

# CTCSWV Scores Big with New PLA System

## *Colleges, individuals benefit from increased access to education*

### Overview

Community colleges across the nation are embracing the College Completion Challenge – committing to increase the number of students completing a degree or other credential by 50 percent (which translates to 5 million students) by the year 2020 (AACC, 2012). To achieve this ambitious goal, postsecondary institutions are seeking ways to widen college access and accelerate college completion – while continuing to ensure the quality and integrity of credentials earned.

Many colleges are finding that Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) – sometimes referred to as ‘experiential learning’ or credit for prior learning (CPL) – is a promising solution to help increase graduation rates among adult learners. At its core, PLA offers ways for students to demonstrate college-level skills and competencies gained outside the classroom. If existing knowledge can be documented to be in alignment with the learning outcomes of a particular college course, the student can earn credit for that course.

This approach continues to gain popularity due to the fact that it greatly benefits the community college student classic profile: adult students who are juggling school, work and families. These adult students often take longer to earn college credentials because of lack of time and money. Credit for prior learning programs also supports veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce, and re-entry students looking to advance their skills or jump start a new career.

Employers want talented candidates with both demonstrated ability and advanced educational credentials or training. By developing a successful PLA program, community colleges can better serve their mission to provide access to higher education for these underserved populations.

Benefits of implementing a PLA system include:

- Offering a jump start on a college degree
- Saving on tuition costs
- Increasing the likelihood of graduating

Improving rates of postsecondary degree completion is a win-win for everyone, which is why the Federal government continues to invest in higher education. On February 9, 2016 President Obama released his Fiscal Year 2017 Budget, which provides \$69.4 billion in discretionary funding and \$139.7 billion in new mandatory funding for the U.S. Department of Education (ED, 2016). Budget allocated to the advancement of access, affordability and completion of postsecondary education continues to build on the Administration’s efforts to not only increase access to college for more people, but make degree completion more of a reality.

Once a degree is in hand, timely access to quality data is crucial to moving a graduate from the talent pipeline into the workforce. As such, the budget also includes \$540 million for the Department of Labor and Department of Commerce to partner and upgrade workforce data at the state level. The intended outcome of the collaborative is to help improve training programs as well as match workers with jobs (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016).

Increasing the percentage of Americans with postsecondary degrees or credentials, combined with employing technology and data analytics to connect workers with jobs, benefits the country on a large scale. By raising both the productivity and income levels of America’s workers, we strengthen and grow the economy.

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## Bridging the Gap

In West Virginia, like many states, there is a significant population of adult workers who are underemployed, displaced, seeking career advancement, or in transition from military service. And although these hardworking self-learners possess valuable work and life experience, holding an advanced degree or certification is needed in order to make a positive transition in the workplace, obtain new employment, or change a career trajectory.

The Community & Technical College System of West Virginia (CTCSWV) was awarded a TAACCCT Round 4 grant to 'Bridge the Gap' of this target audience with learning opportunities and programs that provide the knowledge and skills required to gain employment in West Virginia's information technology, advanced manufacturing, and energy sectors. CTCSWV created a task force comprised of sector professionals, PLA experts, and institutional leaders to help define and implement an online tool that facilitates gathering, assessment and reporting on 'College Credits from Life's Experiences' to guide qualified adult learners to enrollment.

## The Challenge

The college faculty members – practitioners that include both certified PLA specialists and advisors – that are supporting a PLA program have the important responsibility of assessing, facilitating and advocating for the adult student seeking credit for their life experience. In these roles, success is achieved through effective collaboration with the student and other faculty within the consortium. However, PLA tasks fall to educators as well as administrators who are already inundated and engaged full-time – so there is frequent turnover in both tasks and people assigned to complete them. For a PLA system to be successful in its adoption and use, it is imperative that a system is in place, for all stakeholders to quickly engage in the process, enter and manage data, and track outcomes.

