



WORLD EDUCATION

# Environmental Scan of Prior Learning Assessment Policies and Practices in Metro Boston

**Planning Grant Report to SkillWorks  
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Submitted by  
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in collaboration with  
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## I. BACKGROUND

The National College Transition Network (NCTN) at World Education, Inc., in partnership with the Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE) is pleased to submit this report on our investigation of policies and practices related to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in Metro Boston. The goal of this environmental scan was to learn about current policies and practices at the selected institutions, and to identify how they might be strengthened, expanded, and promoted as an effective acceleration strategy in creating bridges to college completion and job attainment for low-skilled adults.

Prior Learning Assessment is an underutilized –strategy for accelerating college completion and the attainment of industry-recognized credentials and shorter term degrees by low-income adults deemed low-skilled by academic assessments. A CAEL study of 48 postsecondary institutions found that 56% of the students who earned some credit through prior learning completed a degree within seven years, compared to only 21% of students who received no credit for prior learning. Latino students are 7 ½ times more likely to persist if they receive some credit via PLA.<sup>1</sup>

Nationally, a renewed interest and investment in Prior Learning Assessment is emerging because of the potential it has to contribute to our college completion and economic competitiveness agendas, specifically as it relates to performance-based funding to state colleges and universities. Further, PLA can be an effective tool for helping veterans to translate military training to civilian credentials.

Reinvigorating PLA has emerged as a priority in Massachusetts landscape as well. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Commissioner, Richard Freeland, has made PLA and adult degree completion one strategic focus for public higher education institutions this year. Similarly, The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) Standards for Accreditation recognize the value of credit earned for prior learning and assert that when the assessment is conducted with appropriate faculty oversight, student learning and achievement “are demonstrated to be at least comparable in breadth, depth, and quality.” Further, NEASC advises that policies and procedures related to PLA should be clearly stated and available to students<sup>2</sup>.

Loosely defined, there are four general categories of methods of assessing prior learning (learning that takes place outside the classroom):

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<sup>1</sup>The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. 2010. “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success.” [http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA\\_Fueling-the-Race](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Fueling-the-Race)

<sup>2</sup>Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges. 2011. “Standards for Accreditation.” [http://cihe.neasc.org/downloads/Standards/Standards\\_for\\_Accreditation\\_FINAL\\_2011.pdf](http://cihe.neasc.org/downloads/Standards/Standards_for_Accreditation_FINAL_2011.pdf)

- Portfolio assessments to collect and document prior learning. Portfolios typically include an essay that describes the learning and ties it to educational goals or alignment with existing courses.
- ACE credit recommendations based on corporate or military training programs
- Reviews and testing out conducted by individual college departments, usually referred to as “challenge exams”.
- Exams used to verify “learning achievements.” (e.g., CLEP, Excelsior College Exams and the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests)

While the use of PLA does not obviate the need to strengthen adults’ academic skills, it validates the college-level skills and knowledge many adults possess. Credit earned for prior learning can help recover lost time for those whose path to college credit is delayed by placement into developmental education. Gaining credit through PLA has also been shown to boost the confidence of returning adults and contribute to their success in degree attainment. This sub-population of adults, who are often referred to as low-skilled, are those working in low-wage jobs, participating in Skillworks and adult education programs, and seeking to upgrade their basic and occupational skills. Some of them are veterans.

While the onus of implementation lies on postsecondary institutions, adult college transition and SkillWorks programs also need to become informed about this process. They can raise adult learners’ awareness that prior learning, training, and military experience matter and may translate into college-level credit. Coaches and navigators should be able to identify potentially eligible adults and encourage and assist them to pursue PLA as part of the college enrollment process. Instructors should engage adults in examining their prior learning through reflection, readings, writing, and discussions.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN**

The activities under this planning grant consisted of an environmental scan of how PLA policies are structured, implemented, and promoted in Metro Boston. In addition to gaining an understanding of the extent to which PLA is implemented at area colleges, we interviewed community based adult education providers to understand the extent to which they are aware of local PLA policies and practices that might benefit their students who are considering postsecondary education.

