Redesign of Prior Learning Assessment in an Award-Winning Degree Completion Program

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century economic landscape, many argue the importance of a college degree, as entry into many occupations now requires advanced credentials. Pursuing a college degree costs time and money, often presenting barriers to those pursuing the dream. Prior learning assessment (PLA) offers a solution to spend less time and money earning a college degree by documenting outside learning. PLA shortens time-to-degree, reduces tuition costs, supports student persistence, and boosts degree completion, particularly for adult learners (non- and post-traditional students) and underserved populations. The purpose of this article was to examine PLA within an award-winning degree completion program primarily serving adult learners in order to improve practice. Aligned with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning’s (CAEL) standards for assessing learning, this article discusses the degree completion program, PLA course and competency portfolio, block credit competency model and block credit competency model and portfolio assessment, program administration, and implications.

KEYWORDS

Adult Learners, Best Practices, Block Credit, CAEL, Model, Non-Traditional Students, PLA, Post-Traditional Students, Prior Learning Assessment, Standards for Assessing Learning

INTRODUCTION

In the shifting economic landscape of the 21st century, many argue a college degree is more important than ever (Insik & Kim, 2017), as advanced credentials are required for entry into many occupations (Cherrstrom & Boden, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2017), college graduates average $61,828 in annual income compared to high school graduates who average $26,780. Over a lifetime, this difference in education equates to significant difference in income. Compared with high school graduates, women and men with bachelor’s degrees respectively earn $630,000 and $900,000 more over the lifespan (Social Security Administration Research, Statistics, & Policy Analysis, 2015). Pursuing a college degree, however, costs time and money (Bowers & Bergman, 2016), and such

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costs often present barriers to those pursuing the dream of a college degree. Prior learning assessment (PLA), however, offers a solution to spend less time and money earning a college degree.

PLA involves documenting outside learning through competency portfolios or assessment testing to receive academic credit (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). Put another way, PLA evaluates college-level “learning and knowledge that students acquire while living their lives: working, participating in employer training programs, serving in the military, studying independently, volunteering or doing community service, and/or studying open source courseware” (Department of Organization, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS), 2019a, para. 2). PLA shortens time-to-degree, reduces tuition costs, supports student persistence, and boosts degree completion, particularly for adult learners (non- and post-traditional students) and underserved populations (CAEL, 2017; Hayward & Williams, 2015; Klein, 2017; Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017; McKay, Cohn, & Kuang, 2016; Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017). Those with PLA credit have higher graduate rates, irrespective of gender, race-ethnicity, age, academic ability, grade point average, and financial aid, compared to those without (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), 2010). PLA often empowers adult learners who, based on past experience or negative messaging from others, do not view themselves as “college material” (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017). Based on a study of underserved student populations, CAEL (2011) reports “the positive findings for low-income, black non-Hispanic and Hispanic students suggest that awarding college credit for significant life learning could be an effective way to accelerate degree completion” (p. 1). PLA can make the difference between earning or not earning a college degree.

In addition to those pursuing a college degree, PLA offers numerous benefits to educational institutions offering such programs. Because PLA grants college credit, there is often the misconception that PLA costs institutions revenue. However, the higher persistence and graduate rates of PLA students make the opposite true. Students with PLA credit take more credit hours, resulting in greater enrollment continuity and overall revenue (CAEL, 2017). Excluding transfer and PLA credit, students with PLA credit average 53.7 credit hours compared to those without PLA credit who average 43.8 credit hours (CAEL, 2017). These incremental credits result in increased tuition and fee revenue to the institution. The purpose of this article was to examine PLA within an award-winning degree completion program primarily serving adult learners in order to improve practice. Aligned with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning’s (CAEL, 2019) standards for assessing learning, we discuss the degree completion program, PLA course and competency portfolio, block credit competency model and portfolio assessment process, program administration, and implications for practice and the future.

AWARD-WINNING DEGREE COMPLETION PROGRAM

In 1973, faculty and administrators at Texas State University conceived the Bachelor of Science in Occupational Education to serve military veterans with courses delivered on military bases. As the program expanded, course delivery evolved into distance-education to best meet learners’ needs, using videotapes and DVDs with limited classroom time (Related Authors, 2015). Today, Texas State University is a large, doctoral, high research activity, Hispanic serving institution, including the College of Applied Arts and Department of Organization, Workforce, and Leadership Studies (OWLS). Within the department, the degree program, now known as the Bachelor of Applied Arts (BAAS), leverages online course delivery to serve the breadth of adult learners, including active military and veteran service members, returning stopout learners, and learners with multiple roles, such as full-time parents or caregivers or employees who work and may attend school part-time. Here we discuss the unique BAAS degree, PLA program as a critical tool, and demographics for university, degree, and PLA learners.

BAAS Degree

Rather than focusing on a single major, the unique BAAS degree plan includes four modules. The first, or cornerstone module of 48 credit hours, comprises general education/core courses, an
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