



Unlocking the [Full] Potential of PLA

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Capella University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. Founded in 1993, the university is dedicated to providing flexible, professionally aligned online degree programs designed to help working adults advance in their careers. As of September 30, 2020, more than 40,000 students were enrolled in Capella's bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and certificate programs. Known for its commitment to learner success, academic quality, and innovations in online education, Capella pioneered competency-based direct assessment programs allowing students to learn at their own pace.

Part 1:

A Brief History of PLA: From the GI Bill to the Great Recession and Beyond

For almost a century, the American higher education system has recognized that adults and returning students should receive credit for their existing knowledge and skills. The process that eventually became prior learning assessment or PLA first gained steam in the 1940s as millions of GIs returned from war. The American Council on Education (ACE), the major coordinating body for colleges and universities in the United States, began its credit recommendation service with a focus on capturing learning acquired through military training, and PLA grew from there.

In particular, the years following the Great Recession saw a [substantial focus](#) on prior learning assessment, as adults who were newly out of work returned to education and then as the adult market continued to grow. Many of those new students, years or even decades removed from K-12 or other formal education, had nevertheless picked up valuable knowledge and skills from work, life, and informal education and training—and both adult students and their advocates increasingly pushed to have that learning recognized. The national college completion agenda, championed by advocacy groups, foundations, and the [Obama-era White House](#), also increased the focus on prior learning assessment as a tool to help more Americans earn quality credentials in a timely way.

Today, [eight out of 10](#) institutions surveyed by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) offer some form of prior learning assessment, and almost four in 10 have increased their PLA offerings in the past three years. Colleges and universities do so with the goal of expanding access for working adults and underserved students, reducing costs and time to obtain a degree, and increasing completion. A major new study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) supports this focus. In likely the [largest evaluation](#) of PLA to date, the organizations examined outcomes data for about 230,000 adult students (ages 25 and older) at 72 institutions across the country—and found that students who received credit for prior learning were not only more likely to graduate, but to do so more quickly.

Prior learning assessment credit, controlling for other variables, increased the likelihood of an adult student completing a credential by 17%, and the boost was even larger for students at community colleges (25%) and minority-serving institutions (33%), Latino students (24%), and recipients of federal Pell Grants (19%). Adult completers with PLA credit also earned their credentials more quickly than comparable students without credit for prior learning, consistent with [previous research](#) on the impact of PLA.

But despite the potential of PLA to improve outcomes, it is still vastly underused: Even at institutions participating in the study, only 11% of students had earned credit from prior learning assessment, and Black

students, Pell Grant recipients, and students living in lower-income communities were least likely to have earned PLA credit.

“ That raises questions about how PLA is conveyed. It raises questions about whether you’re counting on someone knowing how to navigate within a higher ed setting. Very few institutions use PLA strategically as a recruitment tool, and the data make it pretty clear that it is a missed opportunity.”

Becky Klein-Collins
Vice President of Impact at CAEL

Growing demand during COVID-19 pandemic

Changing that trend was important before the pandemic, but it is an especially pressing concern given the economic fallout—and uneven impact—of COVID-19. Millions of Americans are newly out of work, with new jobless claims ticking up throughout the fall of 2020 and more than 28 million people receiving some kind of unemployment benefit, as of November 2020. Workers without college degrees have been particularly hit hard during the pandemic—the [unemployment rate](#) for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher sits at 4.2%, compared with 8.1% for those with only a high school education and 9.8% for those with less. And many jobs that have been lost in the pandemic likely won’t come back. Some leading economists, for example, [estimate](#) that as many as four in 10 temporary losses will become permanent as businesses fail and the crisis accelerates automation and other trends that were already underway.

Millions of Americans will need to develop new skills—often in new and unfamiliar industries and job functions—in order to reenter the workforce. One out of three workers in a June 2020 [survey](#) said that if they were to lose their job, they would want to change their field. Those working in information technology, finance, and manufacturing—all fields that were being reshaped by automation and other technological advances prior to COVID-19—were the most likely to express interest in career switching. Many would undoubtedly need additional education and training to do so. Prior learning assessment can improve that process by assessing and giving adults credit for what they already know and can do and shortening the time it takes them to earn a credential and get back to work.

“ The stakes on this are higher now. Eventually people will come back to college to train and PLA will be powerful.”

