Issue BRIEF

Helping Students Earn College Credit for Prior Learning:

Michigan's M-CAM Experience

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Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is a process for helping adult learners with previous work experience and skills progress more rapidly through training by earning academic credit for skills they already possess. Many colleges and universities use PLA to evaluate an individual's knowledge and skills gained from previous education, training, or experience including:

- Work and volunteer experience
- Military training and service
- Employer-sponsored training and
- Apprenticeships

Evidence suggests that PLA is effective in helping individuals save money on college courses, shorten their time to program completion, and graduate from college, which matters for adult learners who often have family obligations or other reasons to return to work rapidly.[i] One of the goals of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) was to pilot the use of new PLA methods, including the use of portfolios. This brief explores the M-CAM experience with PLA implementation, focusing on the promising practices and challenges that emerged. These findings can inform ongoing discussions about how to help students achieve the credentials needed for the current workforce.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Student awareness of PLA processes and procedures was low, mostly due to limited marketing for the program. Faculty and staff who advise students could benefit from better training on college PLA procedures and how to encourage their use among the student body.
- Noncredit programs provided a pathway for students to obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities that should be recognized under college PLA policies.
- Providing credit for knowledge, skill, and abilities obtained while enrolled in noncredit programs helped to provide a clear pathway and momentum for M-CAM participants seeking further education.
- Dialogue among instructors, faculty, and deans helped facilitate acceptance of content and learning that occurs in noncredit programs and generated support for awarding credit for learning that occurs in outside the credit system.
- Third-party industry certifications provided an important mechanism for noncredit and credit students alike to demonstrate and document their knowledge, skills, and abilities and to obtain academic credit.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The lessons in this brief are drawn from Social Policy Research Associates' (SPR's) evaluation of the Michigan Coalition for Advanced Manufacturing (M-CAM) TAACCCT grant. M-CAM is a coalition of eight community colleges in Michigan that used grant funds to strengthen four career pathways—Welding/Fabrication, Production, Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics, and CNC Machining.

ABOUT THE TAACCCT GRANTS

The Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. TAACCCT funding assists community colleges in expanding and improving training programs that can be completed in two years or less for high-demand, high-skilled occupations.

Context for PLA Implementation

Labor market information analysis estimates that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the U.S. economy will require some level of postsecondary education or advanced training beyond high school.ii Two-thirds of available job openings will require an associate's degree or some other form of training in skilled or technical-related studies; many of these needed skills form the core of M-CAM's manufacturing career pathways—Welding, Tooling and Machining, Production, and Multi-Skilled/Mechatronics. At the heart of the career pathways model is the notion that colleges should make it easier for nontraditional students to enter and exit skill-upgrading activities quickly. In line with this notion, one of M-CAM's goals was to provide more consistent and ample opportunities for PLA, thereby helping students, especially adult learners returning to college, finish their training programs as quickly as possible.

Although PLA is a current subject of interest among colleges and program staff, especially those that serve high numbers of adult learners and veterans, it is not without challenges. M-CAM colleges had existing policies and procedures governing PLA and sought to better align them with the needs of M-CAM students and others like them, but most students remained unaware of these policies. Making institutional-level changes to student assessment and placement proved difficult.

Promising Practices for Awarding PLA

M-CAM colleges reviewed the evidence about PLA effectiveness in designing and implementing their approach. They instituted the following promising practices to advance the use of PLA at their institutions:

- *Colleges identified and engaged adult learners in PLA discussions.* All eight M-CAM colleges hired grant-funded career coaches who assisted students in making decisions about appropriate career pathways, scheduling courses, receiving referrals to partner-funded programs for supportive services, obtaining job search and placement assistance, and addressing life issues. Many of these career coaches were also instrumental in helping M-CAM students learn about college PLA policies and procedures and encouraging students to apply for academic credit.
- *Third-party industry certifications were used to award academic credit.* M-CAM colleges worked collaboratively to identify third-party industry certifications to administer in their advanced manufacturing programs, to help students in noncredit programs document their skills and obtain academic credit through articulation or PLA procedures. The following third-party industry certifications were adopted for four career pathways: Welding used American Welding Society (AWS), Production used Certified Production Technician (CPT) and the Manufacturing Skill Standards Council (MSSC), Computer Numerical Control (CNC) Machining used the National Institute of Metalworking Skills (NIMS) certifications, and Multi-Skilled used Packaging Machinery Manufacturers Institute (PMMI) and/or Siemens Level I and Level II. The M-CAM colleges identified the type and number of credit hours to award noncredit students for successful completion of an industry certification in their academic programs and used the industry certifications, instead of course-to-course articulation, to articulate credit across M-CAM colleges.
- *Some colleges created noncredit transcripts for their students.* Two M-CAM colleges (Macomb Community College and Grand Rapids Community College) instituted noncredit transcripts to help document courses and skills attained

> The director and faculty at Kellogg Community College's (KCC's) Regional Manufacturing Training Center (RMTC), the college's industrial trades training facility, conducts tours of the facility and discusses training opportunities with prospective students. If an adult learner visits the RMTC, the faculty are trained to ask about the individual's prior work experience and to discuss the opportunity for awarding credit based on employer training programs, volunteer and community service, military experience, and prior work experience. KCC is deliberate in its approach with adult learners and encourages them to apply for academic credit based on prior learning and work experience. In one case, an M-CAM student was awarded 12 credits for his welding experience, which he demonstrated for faculty as part of his prior learning assessment process. This allowed the student to save time and money.

by students. The noncredit transcript identifies course duration, timing, and completion, along with any college certificates or industry certifications received. Noncredit transcripts made the process of obtaining credit for prior learning easier to complete because they offered institutional documentation of learning and skills gains.

