



## Prior Learning Assessment & Ohio's College Completion Agenda

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*Helping learners earn postsecondary certificates and degrees.  
Making Ohio more competitive in a global economy  
in which knowledge and skills are highly prized and rewarded.*

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**Ohio**

**Board of Regents**  
University System of Ohio



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## **Vision**

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Ohio will be a leader in recognizing and embracing the college-level knowledge and skills that students have acquired outside the collegiate experience.

To help these students earn postsecondary certificates and degrees, and to make the state more competitive in a global economy where knowledge and skills are highly prized and rewarded, Ohio's universities, colleges, and adult career-technical centers will advance and promote the awarding of credit to students for prior learning based on transparent, consistent, rigorous statewide standards. Institutions will transcript, apply and transfer credits awarded on the basis of the statewide standards.

## **Prior Learning Assessment & Ohio's College Completion Agenda**

### *A Letter from Chancellor John Carey*

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Many students come to one of Ohio's colleges or universities with learning acquired outside the traditional classroom. They may have learning that was acquired from a corporate training program or through extensive volunteer activity. It may be from the military or workplace experience. And it may be from independent study or one or more college-level noncredit courses.

Institutions of higher education have been giving these students an opportunity to “earn” credit for this kind of experiential learning for a long time. Interest in the practice grew with the G.I. Bill and World War II veterans who earned credits for military training. But in most cases, the granting of credit for prior learning has not attracted a lot of attention, and the numbers in terms of students and credits awarded have not been high.

That needs to change!

As Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents, I am committed to opening the doors of our universities, colleges and adult career-technical centers to a much larger number of students, including many who may have begun a postsecondary program years ago, but left without earning a degree or other credential. It also may include Ohioans who left high school and launched a career without any postsecondary learning.

In addition, I am determined to improve Ohio's college completion rates and increase the number of our citizens who have earned an associate degree, a bachelor's degree or a certificate with value in the marketplace. Increasing the number of our citizens with a college degree or other postsecondary credential must be a priority. That collective aspiration is a matter of economic survival. It's a critical strategy for ensuring abundant economic opportunities for our citizens, enhanced economic competitiveness for our businesses, and robust economic growth for our state.

The key to achieving these objectives is highly educated, highly knowledgeable, highly skilled individuals who are capable of innovating, solving business and community problems, and competing on a global stage. By helping learners earn postsecondary degrees and certificates, Prior Learning Assessment is a powerful strategy for developing a statewide talent pool that attracts business investment and stimulates job creation and economic growth.

With this in mind, I convened a *PLA with a Purpose* initiative last year, charging more than 140 faculty and staff from campuses throughout Ohio with developing a set of strategic recommendations for advancing and promoting the awarding of credit to students for prior learning based on clear statewide standards. Many of those who were part of the initiative

participated in three working groups that focused on different methods of awarding credit: credit by examination, military credit, and portfolio assessment. Others were members of a PLA Network that provided advice and counsel during several months of meetings.

I am proud to share the results of the initiative's efforts in *PLA with a Purpose: Prior Learning Assessment and Ohio's College Completion Agenda*. As you read through this report, you'll see that the initiative responded squarely to the challenge put forward in the Regents' 2012 *Complete College Ohio* report. You also will find that it called for action in five critical areas: (1) setting the rules, roles and responsibilities for awarding PLA credit; (2) improving students' access to PLA at the institutional level; (3) ensuring the quality of PLA practices; (4) clarifying how all personnel involved in the assessment of learning will receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform; and (5) defining the state's role in Ohio's PLA partnership.

Those who contributed to this work are to be commended for the time and effort put into developing this report. Yet, ultimately, the value of their efforts will be judged by Ohio's success in transforming the words on these pages into the concerted actions that will be needed to shorten many Ohioans' path to college completion and to make Ohio more competitive in the 21st century economy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Carey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J" and "C".

John Carey  
Chancellor, Ohio Board of Regents

## About Ohio's PLA Initiative

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*PLA with a Purpose* is a statewide initiative of the Ohio Board of Regents, working collaboratively with the state's colleges, universities, and adult career-technical centers to identify and promote promising practices for the assessment and purposeful connection of prior learning competencies to training and degree programs.

Launched in July 2013, the initiative was guided by a PLA Network composed of 50 faculty and administrators from campuses across Ohio. The Network advised the initiative's three working groups and provided final sign-off on the final report.

The initiative's three working groups were built around methods of earning PLA credit: (1) Credit by Examination; (2) Military Credit; and (3) Portfolio-Based Assessment. Each working group was charged with:

- identifying best practices to inform the state's PLA approach;
- defining preferred model(s) for PLA development in Ohio;
- determining how consistency across campuses can be achieved and how quality can be guaranteed;
- addressing cost and credit transfer issues;
- exploring options for the evaluation of PLA policies and practices at the campus level and statewide; and
- generating recommendations for what campuses and the state should do to develop and implement statewide PLA policies and practices in Ohio.

In all, 90 faculty and staff from Ohio colleges, universities and adult career-technical centers participated in the working groups' deliberations.

A full listing of Network and working group members is located at the back of this report.





# **PART ONE:**

Competing in the Talent-Driven 21st Century Economy

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## Building a 21st Century Workforce: Unprecedented Challenge and Opportunity

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There is no shortage of reasons for compelling action to increase education attainment levels in Ohio. There are economic reasons, quality-of-life reasons, even moral reasons – and they interact with and inform each other. Lumina Foundation offers a particularly succinct and powerful expression of the multiple core objectives that are driving action in our state – and across the nation – for a more broadly and highly educated citizenry:

*“Today, more than ever, education equals opportunity. In fact, college-level learning is now seen as key – to individual prosperity, to economic security, and to the enduring strength of our democracy.”<sup>1</sup>*

This trifecta of objectives emerges from a core imperative to build a globally competitive 21st century workforce. Our ability – as a nation and as a state – to attract investment, create and retain jobs, and thrive in a global economy hinges on the education attainment levels of our citizens. Jobs will be located in communities, states, and nations with highly educated citizens who have the college-level knowledge and skills to fill 21st century jobs.

We must not deceive ourselves: The challenge we face is substantial. U.S. employers increasingly report difficulty in finding workers with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to fill today’s jobs. Unfortunately, U.S. education attainment levels are holding relatively flat while attainment levels in almost every other industrialized or postindustrial country in the world are rising.<sup>2</sup>

### The magnitude of the effort required

Just what kind of effort will it take to build a 21st century workforce that helps our state and nation deliver on the promise of enhanced opportunity, prosperity, security, and strength? At the national level, Lumina Foundation has set a “Big Goal” – by 2025, 60 percent of Americans will have a high-quality postsecondary credential – that has been embraced by a number of government leaders, national higher education associations, colleges and universities, and a growing list of communities. And studies conducted by Anthony Carnevale and his associates at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce have shown us that a serious effort to achieve this or similar goals is needed. Their findings include the following:<sup>3</sup>

- About 65 percent of U.S. jobs will require some postsecondary education by 2020. In

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1 Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education*, March 2012, p.2

2 Lumina Foundation, *Strategic Plan: Goal 2025*

3 Unless otherwise noted, all statistics cited here regarding workforce projections and both current and projected job requirements and education attainment levels are drawn from various studies led by Anthony P. Carnevale at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

2011, however, just 38.7 percent of U.S. adults between the ages of 25 and 64 had a two-year or four-year degree<sup>4</sup>, and an additional 5 percent had postsecondary certificates of value.

- At current rates, the United States will produce about 39 million two- and four-year college degrees between now and 2025. That will leave the nation with a gap of 23 million additional credentialed adults needed to meet Lumina Foundation's 60 percent "Big Goal."
- In Ohio, 59 percent of jobs will require some postsecondary education by 2020. In 2011, the most recent year for which data are available, just 36 percent of adults in Ohio have an associate degree or higher – a gap of 23 percent.
- At Ohio's current rate of degree production, about 44 percent (or 2.5 million) of the state's adult population will have a postsecondary degree or credential by 2025 – far fewer than the number needed to meet the demands of projected available jobs. Lumina Foundation has calculated that to reach the 60 percent goal by 2025, Ohio would have to produce 919,000 more adults with postsecondary education credentials than the state currently is on pace to produce.
- Between 2008 and 2018, new jobs in Ohio requiring postsecondary education or training will grow by 153,000, while new jobs for high school dropouts and high school graduates with no additional education or training will grow by just 29,000. During that same period, Ohio will have 1.7 million job vacancies from new jobs and jobs opening due to retirement. About 967,000 of these jobs will require some postsecondary education credentials.
- One Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce study estimates that Ohio's colleges and universities will need to increase the number of degrees they award by 10 percent annually to meet workforce needs for 2018.

## A Call to Action

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems projects that if Ohio continues doing the same things it's doing today, with its current rate of growth in postsecondary credentials, by 2025 the state will have 60,000 fewer citizens with postsecondary education credentials than it has today. This is because of the state's changing demographics – which shows an older and more racially and ethnically diverse population. Also, low-income and minority students, as well as first-generation and adult students, traditionally have been underrepresented on college campuses and among college graduates.

SOURCE: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, College Attainment Dashboard Tool, July 19, 2012

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<sup>4</sup> Lumina Foundation, Strategic Plan 2013 to 2016

In tough economic times, college-level credentials also provide enhanced protection against job loss. Consider these data:

- During the recent national recession, from December 2007 to January 2010, 5.6 million Americans with a high school diploma or less lost their jobs. Jobs requiring an associate degree or some college declined by just 1.75 million, and jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or above actually *grew* by 187,000.
- In 2010, at the peak of the recession, about 8 percent of all undergraduate degree holders were unemployed or underemployed. In contrast, 21 percent of individuals with only a high school diploma and 32 percent of high school dropouts were unemployed or underemployed.<sup>5</sup>
- Since the end of the recession, jobs requiring an associate degree or some college have grown by 1.6 million, and jobs requiring a bachelor's degree have added 2 million new jobs. Workers with a high school diploma or less, on the other hand, *lost* an additional 230,000 jobs.

Some observers have suggested that increasing education attainment levels can actually *drive* economic growth and job creation. For example, a Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta macroblog asserts that "...our nation's inability to match jobs to people with the right skills is a major factor in explaining why employment rates have not improved as quickly as they should have in the economic recovery."<sup>6</sup> And, a new study from the Milken Institute<sup>7</sup> shows that higher levels of educational attainment increase regional prosperity in terms of real wages per capita and Gross Domestic Product per capita.

## The need for accelerated, transformative action

These indicators should be viewed as a call for action – accelerated, transformative action. Nothing less will do. Our collective future is at stake. Unless these gaps are closed and discrepancies eliminated, we will never develop the talent needed to compete in today's technology-driven, global economy.

Closing these gaps also will bring noneconomic benefits. It's well documented that individuals with a college degree are more likely to vote and volunteer than their peers who have only a high school diploma. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed and to rely on public assistance, and typically are healthier, more tolerant and more engaged in their children's education.<sup>8</sup> These societal benefits enhance quality of life and make for a stronger citizenry and stronger communities.