Iris Palmer
Senior Advisor for Higher Education
and Workforce at New America

But, as Palmer points out, displaced workers aren't showing up at colleges and universities in great numbers yet, despite the pressing need to retool. Enrollment at [community colleges](#), in particular, is down significantly—defying the typical pattern of adults returning to higher education during recessions. This, of course, is far from a typical recession, with challenges around in-person learning, many children out of day care and school, and a heightened degree of uncertainty. “The countercyclical pattern isn't proving out right now,” Palmer said. “It might, but not if you don't do something. Institutions should probably be thinking about that right now.”

In part, this reflects the fact that adults aren't necessarily looking to degree programs. As of June 2020, one in four American adults say they plan to pursue additional education or training in the [next six months](#), and almost two-thirds say they would pursue a certificate or other non-degree program if they were to enroll in that time frame. And while it's difficult to track nationally, [enrollment](#) in those kinds of programs does appear to be up. For colleges, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity to help students package them into longer-term pathways. That's where prior learning assessment comes in.

The unfulfilled potential of PLA

While the case for using prior learning assessment may be ironclad, it has not been consistently or effectively implemented across much of higher education. In a 2019 paper, [Connecting Adults to College With Credit for Prior Learning](#), Palmer argues that there are three main barriers to broader adoption: a lack of guidance on how students can access and use PLA; a mismatch between how PLA is administered and program design; and continued concerns about accepting learning outside the classroom, both for academic and financial reasons.

The AACRAO and WICHE [study](#) also raised a similar set of issues related to the implementation of PLA. Of the nearly 500 institutions surveyed, about a third said there are institutions or practices that make it difficult for some students to have their prior learning recognized. The colleges that didn't offer PLA options were most likely to cite institutional culture and a perceived lack of academic rigor in such options.

“Colleges and universities that are eager to better serve post-traditional students — and large numbers are — will have to take a look at their overall culture. Understanding how PLA fits into the broader institutional culture will be critical to expanding options for learners and increasing their chances of success.”

Louis Soares
Chief Learning and Innovation
Officer at ACE

But for institutions that have decided that serving the post-traditional student is a priority, prior learning assessment will likely have to be part of their offerings. And advancing PLA at a college or university, Soares

said, starts with putting in the time to understand where the institution sits today. Most institutions will be beginning that conversation with little data on hand. Few have longitudinal data on where PLA credit comes from, the demographics of students who participate, and how it affects their pathway to a degree. Only 32% of institutions participating in the AACRAO survey said they tracked any data related to PLA over time. Efforts like AACRAO's, CAEL's work with WICHE, as well as [ACE's Taskforce on Transfer of Credit](#), which brought together the expertise of university leaders across higher education including Richard Senese, president of Capella University, are aiming to shed more light on outcomes and institutional practices.

Part 2:

The anatomy of PLA

Defining PLA

Prior learning assessment goes by many different names across higher education, including assessment of prior learning (APL) and credit for prior learning (CPL)—but whatever it's called, it is the process of evaluating and awarding credit for college-level learning that happens outside a college or university. The four most common methods for prior learning assessment are: standardized assessments, evaluation of noncollege education and training, portfolios and other individual assessments, and faculty-developed exams.

- **Standardized assessments:** Students earn credit by successfully completing exams such as Advanced Placement (AP), College Level Examination Program (CLEP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST).
- **Evaluation of noncollege programs:** Students earn credit for training offered by employers, the military, and others based on recommendations provided by the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and ACE. Colleges and universities also do their own evaluations, often working with workforce development agencies, training providers, or major employers in their region.
- **Portfolios and other individual assessments:** Students earn credit by preparing a portfolio or otherwise demonstrating their learning to faculty members, who evaluate it and award credit as appropriate.
- **Faculty-developed exams:** Students earn credit for a specific course by taking a comprehensive examination developed by faculty.

(Adapted from: <https://www.wiche.edu/key-initiatives/recognition-of-learning/pla-covid-19/>)

Capella University has long used prior learning assessment as part of its approach to serving adult students and others who arrive with previous experience. In addition to accepting transfer credits, which the university considers part of its PLA portfolio, it recognizes learning certified by ACE CREDIT and also awards credit for learning documented by industry-recognized certifications and by petition, or individual assessment.

Dozens of common professional certifications have been mapped to course competencies, creating a centralized approach for awarding credit for that kind of learning. The petition process, too, is consistent across academic departments, and students are walked through the ins-and-outs of the process during an optional prior learning assessment lab course. This free course—offered monthly and facilitated by a certified PLA expert—groups students by degree level and helps them understand what is expected of them in the petition process. Preparing students to succinctly present their knowledge, skills, and abilities creates a streamlined approach that reduces the time faculty must spend assessing learners' capabilities and how they map to particular courses and programs of study.