To serve the target population of postsecondary education candidates, WVCTCS used TAACCCT Round 4 grant funds to commission the development of a robust online system to engage, inform and help guide adult students through the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process. In addition, faculty specialists, advisors and administrators required this online tool to be user-friendly and collaborative – providing a way to effectively collect, access, track and report on activity at the student, college and consortium level.

## The Solution

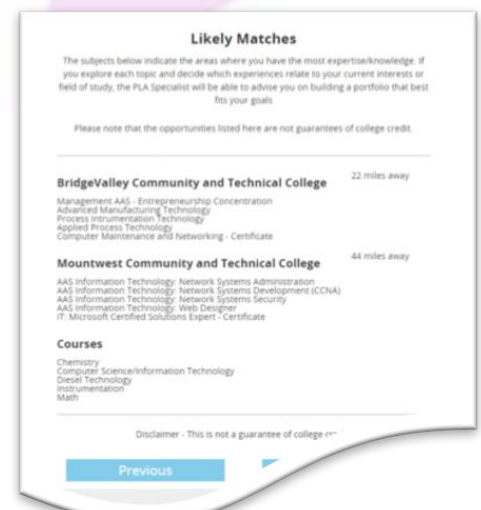
Pittsburgh, PA based, Five Star Development, Inc. (Five Star) created an interactive, engaging public website and administrative system for adult student users that is accessible via desktop, laptop and tablet devices.

The public website delivered ([www.plawv.com](http://www.plawv.com)) provides an overview of the WVCTCS PLA program and process, local participating colleges, as well as offers more in-depth information on popular workforce sectors as well as financial aid. To help familiarize the adult student with postsecondary institution terminology, a glossary and FAQs are at hand.

The PLA system profile tracking begins when the adult student visits the website and completes the 'Life Experience Inventory' (LEI) in wizard format, which guides the student through the initial step of aggregating their prior experience, existing college or military status, and more.

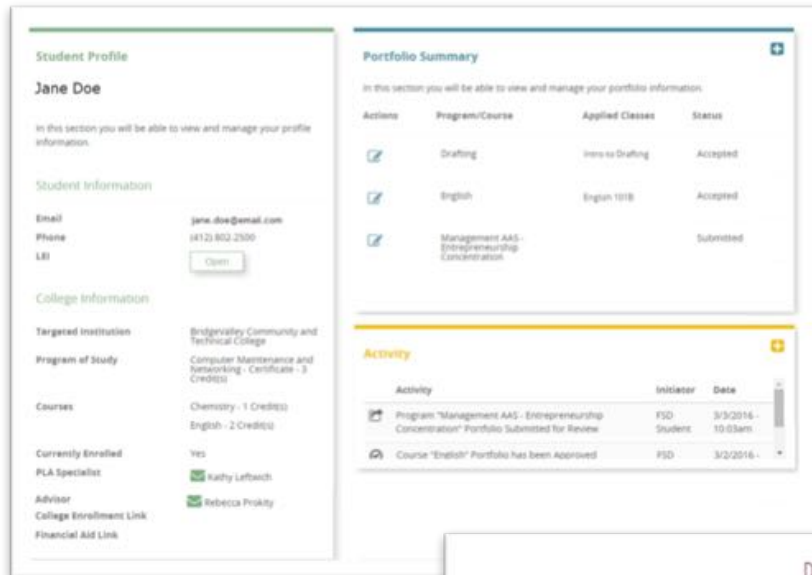
The LEI generates suggested program areas of study as well as nearby institutions that offer programs to advance their career.

**Life Experience Inventory displays  
matching colleges and courses.**



Once a personal account is created, adult students can access a dashboard to manage their profile and portfolio, as well as view their status and key information regarding their targeted institution. Convenient online tutorials are also available to help students navigate the site features.