Our workforce development mandate is clear: To enhance personal prosperity, economic

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5 The Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project

6 Cited in Lumina Foundation, Strategic Plan 2013 to 2016, February 2013, citing the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, <http://macroblog.typepad.com/macroblog/2010/07/a-curious-unemployment-picture-gets-more-curious.html>

7 *A Matter of Degrees: The Effect of Educational Attainment on Regional Economic Prosperity*, Feb. 27, 2013

8 The College Board, *Education Pays* 2012

security and our democratic society, we must close existing knowledge and skill gaps. To be competitive in a talent-hungry, talent-driven global economy, Ohio must increase the number and percentage of its citizens with high-quality college degrees or postsecondary credentials of value in the marketplace. This is non-negotiable for any state aspiring to compete successfully in an economy in which knowledge and innovation are highly prized and rewarded, and where essential workforce skills are being redefined constantly and in the blink of an eye.

There are many strategies for increasing education attainment levels and helping to meet evolving 21st century workforce needs. We must increase high school graduation rates, college-going rates and college completion rates. We must provide new and more flexible pathways to certificates and degrees, such as online courses and innovative scheduling. Most importantly, we must reach out to adults, many of whom have some college but no formal credential, and help them finish the requirements to earn an appropriate credential.

As a flexible pathway to postsecondary certificates and degrees, particularly for adult learners, expanded use of prior learning assessment holds great promise. Of course, it is not new, but it has the potential to open the door to new practices and new ways of thinking about and measuring learning.

In *Cracking the Credit Hour*, New America Foundation reminds us that higher education itself routinely rejects the idea that credit hours are a reliable measure of how much students have learned. It points to a growing body of evidence that seat time does not equal learning and provides a history to document that the Carnegie Unit was never intended to be used for this purpose. And yet, college degrees are still largely awarded based on “time served” rather than learning achieved.<sup>9</sup>

By awarding credit for learning beyond the college classroom, PLA challenges this historic practice. It reflects a growing trend toward competency-based learning and heightened educational quality. As the New America Foundation reports, “In an era when college degrees are simultaneously becoming more important and more expensive, students and taxpayers can no longer afford to pay for time and little or no evidence of learning.”

How much difference can PLA play in our collective efforts to raise education attainment levels? Lumina Foundation projects that significantly expanding the availability of PLA **could produce more than two million new postsecondary degrees by 2025**. So PLA is a viable strategy for helping Ohio and the nation meet evolving and rapidly changing 21st century workforce needs.

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9 New America Foundation, *Cracking the Credit Hour*, September 2012

## Understanding Ohioans' PLA Options

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Prior Learning Assessment can be approached in a wide variety of ways. Nationally, some institutions evaluate noncredit instruction, awarding credit for recognized proficiencies that equate to specific courses offered at their institutions. Similarly, many institutions evaluate both corporate and apprenticeship training for college credit, working with business and trade associations to evaluate prior training for credit.

Based on a 2012 survey of Ohio campuses to identify those methods most commonly used to assess and award credit for prior learning, the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative focused on three approaches: (1) credit by examination; (2) evaluation of military training and experience; and (3) portfolio-based assessment.

### Credit by examination

By giving students opportunities to earn credit by examination (CBE) through either institutional/ departmental examinations or nationally recognized, non-institutional examinations, Ohio's colleges and universities promote students' success by accelerating their academic pathways, saving them money and motivating them to continue with their education. Nearly all of Ohio's campuses award credit through some form of assessment.

### PLA's impact on degree and certificate completion

A recent Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) study found that the availability of PLA may motivate adult learners to persist in their postsecondary programs. Examining the academic records of more than 62,000 students from 48 institutions, the study found that 56 percent of adult PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, compared to only 21 percent of non-PLA students.

SOURCE: Cited in Pamela Tate, Rebecca Klein-Collins, and Karen Steinberg "Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner," *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2011.

**Non-institutional examinations** (CLEP, DSST, etc.) provide a clear pathway for students to quantify the prior learning they have obtained outside the traditional postsecondary teaching/learning environment.<sup>10</sup> Many of the organizations offering these exams, such as the College Board, have fine-tuned the development process over several decades. CLEP

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<sup>10</sup>The field of non-institutional examination development of the verification and award of college-level learning is in a state of evolution. Some of the commonly used non-institutional exams are College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTES) Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate Programs (IB). Other non-institutional exams are also available, such as Excelsior College Examination Program (ECE) and Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (TECEP).

(College-Level Examination Program) exams, for example, are produced in concert with content experts who create, vet, test, and review exam questions to ensure validity, reliability, and comprehensive coverage of the subject matter. Aside from providing students a clear-cut way to demonstrate prior learning, non-institutional exams expedite the path to graduation by giving students the ability to demonstrate college-level learning before admission, and this can keep them motivated.

Although non-institutional examinations are recognized as a well-defined type of prior learning assessment, they do not always provide a clear route for a student's progression through training, certificate, or degree programs. Students who use non-institutional exams can face challenges in the absence of consistent transcription and transfer policies. For example, in academic disciplines containing highly dependent course sequences, students who use a non-institutional exam for a prerequisite course and do not receive a letter grade for it on the transcript often cannot move to a subsequent course (i.e., if a letter grade of C or better is required for the prerequisite course and Pass/Fail is not accepted).

Without clear guidance, students can take non-institutional exams and receive credit for courses that do not apply to their plan of study, spending time and money for credit that does not move them closer to obtaining a degree. This issue also faces students who pursue PLA through military credit and portfolio-based assessment.

Beyond transcription concerns, transferability of the credit also can be a challenge. Students who know they will be transferring to another college need to be told before taking the exam that they need to verify the exam is accepted at the college – and they should find out the required score for acceptance.

***Institutional/departmental examinations*** (e.g., proficiency exams and challenge exams) offer students additional opportunities to quantify their prior learning and accelerate their progress toward training, certificate or degree programs. Institutions across Ohio offer these exams for a wide range of courses outside those covered by non-institutional exams.

In addition to increasing opportunities for students to earn PLA credit, institutional/ departmental exams provide academic departments the flexibility to tailor exams to fit their specific program curriculum, give program faculty confidence that the exams reflect an appropriate level of academic rigor, and provide faculty direct control of the assessment process. Since faculty leadership in maintaining academic rigor is paramount, institutional/ departmental exams remain an important part of the state's overall approach to PLA.

With institutional/departmental exams, achieving consistent standards across departments *within* a college or university – or *among* institutions statewide – is a serious dilemma. Clearly, these examinations should meet the standards for assessing learning outlined by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), which can be found in Appendix A. Such standards are not merely an “academic” matter, since consistency is needed for PLA credit to be transferable to all or most public institutions across Ohio.



From an institutional perspective, the issues related to consistency include:

- keeping institutional/departmental examinations current;
- determining when it is appropriate to award college credit for passing a test as opposed to simply placing the student in a higher level course;
- documenting the validity and reliability of the tests (i.e., psychometrics) for the program, other institutions and accreditors;
- reaching agreement across campuses on what constitutes a passing score;
- providing ongoing training for faculty and administrators engaged in the process; and
- establishing consistent procedures and fees, and ensuring that students, staff, faculty, and administrators are familiar with them.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using non-institutional or institutional/ departmental examinations. Yet, with both approaches, rigor, quality, transparency, and consistency must be assured and addressed in order to promote student success, faculty acceptance, and credit transfer. A considerable amount of CBE currently exists across Ohio campuses, which provides a strong base from which to identify best practices and develop recommendations related to student access and success.

## Evaluation of military training and experience

Today, nearly 900,000 military veterans reside in Ohio and another 80,000 of the state's citizens are currently serving in the United States Armed Forces. More than 75,000 Ohioans have served in the Armed Forces in support of combat operations around the world since September 11, 2001.

Collectively, these veterans are a rich reservoir of highly trained, skilled workers. They could be, with additional education, the antidote for Ohio employers that report a deficit of job seekers and workers with 21st century education and skills. Yet, Ohio's 2012 annual unemployment rate among veterans was 7.6 percent. For post 9/11 veterans, the unemployment rate was 12.8 percent, substantially above the state's overall jobless rate.

In March 2011, the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents issued a directive to the state's public institutions of higher education requiring them to award college credit for military training and experience consistent with the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Consortium guidelines and in compliance with the state's credit transfer policy.

College participation numbers tell a different story. Currently, more than 22,000 students enrolled in the state's public institutions of higher education are using federal veteran education benefits. Since the introduction of Ohio GI Promise, all 36 public colleges and

universities are members of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Consortium, which means they award college credit for military training, experience, and coursework as long as it has been recognized by the American Council on Education (ACE) or a regional accrediting body such as the Higher Learning Commission. In practice, however, applying ACE recommendations toward specific degree or other credential requirements is not always clear cut, which can slow down the credit awarding process.

A recent statewide survey of military credit identified inconsistencies in evaluation, application, and policies related to awarding of college credit for military training and experience at various institutions. Furthermore, there is evidence that some students are not receiving college credit for military training, experience, or coursework that does not have an ACE recommendation, even though credit may be warranted.

## **Portfolio-based assessment**

Portfolio-based assessment, sometimes referred to as individualized assessment, involves the collection of evidence, as well as individual reflection about the learning experience, in support of a person's claim for credit through prior learning. Using this method, a student prepares a structured, individualized portfolio that contains documents, artifacts, and other forms of evidence to demonstrate college-level learning. A portfolio can be hardbound, electronic, virtual, or a combination. The portfolio is then evaluated for college-level learning by a content expert, usually a faculty member who will determine if college credit can be awarded based on the portfolio assessment and possibly a performance or demonstration of learning.

Portfolio assessment can be useful in situations where a student has achieved a body of learning in a particular discipline derived from multiple sources, including significant job or military experience. Also, certain disciplines of learning can best be documented by portfolio. These may involve art, business, communications, and other subjects that cannot be adequately assessed through a test. Sometimes, portfolio assessment is the preferred method for students to obtain block credit. It also can be the preferred method based on a student's learning style.

There also are circumstances where portfolio assessment might not be the best approach. In most cases, standardized tests such as CLEP or course-specific challenge exams are best for the assessment of general education courses. The creation of a portfolio is a rigorous and time-consuming task; it also is currently the most subjective in that it is measured according to the standards set by the content expert who is doing the evaluation. Additionally, a program with accreditation may have further criteria and limitations for evaluation.

Ideally, the determination of which approach is best suited for PLA should be made by the PLA advisor, the content expert, and the student. Often, multiple methods are employed by both the institution and the student.

## PLA from a National Perspective

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The national emphasis on increasing the number of individuals holding high-quality, work-force-valued postsecondary credentials and degrees is causing the broader higher education community to examine strategies for accelerating learning and supporting students to credential or degree completion, while at the same time not compromising on issues of academic quality or rigor. PLA is emerging as one way to address this issue.

