

BENCHMARK REPORT: PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Prepared for Indiana State University

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In the following report, Hanover Research examines higher education institution practices in Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs), and reviews trends in institutions relevant to Indiana State University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) offers students the opportunity to receive academic credit for learning received outside the traditional higher education system. Although sometimes mistakenly described as “credit for *experience*,” PLAs recognize and credit any post-secondary equivalent *learning* received outside the classroom. Although PLA has existed for decades, primarily in the form of credit by exam, in recent years more higher education institutions are looking to PLA as a way to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates.¹ In this report, and the accompanying data supplement, Hanover Research provides Indiana State University (ISU) with an overview of current practices in PLA among institutions identified as ISU peers.²

Institutions utilize a variety of PLA delivery vehicles. This report and supplement look primarily at the following four delivery methods:

- **Portfolio assessment.** For portfolio assessments, students prepare a portfolio that demonstrates knowledge and skills equivalent to what one would learn for credit in post-secondary education. Portfolio preparation is generally conducted in consultation with a PLA coordinator or faculty advisor. Portfolios are reviewed by subject area experts, usually in the form of faculty who teach the course on campus. Upon successful completion of a portfolio assessment, students receive a corresponding academic credit for the learning they demonstrate through the portfolio content.
- **Credit by exam (CBE).** With CBE, students receive post-secondary academic credit for successfully passing a proficiency exam. The most commonly used forms of CBE are standardized tests like the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Test (DSST), and Advanced Placement (AP) tests. Other forms of CBE include institutional and departmental “challenge” exams.
- **Military education credit.** Students with military education are often eligible for college credit at participating higher education institutions. The American Council on Education (ACE) provides a set of recommendations to institutions, designating certain military trainings as equivalent to specific post-secondary level credits.

¹ See for instance, [1] Fain, P. “Prior Learning Assessment Catches On, Quietly.” May 7, 2012.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/05/07/prior-learning-assessment-catches-quietly> [2] “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes.” The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL), 2010. http://www.cael.org/pdfs/pla_fueling-the-race

² Peers assessed in this report include: Ball State University, Bowling Green State University, Central Michigan University, Eastern Kentucky University, Grand Valley State University, Illinois State University, Miami University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Northern Illinois University, Northern Kentucky University, Ohio University, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, University of Akron, University of Southern Indiana, Western Illinois University, Western Michigan University, and Wright State University

- **Other PLA Formats.** Other methods of PLA delivery include corporate trainings and professional credentials. ACE provides recommendations for corporate training equivalencies and works with corporate training programs to deliver post-secondary level education.

KEY FINDINGS

- **CBE is the most commonly offered form of PLA, and CLEP is the most widely accepted form of CBE.** Every institution reviewed for this report accepts at least some CLEP exams for academic credit. These institutions, on average, accept two-thirds of the 33 exams for credit, although the specific exams accepted differ across institutions. AP exams are also commonly accepted.
- **A large majority of reviewed institutions provide some academic credit for military education and training.** Eighteen of the 20 institutions are members of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC) Degree Network System (DNS). DNS members agree to accept ACE recommendations to award academic credit for military education. However, final approval of academic credit is at the institution's discretion.
- **Portfolio assessment is commonly offered at the institutions reviewed.** Although less common than CBE and military education credit, 15 of the 20 institutions offer at least some credit through portfolio assessment.
- **Portfolio evaluation typically occurs at the departmental level with faculty evaluators.** In some cases the process is coordinated through an office of PLA and by a PLA coordinator. However, final portfolio approval almost always requires approval of the department chair and a subject area expert. Subject area experts usually are instructors assigned to the corresponding institutional course.
- **The scope of portfolio assessment and credit awards varies widely.** Approximately half of institutions reviewed offer portfolio assessment at a campus wide level, with all lower division courses available for petition. The remaining institutions utilize portfolio assessment only in particular departments, colleges, or degrees. The maximum number of credits awarded through portfolios also ranges widely, from as low as three credits to an entire bachelor's degree.
- **PLA credits generally cost significantly less than standard tuition.** For CBE, students are required to pay fees charged by the testing agency, currently \$80 for CLEP and DSST exams. Hosting institutions typically charge a small administrative fee, usually around \$25. Portfolio assessment in institutions reviewed ranges from as little as \$30 per portfolio to as high as two-thirds the equivalent tuition (by course).
- **A required portfolio preparation course or tutorial is relatively rare.** Only three institutions reviewed utilize a mandatory training course. Of these, only one, Ohio University, rewards academic credit for the training course.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