Prior learning is recognized in both Capella's standard competency-based credit hour format and its [FlexPath](#) delivery model, which uses a direct assessment approach. Students at the bachelor's and master's level are eligible to earn credits for prior learning, depending on their program of study. All told, 6.2% of students earn credit through prior learning assessment, with students pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing making up the largest group. Additionally, slightly over 9% of 2019 undergraduate learners had ACE credits applied within the same year. For all students who earn PLA credits, those credits, on average, increase the affordability of their degrees, are correlated with greater persistence, and accelerate credit accumulation. Specific outcomes are:

Affordability: Students in bachelor's programs with PLA credits saved an average \$10,000 in the total cost of their degree compared with students who didn't bring in prior learning. Between 2014 and 2018, almost 700 learners saved approximately \$6.9 million in tuition. Master's-level students with PLA on average saved \$9,000 in the total cost of their degrees.

Persistence: Students who bring in prior learning are 9.3% more likely to continue into their fifth quarter than students who don't. The effect was stronger for students in bachelor's degree programs than those in master's programs, and for those enrolled in degree programs with FlexPath.

Credit velocity: In programs with FlexPath, students who brought in prior learning accumulated credits more quickly in their first two quarters of enrollment than those students who did not bring in outside learning. This is the case setting aside the credits students earned through PLA, indicating that earning credits up front creates momentum.

Importantly, students achieve these [PLA] outcomes at a modest cost to the institution while the institution remains revenue neutral—a positive sign for the potential to increase the reach and scale of prior learning assessment across higher education. The consistency of the petition process also reduces the burden on faculty members who have to assess learning. And by deploying PLA strategically, Capella is able to use it as a tool to drive key institutional goals, including increasing retention and improving other student outcomes.

All these are important in that they speak to the potential for PLA to not only expand options and improve outcomes for students, but also to strengthen institutions. In other words, they make a strong case for—and hopefully, increase the likelihood of—expanding prior learning assessment throughout higher education. It need not be a trade-off between what is best for students and what is sustainable for the institution. Prior learning assessment can be a win-win.

Part 3:

Moving PLA forward

To harness the power of prior learning assessment, institutions need to take stock and recommit to changing policies and practices. Experts like Palmer and Soares say culture—institutional, departmental, and faculty-level—plays a major role in whether PLA flourishes or flounders at a given institution. Culture change requires hard, sustained work, but can be accomplished.

At Capella, rich experience with competency-based education and a commitment to serving adult learners creates a culture that has allowed prior learning assessment to grow. Palmer [points](#) to places like Blue Ridge Community and Technical College in West Virginia, South Central College and Pine Technical and Community College in Minnesota, and Northwest State Community College in Ohio as examples where strong leaders and a more flexible view of learning have encouraged PLA. Oftentimes, change begins with a recognition of the recruiting value of prior learning assessment done well. That's no small motivation as higher education finds itself facing enrollment shortfalls and an uncertain future.

For institutions looking to grow their prior learning assessment offerings, or giving them a fresh look amid COVID-19, there are some practical steps they can take. We outline a few below, drawing on Capella's experience and recent research in the field. For state and federal policymakers, too, changes to regulations and policies could allow prior learning assessment to grow—ultimately enabling institutions to better serve adult and other post-traditional students.

Institutional practices

Map where you are today

While institutions don't have to take a centralized approach to prior learning assessment, said Soares, they do need to be clear about their processes in order to be effective. Often that begins with doing an audit of where the institution sits today. Some key steps:

- Analyze where you're getting PLA credit from, such as the military or a major local employer, and what programs that credit is mapping to.
- Document whether you're primarily awarding credit toward degrees or issuing elective credit.
- Map out who is responsible for making decisions, whether that's at the registrar's office, individual academic departments, or a mix.

All this, Soares said, “gives you a feel for where you may have strengths.”

This creates a shared understanding that can serve as a starting point for conversations about how you might want to grow prior learning assessment. It also provides clarity that can make policies and practices more transparent and more seamless for faculty, staff, and students alike.

Communicate consistently

One of the biggest barriers to the expansion of prior learning assessment is that many students simply don’t know about it. Far too many institutions leave it up to students to ask, rather than consistently communicating about PLA or, even better, building it into the normal enrollment and pathway advising process. Time and again in Palmer’s research, she heard from students who knew about PLA options but had to repeatedly ask staff for the information they needed.

At Capella, PLA materials are easily accessible on the institution’s website and admissions counselors notify students of this option upon onboarding. There’s no runaround. That’s one of the main reasons the institution has been successful in helping more students get credit for what they know and can do. The message is clear: To grow PLA, be clear and responsive in communication with students.