However, structures and regulations governing PLA credit granting and transfers are not standardized within states or across institutions, making it difficult for students to understand the availability of credit for prior learning and the mechanisms for acquiring such credit. In addition, the lack of standardization negatively impacts students who find themselves needing to change institutions or states during their academic careers.

A number of states are developing statewide or system-wide approaches to PLA. For example, some states have:

- begun development of systemic approaches to PLA opportunities within a community college system or across a consortium of community colleges and state universities;
- launched efforts to better publicize the availability of PLA opportunities and help students identify institutions that have PLA opportunities;
- reached agreement on a set of general principles that participating community colleges and universities agree to support and that provide students with opportunities to demonstrate prior learning, earn undergraduate credit for that learning, and maintain those credits whether the student stays in one institution or moves to another; and
- passed legislation requiring the development of a statewide assessment or articulation process.

Systemic approaches to PLA are relatively new, often set into policy only within the last five years.

## Preferred Models: In Search of PLA Best Practices

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In recent years, the practice of evaluating whether learning acquired outside the classroom is college level, and then determining the equivalent number of college credits, has received added attention. It might be hyperbole to suggest that this practice has achieved mainstream status, but PLA is alive and well, gaining momentum, and giving students new opportunities to earn credits that are tied to learning outcomes rather than traditional measures of seat time.

Yet, PLA still makes people nervous. As a recent issue of *Inside Higher Ed* asserted, “When done right, the process is a far cry from taking money to offer credit for ‘life experience.’ But that notion persists. And perhaps more fairly, some in higher education worry that the ‘completion agenda’ is putting pressure on colleges to lower the bar for a degree or credential, including through prior learning.”<sup>11</sup>

Historically, PLA has not been universally available. In most states, it has been a matter of local practice and PLA credits frequently have not been accepted in transfer. As Pamela Tate and her colleagues at CAEL report:

*“Most institutions offer some form of prior learning assessment for college credit... but considerable variation exists in terms of which assessment methods are available, how many PLA credits may apply toward a degree, which degree programs will accept those credits, and whether students even receive information from the institutions about PLA options. And PLA credits earned at one institution are sometimes not transferrable to another institution.”<sup>12</sup>*

In many states, this is still the situation. But a growing number of states – particularly in the nation’s Midwest – are developing statewide approaches. Three such states are Kentucky, Tennessee, and Wisconsin.

- In 2008, the **Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education** advanced a series of recommendations for making PLA more available for larger numbers of adult students who have some college coursework, but no degree. Those recommendations included: (1) state colleges and universities should reevaluate and expand policies regarding the opportunity to earn credit for college-level experiential learning in one or more of its forms; and (2) credit for prior learning must be transferable among postsecondary institutions.<sup>13</sup>
- The state of **Tennessee** has moved to expand PLA and guarantee its transferability of credit between institutions. It has set standards for awarding PLA credit, transcribing

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Fain, “College Credit Without College,” *Inside Higher Ed*, May 7, 2012

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Tate, Rebecca Klein-Collins, and Karen Steinberg “Lifelong learning in the USA: A focus on innovation and efficiency for the 21st century learner,” *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative Working Group on Credit for Prior Learning, 2008

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it and ensuring transferability, transparency, and consistency. Moreover, it has established guidelines to make certain that PLA contributes to students' academic progress and success. Tennessee's recommended standards specify that:

- » to be awarded PLA credits, students must be admitted, have declared an academic program, and have met with an advisor;
  - » PLA credit is given only for courses that are applicable to a student's program requirements;
  - » PLA credit issued at another state institution must be accepted, provided it meets the state General Education requirements; and
  - » institutions should periodically review their PLA policies, ensure program transparency, and establish an appeal process.<sup>14</sup>
- **The University of Wisconsin System** has expanded PLA with a particular emphasis upon portfolio assessment and challenge exams. Wisconsin's Prior Learning Expansion Initiative, a pilot designed to maximize PLA access to adults, involves about a dozen two-year and comprehensive campuses strategically located across the state. The pilot's core activities include: (1) convening faculty, administrators and staff to develop comprehensive PLA principles, guidelines, policies, and practices, including those affecting transfer; (2) training academic advisors on PLA; (3) training faculty on the benefits of PLA and its links to learner outcomes; (4) expanding department-level challenge exams/test banks; (5) engaging employers around employees who use PLA; and (6) marketing PLA to a target population of 44,000 Wisconsin residents who have some college credits, but no degree/certificate.<sup>15</sup>

## PLA Best Practices for Ohio

What are best practices? Essentially, they are practices that have been tested and found to work "on the street" – shown to produce superior results and judged to be effective. They may be identified through a systematic process, often called benchmarking. Or, they can be discovered and validated through a less formal, subjective process that searches for practices that meet the criteria of a "best practice."

For the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative's working groups, the identification of best practices was much more than an academic exercise. It was the first step in framing recommendations for what campuses and the state should do to develop and implement statewide PLA policies and practices. And after several months of research, meetings and conversations about how to achieve consistency across campuses, with quality guaranteed, we reached agreement on the core criteria of PLA best practices.

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<sup>14</sup>The Tennessee Prior Learning Assessment Task Force, *Recommended Standards in Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Policy and Practice for Tennessee Colleges and Universities*, August 2012

<sup>15</sup> University of Wisconsin System, Program Review: Credit for Prior Learning Assessment, November 2010; and University of Wisconsin System, Prior Learning Assessment Academic Planning and Policy Task Force, May 2010

1. **Credit is given only for learning, not for experience.**
2. **Transparency will be preserved in all aspects of the PLA process, with clear, rigorous and public criteria for credit granting.**

The prior learning assessment process, criteria, and involvement will be campus-wide activities with strong consensus and support. There will be appropriate written criteria and process steps for the review and granting of credit via all three PLA methods, which will be agreed upon by all University System of Ohio (USO) institutions. Appropriate oversight of the process will be defined and clearly stated in written criteria and process steps on each campus and at the state level.



3. **Consistency in the evidence requested for the evaluation of prior learning will be assured and all USO institutions will transcript, apply and transfer credits awarded on the basis of the statewide standards.**

Standardized criteria for the evaluation of prior learning – using all three PLA methods – will provide evidence of discernible knowledge, consistent within disciplines, and agreed upon by institutions in the USO. The transfer of credit awarded will be built on the state's existing Articulation and Transfer (A/T) model.

4. **Discipline-appropriate faculty from within the institution and other subject-matter experts (SMEs) will evaluate prior learning.**

Content experts will develop the criteria for awarding credit for prior learning, determine the consistency in the evidence requested for the evaluation of prior learning, and then evaluate prior learning.



**5. Ongoing and rigorous training and professional development will be provided to all participants in the assessment process.**

Rigorous training will be provided for faculty, administrators, PLA developers, subject-matter experts, student advisors, and others involved in the PLA process to ensure the use of best practices, and review consistency and quality assessment across the system.

**6. There will be broad institutional commitment to PLA.**

ALL USO institutions will make a commitment to the development and use of PLA, including training and re-evaluation, agreed-upon criteria for credit articulation, and intentional efforts to raise adults' awareness of PLA as a realistic option for continued learning and career development.

With this consensus on the meaning of "best practices" and drawing from the innovative practices of other states, both at the institutional and system-wide levels, the three working groups developed their **preferred models** for awarding credit to students for prior learning.

## **Credit by Examination: A Preferred Model**

- USO institutions' CBE policies will be transparent to ensure students are fully informed about the types of exams offered, the degree programs that accept CBE, and the specific policies for awarding credit (including course equivalencies).
- USO institutions will review policies for quality and consistency on a regular basis and make them readily available to students; they will ensure that their testing is fair and accessible, and that advising and preparatory materials are available.
- USO institutions will catalog and track non-institutional and institutional/ departmental exams offered by course and assign CBE awards to specific courses in a student's plan of study in order to expedite the student's plan to graduation.
- USO institutions will be proactive about raising awareness of CBE, ensuring that procedures are succinct and easily accessible, and they will work to identify opportunities for CBE expansion (e.g., gaps in content areas).
- Institutions will engage faculty and administrators through regular communication and training.
- USO institutions will appoint a single, primary point of contact for PLA.
- System-wide policies will be in place to guarantee the transcription of CBE credit and the transferability of credit among all USO institutions consistently through the current Ohio Articulation and Transfer Policy, which provides standards for Ohio Transfer Module (OTM), Transfer Assurance Guide (TAG), and Career-Technical Assurance Guide (CTAG) courses.
- All Ohio students will have access to CBE and will not be barred from it because of where they are enrolled or an exam's cost.

## **Credit for Military Training and Experience: A Preferred Model**

- To the greatest extent possible, ACE recommendations will be equated to courses with statewide transfer guarantees, such as CTAG, OTM or TAG courses; these course equivalencies will be included in each USO institution's transfer articulation database and/or degree audit system, u.select (or its successor) and the statewide online course reporting systems.
- For ACE recommendations that fall outside the current statewide guarantees (e.g. physical education, leadership, logistics, maintenance), a new statewide transfer credit category will be established for military credit, beginning with the courses for which credit is most often awarded.
- Each USO institution will identify a single, primary point of contact – either a faculty or staff member – for facilitating course equivalencies for military credit.
- Should credit not be captured through ACE recommendations, veterans can apply for PLA via another recognized mechanism (i.e., credit by examination or portfolio assessment), and statewide standards should be developed for such review.
- A regional representative from ACE will be available to conduct training sessions in collaboration with the Ohio Board of Regents, with training available throughout the academic year at USO institutions.

## **Portfolio-Based Assessment: A Preferred Model**

- Standardized, written criteria will be developed for the review and granting of credit via portfolio submission demonstrating evidence of discernible knowledge, not experience.
- Written process steps will be developed for evaluating credit by portfolio, including appropriate oversight.
- All USO institutions will appoint a single, primary point of contact for PLA.
- All USO institutions will accept the written criteria and process steps; resulting credit will be applied to programs in the same way that transfer credit is applied.
- The portfolio process will be documented and easily accessible on school and state websites.
- Discipline-appropriate faculty from within the institution and other subject matter experts will assess and validate a student's portfolio of prior learning based on agreed-upon statewide portfolio framework criteria and built on the existing Articulation and Transfer model.
- Participants in the portfolio assessment process will have professional development to ensure use of best practices, and review consistency and quality assessment across the system.
- A method of granting block credit that builds upon the existing Articulation and Transfer model will be developed.



## From Industry Credential to College Credit

Where, when, and how learning takes place in higher education is going through significant changes. Among the most important of these changes is the use of technical skill assessments aligned with industry-recognized standards to measure career-technical education (CTE) students' acquisition of a defined set of skills and knowledge. Reaching beyond classroom learning, this can help young people and adults find skilled employment and give them the option of continuing their education as they pursue a postsecondary certificate, associate degree, or more.