In this section Hanover examines common PLA delivery methods and reviews the most common practices. This section utilizes the results of a national study from 2010, as well as Hanover’s scan of institutions relevant to ISU.

PLA OVERVIEW

Students enrolling in institutions of higher education bring with them knowledge and training gained prior to formal education in these institutions. Credit for prior learning has a long history, with roots in the G.I. Bill.³ Standardized exams, the most commonly used form of PLA, include nationally recognized tests like CLEP and DSST, as well as institutional examinations for course credit (Figure 1). In 2010, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) published the largest report on PLAs to date. The study included 48 institutions and over 62,000 learners.⁴ As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of these institutions reporting acceptance of at least one standardized exam for credit reached 94 percent in 2009. Portfolio assessments continue to grow in popularity, with 88 percent of institutions participating in the 2010 study reporting some form of credit for portfolios.

Figure 1: PLA Methods Offered by Participating Institutions, 2006 and 2009

PLA METHODS	PERCENTAGE OF INSTITUTIONS, 2006 SURVEY	PERCENTAGE OF INSTITUTIONS, 2009 STUDY
Standardized exams (e.g., CLEP, DSST, Excelsior)	92%	94%
Portfolio Assessments	66%	88%
ACE-evaluated military training programs	No data available	81%
ACE-evaluated corporate training programs	70% (ACE Guides)	77%
Institutional challenge exams	57%	65%
Institutionally-evaluated training programs	38%	63%

Source: CAEL⁵

Note: In addition to the 2009 study of 48 institutions, CAEL provides data from a larger 2006 survey of institutions, many of which did not participate in the 2009 survey.

PLAs and the corresponding credit offer students several benefits. Although pricing structure for PLAs vary by institution, students generally see lower costs through these programs than through paying standard tuition. In addition, CAEL’s 2010 study found that degree completion rates are significantly higher for PLA students as compared to non-PLA students. “Of all PLA students in the sample, 43 percent went on to earn a bachelor’s degree compared to only 15 percent of non-PLA students. **Looking at all degrees, 56 percent of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so.**”⁶ PLA students not only finish degrees at a higher rate, but do so more quickly. PLA

³ Fain, Op. cit.

⁴ “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” Op. cit.

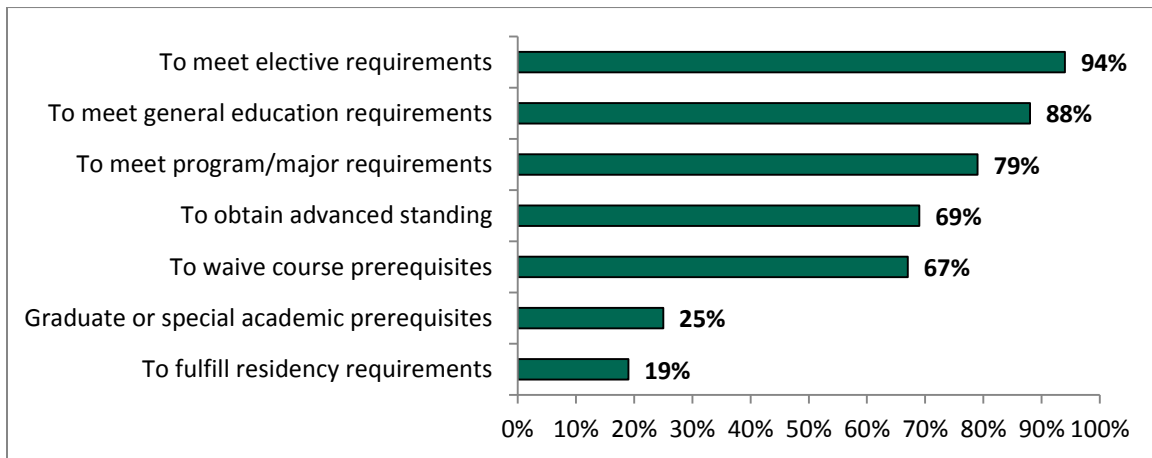
⁵ Ibid. 19.