We interviewed representatives from six postsecondary institutions in Metro Boston: Bunker Hill Community College, Roxbury Community College, Quincy College, Cambridge College, Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology, and the University of Massachusetts, Boston. These institutions represent a mix of public and private two- and four-year colleges, and SkillWorks partner institutions.

The goal of the interviews was to learn about the existing policies and practices, the challenges faced by the colleges and their interest in strengthening PLA. In addition to learning about options for assessing credit, we were interested in understanding the practices used to promote and market those options to students. Prior to the interviews we scanned each

institution's website and catalogue to document the type of information available to students about PLA.

Because our goal is to strengthen the bridge to college for adults enrolled in career pathways and Adult Basic Education transition programs, we interviewed staff from Jewish Vocation Services, YouthBuild Boston, Asian American Civic Association, Xcel Adult Education, Year UP Financial Services, YMCA International Learning Center and the Community Learning Center in Cambridge. From these interviews we gained insight into these community based adult education providers' perspective on the benefits and challenges program participants have encountered or could anticipate in attempting to gain credit through PLA.

We also interviewed Paul Feltman, Director of the Global Talent Bridge program at World Education Services, to glean his perspective on PLA as another avenue for high skilled immigrants to leverage their educational and professional backgrounds.

## II. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

There is a great deal of variation in the approach to Prior Learning Assessment across the six institutions and across departments within each institution. While all offer some form of prior learning assessment options, in most cases, the policies and procedures are not clearly outlined and uniformly implemented nor are they actively or universally promoted across the all departments. Each institution has developed its program independently and has only intermittently benefitted from the expertise and guidance of external organizations, such as CAEL or other colleges, to inform broader institutional practice.

We directed our request to the academic dean or vice chancellor in the absence of a designated PLA coordinator listed on the college website. In some cases, the person we spoke to was able to speak to policy at the entire institution as was the case at Cambridge College and Bunker Hill Community College. However, at Quincy College and UMass Boston, there is discretion and variation across departments that we were unable to capture. The lack of cohesion within an institution makes it impossible to develop a systematic approach to ensure that all students receive the same information about the available options for PLA regardless of their program of study or advisor assignment.

The scope of our work didn't allow for us to schedule multiple interviews at each college. As a result, we were not able to determine whether specific industry sectors or education programs are more or less responsive and amenable to the use of PLA.

All of the administrators we spoke with recognize PLA's value and acknowledge that it warrants greater attention and standardization at their institution. Some have worked to clarify policy and promote PLA as an important option to help students accelerate their progress towards a credential. Several have relied on CAEL's publications and resources to guide their policy development and to provide training to faculty evaluators.

They expressed interest in participating in a forum and other activities to validate and advance PLA policy standards. Topics of interest include:

- local and national policies and best practices
- portfolio development and assessment
- transferability of PLA credits
- training and compensation for faculty evaluators
- marketing and promotion of PLA options
- institutionalizing PLA across all departments

Among the community based education providers, familiarity with prior learning assessment is varied. The majority of graduates from all six programs who go on to college enroll at Bunker Hill Community College, which has the most well-established and marketed, though likely underutilized, PLA system. One CBO advisor was quite familiar with the options at BHCC and knew where the PLA office is located. Another had general awareness of CLEP testing, but was

unaware that BHCC information about the PLA process is available on the BHCC website. Others were entirely unfamiliar with the concept or process.

Invariably, as the interviews progressed, most of the adult educators had an “aha moment” and remembered that a graduate had reported taking some exam or testing out of some course, but they didn’t know what this was. Our interview prompted them to follow up and learn more about the students who have found their way to PLA at their colleges. Similarly, many recognized that they could flag information, for example, student’s veteran status, prior training and certifications during intake, career exploration, and exit/transition phases of the program. This information would help them to better advise students and recommend they speak with a college advisor about potential prior learning credit.

While it’s good to know that some students have found their way to PLA, with a more standardized approach to marketing on the college side and more information to guide community providers, many more students could benefit.

All of the community based education providers thought it was likely that some portion of their program graduates entering college have knowledge and skills that might be eligible to be assessed for credit. In addition to the high skilled immigrant English Language Learners who have attended institutions of higher education in their native countries, others have work and community experience, workplace training and industry certifications, and even some previous college courses, that merit further exploration with a college advisor.

