

RETRAINING THE GULF COAST WORKFORCE THROUGH IT PATHWAYS CONSORTIUM PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLA) BEST PRACTICES

Nine community and technical colleges in Louisiana and Mississippi make up the **Retraining the Gulf Coast Workforce through IT Pathways Consortium**. The goal of the Consortium is to address the critical challenges facing trade-impacted workers in their regions and to meet the fast growing demand for IT workers from local and regional employers. Recognizing the need to value the learning TAA eligible workers, veterans and others have gained through work experience, Consortium members have agreed to develop a streamlined approach to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Although several of the colleges already do some type of prior learning assessment, PLAs are not consistently used across the colleges, nor are students uniformly made aware of opportunities to gain credit through a PLA process.

PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

The purpose of this document is to provide Consortium colleges with examples of “best practices” among their peers regarding PLA policies and practices. These practices provide a framework to use when developing new policies or updating current policies. By working collaboratively as a Consortium and peer learning group, the sharing of these practices will assist the Consortium to develop the training, practices and policies needed to achieve consistency and streamlined PLA practices for TAA eligible workers, veterans and other students to achieve economies of scale among all nine colleges.

HOW THE INFORMATION WAS GATHERED

The information shared in this document was gathered through a number of means. During the June 2013 site visits, the colleges provided members of the National College Transition Network (NCTN) technical assistance team (Dr. Darlene Miller, Ellen Hewett, and Sydney Breteler) with copies of current policies and descriptions of current practices/experiences. After the site visits, college staff began digging deeper into college policies and practices and provided additional documentation to the NCTN technical assistance team. In addition, Dr. Darlene Miller and Priyanka Sharma of the NCTN team scrutinized each college’s website and college catalog looking for further examples of best practices language.

That said - some best practices may have been missed. As you peruse this document, if you find that your college has a practice that you believe needs to be shared with other Consortium members, please do so by posting that information on Basecamp. Peer learning and sharing provides an opportunity for innovative leaders and practitioners to build on collective experience shortening the learning curve for program and policy development, scale-up, and institutionalization. Each quarter the NCTN team will continue to compile and share new best practices among Consortium members. The dissemination of best practices among Consortium members and colleges across the US will be an important element in PLA professional development activities.

BEST PRACTICE PLA POLICY LANGUAGE EXAMPLES

Definitions of Types of Nontraditional Credit

Given that each college must have policies and procedures in place to validate college-level knowledge acquired through experiential learning that are aligned with state policy and regional accreditation standards, defining nontraditional credit through a college policy is paramount. Two of the colleges in the Consortium have very comprehensive policies to define nontraditional credit: Delgado Community College (DCC) and Bossier Parish Community College (BPCC). Both colleges make their policies available in their college catalog and on their website.

DCC's Academic Procedures Resource Guide includes definitions of the types of nontraditional credit awarded by the college. The Guide has complete and clear definitions of: Advanced Placement, CLEP, Correspondence Credits, Credit Examinations, Credit from Noncredit Coursework, Life Experience Assessment Program, Military Credits, Non-traditional Courses from Other Institutions, Technical College Credits, and Career Tech Articulated Courses.

BPCC has a comprehensive PLA website that includes the college's policy and definitions of the types of PLA available including: nationally recognized examinations, challenge and/or skills exams for BPCC specified courses, non-academic instruction evaluated by ACE (military, CLEP, and DANTES), and portfolio assessment.

Northeast Mississippi Community College (NMCC) has clear and comprehensive definitions of the types of credit by examination in their college catalog which also includes the process of applying for each type of credit by examination (CBE). Also, NMCC has a Board of Trustees policy that "recognizes the importance of the knowledge that an individual achieves prior to attending NMCC." The policy charges the administration to "develop and administer procedures that award credit for nontraditional instruction." Thus, the college has clear and comprehensive definitions of the types of CBE in their college catalog which also includes the procedure for applying for each type of CBE.

South Louisiana Community College (SoLACC) identified in policy six sources by which advanced placement credit may be earned. Each is defined in policy along with the procedure for students to apply for advanced standing credit. These policies are available in the college catalog and on the college website under the college's policy manual webpage.

Academic Integrity and Challenge Exam Statement

Maintaining academic integrity in the award of PLA credit is paramount. Faculty is responsible for the academic integrity of the curriculum, therefore, determination of credit awards or competency levels must be made by faculty or a subject matter expert whose experience and credentials are appropriate to a faculty position.

Meridian Community College's Institutional Advanced Standing (Challenge) Examination Registration Procedure includes a statement regarding academic integrity and course rigor as determined by the faculty.

This examination will be thorough and in keeping with the established goals and objectives of the course(s) and the overall program. Theoretical knowledge will be tested by faculty recommendation through common acceptable measures (i.e., paper and pencil, computerized, etc.) with the possibility of a skills component. Both written and skills testing are encouraged to insure "course rigor" is maintained and achieved.