Track outcomes

The best argument for a practice is success. Yet most institutions do not track which students use prior learning assessment or how it affects their academic trajectory. More should, both to make the case for PLA and to understand how to refine or redesign practices. Demographic and outcomes data around PLA shed light on what’s working and what isn’t.

Capella, for example, has relied on data to determine additional industry certifications it should bring into its regular PLA portfolio, and reviews persistence and degree conferral rates for those with prior learning credits versus those without to examine whether the program remains effective.

Ecosystem change

Change financial incentives

Across higher education, one of the biggest barriers to the expansion of prior learning assessment is the lack of financial support and incentives aligned with the practice. Colleges are concerned about losing tuition revenue and, in the case of public institutions, that they won’t receive funding for students who participate in PLA. Within institutions, departments are often rewarded with more resources when their courses are full.

States should consider providing funding for students who are awarded credit through PLA. The current federal financial aid system also contributes to limiting PLA. When institutions charge fees for the assessment processes associated with PLA, those fees are not eligible for federal aid and students must bear the full cost. This limits access to PLA and forces students who can’t cover the cost to either take a course they don’t need or to not attend at all if they’re unwilling to spend time on an unnecessary class. A

[study](#) by CAEL found that, among institutions participating in a federal experiment around financial aid and PLA, only 7% of adult students who were Pell recipients received credit for prior learning, while 16% of adults who didn't have Pell grants did so. Yet, the study found that when lower-income students received PLA credit, it had an outsized impact on their completion rates.

We must change rules that prevent the students who need it most from having full access to PLA. However, while aid eligibility is necessary, it should not be without limits. The fees eligible for aid should be relatively modest and capped to preserve most federal aid for current learning. Nothing is gained if we trade access to prior learning assessment on the front end for the ability to pay for coursework on the back end. Both are necessary if we want to help more students complete degrees.

Unpack competencies

Even without a formal change in regulations around financial aid, the higher education ecosystem can evolve in ways that will make prior learning assessment more attractive for both institutions and students. One crucial way would be if more institutions used competencies, rather than time and course completions, as the measure of learning. By focusing on clearly defining and assessing knowledge, skills, abilities, and intellectual behaviors, competency-based education creates a consistent language for prior learning assessment. In other words, if institutions are regularly in the habit of thinking of learning in terms of competencies, it becomes much easier to assess the value of and apply outside learning to a program of study.

This is true for any model of competency-based learning, but is especially true for direct assessment programs, which are completely untethered from seat time. Direct assessment used in combination with prior learning assessment can be especially powerful in creating momentum that keeps students engaged and in speeding time to degree. Capella's experience bears this out, with PLA benefiting all students in competency-based programs but especially those in its FlexPath direct assessment programs, who saw even higher retention and credit accumulation rates.

Develop interoperable learner records

With interoperable learner records, prior learning assessment would be much less burdensome for students, and less time- and resource-intensive for institutions. Such records would contain verified information about a learner's formal education and credentials, informal learning, and work that the user could share across systems, devices, platforms, and applications. Learners could share their records with an institution, which could then seamlessly verify their credentials, certifications, work experience, and other college-level learning and map them to credit. This would significantly reduce the complexity of the prior learning assessment process and the administrative costs to the institution.

Interoperable records, however, are still in their infancy. Early attempts at such records draw on distributed ledgers like blockchain or other technologies that seamlessly verify, connect, and store data. Efforts to create those connected data systems should be encouraged through philanthropy and federal and state government support. We need more experiments, like ACE's blockchain initiative, which is funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Education. Connected data, and the interoperable learner records it would enable, may well be key to unlocking PLA's full potential.

A call to action

The educational and economic fallout from COVID-19 has heightened the urgency around prior learning assessment. Even before spring 2020, a growing number of students were moving in and out of education and across institutions—working, parenting, and gaining other experience along the way. At the same time, a postsecondary credential was becoming ever more critical to landing a job and building a financially stable and rewarding career. Prior learning assessment marries those two trends, translating learners’ outside experiences into knowledge, skills, and abilities that can build toward a degree or other meaningful credential.

While PLA is widespread—[the AACRAO study](#) revealed a majority of the surveyed institutions are offering some form of it—the number of students it serves is still far too limited. As research and Capella’s experience show, there are a number of important practice and policy shifts that could help change that. However, first we in higher education must shift from viewing prior learning assessment as nice-to-have and instead recognize that it’s both strategic and essential.