

## Northeast Resiliency Consortium Standards for Prior Learning Assessment September 2, 2015

### Background and History

Within the Trade Adjustment Act Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant for the Northeast Resiliency Consortium (NRC), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) was identified as one of the strategies “to ensure multiple pathways to learning are recognized and accelerate trade-workers time to completion” (NRC Technical Proposal, p. 20). One of the PLA outcomes identified was to develop NRC’s “first-ever regional standards for PLA’s while allowing for slight adaptation within each state’s practices” (ibid). The following document provides the agreed upon standards for the NRC. Each of the following NRC members have agreed to employ minimally these standards within the TAACCCT programs:

- Atlantic Cape Community College, New Jersey (<http://atlantic.edu>)
- Bunker Hill Community College, Massachusetts (<http://www.bhcc.mass.edu>)
- Capital Community College, Connecticut (<http://www.ccc.commnet.edu>)
- Housatonic Community College, Connecticut (<http://www.housatonic.edu>)
- Kingsborough Community College, CUNY, New York (<http://www.kbcc.cuny.edu>)
- LaGuardia Community College, CUNY, New York (<http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu>)
- Passaic County Community College, New Jersey (<http://www.pccc.edu>)

Many people have achieved college-level learning gained through work experiences and training, serving in the military, taking non-credit course work, engaging in community service and volunteer activities, and studying independently such as through open educational resources and the internet. Some of this learning has been documented through formal certificates, licenses and other types of credentials, or through standardized examinations. Many sources, such as the American Council on Education (ACE) or the National College Credit Recommendation Services (NCCRS), have evaluated this learning using rigorous assessment methods pulling on the expertise of faculty across the country. Individual institutions have also developed processes, such as challenge exams and portfolio assessment, to evaluate learning acquire outside of their traditional classrooms.

Prior Learning Assessment is an academic assessment process through which individuals document verifiable college-level learning acquired outside of the traditional learning environment for academic credit. This is an academic process and the procedures must maintain the same quality, integrity and equity as any other academic program at the institution in order to award equivalent credit. The following standards are developed to guarantee that all member colleges of the NRC follow equivalent academic conventions to ensure the integrity of the PLA process.

## **NRC PLA Standards**

These standards describe the methods by which the member institutions of the Northeast Resiliency Consortium agree to employ for programs identified under the TAACCCT grant. The standards are organized around Five Critical Factors for PLA Programs (Hoffman, Travers, Evans & Treadwell, 2009; Travers, 2013). Prior to the development of the NRC PLA standards, each member institution completed an inventory of current PLA practices organized around the Five Critical Factors. Through individual and joint meetings of the NRC, institutions reviewed the resulting inventory and provided feedback related to each institutions current and planned practices.

In addition to the Five Critical Factors inventory, critical external sources were referenced. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and the New England Association for Schools & Colleges/ Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC/CIHE) (the two accreditation agencies for the regions included in the NRC) statements on PLA were reviewed to ensure that the standards aligned with each accreditation agency's expectation. The *Ten Standards for Assessing Learning* developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL; [www.cael.org/pla.htm](http://www.cael.org/pla.htm)) were also considered and integrated into the NRC standards. The NRC Technical Proposal for the TAACCCT grant provided technical requirements for the standards, as well. For each following standard, the source material is indicated.

### **Philosophy, Mission, Policy**

The alignment of philosophy, mission and policies is essential for successful PLA programs. Every practice has underlying philosophies that shape how policies are interpreted and established. There needs to be a clear alignment of the institution's philosophy, mission and policies to support using PLA credits to meet curricular requirements.

**Standard 1:** The Colleges' philosophy and mission support the award of PLA credits toward program requirements. The basic principles of the college regarding credit for prior learning are clear and communicated to all constituents (comparable to MSCHE).

**Standard 2:** Each College has a policy in place to support the award of PLA credits toward program requirements (comparable to MSCHE). The policy includes, but is not limited to:

- The methods by which prior learning can be evaluated and the level and amount of credit available by evaluation.
- The ways in which the credits can be applied to program requirements based on the college's curricula and standards.
- Definition of college-level learning.

**Standard 3:** Policies, procedures and criteria applied to PLA activities, fee structure, any pertaining financial aid practices, and provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to prospective and enrolled students, as well as faculty and staff involved

in the assessment process, and be included in academic catalogs and college websites (Comparable to CAEL Standard 7; MSCHE; NEASC/CIHE).

### **Institutional Support**

Institutional support must be sufficient to ensure the quality and integrity of the PLA programs. Institutional support includes the financial structure and business model, institutional buy-in, marketing, and technology.

