Chapter 10
Prior Learning Assessment: Accelerating or Augmenting the College Degree?

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ABSTRACT

The average time taken to earn an American four-year degree is 55 months, with only 40% of students graduating on time. Increased time to graduate, failure to complete degrees, spiraling tuition costs, and daunting graduate debt have all focused minds on finding ways of accelerating the degree-granting process without eroding its quality. One solution is using Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) to generate college-level credits from learning that has taken place outside the academy. PLA can range from the acceptance of standardized examinations results to the determination of college-level equivalencies by evaluating the student’s informal learning. This chapter explores different forms of PLA and suggests that more extensive forms of PLA provide considerable benefits, not only in generating credits but in supporting, integrating, and potentially transforming learning experiences. The chapter discusses the multiple benefits of PLA and explains how it might be implemented to benefit students, faculty, and institution.

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, institutions of higher education acknowledge the value and knowledge-content of learning gained through self-directed study or in informal settings such as the workplace, military, and community. The candidate’s prior learning is formally assessed, recognized, and accepted as college-level and/or credit-bearing by the academic institution. In America, the process is generally known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), although some scholars and institutions stress the outcome of that assessment and talk of Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). In Australia and South Africa, however, prior learning is normally recognized rather than assessed, and that recognition is reflected in the acronym used (RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning). In the United Kingdom, “prior experiential learning” is assessed rather than simply recognized (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning – APEL). Most Canadian institutions of higher education consider that “prior learning” must first be assessed and then recognized (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition – PLAR), although some insist that prior learning assessment finds its way into the academy through a process of articulation (Prior Learning Assessment and Articulation – PLAA).

Although the philosophy, intent, and acronyms may differ by location the outcome of assessing and recognizing prior learning is remarkably similar: PLA candidates receive college-level credits to apply to degree programs, allowing them to graduate more speedily. Indeed, a recent study has shown that American college students who go through a PLA process earned their baccalaureate degrees between six-and-a-half to ten months earlier, depending on the cluster of PLA credits awarded (Klein-Collins, 2010, p. 43). Speedier degree completion has obvious pragmatic advantage for students, but just as importantly the same report (Klein-Collins, 2010, pp. 34-42) also indicates that students who undergo PLA have higher rates of academic persistence, institutional retention, and degree completion – a finding confirmed by other researchers for adult learners (CAEL, 2011a, 2011b; Chappell, 2012).

Higher rates of academic persistence, institutional retention, and degree completion are always matters of concern; however, they have become more urgent – certainly for students – against a background of sharply increased tuition rates and escalating student debt. Significant economic pressures and financial concerns set the scene for initiatives and practices that might reduce the cost of the university degree. Since the cost of PLA is generally lower than the cost of the institution’s credits (tuition rate), students can also potentially reduce the cost of their degrees. PLA has been promoted as a way forward that is both cost effective and educationally sound. Yet, if PLA is used to reduce the length of time taken to graduate, questions remain:

- In what ways might the new degree be changed?
- Will the quality of any potentially accelerated degree be reduced?
Characteristics of Career and Technical Education Faculty across Institutions of Higher Education in the United States
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