

Workplace Learning Recognition: Make Faculty Part of the Plan

Janice Karlen, LaGuardia Community College, New York, USA

At the core of prior learning assessment (PLA) is the acknowledgement and recognition of learning and skills gained through the workplace. Often, students present themselves to us with many years of quality experience, demonstrated learning and the request that we recognize these accomplishments for college credit. Here are some practices that facilitate this recognition.

At many institutions, PLA is an administrative process that involves faculty only at the final stage of portfolio evaluation. Most people dislike being presented with a *fait accompli* for approval. Faculty are no different in this respect (and, in fact, some may be worse). Including them earlier in the PLA process may be a key to increasing success.

One successful model of PLA occurs at LaGuardia Community College (LAGCC). LaGuardia is a two-year community college located in the New York City borough of Queens, and is a part of the City University of New York (CUNY). The college offers associate degrees in the arts, sciences and applied sciences, as well as continuing education programs. There are over 19,000 students enrolled in credit programs and over 65,000 in continuing education. Over half the students in credit programs are under age 22 and 49 percent of matriculated students are foreign born. LaGuardia uses a course match model of prior learning credit and offers unrestricted elective credit for veterans' active duty military service upon proof of honorable discharge. Credit recommendations from ACE (American Council on Education), NCCRS (National College Credit Recommendation Service) and various testing services also are accepted.

At LaGuardia, the two PLA coordinators also are faculty members. One of them is a professor and the program director for the business administration and business management programs, while the other teaches experiential education, working with students on career education and internships. Since many of the PLA requests coming from students are business-related, there is direct faculty input in the discipline from the start. Where the knowledge acquired through work experience is more suitable to internship, that faculty member may work directly with the student to develop a portfolio demonstrating the reflective practice required by the internship experience. Additionally, the relationship of these faculty members with their colleagues in other departments provides beneficial linkages when there are requests that are not from a business discipline. There is an element of trust between faculty colleagues that does not always occur in the administration/faculty realm that fosters understanding and good communication.

One successful method of assuring that students receive appropriate recognition of their learning occurs when the originators of continuing education workplace development initiatives involve faculty in the program development process. Faculty, especially those teaching career programs, want students to enter and be successful in their workplaces and careers. Both faculty and administration do not want students to repeat courses if they already possess mastery of the learning outcomes. They want programs to be recognized by employers as producing high quality workers. A successful practice that supports this goal is the development of internal articulation agreements between the workforce training programs offered through continuing education divisions and academic programs. This may be done for both contract and grant-funded programs. At LaGuardia,

one successful example is the Goldman Sachs *10,000 Small Businesses* initiative. Individuals successfully completing this program are eligible to receive nine PLA credits in the entrepreneurship and small business management program option within the Business Management degree. Academic faculty developed modules for the *10,000 Small Business* curriculum and they teach them. A second example is the LaGuardia Human Services/Mental Health major and the LAGCC Continuing Education Program for Certified Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselors-Trainee. Agreement exists between the academic department and the Division of Continuing Education for students to receive nine credits in the academic program upon receiving certification in the continuing education program. The continuing education program must submit to academic faculty any changes to the program in order to maintain the “articulated” status. However, individuals who receive PLA credit must apply and register as students at LAGCC before credit is awarded for their workforce development learning.

Individuals who request recognition of their learning through PLA at a community college have an additional consideration that is seldom mentioned, but should become part of a dialogue with the student petitioner: unfortunately, community college students may have difficulty transferring credits earned as part of the PLA process. The four-year institutions to which they apply may not accept PLA credit in transfer at all, or they may require student participation in their own PLA program. Of particular concern are courses in a sequence such as accounting. Accounting majors are usually required to take Principles of Accounting I, Principles of Accounting II, Intermediate Accounting I and Intermediate Accounting II as part of their academic program. If the community college grants PLA credit for one or two of the Principles courses, the student may successfully complete the sequence at the community college and graduate. Potentially, when the student transfers to a baccalaureate institution, that school may not accept the PLA credit granted by the community college from the Principles courses, and therefore will reject transfer credit for the entire accounting sequence, even if the Intermediate Accounting courses were taken in a classroom and successfully completed. This is an important consideration for both PLA professionals and students. Academic faculty are often aware of these issues and are a valuable resource as PLA professionals work with students on developing their academic program plans.

There will always be faculty members who believe that unless they are the instructor and a student takes a course in their classroom, the student has not received sufficient, quality instruction to be awarded credit for a course. Fortunately, there is a growing body of faculty who recognize that learning takes place through a variety of means. They are taking courses online or enrolling in MOOCs (massive open online courses) and would argue strenuously that they had learned something even though delivery standards, pedagogy or other issues might not be to their liking. The more insightful and progressive faculty are assets to our work of becoming more inclusive in acknowledging workplace learning. Virtually all academic programs have assessment standards for the programs themselves and for individual courses, so it becomes much easier to match the learning that occurs in the workplace or elsewhere with the goals of traditional delivery environments. Recognizing that faculty are becoming increasingly receptive – even embracing alternative ways of learning in their own lives – supports one of the fundamentals of PLA: the recognition of workplace learning.