- *Colleges marketed PLA to adult learners.* While M-CAM colleges had existing policies and procedures governing PLA, focus groups and interviews with M-CAM students suggested that many adult learners were unaware of PLA opportunities and processes at their respective schools, suggesting that additional outreach and marketing of available PLA processes is needed at community colleges. One M-CAM college—Lansing Community College—created a one-page flyer that advertised PLA throughout its advanced manufacturing training center. In addition, industrial trades faculty were briefed on the value and importance of PLA for their adult learner population. These same faculty were encouraged to discuss PLA opportunities in their classrooms and labs.

> To address the lack of transparency around prior learning assessment, Lake Michigan College began requiring all new students to attend an orientation event in which "credit for experiential learning" was discussed in detail (July 2016). Students were provided with examples about how the process could reduce the cost of tuition and accelerate the completion of degrees.

PLA Implementation Challenges

M-CAM staff reported several challenges in expanding the use and enhancing the experience of PLA at their institutions:

- *PLA requires a high level of communication and coordination across college departments and divisions.* There are many methods for awarding prior learning credit, such as those conducted by the Center for Adult and Experiential Learning and by portfolio reviews. Each of these approaches requires different forms and levels of engagement between students and faculty and across academic departments and administrative offices (e.g., provost, academic advising, registrar).
- *There is a lack of consistent and accessible information about PLA.* The terminology for PLA varied significantly across the M-CAM colleges, which created confusion about what it is. Colleges could do more to actively and consistently market PLA to students, guidance counselors, and the public.
- *There is a lack of data to assess the effectiveness and usage of PLA among students at M-CAM colleges.* M-CAM faculty and project staff were unable to provide detailed estimates on the extent of PLA use within their manufacturing training programs. In general, colleges could do more to increase usage of PLA within their institutions by sharing information at the program-, departmental- and college-level with faculty and staff about its effectiveness and utilization rates.
- *Fees associated with PLA may inhibit use.* Many of the M-CAM colleges charged students for PLA, on either a per-course, per-exam, or per-credit-hour basis. Fees ranged from $25 per credit hour to $100 for individual portfolio assessments. These fees may discourage students from pursuing PLA to obtain academic credit. Six of the eight M-CAM colleges charged a per-credit hour rate commensurate with in-state tuition rates for students pursuing PLA through portfolio review and credit-by-exam methods.

> To improve communication and coordination across M-CAM college departments and divisions, Lake Michigan College, the lead for this component of the TAACCCT grant, held a series of meetings to address PLA and articulation with college registrars, M-CAM staff, faculty, and college administrators from all eight institutions. In addition, the M-CAM colleges solicited the assistance of their third-party evaluator in developing a briefing paper addressing current PLA policies and procedures utilized at each of the eight colleges, which helped to inform the consortium's discussions.

- *Decision-makers were concerned about preserving student seat time and avoiding lost revenue from students gaining credit without registering for and completing courses.* Faculty and administrators at some colleges were concerned with decreased student seat time and lost revenue if students obtained credit through PLA processes. With community college enrollment levels already suffering, some faculty saw PLA as another revenue loss for their colleges and/or departments. Many M-CAM colleges that operate their training programs using structured schedules feared that courses might not meet minimum student enrollment levels if PLA was used to award academic credit.

Implications

Our research suggests that PLA is an important tool for accelerating time-to-credential for students and a challenge to implement effectively for colleges. However, there are steps colleges can take to make the adoption of PLA easier:

- Communicate about PLA policies and procedures with college personnel, employers, and students. Faculty, staff, and college counselors could be more familiar with PLA policies and procedures and play a more active role in marketing its use and benefits to students.
- Translate how specific areas of knowledge, skills, and abilities, including third-party industry certifications and apprenticeship programs, can qualify students for academic credit.
- Document the use of PLA across the college by creating tracking systems and providing guidance to program staff and faculty for whom the process is new, possibly connecting staff and faculty to more experienced staff (e.g., peer mentors).
- Convene a workgroup to review PLA policies and procedures and designate departmental champions who can ensure students and faculty are aware of PLA and how to access it.

About This Series

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[i] Rebecca Klein-Collins, *Fueling the Race to Post Secondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes* (Chicago: The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2001), 6-7.

[ii] Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, and Jeff Strohl, *Recovery: Job Growth and Educational Requirements Through 2020*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Center for Education and the Workforce, June 2013), 6.

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