At the same time, they recognize potential barriers for their program graduates seeking credit for prior learning. These include:

- Anxiety related to test taking and test taking skills for students seeking credit through CLEP or challenge exams.
- Additional costs of assessments.
- Lack of information about the process, the type of learning they can present for assessment, and how they would document it.
- Lack of self-confidence and awareness to recognize and promote their knowledge and skills.
- Limited writing skills needed to reflect on and articulate skills and knowledge through a college level portfolio essay.
- Challenges in documenting prior learning. Many, especially immigrants, may not have possession of or be able to access past training certificates, educational transcripts or even verification letters from past employers.
- Cultural norms against boasting about skills and knowledge.
- Difficulty in accessing services; for example, the BHCC Center for Self Directed Learning has moved to a satellite building that’s not geographically available to most participants.
- Daunting assessment process without assurance that you’ll come out with credit at the end.

The barriers described above are consistent with the types of college and career readiness skills that these education providers work to address in their program curricula. All expressed a strong interest in learning more about the options so that they can better prepare and advise program graduates. They would like to see colleges clarify and promote their PLA policies to all students, to ensure that it is not just the more assertive and confident students who can take advantage of it. Providers want to be able to inform students about any processes that have the potential to save them time and money along their chosen career and educational pathway.

Paul Feltman was equally enthusiastic about the potential for high skilled immigrants to benefit from a variety of PLA methods. He agreed that there is work to be done to fortify PLA implementation and marketing on campuses. In addition, since many immigrants seek initial English instruction and educational guidance from community based providers, these providers also need to be well informed about PLA options.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

We learned through this investigation that there is still substantial work to be done at each college to expand knowledge of Prior Learning Assessment and to improve systems for institutionalizing Prior Learning Assessment policies that are aligned with standards and best practices. Even the colleges with clearly written policies and procedures for PLA identified gaps in their systems for informing students about the process; as a result the numbers of students who take advantage of these opportunities remain small. To ensure that students who are eligible and interested in seeking Credit for Prior Learning have the opportunity to accelerate progress toward their educational and career goals, we recommend the following:

1. Strengthen pathways to college, credential attainment, and employment by increasing the understanding of PLA fits within industry, workforce agencies, college faculty and staff, and community based education providers and their workforce training and career pathway strategies.
2. Tie capacity and leadership of local colleges to Board of Higher Education priorities and efforts to promote PLA and opportunities for adult learners.
3. Facilitate capacity-building and cross-training activities among workforce, higher education, and adult education systems to improve outreach, marketing, intake, coaching, and advising practices as it relates to PLA opportunities.
4. Support colleges to develop clear, uniform policies that allow for a greater variety of methods for assessing Prior Learning and articulation to credit.
5. Develop systematic approaches and procedures for marketing Prior Learning Assessment methods across all departments so that all students who are eligible can access opportunities for credit attainment.
6. Cultivate leadership in the colleges that have stronger PLA systems in place and develop mechanisms for regional collaboration and peer learning as well as targeted capacity building
7. Provide training to community based education providers so that they can better guide program graduates to PLA options when they transition to college.



#### IV. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Following are the questions we used to guide our interviews about how the institutions address prior learning assessment.

##### **Interview Questions for Postsecondary Institutions**

- ⇒ What are the policies that guide prior learning assessment (PLA) processes at your institution?
- ⇒ Which types and methods of prior learning assessment are offered at your institution?
- ⇒ Do you have a formal written set of policies on prior learning assessment?
- ⇒ How often do you review your PLA policies?
- ⇒ What department(s) or office(s) have the responsibility for establishing your PLA policies?
- ⇒ How are policies about PLA implemented?
- ⇒ How are PLA credits transcribed?
- ⇒ Does your student record system capture data on PLA usage?
- ⇒ In what ways do the policies and practices vary across departments?
- ⇒ Which departments are more likely to promote and use PLA?
- ⇒ In what ways can PLA credits be applied at your institutions?
- ⇒ Is there a limit to the number of PLA credits that can count toward a degree? If so, what is that limit?
- ⇒ What types of financial supports are in place for students to cover PLA costs?
- ⇒ How does the institution inform students about PLA options and policies?
- ⇒ Which departments and offices take the lead in promoting PLA options and policies to students?
- ⇒ Is there a formal process by which students request consideration for PLA?
- ⇒ If portfolio assessment is offered at your institution, who conducts the portfolio assessment?
- ⇒ How do students learn to develop a portfolio?
- ⇒ How are faculty trained to evaluate portfolios?