For Ohioans, this is a realistic and legislatively mandated option. Ohio Revised Code §3333.162 requires the Ohio Board of Regents, in consultation with the Ohio Department of Education, to develop policies and procedures that enable students to transfer agreed-upon technical courses and programs completed at an adult career-technical center or a public secondary career-technical institution to a public college or university. The courses and programs affected by this directive are those that adhere to recognized industry standards and equivalent coursework common to the secondary career pathway and adult career-technical education system, as well as regionally accredited state institutions of higher education.

Building on this directive, Ohio's FY 2014-2015 biennial budget requires the Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents, not later than June 30, 2014, to establish a system in which graduates of Ohio career-technical centers, who complete a 900-hour program of study and obtain an industry-recognized credential approved by the Chancellor, shall receive 30 college technical credit hours toward a technical degree upon enrollment in a public institution of higher education. This new pathway (One-Year Option) can be used to bring thousands of adults back into the postsecondary system – to enhance their lives and to build the talent base needed to fuel Ohio's future economic growth and prosperity. The impact of this effort can be transformational.

For consistent reporting of industry-recognized credentials attained by students across colleges and technical centers, the Ohio Board of Regents is presently working to establish a list of approved industry certifications and a continuous process for keeping the list current with industry-recognized credentials valued in the workforce. Industry-recognized credentials include: (1) all occupational licenses and registries provided by state or national professional boards; (2) the apprenticeship completion certificate issued by the Ohio State Apprenticeship Council; and (3) industry certifications from a valid third party.

## Aligning PLA to Ohio's Articulation and Transfer System

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Easy credit transfer and accelerated student mobility are the cornerstones of the University System of Ohio. They give all Ohioans a clear pathway for gaining the skills and knowledge necessary for productive and satisfying 21st century careers. Yet, credit transfer cannot be imposed from above. ***It must be both a statewide imperative and an institutional priority.***

Ohio's Articulation and Transfer system offers a model for the higher education community, state lawmakers, and advocacy groups in other states. For Ohio, it provides both a model and an infrastructure upon which to build in developing a PLA system that significantly enhances the state's workforce talent. The A/T system can speed up the work needed to achieve agreements around the awarding and transfer of PLA credit, especially where outside assessments are not available.

PLA is grounded in an equivalency equation that matches demonstrated learning to college-level learning outcomes. As demonstrated by the state's A/T initiatives, it is imperative that equivalencies be established by participating faculty who are the stewards of their disciplines. It is faculty members who need to "own" the system by which equivalencies are determined, and reviewed, and credit awarded. The A/T initiatives have provided an orientation and pathway for addressing equivalency, as well as other related issues that are central to the success of PLA.

The Ohio Articulation and Transfer Network (OATN) can play a role in facilitating implementation of parts of the PLA with a Purpose Network recommendations. OBR will explore how implementation can be supported through OATN to avoid duplication and leverage our existing comprehensive transfer system.

The A/T system also provides guidelines for guaranteed transfer and application of PLA credit to the degree and major. Credit earned through the PLA process will be transferred and applied as specified in the A/T policy (i.e., on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through a traditional classroom experience at the awarding institution).

To address the issue of quality, the procedures and guarantees set in the A/T system have been incorporated, where applicable, into the recommendations advanced in this report. These procedures and guarantees address the issues of ***standardization, faculty oversight, and evaluation of student performance at the next level.*** They provide a solid foundation upon which to build in administering a statewide PLA framework.

## Ohio Faculty and Administrators Speak

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In March/April 2013, Public Agenda conducted a series of focus groups with faculty members and administrators from two- and four-year Ohio colleges and universities.<sup>16</sup> The topic was Prior Learning Assessment, and the purpose was to learn more about faculty and administrator attitudes toward the practice of awarding credit for knowledge and skills that students acquire outside the classroom, and to get an initial sense of barriers and enablers to implementing and scaling promising PLA practices in Ohio.

In all of these groups, there was an overall continuum of acceptance for PLA ranging from skepticism to keen interest, with many thoughtful concerns about administration and implementation.

### Starting Points for Faculty and Administrators

Public Agenda reported that nearly all faculty members endorsed PLA as a valid educational concept and moved immediately to a discussion of the practical details of administration. It wrote that some faculty members “fear PLA as a harbinger of what they see as the possible gutting of quality in higher education and a potential betrayal of the fundamental purposes of education. Many also feel battered by the changes sweeping the nation and this exacerbates concerns and strengthens common misconceptions.”

After the Akron sessions, Public Agenda said administrators are generally enthusiastic about PLA. They see it as a positive service to students, including veterans, and as a useful example of a broader shift from emphasizing seat time to thinking about student learning. Reporting that administrators see prior learning assessment as a win-win, Public Agenda wrote that it allows “the institution to serve the needs of students by helping them move through faster with less debt,

Following its Akron focus groups, Public Agenda wrote that faculty members have many open questions about how PLA works and concerns based on misconceptions and deep values. It wrote that some faculty members seem to believe that this initiative will be a sweeping change to the whole curriculum in that students who never set foot in a classroom could simply test their way to a degree. In Public Agenda’s words, “While this is a misconception that might be easily addressed through good communication and dialogue, faculty have deep concerns that need deeper engagement.”

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<sup>16</sup>Three focus groups were conducted with faculty and administrators at The University of Akron. Three additional sessions were conducted in Columbus with participants from Columbus State Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, Southern State Community College, Terra State Community College, Zane State College, University of Cincinnati, and Wright State University.

while also allowing the university to meet the demands of legislation to find more efficient ways to increase completion without sacrificing quality.”

Following the Columbus focus groups, Public Agenda said the most striking finding, especially in the conversations with faculty members, is that “we found a great deal of interest and acceptance of PLA as a concept. The faculty members displayed little of the ideological resistance we have seen in some of our other research and we found little notable difference between the views of faculty and those of administrators.”

Public Agenda continued: “It is impossible to make generalizations based on just a few groups, but part of this may be a result of how these [Columbus] focus group participants were selected. In recruiting these three focus groups, we specifically asked for faculty members who had some prior exposure to PLA as a concept or as a practice. Furthermore, about half of our respondents – both faculty and administrators – were from two-year institutions, where faculty and administrators are often more familiar with the needs of adult learners. As a result, most of our respondents in these groups had first hand experience with PLA.”

## **Perceived benefits of PLA**

Based on its Columbus sessions, Public Agenda identified the perceived benefits of prior learning assessment.

- The main advantage, in the eyes of respondents, is that PLA is a way to serve students and to help them advance their education by reducing the barriers of time and cost/debt.
- Specifically, PLA is a way to front end success for adult learners who may find returning to school intimidating. The idea of starting with some credits already under the belt may be empowering and encouraging to adult learners (including veterans, who are also transitioning to civilian life).
- This empowerment can also boost retention and completion, benefiting both the student and, indirectly, institutions that are now under increasing pressure to promote retention as well as recruitment.
- Respondents thought it made sense to honor and respect the life experience of these adult learners.

## Practical concerns

Although PLA is not a new concept, Public Agenda's respondents pointed to a number of practical and administrative concerns, including the following:

- **Depth and quality.** While respondents did not doubt that previous learning may often provide a rich alternative to a standard academic course, determining what experience should count for what academic credit is not always a simple matter. This is particularly true when it comes to the question of counting previous experience for required courses, rather than electives. Public Agenda asserted: "If PLA is to be really effective, it should count for required courses and not be marginalized to electives. However, it is much harder to make a one to one alignment between life experience and a required major course with specific learning objectives that may even be mandated as part of professional certification."
- **Partial alignments.** Public Agenda reported that its respondents "worry that previous life experience provides some of what students learn in a course, but not all of it. At the moment, however, there is no easy way to award partial credit for a course. A related question relates to setting standards for PLA: how much is good enough to grant credit?"
- **Problems of standardization and potential for abuse.** The issue here, according to Public Agenda, is that "faculty and administrators everywhere tell us that higher education has become a consumer-driven enterprise. In an older model, the highly educated student was the product of higher education. Today, increasingly, the model has shifted inexorably to the student-as-consumer. Our respondents worry that PLA will be one more venue where higher education institutions will compete for students by offering lower standards for PLA credit."

## Keeping PLA in perspective

Public Agenda concluded its report after the Columbus sessions: "While our respondents endorse the idea of giving adult learners credit for their experience, they insist that PLA should be only a portion of higher education. PLA might be a good way to give students credit for internships and practicums, for example, or for courses with specific technical content. This might be especially true in fields such as health care, where there is already a heavy clinical or practical component. But our respondents still feel that there are important soft skills that are best learned and assessed in a higher education environment."

## **PART TWO:** Priorities for Action

## Recommendations for Building an Effective PLA System

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Ohio's postsecondary institutions are serving a wide variety of learners today. They are older, more likely to be financially independent from the parents and more likely to have college-level knowledge and skills from other institutions or from non-classroom experiences. In many institutions, these "neo-traditional" students are the majority, outnumbering their "traditional" classmates.

To meet the goals of these "neo-traditional" learners, Ohio's colleges and universities are developing new models of teaching and learning, and they are implementing strategies designed to improve campus completion rates and contribute to the state's determination to dramatically increase the number and percentage of Ohioans with college degrees or other credentials of value in the marketplace.

Members of the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative believe the prior learning assessment is one way these postsecondary institutions can adapt to the growing diversity of their students. They believe that PLA needs to be aligned with institutions' missions, just as it must support their academic integrity. So, the initiative's change agenda begins with college and university campuses embracing and advancing the recommendations offered in this report – and it culminates in a partnership through which the Ohio Board of Regents works collaboratively with all USO institutions to promote promising practices for the assessment and purposeful connection of prior learning competencies to training and degree programs.

In this report, the initiative offers **five core, centerpiece recommendations**, each of which is backed by a number of **actions** – some general in nature while others are linked to specific PLA methods – required for effective implementation. The five core recommendations focus on (1) defining the processes and procedures governing PLA on USO campuses; (2) improving students' access to PLA opportunities; (3) ensuring the quality and rigor of PLA processes; (4) providing training and professional development to participants in the assessment process; and (5) clarifying the state's role and responsibilities in the awarding of PLA credit.

## CORE RECOMMENDATION

1

**The Ohio Board of Regents should work collaboratively with all USO universities, colleges and adult career-technical centers to establish a statewide Prior Learning Assessment system with uniform criteria and process steps for the review and granting of credit via all three PLA methods, which will be agreed upon by all USO institutions.**

Campus opportunities for prior learning assessment must be aligned with their respective institutional missions and academic integrity, as well as the needs and aspirations of their students. As part of a statewide system, they also must be defined by a set of uniform processes for awarding credit, with consistent criteria or standards for students to earn this credit.

