

# OPPORTUNITIES & LIMITATIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLA) PROGRAMS

Come learn more about Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) programs and how your institution can best support adult learners in their degree completion. This poster will provide case study findings on the opportunities and limitations of a community college PLA program and how these findings can guide your institution in effectively implementing a PLA program for your students.



Dr. Theresa Sullivan  
Associate Professor - Office Management  
Montgomery County Community College



## INTRODUCTION

PLA provides nontraditional students with the opportunity to pursue college credit for their professional experiences, military training, certifications, corporate training, and apprenticeships.

- Links to theories of andragogy (Knowles, 1984), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000)
- Klein-Collins (2010) found that students who successfully earn PLA credits persist and complete at rates 2.5 times higher than their non-PLA peers
- Hayward & Williams (2015) found that students who earn PLA credits via CLEP exams graduate at higher rates than students who earn credits via other forms of PLA (ACE, portfolios, combination)

Yet this potential is rarely realized in practice on a meaningful scale.

## OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this evaluative case study was to examine the nature and utilization of Montgomery County Community College's (MCCC) PLA program both during and after the TAACCCT II grant period to better understand why more nontraditional community college students do not successfully pursue PLA credits.

## METHODOLOGY

Single Case Study (Yin, 2014) - Bounded by:

- Montgomery County Community College (Blue Bell, Pottstown, Virtual Campus, and Towamencin, PA)
- Nontraditional students (age > 25)
- Successfully earned PLA credits
- Petitioned for PLA credits but never successfully earned them.
- Had neither petitioned for or earned PLA credits
- Transcribed PLA credit includes: Transfer credits, industry and professional certifications, non-credit training, ACE credits, military credits, credit by exam, apprenticeships and portfolio evaluation

2015-2017 (during and after TAACCCT II grant period)

## RESULTS

- Due to their complex nature, PLA programs are not widely understood, with many stakeholders unaware of their very existence.
- PLA is effectively utilized and functioning well for Veteran Students (Intra—Institutional Partnership Capital)
- New framework for assessing PLA programs:
  - "An Open-System Theory understanding of CAEL's Ten Principles For Effectively Serving Adult Learners"
- New data model:
  - "PLA Decision-Making Process for Community College Adult Learners"



## ANALYSIS

Data sources included a series of unstructured interviews (24) with the following stakeholders:

- Faculty
- Administrators
- Advisors
- Workforce Development Partners
- Students

Additional data sources included:

- Student Focus Group
- Direct Observation
- Document Analysis
- Archival Records

Analysis included the following:

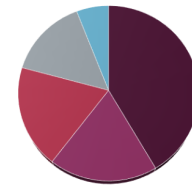
- Pattern Matching
- Chronological Time-Series Sequence Analysis
- Transcription
- Indexing
- Triangulation of Sources

- 934 students (less than 1% of total student population) earned PLA credits

- Average = 6.45 credits

PLA Type	# Students	% of Total
Military	393	42%
Certifications	178	19%
Test	174	19%
Portfolio	137	15%
High School	52	6%
Total	934	

Number and Percentage of Students Who Earned PLA Credits (by type) 2015-2017



• Military • Certifications • Test • Portfolio • High School

## CONCLUSION

This study found that five factors contribute to a student's decision not to pursue PLA credits:

1. Lack of confidence
2. Inability to document prior experiences
3. Poor timing
4. Incongruence of prior experiences with their academic program
5. Lack of awareness

Further, this study determined the following findings and implications for opportunities at your institution:

- Process map the PLA program
- Establish clear & stable program ownership
- Launch a PLA "Awareness Campaign"
- Develop & post clear and concise online materials
- Engage in proactive outreach with all stakeholders
- Develop & implement a PLA Program Assessment Plan

Finally, direct alignment and documentation for veteran students supports successful attainment of PLA credits

## Findings:

Taking an Open-System Theory understanding of CAEL's Ten Principles for Effectively Serving Adult Learners perspective coupled with Amey, Eddy, and Campbell's (2010) Partnership Capital model, this study determined that ten factors contribute to the limited number of nontraditional community college students successfully pursuing PLA credits

1. School is not the only responsibility for a nontraditional community college student
2. Lack of Sustained Outreach Led, Naturally to Lack of Awareness
3. Limited Institutional Human Resources Devoted to the Program
4. Faculty and Curricular Design Aspects of the Teaching and Learning Process Limit PLA Participation
5. Unfamiliarity with Yet Another Form of Technology
6. No Mention of PLA in Student Support Services
7. Lack of Financial Investment in the PLA Program
8. A Need for New and Improved Strategic Partnerships
9. Transfer and Employment Concerns Regarding PLA
10. A Lack of Assessment and Mechanism to Adapt the PLA Program



## Findings:

This study found that six institutional, personal, and academic areas influenced a student's decision to pursue PLA credits at MCCC. These areas included:

1. Limited time due to juggling responsibilities
2. Financial resources
3. A strong sense of self-confidence
4. The direct alignment of prior experiences with the student's academic program
5. The student's role as an organized, self-directed, tech-savvy, multitasker
6. Faculty encouragement



## REFERENCES

- Amey, M. J., Eddy, P. L., & Campbell, T. (2010). Crossing boundaries: Creating partnerships to promote educational transitions. *Community College Review*, 37(4), 333-347.
- Hayward, M. S., & Williams, M. R. (2015). Adult learner graduation rates at four U.S. community colleges by prior learning assessment status and method. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(1), 44-54. doi:10.1080/10668926.2013.789992
- Klein-Collins, R. (2010). Fueling the race to postsecondary success: A 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Retrieved from [http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA\\_Fueling-the-Race](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Fueling-the-Race)
- Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., et al. (2020). The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609770.pdf>
- Knowles, M. S. (1984). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (3rd ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.