⁶ Ibid. 34.

students earned bachelor’s degrees “an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months” faster than non-PLA students, and associate’s degrees “between 1.5 and 4.5 months” faster.⁷

The ways in which PLA credits may be used at postsecondary institutions varies widely. As Figure 2 shows, PLA credit is most often used to fulfill elective requirements or general education requirements. **Only 19 percent of institutions in the CAEL study allowed PLA credits to count toward residency requirements.** Likewise, a large majority (80 percent) of institutions in the CAEL study “limit the total number of PLA credits that can apply towards a degree.”⁸ Although no clear standard exists, institutions commonly limit “PLA credits to approximately half of the credits needed for the degree (i.e., 30-32 credits for an associate’s degree, and 64 credits for a bachelor’s degree).”⁹ Every institution reviewed for this report accepted PLA credits for lower division, undergraduate credit, with 75 percent reporting upper division credit when appropriate.¹⁰

Figure 2: Ways in Which PLA Credits Can Be Used (National Survey)



Source: CAEL¹¹

The majority of institutions offering PLA credit provide several format options. CLAE separated the available formats into six categories, including standardized exams, ACE-evaluated corporate training, ACE-evaluated military training, institutionally evaluated training, institutional challenge exams, and portfolio assessments.¹² Over half of the institutions participating in the study offered five or more PLA methods, with only 16 percent of participating institutions offering three or fewer PLA methods.¹³

⁷ Ibid. 8.

⁸ Ibid. 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes.” The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL), 2010. p. 20.
http://www.cael.org/pdfs/pla_fueling-the-race

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

PORTFOLIO CREDIT

Seventy-five percent of institutions identified as ISU’s peers (15 out of 20) offer some form of academic credit to students through a portfolio system, in line with the 88 percent of participating institutions reporting portfolio credit in the 2010 CAEL study.¹⁴

CREDIT LIMITS

The maximum amount of credit offered in individual institutions varies widely. The most limited option, through Miami University, offers portfolio credit in only the English department, with a maximum of three credit hours earned. On the other end of the spectrum, Northeastern Illinois University offers a special degree program entitled “University Without Walls” (UWW), which is 100 percent competency based. Several peer institutions do not note any particular credit hour max, but maintain residency requirements for graduation. Limits of 30 to 60 credit hours are common.

SCOPE

Like maximum credit allowed, the scope of portfolio assessment and credit varies from institution to institution. While the majority of ISU’s peers offer *some* portfolio credit, there are no clear trends in how widely this credit is offered at the institution. Seven of the 20 peer institutions appear to provide general, campus wide access to portfolio assessment and credit. The remaining eight institutions offer portfolio assessment and credit only in specific schools or departments. Six peer institutions offer portfolios in only one or two specific degrees, generally targeted at adult learners.

Some institutions may limit portfolio options in particular departments. Because departments generally have oversight of the portfolio process, individual departments or schools may opt-out of the program.

In institutions offering campus wide portfolio assessments (listed as “general” in scope in the data supplement to this report), some may limit options in particular departments. Because departments generally have oversight of the portfolio process, individual departments or schools may opt-out of the program. The 2010 CAEL study found that “38 percent of the participating institutions limit PLA credit to specific departments or programs.”¹⁵ One university administrator explained to CAEL why this is the case:

Most schools [within the university] are cooperative. But sometimes, we have a school that is not cooperative. That school will not accept portfolio credits into its degree plans, and its faculty will not participate in evaluating submitted portfolios. But we know that going in, so we can steer students away from attempting credits in those areas.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. 20. See the supplement to this report for additional information on ISU peers.

