

## Rethinking PLA: The Case for Experiential Education

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### Abstract

Much effort has been directed toward identifying and enhancing our institutions capabilities and resources to attract and retain our adult learner. The College of the Liberal Arts and World Campus actively participate in self-evaluation posing questions and identifying issues that need to be addressed. The question before us is how we improve policies and practices to increase adult degree completion. Our stated goal is not to simply accelerate the degree process, but rather create and establish integrated programs of study for the adult learner that leads to student competency. We recognize adult learners bring to their studies significant experiences and training. This stated truth became a reality when we began to receive documentation from our students that narrated their training and experience. From border guards that worked in isolated border crossings on the United States and Canadian border, to army analysts that collect and review intelligence, to soldiers that documented the war effort in Afghanistan to a winter Olympian each student brought with them a compelling story and substantial experience. At this point another truth emerged that the accepted and traditional methodology for awarding credit for experiential learning and training is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). The accepted practice of PLA is inherent to degree completion for the adult learner and for maintaining academic integrity. This new found reality, based upon an old truth, required that we develop a PLA assessment program that was both effective for the adult learner in communicating what they had learned, but also honored the academically rigorous and progressive standards of the College of the Liberal Arts. Taking into consideration the stated standard that general credits in the student's program of study rest with the department concerned (Faculty Senate Policy 42-99) we addressed the issues facing our majors in the programs of Law and Society and Letters, Arts and Sciences. The answer for our learners and for the integrity of the program rest with another truth – the value of self-study and “learn by doing” found in independent study and internships. As we reviewed and revamped the curricula of Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences, during the 2012-2013 academic year, we acknowledged that the intersection of the adult learner, experiential learning and the assessment of prior learning is not course driven, but content driven. Our challenge is to assist the learner in communicating what they have learned. We needed to create a learning environment that offered a practice to theory approach as well as the theory to practice standard. By so doing we could support the adult learner and the institution in answering what is college-level learning and how do we communicate what it is.

## Introduction

Simply, PLA is the evaluation and assessment of a student's life learning for college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. We adhere to the PLA mantra that credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience. For the purposes of this PLA policy we will be addressing the evaluation and assessment of the unique needs of the matriculated adult learners to the College of the Liberal Arts majors of Law and Society (LAWSC) and Letters, Arts, and Sciences (LAS). The challenge before us is the evaluation and awarding of credits for training and work experience that enhance the learners standing within the major.

### Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences Paradigm

It is often said that learning is big and is not limited by where we live, what we do, our gender, age, ethnicity, race or economic status. The notion that education is fluid is a driving force behind the development and delivery of majors online. It moves us forward as we continue to blur the lines between the classroom and the community. Essential to the success of creating a big tent approach to a college education is prior learning assessment. Prior Learning Assessment validates lifelong learning and serves as an alternative approach to the earning of college credit. The question is not whether we should award PLA credits, but how we assess and evaluate the skill sets of adult learners.

The College of the Liberal Arts recognizes the value of the adult learner's life experiences. We seek to assess and evaluate adult learner skill sets that are acquired through work, corporate training programs, military training and service, law enforcement training and service, Homeland Security, U.S. Custom and Border Protection, first- responder training and service and documented volunteer and community service and acquired skill sets earned and recognized as exceptional. The importance associated with such training and experience is consistent with residential student internship experiences. The internship and independent study are long valued for making majors market sensitive; putting into place the option of theory to practice. The difference between the residential standard and the PLA approach to an internship model is when the student completes the experience. The adult learner arrives on campus with a richness of experiential education that we seek for the residential student once

the student is on campus. The theory to practice standard approach in many cases does not fit the learning model of the adult learner. Consequently, we need to consider a paradigm that applies practice to theory.

### Rationale

Inspired by the Workforce Education program at Penn State we began to look at academic paradigms that valued experience as an essential element of the learning process. In addition we found research that supported the long held assumptions that PLA credits increased the learner's persistence to graduation rate. Nan Travers (2011a) SUNY Empire State College concluded that:

That participation in PLA increased students' self-awareness and personal development as a learner, and improved their problem-solving skills, study skills, reflection skills and self-regulated learning; all of which are hallmarks of a good student.

One should be careful not to conclude that the mere act of awarding PLA credits resulted in this desired outcome, but rather we hold to the position that "participation" is central to the development of the learner. We concluded that a viable assessment program needs to create the opportunity for the student to apply one's knowledge, evaluate and analyze, to create new meaning or structure and reflect; be an engaged participant in the learning process and the earning of PLA credit.

