

Northeast Resiliency Consortium Colleges' Prior Learning Assessment Policy, Standards Development and Practice

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Abstract

This practice article describes prior learning assessment (PLA) policies and practices from four “Achieving the Dream” colleges in the Northeast Resiliency Consortium (NRC):¹ Bunker Hill, Atlantic Cape, LaGuardia, and Passaic County Community Colleges (all located in the USA). These colleges acknowledge that college-level learning occurs on the job, in the community and in peoples’ lives. They have developed and implemented PLA on their campuses to enable community members to earn credentials more quickly. In this effort, they have been aided by the NRC’s PLA Standards.

Background

The NRC was created in the wake of recent natural and man-made disasters in the Northeast portion of the United States, as communities seeking to recover and move forward realized the value of a resilient workforce. In partnership with Achieving the Dream (ATD), the NRC focused on building resiliency by enhancing training opportunities for adults and dislocated workers, increasing credential attainment, and improving employment outcomes. Led by Passaic County Community College (New Jersey), the NRC includes Atlantic Cape (New Jersey), Bunker Hill (Massachusetts), Capital (Connecticut), Housatonic (Connecticut), Kingsborough (New York), and LaGuardia (New York) Community Colleges.

One of the consortium’s key approaches to meeting its strategic goals was to build the colleges’ capacity to use prior learning assessment (PLA) to accelerate student progress and increase credential attainment. The colleges recognized from the start that using PLA to award academic credit meant PLA would need to meet the same quality, integrity and equity as any other academic program. Therefore, the consortium developed standards to guarantee that all NRC colleges would follow a rigorous academic PLA process.

The first step in the process of developing the NRC PLA standards required that each college complete an inventory of PLA practices organized around the Five Critical Factors for PLA Programs² (Hoffman, Travers, Evans & Treadwell, 2009; Travers, 2013). Relevant external sources also were brought into the review, including statements on PLA expectations from the colleges’ accreditation agencies and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning.³ Institutions reviewed the inventory results and other guidance and provided feedback on each institution’s current and planned practices. The document, “Northeast Resiliency Consortium Standards for Prior Learning Assessment” (Travers, 2015), is the culmination of this work, outlining 17 standards of practice.

PLA Standards Development, Policy and Implementation Across the Consortium States: Atlantic Cape Community College; Bunker Hill Community College; LaGuardia Community College and Passaic County Community College

Before the NRC existed, several consortium colleges had institutional philosophies, missions and policies that supported PLA. Bunker Hill Community College, for example, was a pioneer in granting credit for nontraditional learning by evaluating learning achieved through experience. The college has had a strong PLA program in place with clear and comprehensive policies. Still, the college notes that the NRC PLA Standards have resulted in increased institutional understanding of the college's PLA program. Passaic County Community College, another college that used PLA before it joined the NRC, found the NRC PLA Standards to be a platform for academic integrity, providing the assurance that experiences and learning validated by PLA through assessment are equal to or greater than the college's classroom content and outcomes.

Colleges leveraged the NRC grant funding from the Trade Adjustment Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program⁴ to create a PLA infrastructure. While some colleges have more centralized PLA policies, others are decentralized. At Atlantic Cape Community College, for example, the development of PLA policy begins with the vice president of academic affairs, who is the chief academic officer and is responsible for PLA. The implementation of PLA programs and policies is moving to the college's workforce development college and career pathways department. At Passaic, the TAACCCT grant was used, in part, to appoint a director for PLA whose responsibilities include building PLA infrastructure. The institutionalization of PLA policies, including the expansion of transfer credit, credit by exam, the development of internal articulation, and memos of understanding moving non-credit courses to credit have helped build a clear, coordinated structure that supports PLA. At Bunker Hill, any new PLA policy is created or implemented on a program or departmental level based on college policies, program policy, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and American Council on Education (ACE) guidelines. Bunker Hill's faculty members are actively involved in developing and overseeing the policies. The NRC PLA Standards and resulting updated policies have been welcomed by faculty members who value the opportunities that the PLA program offers to students in assisting them to reach their goals at an accelerated pace and in an affordable way.

As the NRC PLA Standards were developed and implemented, some tensions emerged. After educating the community at Atlantic Cape that PLA is an academic process, the previous debate that PLA is "giving away credits" is now changing. At Passaic, discussions emerged about PLA's effect on individual or program enrollments. While transfer credits, standardized external credit by exam and awarding of articulated credit were readily accepted, credit for workplace and life experience faced considerable challenge. Passaic also outsourced portfolio review to Thomas Edison State University, which could be costly for students. Now the director for PLA, on an ad hoc basis, assists students with developing a single course portfolio and advocates for the award of credit. In the view of Passaic's director for PLA, time and persistent advocacy ultimately will result in the institutionalization of PLA practice.

Student Success and PLA Participation

There is a clear connection between PLA participation and colleges' ability to expand their student success efforts. At Atlantic Cape, increasing interest in PLA from the professional health care community is spurring the college to improve PLA processes so students can earn credits for college-level work completed in workforce development and earn credentials more quickly. Passaic's Bridge programs, designed to link non-credit courses to credit, are of significant value in providing credentialed, short-term skills that increase students' employment opportunities while at the same time incentivizing them to pursue additional opportunities through credit programs. Bridge programs also facilitate the ability of degree-seeking students to obtain a concurrent credential for in-course employment or resume building.

Going forward, LaGuardia Community College, in collaboration with the NRC, will offer a series of professional development activities aligned with the NRC PLA Standards for targeted faculty and staff advisors. This multi-disciplinary team will also examine practices and policies and make recommendations to ultimately further the goals of credit for PLA at the college.

For the Northeast Resiliency Consortium colleges, PLA is a multifaceted benefit program offering value to students, colleges, faculty and their respective communities.

Notes

- ¹ This workforce product was funded by a grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration. The product was created by the grantee and does not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Labor. The U.S. Department of Labor makes no guarantees, warranties, or assurances of any kind, express or implied, with respect to such information, including any information on linked sites and including, but not limited to, accuracy of the information or its completeness, timeliness, usefulness, adequacy, continued availability, or ownership. For more information, go to <http://www.northeastresiliency.org/>.
- ² The Five Critical Factors for PLA Programs are: Philosophy, Mission and Policy; Institutional Support; Program Parameters; Professional Development; and Program Evaluation.
- ³ CAEL’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning can be found at <http://www.cael.org/ten-standards-for-assessing-learning>.
- ⁴ For more information about the TAACCCT grant program, visit <https://www.doleta.gov/taaccct/>.

References

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