Yet, this uniformity and consistency in the way credit is awarded cannot be the product of a rigid top-down process. Instead, system-wide criteria and processes that will inform and guide USO institutions as they develop and refine their own policies and procedures must be developed collaboratively through partnerships that lay the groundwork for effective execution. Therefore, the implementation of this first recommendation requires numerous actions:

- OBR should convene consultations with USO institutions to establish system-wide criteria and processes for the review and granting of PLA credit earned through credit by examination, military training and experience, and portfolio-based assessment – with the consultations completed by the end of 2014.
- All system-wide criteria and process steps should be written and well-documented to provide clarity and transparency for all stakeholders, including prospective and currently enrolled students, faculty, academic administrators, and potential employers of students receiving credit from prior learning assessment.
  - » *For CBE*, the components of such criteria and process steps should include the testing location, specification of student enrollment status, frequency for taking the exam(s), expected interactions with advisers/faculty prior to the exam, and a consistent scoring system (i.e., cutoff scores, equivalencies and credit hours awarded) that includes the identification and listing of the exams to be used.
  - » *For portfolio-based assessment*, OBR should work collaboratively with USO institutions to develop a portfolio review framework and protocols that all institutions adopt for granting credit for demonstrated prior learning.
- PLA credit should be granted only to students who are currently enrolled or are going to be enrolled in a program of study and in good academic standing – and after the student has consulted with an advisor about the possibility and advisability of seeking credit via CBE, military credit or portfolio-based assessment.
  - » *For CBE*, students should be expected to take the exam within a reasonable period of time once their application has been accepted, and exam retakes should be



either limited or prohibited with particular consideration given to whether students should be prohibited from attempting CBE after having unsuccessfully taken or attempted a course.

- All USO institutions should develop and communicate a process for appealing PLA decisions (e.g., credit awarded, review process). In cases where institutions already have established procedures for appeals in traditional courses, institutions should consider following those same procedures for PLA credit.
- All PLA credit should be transferable on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through regular study at the awarding institution, and other USO institutions must accept credit for transfer. With respect to the implementation of this recommendation, there is some disagreement among the three working groups. The credit by exam and military working groups want credit to be treated as incoming transfer credit/courses, not native credit/courses. In contrast, the portfolio-based assessment working group believes that credit should be posted to a transcript in a similar manner to native courses with an additional designation or grade that identifies it as PLA credit.
  - » *For CBE*, USO institutions should develop a statewide listing of non institutional exams that meet the established transfer requirements of Ohio Transfer Module (OTM), Transfer Assurance Guides (TAG) and Career-Technical Assurance Guides (CTAG).
  - » *For military credit*, students should not be required to resubmit transcripts for additional evaluation when they transfer credit for courses with statewide transfer guarantee (OTM, TAG and CTAG). For credit awarded outside statewide guarantee, receiving institutions should accept the credit awarded and apply it in the same

## ***A Call for Federal Action***

The PLA with a Purpose initiative recommends that the state, through a multi-state collaborative effort, urge the federal government to build upon the concept of the regionally accredited Community College of the Air Force and establish a single regionally accredited Department of Defense (DoD) community college for all branches of the Armed Forces. It also encourages the state and the multi-state collaborative to advocate for federal financial aid criteria, including Veterans Affairs (V.A.) Education Benefits regulations that allow greater flexibility in the definition and application of Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP).

These two actions will enhance the recognition and awarding of postsecondary credit for prior learning achieved through military training, experience, and coursework. In addition, it will remove financial barriers that many service members and veterans face as they pursue postsecondary degrees and credentials.

manner as the awarding institution. In principle, the receiving institution should request an official Joint Services Transcript **only** to help students advance their progress toward degree completion by assessing for further course equivalencies and/or additional credits. Also, in transferring military credit, financial aid implications for the student should be considered. For example, deferring credit for technical courses may be recommended policy, as related to the financial aid implications of the student's decision.

- PLA credit **may** be treated as in-residence credit at the institution that conducted the review and awarded the credit, in accordance with institutional practice, and where there are not institutional or program-level accreditations that prevent PLA credit as in-resident credit. Not all institutions will agree with this recommendation and there was substantial disagreement among participants in the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative – often based on the PLA method used to acquire credit. The initiative's intent is **not** to change institutional policy. Campuses should have flexibility to determine whether PLA credit will be treated as in-residence credit, consistent with their missions and the needs of their students. However, recognizing the need for consistency, the initiative urges the OBR to monitor institutional practices in this area and to provide further guidance as PLA policies are developed and carried out.
- OBR should work with USO institutions to ensure that system-wide criteria and process steps are accepted on every campus and built into aligned, institutional procedures. It should encourage all USO institutions to adopt policies confirming that credit awarded by one college or university through all three PLA methods will be transferred and applied at other USO institutions on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through traditional classroom experience.
  - » *For CBE*, all USO institutions should create a consistent scoring system – e.g., for non-institutional exams; they should develop and agree on cutoff scores, course equivalencies, and credit hours to be awarded. Institutions are encouraged to consider the credit recommendations of the American Council on Education (ACE) or similar organizations in their policies whenever a recognized college-level examination has been previously evaluated and the results published. Such examinations have undergone a detailed assessment by subject matter experts, which can guide colleges and universities in their application of CBE.
  - » *For CBE*, USO institutions should consider developing institutional/departmental exams, as an alternative to existing non-institutional exams, where the latter are judged to be inadequate by discipline faculty. For example, postsecondary faculty have developed common course learning outcomes for English Composition through the Ohio Articulation and Transfer Network. To encourage consistency across institutions through the use of an English Composition proficiency exam, faculty may be able to create a statewide proficiency exam that is aligned to the existing OTM course.
  - » *For military credit*, statewide faculty review panels should be used to determine course equivalencies for the military coursework and Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) designations or ratings within current statewide credit transfer guarantee initiatives. Equivalencies established in this way will be entered into the statewide electronic database and be part of the statewide guarantee.

- » *For military credit*, the state should explore statewide guarantees in both academic areas (e.g., leadership, communications, logistics and physical education) and technical areas (e.g., security/law enforcement, medical corps, transportation and maintenance). Course credit awarded outside of a military transcript or ACE recommendations should be reviewed by relevant department/faculty at individual USO institutions.
- » *For military credit*, determining trends at both two-year and four-year institutions of those military experiences for which credit is most often awarded may be a good starting point to build course equivalencies at both state and individual institutional levels. When evaluating military training, experience, and coursework for course equivalencies, institutions should include, as resources, faculty and staff with military background and expertise in the subject area as well as ROTC personnel.
- OBR should revisit and further develop its proposed 2011 directive on CLEP credit, beginning immediately. (See the proposed directive at <https://ohiohighered.org/board-of-regents/chancellor/proposed-actions>.)
- OBR should work collaboratively with USO institutions to set fees for prior learning assessment credit that is comparable throughout the state and reflects the actual cost of administering the PLA process. The initiative's three working groups did not opine on what those fees should be, but there is consensus that the fees should be *for the cost of reviewing and posting credit*, not for *credit hours awarded*.

#### CORE RECOMMENDATION

2

**All USO institutions should make prior learning assessment accessible to their students by ensuring that their PLA processes and procedures are fully transparent, with clear, rigorous and public criteria for credit granting, and by making information about PLA opportunities readily available to prospective students, currently enrolled students, faculty, academic administrators, and potential employers of students receiving credit from prior learning assessment.**

For students, the benefits of prior learning assessment are clear. PLA credits spur postsecondary students to continue beyond the first year, reduce students' time to degree by not requiring them to take courses in subjects they've already mastered, and give adults an incentive to begin or return to college. PLA credits reduce the cost of higher education since prior learning credit is typically carried out at a lower cost compared to tuition charged by the credit hour. PLA credits increase degree and certificate completion rates.

Yet, none of these benefits can be realized, nor can academic programs be sustained, if market demand is absent and student awareness is not promoted. For this reason, identifying and articulating the benefits of PLA to students and other stakeholders is essential.

Institutions must strive to make PLA policies and opportunities as clear and transparent as possible.

To be effective, OBR and USO institutions need to use a variety of methods to communicate the value and availability of PLA. So, the implementation of the initiative's second recommendation requires numerous actions:

- Each USO institution should make a visible commitment to prior learning assessment by identifying a primary PLA contact and making the minimization of barriers to student usage a campus-wide priority. The identified point of contact should be well-publicized and accessible to students, faculty and other stakeholders.
  - » *For military credit*, unless the contact person is fully familiar with military credit issues, another visible individual should be appointed to answer veterans' and servicemembers' questions and explain the processes for determining course equivalencies.
- All USO institutions and OBR should be proactive in providing prospective students and those already enrolled with information about PLA purposes and opportunities, including written criteria and clear and transparent process steps for the review and granting of credit via CBE, military experience, and portfolio submission demonstrating evidence of discernible knowledge. Specifically:
  - » All three PLA methods should be documented and easily accessible in campus publications and websites as well as on the state website. Institutions and OBR should consider developing a PLA webpage that can be easily accessed from the homepage and with hyperlinks to it from the Registrar's Office, Transfer Office, Admissions and Academic Advising pages.
  - » USO Institutions should use their course catalogues to broaden students' exposure to information about PLA.
  - » USO institutions' websites and other communication channels should be used to detail PLA delivery systems including CBE testing options, schedules, locations, and exam registration processes. To guarantee that a maximum number of students have access to earning CBE credit, testing centers should offer extended hours of operation beyond standard business hours, if sufficient resources are available.
  - » *For military credit*, USO institutions should work to ensure that veterans and servicemembers know about PLA and have access to its benefits by: (1) offering a meaningful evaluation as soon as possible following admission to the college or university; (2) incorporating specific information about PLA criteria and processes for military training, experience, and coursework on their web sites; and (3) using u.select or its successor to display course equivalencies for military training, experience, and coursework on their websites. In addition, USO institutions should work collaboratively with OBR in developing a public course reporting database system (i.e., search engine) for military training, experience, and coursework that can be guaranteed to transfer and apply consistently across the statewide system.

## CORE RECOMMENDATION

3

**All USO institutions should guarantee the quality, rigor, and effectiveness of their PLA efforts by regularly reviewing all prior learning assessment processes and procedures, and by submitting a biennial accountability report to OBR, which should conduct its own oversight reviews of institutional programs and investigate the use of financial incentives to promote improved performance.**

Quality is more than a promise. It must be assured by the continuous review of PLA policies and procedures and by ongoing oversight of performance at all levels. For this purpose, CAEL has produced a set of quality assurance principles that some states have used as guidelines for their statewide PLA initiatives (see next page). Some of these principles speak to the way programs are structured and the practices that are put in place to carry out key functions, while others address fundamental oversight issues.