Who Can or Cannot Take Challenge Exam

Colleges should also clearly state in policy who can and who cannot apply for challenge examination or nontraditional credit. Statements may include the following components:

- A student may not take a Credit Examination in a credit course in which he/she has been or is currently enrolled or which he/she has completed at another college. (Delgado)
- A student who has not earned college-level credit in the subject area may take a CLEP subject-area examination. (Pearl River)
- A student may not take a Credit Examination for a course he/she has audited. (Delgado)

- A student must be both enrolled and in good standing at the time of application and may only make one application for any given course. (SoLACC)
- Permission to take a challenge examination in a given course will be denied those students currently enrolled in the course, those who have previously attempted the course for credit at any college, those previously taking a challenge examination in the same course, or those who did not receive approval from the dean responsible for the course. (BPCC)
- Credit for challenge examination will not be awarded for a course which was previously pursued beyond the midpoint of the semester by the student. (BPCC)

Residency Requirement

For colleges accredited by SACS, all credit awarded via PLA must be in accordance with Standard 3.5 which states that at least 25 percent of the credit hours required for the degree must be earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree. Additionally, PLA policy must coincide with the college's residency requirement, thus the importance of a residency statement in policy.

The following are examples of residency type statements:

- The Candidate for the Challenge Examination must be eligible for admission to Copiah-Lincoln Community College as a student.
- Regularly enrolled students (students currently enrolled in other courses) in good academic standing may register for a challenge examination in any approved course. Challenge examinations will be available only to students pursuing a BPCC associate degree, academic certificate, or certificate of completion.
- A student must earn a minimum of 15 semester hour of college credit at Pearl River Community College before Advanced Placement credit is posted to the transcript.
- A student must be enrolled in a degree-seeking program beyond the official 14th day of enrollment in order to request non-traditional credit. Credits may be requested only for courses that are offered by Delgado Community College.
- To qualify for graduation, twelve (12) of the final fifteen (15) hours of required coursework must be earned in courses taken at Delgado; therefore only three (3) non-traditional credit hours may be earned after the student enrolls for any of the final 15 hours or credit toward a degree.
- Typically, no more that 25% of the total hours applicable toward a degree or certificate and no more than 33% of the hours composing the major area of concentration may be applied from non-traditional, portfolio based, and/or LEAP credit unless required by the program. (SoLACC)

Transfer in Policy

Many of the colleges in the Consortium have statements regarding transferring out of nontraditional credit. DCC and SoLACC take this one step further by having policy statements regarding transferring in nontraditional credits from other institutions.

DCC's policy statement is clearly delineated in the college's Academic Procedures Manual.

Delgado Community College accepts non-traditional credits that have been awarded by other regionally accredited institutions. These credits have the same limitations in their use in meeting graduation requirements as do non-traditional credits earned at Delgado Community College and will be used in computing the total hours of non-traditional credit for which a student is eligible.

SoLACC's statement regarding transferring in of nontraditional credit is found in policy manual and in the college catalog.

Transfer credit from non-regionally accredited institutions may be accepted by SoLACC. Special consideration is given to courses from institutions listed in the Louisiana Board of Regents Student Transfer Guide and General Education Transfer Matrix. Proprietary business schools and health professions colleges are often non-regionally accredited institutions. Students desiring to transfer credits from such institutions may request a review of their transcripts by the Academic Dean.

Challenge Exam Timing

Colleges may choose to only allow students to take a challenge examination or apply for other types of PLA during certain times in the semester or quarter. This may be determined based on admissions requirements, faculty workload, and/or other institutional policies regarding enrollment. DCC policy clearly articulates when a student can take a challenge examination:

- A student who wishes to take a Credit Examination for a by-passed course must take the examination by midterm of the semester in which the student is enrolled in the more advanced course.
- A student can apply for credit by examination only twice in the same course.
- The non-traditional credit granting process must be requested and completed by the mid-term of the semester in which it is requested.

DCC also has a statement regarding final semester of enrollment and graduation:

- All non-traditional credits must be awarded before or during the semester prior to graduation. All non-traditional credits awarded during the semester of graduation must be approved by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.

Challenge Examination Crosswalk

Given the number of ways to award nontraditional credit (CLEP, DSST, AP, IB, ACE Military, challenge examination, and professional certification/industry credentials) colleges should develop a crosswalk and make this crosswalk easily accessible on their website.

Three Consortium colleges publish a crosswalk with CLEP examinations in their college catalog including LA Delta, Meridian, and BPC. BPC takes it one step further by cross-walking CLEP, DANTES and Professional Certification Examinations to courses offered there. This crosswalk is available in policy and procedure and is easily accessible on the college's website. Examples from this crosswalk are below:

EQUIVALENT BPC COURSE	CLEP EXAM	HOURS
ACCT 205 ELEMENTARY ACCOUNTING I	FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING	3
EQUIVALENT BPC COURSE	DSST (DANTES) EXAM	HOURS
BADM 105 GENERAL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS	3
EQUIVALENT BPC COURSE	NATIONAL INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) CERTIFICATES	HOURS
CIT 114 MICROSOFT WINDOWS	72-680 TS: WINDOWS 7, CONFIGURING OR 72-620 TS: CONFIGURING MICROSOFT WINDOWS VISTA CLIENT	3

Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana is another example of a college that does an outstanding job of acknowledging industry certification by providing a certification crosswalk with Ivy Tech courses. <http://www.ivytech.edu/pla/AP-IBCcrosswalkMay2013.pdf> Ivy Tech breaks their crosswalk down by academic areas. For example:

ACCOUNTING CERTIFICATIONS	IVY TECH COURSES
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF BANKING (AIB) COURSE 1000 ACCOUNTING I AND AIB COURSE 1010 ACCOUNTING II	ACCT 101 FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL BOOKKEEPING (AIPB) - CERTIFIED BOOKKEEPER	ACCT 101 FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING I ACCT 106 PAYROLL ACCOUNTING

Detailed Processes for Applying for PLA

Many of the colleges in the Consortium have detailed procedures in the college catalog for applying for PLA or CBE. NMCC, MCC, Co-Lin, and SoLACC define the types of PLA awarded by the college followed by the application procedure. BPCC does the same and also includes this information on the college website. In all cases, it is important for the college to articulate the role of the faculty, the dean, the chief academic officer and the Registrar. For example:

- Applications for the “Advanced Standing Examination” must be submitted to either the Dean of Academic Affairs or the Associate Vice President of Workforce Education before the student takes the exam. (Meridian)
- Examinations will be given according to the times assigned by the appropriate dean. (BPCC)
- The candidate must have discussed his/her interest in taking a Challenge Examination with the appropriate faculty member and document/demonstrate to the that faculty member’s satisfaction that he/she has achieved subject matter master through some prior learning experience. (Co-Lin)
- The student who desires to apply for credit by examination should complete the Application for Credit Examination in the Registrar’s Office. (SoLACC)
- Once reviewed, the Registrar forwards the application to the appropriate academic supervisor for evaluation of request. (LA Delta)

Transparency and College Website

Transparency is a core value of The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and of the Council on Occupational Education. Thus, every effort must be made to ensure transparency in the PLA process including making all policies and procedures fully available and accessible in the college catalog and on the college website.

Many of the colleges in the Consortium have their policies and procedures available on the college website and in the college catalog. Nonetheless, given that students are more technologically savvy than ever before and use the website to garner most of their information, it is important that the colleges’ website on PLA be easy to find and clear. When the policies are embedded in the college policy manual and not found under the Admissions webpage, many learners will not know that there are options for earning credit through PLA. When PLA policies and procedures are found either on the “Faculty and Staff” page under “Policy and Procedure Manual” or on the college’s “Policy Handbook” page, students who are not aware of opportunities to gain credit for experiential learning would not know how to find this information.

Of all of the colleges in the Consortium, BPCC's PLA website is currently the most comprehensive and accessible. It is found under the "Future Students" page under "BPCC Accelerated." One can also find "Prior Learning Assessment" under the college's A-Z index. The page contains a policy statement, a definition of PLA and the college's certification crosswalk. <http://www.bpcc.edu/accelerated/pla.html>

Two colleges outside of the consortium set the standard for PLA webpages. Edmonds Community College's (EdCC) PLA website is comprehensive and easy to find. You can access the PLA page through the A-Z index by searching on "prior learning assessment." EdCC also creates webpages for all of the components in their college catalog instead of putting the catalog online in PDF format. Thus, if you are a future or current student and you select "Catalog" from any of the pull down menus, you come to a webpage with pull down menus for every section of the college catalog. Advanced Placement and Additional Ways to Earn Credit is easily found under "Academic Information and Requirements." <http://catalog.edcc.edu/index.php?catoid=23> EdCC also has a separate PLA website and a PLA Director. <http://www.edcc.edu/priorlearning/>

Ivy Tech Community College also has a very accessible and comprehensive PLA website. Located under the "Admissions" webpage is the PLA website (<http://www.ivytech.edu/pla/>). The webpage includes definitions, processes, college certification crosswalk, crosswalk for CLEP and DSST, and a separate page for frequently asked questions.

IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS

This paper and its companion document, Effective PLA Policies and Practices: Components and Benchmarks, serve as the foundation in our efforts to ensure that there is a consistent and streamlined approach to PLA across the Consortium. This means that our next step must be to discuss the content and implications detailed in these papers. As one way to do this, a 60 minute webinar will be offered in September 2013 to deepen colleges' understanding of PLA standards and to identify how to promote best practices across the Consortium. Prior to the webinar, please contact Dr. Darlene Miller or Ellen Hewett, and/or use Basecamp to pose questions, concerns and suggestions.

After the webinar the NCTN team will work with each college to develop an action plan articulating the steps and tools needed to enhance their current PLA policies and practices. An important part of NCTN's support is to ensure that the best practices among Consortium members are integrated with the other colleges whenever possible. The NCTN team is recommending three potential strategies. First, the NCTN team will assist Consortium faculty in developing a crosswalk similar BPCC's best practice for the classes being taught for the grant. Second, the NCTN will create sample PLA policies, including procedures, based primarily on effective examples from the Consortium for adoption by the colleges. Finally, during the fall of 2013, the NCTN team will guide the generation of PLA content and placement for colleges' websites. Looking at the best practices in the field will help in this effort.

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