**Standard 4:** Designated person or personnel at each college will be assigned to coordinate PLA activities, either as a primary or secondary responsibility. This role will be responsible for:

- Communicating clear and accurate information concerning PLA options, policies and procedures to students, faculty, and staff;
- Ensuring evaluation activities are conducted with integrity and equity;
- Maintaining accurate records of PLA activities; and
- Providing and/or organizing professional development opportunities across the college.

**Standard 5:** Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the PLA process and not determined by the amount of final credit awarded (CAEL Standard 8).

### **Program Parameters**

Prior learning can be identified and assessed in a variety of methods to determine if academic credit should be awarded towards program credentials. Common methods include, but are not limited to, standardized examinations, evaluated military and professional learning credits by the American Council on Education (ACE), the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and regionally accredited institutions, individualized prior learning portfolio assessments, and institutional challenge exams. The program parameters include the types of PLA accepted, the ways in which those credits can be applied to the academic program, and the policies and practices that insure the PLA process is of quality, has integrity and is equitable across students.

**Standard 6:** PLA credit is granted for verifiable college-level learning, but not only for the experience itself (Comparable to CAEL Standard 1; MSCHE). This means that the learning acquired through the experience is what is evaluated for credit, not just participation in the experience.

**Standard 7:** The assessment process should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes (CAEL Standard 3).

**Standard 8:** Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted (CAEL Standard 5; comparable to MSCHE). Each college will determine which types of PLA credits are appropriate to and accepted toward the designated TAACCCT

programs. Institutions should minimally consider the types of PLA credits designated in the NRC's TAACCCT Technical Proposal:

- Military credits credit recommendations evaluated by ACE
- Standardized examination, such as CLEP, ACT, and DANTES
- Use of portfolio-based assessments to capture competency acquisition through work-based experience or non-credit courses offered through NRC colleges
- Institutional challenge examinations developed and administered by individual member colleges

**Standard 9:** Each institution will determine ways in which the PLA assessment outcomes (e.g., recommended credits) can be applied to the designated TAACCCT programs requirements that are in accordance with institutional, system, state and accreditation regulations and made public to students, faculty and staff (comparable to MSCHE).

**Standard 10:** The evaluation of PLA credits earned and or outcomes applied to program requirements should be based on the same criteria used to evaluate student outcomes expected for all credit and non-credit bearing academic courses. When PLA awards are for credit, the assessment must be at the level of acceptable college-level learning. Criteria need to be clear, explicit and at the appropriate level for its application that are both agreed upon and made public to students, faculty and staff (Comparable to CAEL Standard 2; MSCHE; NEASC/CIHE).

**Standard 11:** The evaluation of PLA outcomes must be conducted by the faculty or equivalent subject matter experts, whose competencies have been reviewed by procedures parallel to those employed by the college for full-time, part-time, and/or adjunct faculty (Comparable to CAEL Standard 4; MSCHE; NEASC/CIHE).

**Standard 12:** Each institution must indicate under whose academic authority (faculty and academic administration) PLA credits are awarded and make explicit the procedures for this award (Comparable to CAEL Standard 4; MSCHE; NEASC/CIHE).

**Standard 13:** When PLA awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized, similarly to all other transfer and institutional credits. Because of the nature of PLA, care should be given in the award of credit to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning (Comparable to CAEL Standard 6; MSCHE).

**Standard 14:** Matriculated students enrolled in the identified TAACCCT programs should (based on NRC's TAACCCT Technical Report):

- Receive early advising on PLA opportunities. Although an individual may request evaluation of their verifiable learning at any time, PLA should be considered early enough to ensure maximizing its benefits toward the desired program (Comparable to MSCHE).

- Be allowed to use PLA awards toward identified requirements as indicated by the program.

Individual institutions may choose to extend PLA opportunities to other programs and students beyond those enrolled in the TAACCCT programs.

### **Professional Development**

The role of professional development across all constituents involved in prior learning assessment (PLA) is essential. The constituents involve a large array of individuals who are involved with PLA at some level.

**Standard 15:** All personnel involved in the assessment of prior learning must be adequately trained for the role that each contributes to the PLA process. Those involved in the assessment procedures need professional development on evaluating learning acquired external to the traditional academic environment. All PLA personnel need to pursue continuing professional development for the functions they perform (CAEL Standard 9; comparable to MSCHE; NEASC/CIHE).

### **Program Evaluation**

The evaluation of PLA programs is often overlooked, yet it is as important as any other academic program. The PLA program is an academic process and needs to be held to the same standards of excellence and undergo similar evaluation processes as expected of all academic programs (credit or non-credit).

**Standard 16:** Institutions need to monitor, review, evaluate, and revise PLA programs regularly in accordance to campus policies for all standard academic program reviews (Comparable to CAEL Standard 10; MSCHE).

**Standard 17:** Institutions need to collect and analyze data pertaining to students meeting the expected outcomes of the PLA process (comparable to MSCHE).

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