To assure quality, OBR and campus-level officials must be able to answer two questions. First, are the system-wide criteria and process steps being carried out? Second, how effective are institutional PLA programs in terms of student learning, recruitment, retention, time to degree, and completion? To answer these questions, the implementation of the initiative's third recommendation requires numerous actions:

- To build trust in the rigor, quality, effectiveness, and fairness of the way PLA credit is awarded, transcribed, and transferred, each USO institution should conduct a periodic review of its own program at the departmental and campus levels. All campus stakeholders – faculty, academic administrators, students, and referral sources – should be engaged in these assessments of PLA delivery and results. The office of academic affairs should periodically review the administrative processes and fee levels to ensure they are effective and fair.
  - » *For CBE*, institutional/departmental and non-institutional exams should be reviewed regularly by faculty to ensure that they are current and appropriate.
  - » *For military credit*, the faculty-led ACE review process should be the key to assuring quality and rigor in the review of courses and determination of equivalency.
  - » *For military credit*, institutions should have at least one faculty member serving as an ACE evaluator to provide broader years understanding of the ACE review process.
  - » *For military credit*, with guidance from OBR, USO institutions should assess the academic progress of student veterans to determine if there is a correlation between the number of credits awarded for military experience based on ACE recommendations and academic performance. It may be appropriate to use the USO Military Credit Survey Data in order to determine the baseline benchmarks.
  - » *For portfolio-based assessment*, USO institutions should review the statewide portfolio framework policies and procedures every two years to determine the success of the initiative and to develop a continuous improvement process and ongoing review.

- OBR should review each USO institution's PLA program and practices at least every five years. The review should evaluate all program elements for consistency with system-wide criteria and processes. Special attention should be given to the way PLA credit is being reviewed, granted, transcribed, applied, and transferred.
- OBR should set benchmarks that USO institutions can use to evaluate the impact and success of their PLA programs. These benchmarks should include, but not necessarily be limited to, the volume of PLA credits awarded annually, average volume of PLA credits per award, PLA recipient data (e.g., a demographic summary of PLA recipients by age, gender, ethnicity, and GPA), and student success indicators (e.g., retention, time to degree, and college completion).
- OBR should consider options for including financial incentives to promote USO institutions' improved PLA performance in future biennial budget formulas.
- OBR should report every three to five years on prior learning assessment's impact system-wide on students' persistence and success in completing degree and certificate programs, and make recommendations for changes in the program.

## CAEL guidelines for statewide PLA initiatives

Among the issues to be addressed in establishing statewide PLA systems, CAEL suggests the following:

- Consider the institutional stakeholders involved
- Identify steps necessary to approve and implement PLA
- Clearly articulate the purpose of PLA
- Identify criteria for awarding PLA credit
- Develop articulation among institutions so PLA credits can transfer widely
- Determine which courses, if any, should be exempt from PLA and why
- Determine how student PLAs will be evaluated
- Ensure that assessors are trained and evaluated
- Decide when a student is eligible for PLA credit
- Determine how students will be prepared to participate in the PLA process
- Determine how students will be advised and how advisors will be trained
- Determine what institutions will charge for PLA credits
- Determine whether PLA utilization will be tracked and how PLA programs and outcomes will be evaluated

SOURCE: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning Presentation to Oklahoma Reach Higher Program Faculty June 18, 2010



CORE RECOMMENDATION

4

**All participants in the PLA process should receive training and professional development, with support and guidance from the Ohio Board of Regents, to ensure use of best practices, consistency of review and quality, and rigorous assessment at all USO campuses.**

One of the factors affecting the quality of PLA programs and practices is the performance of personnel involved in prior learning assessment either at the departmental or institutional level. Enhancing faculty and staff awareness and the ability to carry out PLA roles and responsibilities through training and communication must be a priority on every USO campus. Therefore, the implementation of the initiative's fourth recommendation requires numerous actions:

- To ensure that students receive adequate and accurate advising regarding PLA, the PLA process and the criteria for granting credit for prior learning, all USO institutions should be responsible for providing discipline-appropriate faculty, academic administrators, and student advisors with training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform. Professional development should include training on best practices, consistency of review and quality assessment, and criteria for transcribing, applying, and transferring credit.
- OBR should offer guidance and facilitate the PLA training and professional development that USO institutions provide to their faculty, administrators and staff – and for this purpose, it should seek new resources from public and private sources.
  - » *For military credit*, training should familiarize faculty and staff with Joint Services Transcripts and the existing ACE review processes, including quality standards. A regional representative from ACE should be available to conduct training sessions in collaboration with OBR staff, either on campus or in a regional or statewide setting. Training should be ongoing throughout the academic year. Any training on how to interpret ACE recommendations that is developed by OBR should be required for faculty and staff involved in the awarding process (e.g., transfer specialists and student advisors).
  - » *For portfolio-based assessment*, training on the assessment process should be facilitated by the state in order to ensure quality and consistency among all USO institutions. A state-level committee should be formed to assist in identifying the trainers and the delivery methods; established and creditable training organizations and/or individuals within the USO system may be engaged to conduct training, with all USO institutions required to participate in the training.

**CORE RECOMMENDATION****5**

**The Ohio Board of Regents should convene consultations with USO institutions to (1) develop standardized criteria and process steps for the evaluation of prior learning; (2) assure consistency in the evidence requested for the evaluation of prior learning; (3) provide oversight for the transcription, application and transfer of credits awarded through the state's existing Articulation and Transfer initiatives; and (4) establish methods for reporting and measuring PLA's impact on students' completion of their degree and certificate programs.**

Charged with preparing a roadmap to a statewide system for assessing and connecting prior learning competencies to training and degree programs, the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative has made a series of recommendations for defining the processes and procedures governing PLA and improving students' access to PLA opportunities. The three working groups have recommended actions for ensuring the quality and rigor of PLA processes and providing training and professional development to participants in the assessment process.

Throughout this report, we have urged the state of Ohio, through the Ohio Board of Regents, to provide critical leadership in developing and executing an integrated, statewide PLA system. That leadership is reflected in calls for OBR to:

1. convene consultations with USO institutions to establish system-wide criteria and processes for the review and granting of PLA credit;
2. work with USO institutions to ensure that system-wide criteria and process steps are accepted on every campus and built into aligned, institutional procedures;
3. collaborate with USO institutions in providing prospective students and those already enrolled with information about PLA purposes and opportunities, including written criteria and clear and transparent process steps for the review and granting of credit;
4. review each USO institution's PLA programs and practices at least every five years with special attention given to the way PLA credit is being reviewed, granted, transcribed, applied, and transferred;
5. set benchmarks that USO institutions can use to evaluate the impact and success of their PLA programs;
6. report every three to five years on prior learning assessment's impact system-wide on students' persistence and success in completing degree and certificate programs; and
7. offer guidance and support for the PLA training and professional development USO institutions provide to their faculty, administrators, and staff.



It's an ambitious list of priorities – collectively a bold agenda for action. But we believe that the state must do more. Therefore, the implementation of the initiative's final recommendations calls for a few additional actions:

- In consultation with USO institutions, OBR should develop a method of granting block credit, particularly for portfolio-based assessment, that builds upon the existing Articulation and Transfer model. In spite of recent efforts to move teaching and learning to a competency-based approach that stresses performance and outcomes, not seat time, the credit hour is still higher education's gold standard. And yet, several institutions of higher education are expanding their competency-based offerings, particularly for working adults. We believe the door to block credit has been opened as these online, self-paced programs are emphasizing the testing of competency and even learning that occurs outside of the traditional classroom. OBR should provide leadership as Ohio's universities and colleges explore this promising innovation.
- OBR should develop a method within the current Higher Education Information (HEI) system to track the academic progress of students who receive PLA credit through CBE, credit for military training and experience, and portfolio-based assessment. Credit earned through PLA would not be noted on students' transcripts, but HEI tracking would allow OBR and USO institutions to measure their programs' success in encouraging postsecondary participation and improving rates of college completion.
  - » *For military credit*, OBR should revisit how military credit is reported to the HEI system. Currently, this credit is reported in the Outside Coursework (OC) type, which also includes other forms of credit. As such, the comment period may be important to allow institutions to report any limitations they may have from a system standpoint. One solution might be to create a new credit type strictly for Military Credit awarded.
- In collaboration with USO institutions, OBR should design and launch a statewide marketing campaign to familiarize prospective and current students with their PLA options. While a joint state and local campaign should provide information about PLA in all its forms, the Ohio GI Promise and its benefits for potential military and veteran students should be emphasized.
- OBR should seek new resources to support campus-level prior learning assessment, particularly for portfolio-based assessment that involves extraordinary investments of time and faculty who can assess and validate a student's portfolio based on system-wide criteria. The framework would be built on the existing Articulation and Transfer model.

## The Way Forward

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We have a clear vision of a higher education system that helps students earn postsecondary certificates and degrees by recognizing and embracing the college-level knowledge and skills they have acquired outside the collegiate experience. It is a vision in which the state's universities, colleges and adult career-technical centers make Ohio more competitive in a technology-driven global economy as they advance and promote the awarding of credit – or, in the case of adult career-technical centers, recognize toward completion of a certificate or credential – for prior learning.

In the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative's five core recommendations, as well as the actions required to carry them out, Ohio also has a plan for achieving this vision. Yet, the critical question is: Do we have capacity and the will to carry it out?

Today, higher education is experiencing a tectonic shift – the landscape of higher learning is being reshaped and radical change is becoming the norm. We can see it in an extraordinary explosion of knowledge and a highly diversified marketplace – from selective colleges and universities to public access universities, private and independent colleges and universities, community colleges and proprietary institutions – all offering different educational choices and enrolling students with different learning objectives. We can see it in the disruptive innovation of online learning, which has spawned new postsecondary providers and new teaching and learning models.

Higher education's new landscape also is reflected in the pressure colleges and universities feel to clearly prove their value and the quality of their outcomes, often to a skeptical community. And we can see it in today's "neo-traditional" students who are older or more independent compared to earlier generations of learners.

These and other forces make the implementation of large-scale change harder. They also make it more important than ever before.

The connection between implementation and results is indisputable. Yet, implementation is not simply a matter of doing things, of sweating the details, or of making things happen. It's a systematic process that requires determined leadership, aligned activities, and a demand for quality and accountability.

### Determined leadership

Participants in the *PLA with a Purpose* initiative believe that the starting point for effective implementation is **committed and engaged leaders**. Campus leaders – at the institutional, college, and departmental levels -- have a unique capacity to confirm and legitimize a new policy direction. They have the ability to synchronize people – to get them to work together to achieve great things. Without genuine and vocal support at the top, buy-in across the

campus will most likely be shallow and PLA will be executed in an uneven and inconsistent manner. And campus leaders are uniquely positioned to build PLA **teams** with the right composition and sufficient credibility to be trusted, heard, and followed as prior learning becomes part of an institution's mission.