¹⁵ Ibid. 21.

¹⁶ Ibid.

EVALUATION MANAGEMENT AND FACULTY COMPENSATION

Management of this process is similarly varied. In many cases, a PLA coordinator oversees the process, providing advice to students and coordinating with department chairs and other faculty. Other institutions have no coordinator and direct students to the department they wish to petition for credit. In almost all cases, however, final approval of credit for a portfolio rests with faculty experts and department chairs.

To compensate for the additional workload required of faculty performing evaluations, some institutions provide incentives for faculty. Eastern Kentucky University, for instance, charges \$50 per credit hour for portfolio assessment, and pays the entire amount directly to faculty evaluators.¹⁷ The majority of institutions reviewed do not publicly provide faculty compensation policies.

Figure 3: LearningCounts Course Tuition and Portfolio Assessment Fee

COURSE OFFERING	INCLUDING TWO PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENTS	INCLUDING THREE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENTS	ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENTS
Instructor-led Portfolio Development Course Tuition	\$775	\$875	\$125 each

Source: LearningCounts¹⁸

Third party platforms offer institutions the option of bypassing management and administration of the portfolio assessment process. CAEL’s LearningCounts program currently lists 46 colleges and universities as partners in portfolio management, including Eastern Kentucky University and Wright State University.¹⁹ LearningCounts manages the portfolio process, which includes a required course in portfolio design and the philosophy of prior learning credit. Participating institutions are provided a portfolio credit recommendation, which is submitted to the registrar for final approval.²⁰ To join LearningCounts, institutions pay a membership fee of \$8,745 annually.²¹ Additional fees are paid by students, as shown in Figure 3.

FEES

The majority of institutions reviewed for this report charge fees for portfolio assessment. Fees range from as little as a flat \$30 per portfolio submission at Western Illinois University, to as high as the equivalent of two credit hours in the corresponding course at Northeastern Illinois University.²² While a flat fee appears to be most common, several institutions divide

¹⁷ “Protocol for Undergraduate Academic Credit for Prior Learning through Portfolio Assessment.” Eastern Kentucky University, September 2014. p. 4.
http://academicaffairs.eku.edu/sites/academicaffairs.eku.edu/files/files/portfolio_credit_Sept%202014.pdf#_ga=1.34921574.633347779.1460054102

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Portfolio Assessment.” LearningCounts. <https://learningcounts.com/portfolio-assessment/fn/>

²⁰ “Higher Education - Learning Counts.” CAEL. <http://www.cael.org/higher-education/learning-counts>

²¹ Himmerick, Kristen. Senior Director of Operations, LearningCounts. Email Correspondence. April 26, 2016.

²² “Prior Learning Portfolio.” Western Illinois University.

http://wiu.edu/distance_learning/bachelor_of_arts_in_general_studies/portfolio.php [2] “Prior Learning

the costs associated with portfolio assessment. Murray State University, for instance, charges \$25 for “portfolio administration,” \$25 for “portfolio assessment,” and \$25 per credit hour for credits approved through the process.²³

REQUIRED COURSES

Some institutions reviewed require that students take a specific course in portfolio design prior to submitting a portfolio for assessment. This course may be for credit, as with LearningCounts partners, or a less intensive not-for-credit seminar. Ohio University, for example, requires a full three credit course in portfolio development, while Western Illinois University directs students participating in the Bachelor of General Studies program to a not-for-credit “prior learning portfolio tutorial.”²⁴ The University of Akron provides different portfolio courses at the two colleges offering portfolio assessment, a PLA workshop and a PLA portfolio preparation course.²⁵ Neither results in academic credit. A majority of the institutions reviewed, however, do not require a portfolio design course. In many cases these institutions provide a PLA guide or handbook to students, and direct them to departmental advisors.²⁶

Assessment.” Northeastern Illinois University. <http://www.neiu.edu/academics/nontraditional-degree-programs/ba-interdisciplinary-studies/prior-learning-assessment#PLP>

²³ “Continuing Education and Academic Outreach.” Murray State University.

http://www.murraystate.edu/Libraries/Academic_bulletins/13_ContinuingEducationAcademicOutreach.pdf

²⁴ [1] “Credit for Experience.” Ohio University. <https://www.ohio.edu/ecampus/credit-for-experience.html> [2] “Prior Learning Portfolio,” Op. cit.