On the administrative side, college-based PLA specialists and advisors can access, track and manage information to support the student from discovery to portfolio assessment to credit award and enrollment. Actions taken on both user sides – student and college – are tracked to give PLA specialists and advisors a referable, chronological history of an individual student’s case activity.



The system stores program areas of study that are matched to career experience and skills, which is modifiable with the appropriate permission-level access.

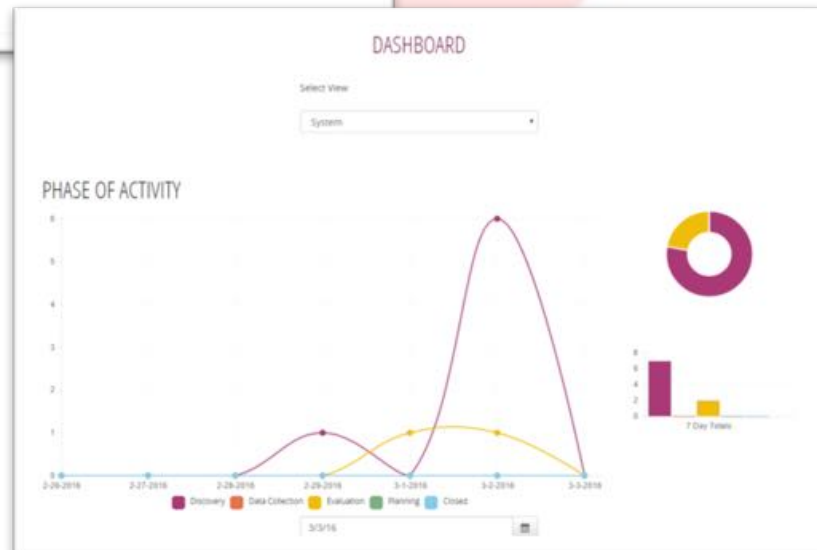
Data collection, evaluation and planning features are controlled with secured access as well as permission-level site controls.

**Data and reports at the student, college, and consortium-level.**

As a result, based on authorization and role, data and reporting is available at the student-level, college-level and consortium-level detail.

## The Result

Taking a holistic approach to ‘Bridging the Gap’ to enrollment, Five Star developed an integrated solution for WVCTCS to effectively promote and manage their PLA program. Five Star delivered an engaging public website, simple-to-use Life Experience Inventory wizard, and user-friendly Prior Learning Assessment system for WVCTCS. The result gives the consortium a toolset that inspires adult learners to seek out credit for their experience and to pursue educational opportunities that results in increased employment in high demand careers. ■



## References

American Association of Community Colleges – AACC (2012). *Fact Sheet: The College Completion Challenge Toolkit*

U.S. Department of Education – ED (2016). *Fact Sheet: Data & Research, President's FY 2017 Budget Request for the U.S. Department of Education*

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary – (2016) *Fact Sheet: President Obama Proposes New ‘First Job’ Funding to Connect Young Americans with Jobs and Skills Training to Start Their Careers*

# CASE STUDY

## About WVCTCS

The Community and Technical College System of West Virginia (WVCTCS), comprised of nine institutions, delivers a comprehensive community and technical college education in all regions of West Virginia. Whether it is customized training, skill enhancements, skill certificates or associate degree programs, West Virginia's community and technical colleges are prepared to deliver. For more information on the PLA program at WVCTCS visit [www.plawv.com](http://www.plawv.com) or call 304-558-0265.

## About Five Star

In business since 1997, Five Star delivers innovative technology plans and solutions — quickly, efficiently, and comprehensively. With hands-on business experience and extensive technical knowledge, Five Star has a unique ability to swiftly target the heart of the problem and introduce innovative solutions. By creatively identifying possibilities previously undiscovered — our client wish lists become realities that add real efficiencies to their organization. For more information visit [www.fivestardev.com](http://www.fivestardev.com) or email [info@fivestardev.com](mailto:info@fivestardev.com) or call 412-802-2500.

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