objectives within each course.

Both the undergraduate and graduate portfolio assessments have been a great success and we have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the students. The feedback from students frequently highlights several factors: the benefits that come from being able to complete the coursework at their own pace, the opportunity to draw from and apply their professional knowledge in an academic setting, and, critically, feeling that their professional experience is valued as they work toward their degree. From an instructor perspective, it has been extremely rewarding to work alongside these students as they engage with their professional experience through an academic lens.
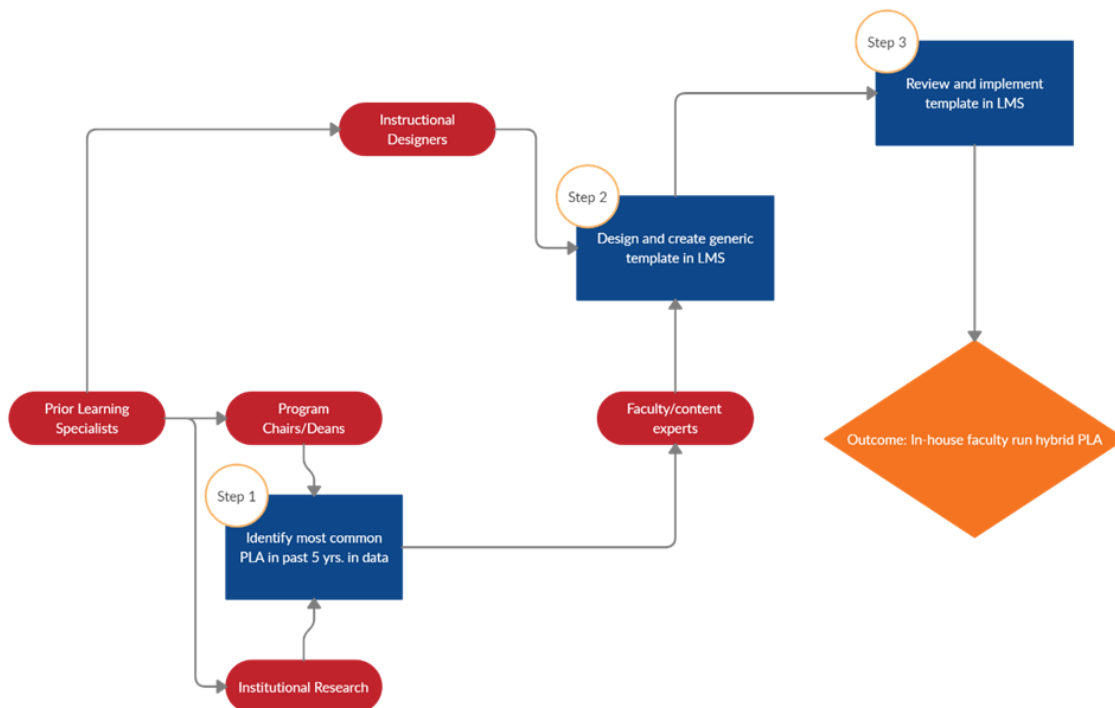

Figure: PLA at Wilmington

Implementing Portfolio Assessment at a Community College (Justin Garcia)

The portfolio assessment process developed at West Hills Community College District was a two-year endeavor involving full-time faculty, counselors, administrators, and staff. Kicking off in 2017, the milestones characterizing the subsequent two years included institutional policy revisions, faculty and staff training, agreement on the key components of a learning portfolio submitted for credit, and the development of a 1-unit (credit) course designed to guide students in preparing their portfolios for submission. Achieving these milestones ultimately led to accepting the first cohort of students requesting credit by portfolio assessment in spring 2020.

The revision to institutional policies involved synthesizing credit for prior learning policies from institutions across the United States. Then, incrementally, meetings held with faculty and administrators shaped each policy statement related to portfolio assessment that the institution's shared governance committees eventually approved. The policy statements included setting the maximum number of units students may earn through portfolio assessment at 15 (approximately one college semester), ensuring subject matter faculty assessed portfolios for the awarding of credit, and codifying that separate portfolios would be evaluated for each course (that is a so-called "course match" model).

Arriving at an agreement on the key components of a portfolio submitted for credit involved surveying the institutional credit for prior learning handbooks from various institutions. As a result of this review, the college faculty recommended a standardized format for all portfolios that included a learning narrative, professional resume, and supporting documents such as awards, licenses, and samples of work. Through conversations about these elements of the portfolios, faculty recommended that for each course eligible for credit by portfolio assessment, the faculty within the discipline would prescribe the nature of the learning narrative, professional summary, and supporting documents, and shepherd this through the curriculum review process. This practice maximized the number of eyes on the prescribed portfolio instructions prepared by faculty when recommending a course from the college catalog for portfolio assessment. These prescribed instructions eventually became known as a "PLA Template."

Another key milestone of the implementation of credit by portfolio assessment was the development of a 1-unit portfolio development course. A pair of faculty including one full-time English instructor and one counselor developed a six-week portfolio development course informed by syllabi publically available through the Canvas Commons and partner institutions upon request. The course includes modules designed to guide students in the preparation of their learning narrative, including asynchronous discussions and assignments where students submit the rough draft and final draft of their narratives. Additional modules allow students to review sample resumes and direct them toward resources to prepare their own professional resume. Latter modules inform students to retrieve various types of supporting documents to include in the portfolio.

After reaching these milestones, the soft launch of portfolio assessment began in spring 2020 with the support from instructional faculty within the health science department. Faculty within that department recommended one of their courses by preparing a "PLA Template" articulating the required components for a portfolio submitted for credit. The course chosen was Introduction to Medical Professional, which regularly filled quickly and for which there was often a student waitlist. Faculty assigned to teach the course recommended portfolio assessment to students who had professional experience in health care and who were waitlisted for the course. Six students opted to enroll in the portfolio development course with the intention of preparing a portfolio to submit for credit in the course, Intro. to Medical Professional.

The portfolio course launched with these students in spring 2020, and by the end of the semester, the students had prepared portfolios ready for assessment by the health science faculty. The faculty who served as assessors recommended credit to each student based on their

portfolios. After the faculty assessed the student portfolios, student testimonials captured at the end of the portfolio course were reviewed. One student stated: "Even though I had a rough time preparing my narrative, I actually enjoyed writing about myself. The narrative was my favorite part of this class." Regarding the entire process of developing the portfolio through the portfolio development course, another student stated: "Taking this course has made me more confident in a way with my education and work. It has helped me improve my writing. I've learned how to make things organized and sound more professional. It also taught me to look at things in a positive perspective." The testimonials suggested that the process of developing a portfolio to earn credit toward a course was, in and of itself, an educationally valuable learning experience.