²⁵ [1] “Earn College Credit for Life Experience.” The University of Akron.

<http://www.uakron.edu/summitcollege/future-students/tea/tea.dot> [2] “Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Program.” The University of Akron. <http://wayne.uakron.edu/tea/>

²⁶ For example: “PLA Student Handbook.” Central Michigan University, June 23, 2015.

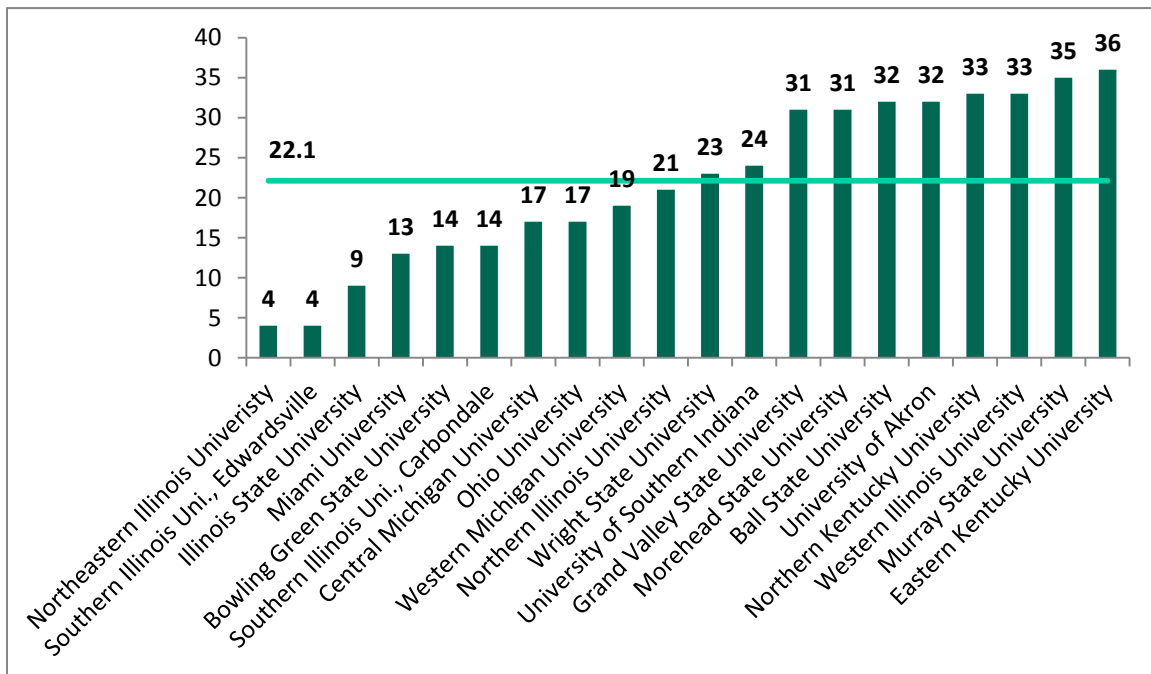
<https://www.cmich.edu/global/prior-learning/Documents/PLA%20Student%20Handbook%20Revised%2006-23-15.pdf>

CREDIT BY EXAM

Credit by Exam, especially through standardized testing, is the most commonly offered PLA format both nationally and among institutions reviewed for this report.²⁷ Every institution reviewed accepts credit through CLEP and AP examination, although the number of courses accepted for CLEP credit varies widely. Institutions accepting CLEP credit are free to accept individual exams and to not accept others. CLEP provides 33 exams, with a total of 37 possible course awards. Institutions in this review on average accept 22 of the 37 awards for credit, as shown in Figure 4. The number of awards accepted ranges from as low as four at Northeastern Illinois University to 36 at Eastern Kentucky University. Although less common than CLEP and AP, over half of the reviewed institutions accept DSST exams as well.