Just as skilled leadership is critical for every USO institution, PLA's implementation demands unwavering leadership from the Ohio Board of Regents and other state education policy leaders. PLA must be a priority, and state officials need to be ready to provide leadership in addressing a number of issues identified, but not resolved, by our network and working groups. For example, going forward, the state will need to lead in:

- monitoring the visibility of USO institutions' commitment to PLA – their determination to help students understand from the onset that the institution believes in PLA and takes actions to support it;
- creating a method of granting block credit that builds upon the state's existing Articulation and Transfer model, which is available to all USO campuses and accessible to students pursuing military credit or portfolio-based assessment;
- establishing a consistent scoring system for CBE (i.e., the adoption of common passing scores and credit hours awarded, when appropriate, with clear connections to course equivalencies);
- ensuring that students who have been awarded PLA credit are tracked through the HEI system to ascertain their continued success, particularly those who transfer from one institution to another;
- facilitating and coordinating training and professional development for faculty and staff who are involved in reviewing, awarding, transcribing, applying, and transferring PLA credit;
- reviewing the fees USO institutions charge for PLA to ensure they are comparable throughout the state and reflect the actual cost of carrying out PLA practices;
- working with USO institutions to develop and carry out an ongoing cooperative marketing and communications strategy to ensure that students and other on-campus and off-campus stakeholders understand PLA opportunities and processes; and
- seeking new resources from public and private sources to support institutions' and the state's PLA activities.

## **Aligned activities**

Alignment is achieved when everyone is marching in the same direction, coordinating and not duplicating their efforts, and not working at cross-purposes with conflicting goals and practices. It's a simple idea, but there's nothing simple about avoiding performance-sapping conflicts, inconsistencies in the way policies are interpreted and carried out, and wasted resources.

In their preferred models, all three of our working groups identified ways to heighten alignment – or consistency – in Ohio’s PLA system. They called for standardized, written criteria and process steps for the review and granting of credit for prior learning. They charged all USO institutions with accepting these criteria and process steps, with OBR providing appropriate oversight to ensure consistency across all institutions.<sup>17</sup>

All three working groups pointed to the need for professional development for participants in the PLA process, to ensure the use of best practices and quality assessment across the system. And all three groups concluded that USO institutions would have to transcript, apply, and transfer credits awarded on the basis of common statewide standards.

We know that these imperatives, by themselves, are not enough to guarantee consistency, and we recognize that institutions often need the flexibility to match the expectations of a statewide system to their own institutional missions and the learning needs of their students. Therefore, what we have recommended should be seen as a framework – a blueprint for campus-level action. Campuses should be expected to make decisions and implement policies based on their own needs, and minor variances in the way these standards are carried out should not cause alarm. However, the drive for consistency makes necessary periodic institutional reviews of PLA policies and practices, along with state accountability assessments tied to state funding formula for USO institutions.

### **PLA with a Purpose recognizes the need for flexibility**

We recognize that institutions often need the flexibility to match the expectations of a statewide system to their own institutional missions and learning needs of their students. Therefore, what we have recommended should be seen as a framework – a blueprint for campus-level action. Campuses should be expected to make decisions and implement policies based on their own needs, and minor variances in the way these standards are carried out should not cause alarm.

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<sup>17</sup> As it ended its deliberations, the CBE working group identified several additional issues that need attention as Ohio’s PLA system moves forward. These included: (1) basic requirements for administering and assessing exams across institutions and disciplines (tests in proctored settings, set time limits, use of common rubrics or grading standards, adoption of common passing scores when appropriate, and connection to course equivalencies); (2) the number of times students can re-take an exam; (3) the decision on whether students should be prohibited from attempting CBE after having unsuccessfully taken or attempted a course; (4) the evaluation of students’ preparedness for CBE; and (5) resources to help students prepare for exams (e.g., a syllabus, a listing of course outcomes and other materials).

## Quality and accountability

All USO institutions should be willing to stand behind the quality of the programs and procedures through which they review, award, transcript, apply, and transfer credit for prior learning. They owe it to their students and to the state, with its documented need for technology-savvy workers who have a strong work ethic and advanced reasoning, collaboration, and problem solving skills.

Throughout this report, we have advanced numerous recommendations and actions intended to promote quality and accountability – from uniformity and consistency in the way credit is awarded to the standardized determination of course equivalencies, to full transparency with clear and rigorous criteria for credit granting, to the field-tested ACE review process for assessing military credit, to professional development for those involved in the review process and to appropriate oversight by OBR. Yet, the initiative’s strongest appeal for quality and accountability is found in the assertion that all USO institutions should be expected to transcript, apply, and transfer credit awarded on the basis of common state-wide standards.

Perhaps, going forward, Ohio’s biggest challenge will be to provide assurance that the portfolio credit evaluation, review process, and credits awarded are of a consistent nature and quality throughout the state’s higher education system. Currently, this is the most subjective form of PLA, so we made a special effort to develop a “quality guarantee” that would be built on four elements: (1) a portfolio framework developed by OBR in consultation with USO institutions that all participating campuses agree upon, adopt, and implement; (2) appropriate discipline faculty at each institution within the USO system who share responsibility for the review of portfolios, awarding of credit, and the oversight of the credit validation process; (3) training on the portfolio assessment process that would be facilitated by the state in order to ensure quality and consistency among all USO institutions; and (4) tracking of all students with awarded PLA credit through the HEI system to ascertain the continued success of students upon transfer.

## A final thought

It is clear that a number of states are working at the leading edge of strategically deploying PLA policies to help students earn postsecondary credentials and degrees, and to build their workplace talent through pathways that extend beyond the college classroom. With its proven track record of promoting strong articulation and transfer policies, Ohio is positioned to join this group of leading states and to potentially emerge as a national leader in the PLA landscape.

For that to happen, OBR and the state's USO institutions must work collaboratively, knowing that they are stronger working together than working as individual organizations or even marching in different directions. They must set clear, rigorous and transparent PLA standards and then leverage their collective ideas, resources, energy, and resolve to turn those standards into action that recognize and embrace the knowledge and skills that students have acquired outside the collegiate experience.

But there is more. To emerge as a national leader, Ohio must frame a statewide system for monitoring and assessing USO institutions' PLA policies and practices. It is demanded by the initiative's commitment to consistency, quality, and accountability. But assuming that USO institutions build a genuine sense of ownership – embracing prior learning assessment and making it accessible to their students – the state's oversight should be focused less on compliance than on assistance, capacity-building, and improvement.





## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A: Ten CAEL Standards for Assessing Learning**

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To determine whether to award college credit to students for prior learning, follow these standards:

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

## APPENDIX B:

### Prior Learning Assessment: Selected Best Practices

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As the body of this report confirms, a growing number of states are developing statewide PLA systems.<sup>18</sup> In other states – including two of Ohio’s neighboring states, Indiana and Michigan – postsecondary institutions have developed their own approaches without an overarching statewide system.

At the institutional level, distinctive CBE endeavors addressing the best practice criteria of accessibility, transparency, consistency and quality can be found on numerous campuses, just a few of which will be highlighted here.

#### Institutional CBE Best Practices: Non-Ohio

- **Thomas Edison State College (Trenton, New Jersey)** is a college built “exclusively for adults.” It has merged its non-institutional and institutional examination programs, which ensures that the CBE program is consistent, accessible, and successful. The college has a separate office that is responsible for working with faculty to develop a set of standardized exams that are used for PLA. The office is staffed by experts in exam development who help faculty build exams and evaluate their effectiveness. Other institutions across the country use these examinations. The college does not charge for their use. The CBE program at the college is very accessible to students, who can find a description of the CBE program on a single webpage. There also are links to a list of exams, a description of each exam, and a web registration page. For more information, visit <http://www.tesc.edu/degree-completion/Testing.cfm>.
- **Charter Oak State College (New Britain, Connecticut)** is a “school without walls” that meets the unique needs of adult learners through a convenient online curriculum and a flexible credit transfer policy that accelerates the path to degree completion. The college promotes multiple ways to earn credit, including through non-institutional exams, evaluation of military training, portfolio assessment, and business and industry training evaluated by ACE, National CCRS (formerly PONS), and the Connecticut Credit Assessment Program (CCAP). Charter Oak provides a centralized repository of information about CBE. Resources are available on policies, costs, and registration procedures, including exam preparation materials. Students are assigned an academic counselor to assist in their degree completion and determine if testing is a good match for them. Charter Oak accepts credit from numerous faculty-approved exams: CLEP, DSST, ECE, TECEP, and Charter Oak State College Pathways & Statistics Exams. It uses the ACE recommended passing scores as the basis for awarding credit. Other exams may be

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<sup>18</sup> The state of Washington’s PLA policies and practices merit attention. For that purpose, see Washington State Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning Work Group, “*Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning: A handbook for faculty and staff*,” 2012.

accepted as reviewed and approved by the Charter Oak Faculty of Consulting Examiners. For more information, visit <http://www.charteroak.edu/current/academics/earningcredits/exam>.

- **SUNY Empire State College (Saratoga Springs, New York)** focuses on nontraditional teaching and learning, where college faculty mentors guide learners through designing an individual degree program within 12 broad areas. It offers flexible programs, including distance education, extensive transfer of credits from other universities, and PLA credit for knowledge gained through standardized exams, non-collegiate sponsored learning (training, credentials, etc.), and portfolio assessment (through an online “PLA Planner”). PLA credit is granted to degree-seeking students for verifiable college-level learning acquired through life or work experience. Empire State’s website is comprehensive and offers the student a step-by-step online guide (called “iPLA”) to facilitate the exploration of credit for prior learning, including CBE. Credit by examination options include CLEP, ECE, TECEP, and DSST. Centralized resources are provided to students, including CBE preparatory materials and a list of CLEP exams, cut scores, and credit amounts. In March 2013, SUNY’s board of trustees proposed an expansion of the PLA program offered by Empire State College, with the aim to copy the Empire State model across the system. For more information, visit <http://www.esc.edu/degree-planning-academic-review/prior-learning-assessment/evaluation-prior-college-level-learning/standardized-tests>.

## **Institutional CBE Best Practices: Ohio**

Most, if not all, of Ohio’s community colleges offer students the opportunity to earn CBE. There are variations in the degree to which the information is made accessible to students and to which the fees and procedures are consistent across departments. Most schools require approval from a dean and/or the department administering the exam, require students to be currently enrolled, limit the number of credits that can be earned by exam, and limit or prohibit re-takes of the exams. Some institutions also have screening mechanisms that require students to demonstrate preparedness prior to taking the exams. Two Ohio community colleges that offer models for handling institutional/departmental exams are Edison Community College and Sinclair Community College.

- **Edison Community College (Piqua, Ohio)** has a master list of institutional/departmental exams, which helps students see what their options are. In addition, the list is accompanied by a clear, step-by-step description of the process students must follow to take the exams. Registration is centralized and the process is uniform across all departments. To help students prepare, the information sheet includes a link to a website that has a syllabus posted for the associated course. At Edison, there is a testing coordinator, a consistent fee structure, and a rule that students may not retest for one year. For more information, visit <http://www.edisonohio.edu/uploads/Proficiency%20Exam%20info%207.22.13.doc>.