We tested our conclusion by seeking advice and counsel from those who are stakeholders in the Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences program including: The College of the Liberal Arts, World Campus academic advisers and World Campus program support.

Our conclusion was further bolstered by the following findings based upon the results from Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48 –Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes, which included The Pennsylvania State University and was funded by Lumina Foundation for Education (CAEL 2010). The findings were based upon data collected from 62,475 students at 48 postsecondary institutions.

The summary of the findings include:

- PLA students had a higher degree-earning rate than non-PLA students.
  - 56% of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while 21% of non-PLA students did so.

Break down of degree earned:

- 43% of PLA students earned a bachelor's degree – 15% of Non-PLA students earned a bachelor's degree

13% of PLA students earned an associate's degree – 6% of non-PLA students

- Students with PLA Credit demonstrated greater persistence. The findings were based on the patterns of annual enrollment and credit-earning.
- Student with PLA credit needed less time to earn degrees.

Conclusion: The research suggests that a “PLA effect” exists. Learners across a range of institutional contexts and from a diverse population benefit from the awarding of PLA credits. The research found that the greater the flexibility the student has for using the PLA credit the better the academic outcomes.

One explanation suggests that PLA credits are a powerful motivator for the adult learner. They provide a confidence boost; communicating to the learner a level of acceptance and belonging to the larger community of learners. The awarding of credits serves as a validation of the training and expertise that the adult learner brings to the program. However, essential to the findings is the ability for the learner to communicate what they have learned. The assessment tool must provide the student with the skill set needed to structure meaning from the experience which in turn gives the learner confidence. Given the findings of the study the research serves as important rationale for the College of the Liberal Arts PLA program for the majors of LAWSC and LAS. As previously stated the PLA program is course based with decisions to award credits determined by the academic department that is responsible for the major. The College of the Liberal Arts Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences programs will expand the course-based model for adult-learners by including Internship (LA 495) and the independent study (LA496) credits as course-based options.

The framework for this model is the finding that flexibility in the application of PLA credits results in better academic outcomes. Generally all adult learners should benefit from this model. Specifically military and veterans as well as law enforcement and related personnel as previously outlined will benefit. Given that these groups of adult learners serve as a targeted market for the stated majors it stands to reason that the PLA model for the majors should address the specific skill sets of the targeted population:

Projected outcomes:

- Enhance opportunities for newly matriculated adult learners;
- Promote consistency in the determination of credits- create a level playing field;
- Better align degree programs with adult learners professional training;

- Validate quality of training and related work experience;
- Meet commitments as outlined in Maritime Law Enforcement College Partnership Program;
- Build pathway for success for the adult learner – resulting in a range of policy options that create flexibility in the awarding of PLA credit.

### LA 495 & LA 496- Internship and Independent Study Credit

Residential students demand a curriculum that is career-oriented; relevant to their studies. The adult learner also wants a career-oriented curriculum. But unlike the traditional residential student the adult learner may have work or training experiences to build upon. They want their curriculum to be relevant to their training and experiences. The role of the academy is to develop alternative pedagogy – one that allows experiential learning to be integrated in the learning process. Students learn by doing and reflect upon the experience- communicating what they learned. The distinguishing characteristic of an internship from other forms of self-study is the need for supervision and a balance between learning and contributing. The training and work (learning and contributing) experience of the military, veterans and the stated groups make the learning appropriate and of sufficient quality to warrant consideration for internship or independent study credit.

Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education offers the framework for an internship (CAS):

The primary mission of Internship Programs (IP) is to engage students in planned, educationally-related work and learning experiences that integrate knowledge and theory with practical application and skill development in a professional setting.

The essential elements of the internship and independent study are to integrate knowledge and theory with practical application and skill development. The Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences experiential learning paradigm acknowledges that internships and independent study allows for practical experience to be before theory and knowledge or after theory and knowledge. The actual internship or independent study is the vehicle for addressing cognitive complexity – resulting in the integration of knowledge, theory and practical application.

### Conclusion

The overarching goal of the Law and Society and Letters, Arts, and Sciences PLA program is to provide an adult centered approach to the integration of practical or nonacademic experiences with cognitive complexity- critical thinking, reflective thinking, effective reasoning and creativity. The collaboration of the College of the Liberal Arts with the University Library and

World Campus will offer the students the academic and digital literacy skill sets necessary to communicate what they have learned and what is college learning.

## References

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