Students generally pay a small fee to the institution hosting the exam, in addition to fees paid to the exam provider. CLEP and DSST exams cost \$80 per exam, with host institutions commonly receiving an additional \$25. Funding for both CLEP and DSST exams is available to military students.²⁸

Figure 4: Count of CLEP Awards Accepted for Credit by Institution



Source: Institutional Websites

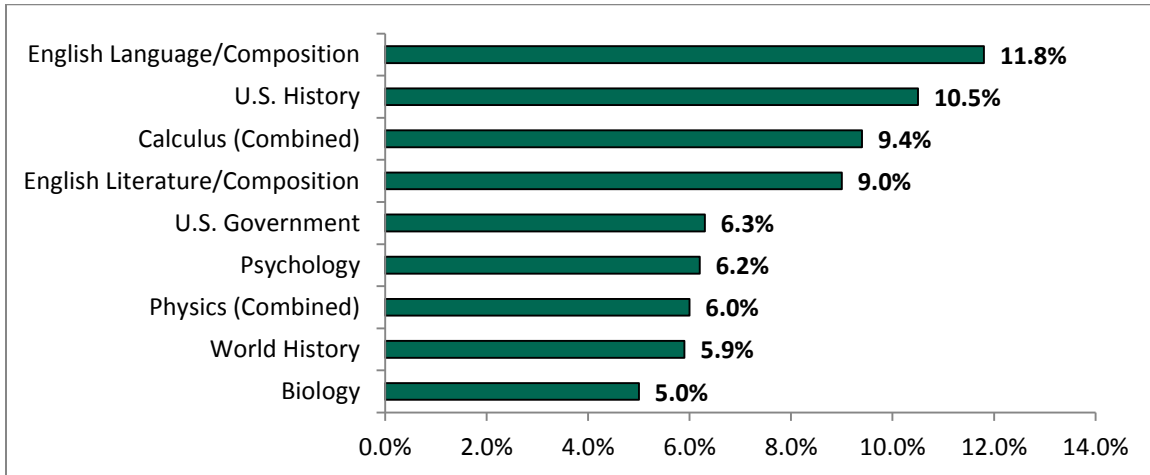
According to The College Board, the most popular AP exams are in English, History, and Calculus. Out of 36 AP courses, exams in English, Calculus, and U.S History combined

²⁷ "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes," Op. cit. p. 19.

²⁸ "Alternatives to Traditional College Credit." DANES. <http://www.dantes.doded.mil/service-members/ta-alternatives/clep-dsst.html#sthash.uY9qYptj.dpbs>

account for over 40 percent of all AP exams. Figure 5 shows the most common AP exams by the percentage of total AP exams taken in 2015.

Figure 5: Most Common AP Exams by Percentage of Total Exams in 2015



Source: The College Board²⁹

MILITARY CREDIT

Students with a background in military service are often eligible for academic credit for post-secondary level education received in the military. Every institution reviewed for this report offers some level of credit for military education. Eighteen of the 20 institutions reviewed are members of Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), an organization that “maximizes the proper award of academic credit for military training,” and “facilitates the transferability of credits, so servicemembers can reach their educational goals.”³⁰ In principle, members of the SOC Degree Network System (DNS) agree to accept ACE recommended military courses and training. However, institutions are free to accept or reject ACE recommendations on a course by course basis. According to the 2010 CAEL study, military students are more likely to earn PLA credit as compared to non-military students. Over two-thirds (67 percent) of military students earned at least some PLA credit.³¹

ADDITIONAL PLA FORMATS

While CBE, portfolio assessment, and military training credit are the most commonly offered forms of PLA, other PLA formats are available. Among the institutions reviewed for this report, Northern Kentucky University (NKU) is the only institution to accept ACE corporate training for credit, as well as industry credentials. Students must submit the ACE transcript “Registry of Credit Recommendations” and other course materials to petition for academic

²⁹ “2015 AP Exam Volume.” College Board. <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2015/2015-Exam-Volume-Change.pdf>