- ⇒ In general, what are the attitudes among faculty towards prior learning assessment?
- ⇒ What are the barriers or challenges to a wider adoption of credit for prior learning?

### **Interview Questions for Community Based Education Providers**

- ⇒ Is a goal of your program to help students gain postsecondary training and credentials?
- ⇒ Sectors targeted
- ⇒ What sorts of credentials? How did you validate the value of these credentials in local labor market?
- ⇒ Of your program graduates who continue to postsecondary education, which schools do they enroll in?
- ⇒ Do you have formal partnerships or MOUs with any of these schools? Which one?
- ⇒ What is the scope of the formal partnership activities with these schools?
- ⇒ What is the scope of informal partnership activities with schools w/out MOUs?
- ⇒ What is your understanding of these types of prior learning assessments?
  - Standardized exams to validate learning gained in standard subjects (e.g. Composition & Literature, Math, World Languages, Business)
  - Challenge exams that enable a student to earn credit for an existing course without taking it.
  - Portfolio assessment to reflect learning gains in any setting
  - Credit for certifications or licenses earned through workforce and occupational training courses, apprenticeship, and military training, e.g, nationally recognized industry credential exams.
  - Transfer credit – from US accredited schools
  - International credit transfer (through transcript evaluation)
- ⇒ Are you aware of any options for attaining credit for prior learning that are available at the institutions you and your students engage with?
  - Standardized exams to validate learning gained in general education subjects (e.g. Composition & Literature, Math, World Languages, Business)
  - Challenge exams that enable a student to earn credit for an existing course without taking it.
  - Portfolio assessment to reflect learning gains in any setting
  - Credit for certifications or licenses earned through workforce and occupational training courses, apprenticeship, and military training, e.g, nationally recognized industry credential exams.

- Transfer credit – from US accredited schools
  - International credit transfer (through transcript evaluation)
- ⇒ Which ones would you be interested in learning more about?
- ⇒ Which ones might be relevant to your program participants' prior learning?
- ⇒ Have you had any program graduates who have tried to obtain credit for prior learning at a local postsecondary institution? Which school?
- ⇒ Do you know (in general terms) what the process and outcome was?
- ⇒ Who in your program is primarily tasked with helping program graduates navigate college admissions, enrollment, financial aid, etc.?
- ⇒ Do you advise students/employees to look into options for Prior Learning Assessment?
- ⇒ Employer partners – what sorts of training and certifications are required of entry- mid-level employees in your industry? Have you worked with any higher ed institutions (e.g. ACE) to see if your internal training or the national certifications you require can translate to credit.
- ⇒ Thinking about program participants and their backgrounds – when they enter your program and by the time they graduate – do you think they might have attained skills and knowledge that could translate to college-level learning in some area of their lives (including in your program)? What types of skills and knowledge?
- ⇒ Should they be advised to investigate for potential credit when they are enrolling in postsecondary education? Why or why not?
- ⇒ What barriers do you think your program graduates would have in seeking existing opportunities to demonstrate prior learning that might merit college credit?
- Lack of college level experiential learning
  - No industry credentials or outside training certificates earned
  - Lack of information about the process
  - Lack of self-confidence/ awareness to recognize and promote their knowledge and skills
  - Lack of interest in postsecondary education
  - Limited writing skills needed to write a college level portfolio essay
  - Unable to document prior learning (no record of training attendance, certificate, letters of verification)
- ⇒ Would it be valuable to you and your staff and partners to learn more about the policies and practices for prior learning assessment at local colleges?

- ⇒ Would it be valuable to you and your staff and partners to learn more about how to students consider whether they have prior learning that might translate to college credit?
  
- ⇒ Would it be helpful to participate in discussion with local colleges around issues related to PLA and college and career advancement for low skilled adults and adult learners?