- **Sinclair Community College (Dayton, Ohio)** offers an approach that is clear, consistent, and accessible to students. Proficiency testing is tracked by a Curriculum Management Tool (CMT), a software system that identifies which courses offer proficiency testing. A link to the Proficiency Testing Report is provided on the PLA website. In addition, departments are sent a questionnaire that captures data about individual proficiency examinations, delivery mode (oral, written, computerized, etc.), testing location (testing center, department lab, other lab, etc.), test format (interactive/oral, multiple choice, portfolio, etc.), time limit, and any additional testing notes the student may need to know. This information is then entered into a spreadsheet that all PLA Program and Academic Advisors can access and share with a student inquiring about a proficiency exam. To maintain consistency in the proficiency exam process, any student who wants to take a proficiency exam must speak with a PLA Program Advisor to begin the process. A student must complete and sign a form that outlines the policies and procedures for each exam and explains that the fee is non-refundable and that the exam can be taken only once. All forms are available electronically to students who request to work with a PLA program advisor via e-mail. For more information, visit <http://www.sinclair.edu/about/administrative/vpi/trs/proficiencyexams>.

**Four-year institutions** across the state also offer a range of CBE approaches. Again, there is variation in the degree to which the process is centralized and accessible to students. At some institutions, students are referred to individual departments, while at others they can access information, register, and pay online at one website. The programs at The Ohio State University, The University of Akron, and Wright State University are highlighted below.

- **The Ohio State University (Columbus, Ohio)** offers students a variety of ways to earn CBE. The Credit by Examination program meets the criteria of quality, transparency and consistency. OSU provides a helpful brochure online that clearly presents the features of the program. In addition to offering students non-institutional exam options like CLEP, IB, and DSST, OSU offers two types of institutional/departamental exams: “EM” exams and Departmental exams. EM exams are institutional/departamental exams that are administered at the University Testing Center. The exams cover a range of courses from the sciences, the social sciences, mathematics, and business. A brief description of each course and of the exam is provided in the brochure. Departmental exams are administered by individual departments. The brochure includes a list of courses that offer Departmental exams, a description of the specific exam, and a phone number students can call to make testing arrangements. Overall, the OSU CBE program is an effective way for qualified students to save significant time and money toward their degree. For more information, visit [http://registrar.osu.edu/testing/em\\_brochure\\_2013\\_2014.pdf](http://registrar.osu.edu/testing/em_brochure_2013_2014.pdf).
- **University of Akron Express to Success (Akron, Ohio)** has developed an innovative, student-centered approach to institutional/departamental CBE. The program is designed to help adult students and veterans complete their degrees efficiently. Information about the university’s CBE program is accessible to students on a well-designed webpage. There students can easily learn what exams are available, apply to take an exam, pay for it and read the program’s terms and conditions (e.g., students receive both credit and a grade for CBE and are prohibited from re-taking an exam to replace the grade earned

on a CBE, etc.). One unique feature of program is the Test Prep Tutorial, a 10-hour (over 1-2 weeks) refresher experience for students who believe they have already mastered the material in the associated course and are considering attempting CBE. Currently, UA offers tutorials in statistics, math, psychology, sociology, and communication. This program, which can serve students who are not currently UA students, is convenient and cost effective for students. For more information, visit <http://www.uakron.edu/bcas/academics/tpt>.

- **Wright State University (Dayton, Ohio)** stands out for its comprehensive guiding policies, accessible explanation of decision-making processes, and transparent course equivalency charts. Its institutional commitment to CBE also is apparent through the breadth of non-institutional exams offered: AP, CLEP, DSST, IB, and ECE. Non-institutional exam information also is well-linked to other college departments. For more information, visit <http://www.wright.edu/transfer/academics/credit-transfer>.

## Military Best Practices

Two exemplary approaches to awarding credit for military training, experience and coursework are found in the state of Minnesota and at IvyTech Community College of Indiana.

- **Minnesota's Statewide Reintegration Initiative** is a collaborative of the state's higher education institutions, the Minnesota National Guard, state lawmakers, and a number of state agencies. The state began its journey by (1) educating the higher education community about service members and veterans; (2) creating a military student-friendly environment; and (3) developing infrastructure via laws, policies, and practices. Awarding college credit for military training, experience, and coursework is only a fraction of the state's effort to help servicemembers and veterans achieve their highest level of academic attainment, but its operation is so comprehensive and advanced that Ohio can learn from Minnesota's best practices and challenges. Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System's (MnSCU) online tool enables service members and veterans to learn about course equivalencies that they can earn from their military training, experience, and coursework, as well as a life planning guide that educates students about their own career, education finance, leadership, and personal aspirations. For more information, visit <http://www.mnscu.edu/military/transfer.html> or GPS Lifeplan at <http://www.gpslifeplan.org/mnoline>.
- **IvyTech Community College system (Indianapolis, Indiana)** offers expansive crosswalk resources from certification and military training to college courses. IvyTech has taken a systematic approach to aligning non-traditional learning opportunities such as work experience, military service, and technical training service in AmeriCorps or Peace Corps. It also provides a system-wide credit course equivalency guarantee. IvyTech's crosswalk provides a starting point for other states interested in aligning certification and military training to their courses and academic programs. For more information, visit <http://www.ivytech.edu/pla>.

## Portfolio Best Practices

Several states have taken a comprehensive approach to prior learning assessment that includes the use of portfolio-based assessment. They have addressed a number of critical issues, such as the articulation and transfer of portfolio credit (Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Washington); allowable fees charged for portfolio-based assessment (Minnesota and Tennessee) and the use of third-party validation and portfolio course options (SUNY Empire State College, Pennsylvania, and Vermont). In addition, two portfolio-based assessment initiatives in Ohio merit attention.

- **The University of Toledo (Toledo, Ohio)** offers Portfolio Development and Assessment through its University Credit Assessment Center (UCAC), which is housed in the College of Adult and Lifelong Learning. Best practices are found in student resources, faculty resources, and pre-articulated course portfolio requirements. Students seeking credit through the assessment of portfolios have access to individualized coaching, template samples and on-line forms, policies, and process information. Faculty have online access to portfolio assessor guidelines. Onsite departmental and individual faculty consultation also is available from PLA staff. The UCAC staff continually seeks to support innovative degree program offerings such as three-year accelerated B.A. degrees and honors programs. The UCAC has developed pre-articulated portfolio content requirements with select departments and faculty. It continually seeks to streamline the portfolio submission process. The Center discusses expansion of portfolio content options to support alternative demonstration of learning methods such as badging and competency-based learning. For more information, visit <http://www.utoledo.edu/call/pla.html>.
- **Cleveland State University (Cleveland, Ohio)** offers the Assessment and Accreditation of Prior Learning Experience (AAPLE) Program through its Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs. The program helps integrate life and work experience with other learning goals and educational programs. It awards between four and 24 credit hours, depending on the amount of experience and its relevance to a degree in Urban Affairs, based on portfolios submitted by students. The AAPLE process begins with a student enrolling in UST 190, Analysis of Experiential Learning in Urban Studies, a two-credit course. The course provides the understanding necessary to identify relevant prior learning and present evidence of competence in those areas. Portfolios developed in UST 190 are used as the basis for evaluation of credit. All portfolios must be submitted within one year of completion of UST 190, which also familiarizes students with the various majors in the college and assists in planning a bachelor's degree program. It is important that students be fully versed in the policies and procedures that underpin the program before they engage in any efforts in the direction of seeking credit through preparation of a portfolio. The steps outlined and the procedures indicated have been developed with the purpose of assuring that Levin College's approach to granting credit (as an outcome of assessment of non-collegiate, but college-level experiential learning)



embodies the highest level of academic standards. Though this approach may impose rigorous efforts on the part of students and faculty assessors alike, it is believed that adherence to high and generally accepted standards serves all involved parties well. For more information, visit <http://urban.csuohio.edu/academics/undergraduate/aapple.html>.

Finally, the **Western Governors University (Salt Lake City, Utah)**, founded in 1997 by a consortium of 19 states, has developed a unique competency-based approach to PLA. At the university, each degree program is developed by a council of experts in the field that defines “competencies” students need to possess to graduate. These competencies form the curriculum. This combination of expertise in industry knowledge and academics guarantees that students’ degrees will be relevant in their chosen field. Students earn degrees through demonstration of skills and knowledge in required subject areas, using a series of carefully designed assessments. It can involve testing, writing papers, and completing assignments, but without a focus on seat time or credit hours. For more information, visit <http://www.wgu.edu>.

## APPENDIX C: Ohio's PLA Leadership: Network and Work Groups

*(alphabetical by institution)*

### PLA Network

**John Buttelwerth** (Co-Chair)  
Cincinnati State Technical and Community College

**Mike Sherman** (Co-Chair)  
The University of Akron

**Maureen Heacock**  
Antioch University

**May Charles**  
Belmont College

**Barbara Henry**  
Bowling Green State University

**Mark Knutsen**  
Central Ohio Technical College

**Colette Burnette**  
Central State University

**Jane Cape**  
Clark State Community College

**Edward Hill**  
Cleveland State University

**Lisa Schneider**  
Columbus State Community College

**Raymond Irwin**  
Cuyahoga Community College

**Mariah Orzolek**  
Defiance College

**Robin Snider Flohr**  
Eastern Gateway Community College

**Maggie Sykes**  
Edison Community College

**Joe Wakeman**  
Hocking College

**Cindy McQuade**  
Inter-University Council of Ohio

**Barb Friedt**  
Lakeland Community College

**Roy Church**  
Lorain County Community College

**Stephanie Sutton**  
Lorain County Community College

**Kim Chaney**  
Mahoning County Career & Technical Center

**Mary Mihalopoulos**  
Mahoning County Career & Technical Center

**Vicky Wood**  
Marion Technical College

**Dave Sauter**  
Miami University

**Lynn Jones**  
North Central State College

**Cindy Krueger**  
Northwest State Community College

**Mike Snider**  
Ohio Association of Community Colleges

**William Souder**  
Ohio Board of Regents

**Howard Dewald**  
Ohio University

**Mark Moffitt**  
Otterbein College

**Renay Scott**  
Owens Community College

**Jeff Bauer**  
Shawnee State University

**Jared Cutler**  
Sinclair Community College

**Pat Lemmons**  
Sinclair Community College

**Ryan McCall**  
Southern State Community College

**Cheri Rice**  
Stark State College

**Lynn Sullivan**  
Terra State Community College

**Randy Smith**  
The Ohio State University

**Stacey Moore**  
The University of Akron

**Heidi Pettyjohn**  
University of Cincinnati

**David Lawrence**  
University of Rio Grande/  
Rio Grande Community College

**Dennis Lettman**  
University of Toledo

**Barbara Wagner**  
Upper Valley Career Center

**Logan Billing**

Upper Valley Career Center

**Tom Harris**

Warren County Career Center

**Margaret Hess**

Warren County Vocational School District (WCVSD)

**John Tigue**

Washington State Community College

**Joe Law**

Wright State University

**Tammy King**

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**Paul Brown**

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