³⁰ “About SOC.” Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges. <http://www.soc.aascu.org/Default.html>

³¹ “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes,” Op. cit. p. 31.

credit.³² NKU accepts industry credentials “in fields like nursing, respiratory care, business, and radiology.”³³

Nationally, ACE’s credit evaluation service reviews hundreds of corporate training programs each year.³⁴ Among others, Starbucks, Jiffy Lube, the NSA, and McDonald’s all use ACE evaluated programs. McDonald’s “Hamburger University,” for instance, “trains 5,000 employees a year.”³⁵ Students who complete Hamburger University courses can receive credit at community colleges and at 15 college partners, including online branches of Penn State and Drexel Universities.³⁶

PARTNERSHIPS

Although most PLA initiatives are localized to particular institutions, several groups of post-secondary institutions are creating PLA alliances. PLA alliances and articulation agreements allow students to transfer PLA credit received at one partner institution to any other in the alliance. Initiatives to develop PLA alliances are underway in both Illinois and Ohio, and include institutions reviewed for this report.

ILLINOIS PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT ALLIANCE (IPLAA)

The IPLAA is an attempt to “integrate individual providers’ policies of prior learning assessment into pathways between institutions that honor each other’s prior learning assessment outcomes.”³⁷ If successful, the IPLAA will allow students to transfer PLA credit between all participating institutions in the alliance, including between two-year community colleges and four-year universities. The alliance is currently accepting applications for additional institutions to join.³⁸ The IPLAA is a product of the Regional P-20 Network Adult Learner Work Group, composed of the following institutions.³⁹

- College of DuPage
- Elgin Community College
- Harper College
- Kishwaukee College
- McHenry County College
- Northern Illinois University

³² “Credit for Prior Learning at NKU.” Northern Kentucky University. <https://testing.nku.edu/CPL.html>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fain, Op. cit.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “A Proposal for the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance (IPLAA).” Northern Illinois University, September 2, 2015. p. 2. http://www.niu.edu/p20network/_pdfs/9.9.15-meeting-materials/PLA-Policy-Paper-9.2.2015.pdf

³⁸ “An Invitation to Join the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance.”

http://www.niu.edu/p20network/_pdfs/work-groups/adult-learners/Invitation-to-Join-the-IPLAA.pdf

³⁹ “A Proposal for the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Alliance (IPLAA),” Op. cit. p. 2.

OHIO PLA GROUP

The Chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents made PLA a top priority for the University System of Ohio (USO) in 2013, and published a report detailing recommendations in 2014. The report promotes all forms of PLA reviewed in this report, describing CBE, credit for military training, and portfolio assessment as the three “preferred models.”⁴⁰ The following best practices are identified to make PLA a viable system wide option:

- Credit is given only for learning, not for experience
- Transparency will be preserved in all aspects of the PLA process, with clear, rigorous and public criteria for credit granting
- Consistency in the evidence requested for evaluation of prior learning will be assured and all USO institutions will transcript, apply and transfer credits awarded on the basis of the statewide standards
- Discipline-appropriate faculty from within the institution and other subject-matter experts (SMEs) will evaluate prior learning
- Ongoing and rigorous training and professional development will be provided to all participants in the assessment process
- There will be broad institutional commitment to PLA

The last of the six best practices, in particular, relates to articulation and calls on USO institutions to make a commitment to “agreed-upon criteria for credit articulation.”⁴¹ Institutions are encouraged to integrate PLA into the already existing Ohio Transfer Module to guarantee articulation between other institutions in the USO system.⁴²

⁴⁰ “Prior Learning Assessment & Ohio’s College Completion Agenda.” Ohio Board of Regents, April 16, 2014. p. 23.
https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/ohiohighered.org/files/uploads/PLA/PLA-with-a-Purpose_Report_FINAL_041614_0.pdf

⁴¹ Ibid. 23.

⁴² “The Ohio Articulation & Transfer Policy.” Department of Higher Education.
<https://www.ohiohighered.org/transfer/policy>

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