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APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Supporting The Adult Learner Lifecycle Through Prior Learning Assessment

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Adults are knowledgeable.

Personal, professional, academic and informal learning occurs with life experience. They all have competence and can demonstrate learning. Yet traditional and popular higher education interventions (i.e., courses, degree programs) are not necessarily set up to recognize, validate, or offer opportunities for adults to demonstrate their knowledge. Perhaps unknown to the general public – and not necessarily well-developed at some institutions – is a longstanding practice which exists to support, validate and facilitate credit awarding for demonstration of learning from adults.

This practice, known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), provides adult learners with the means to potentially earn credit for work and life experience. Prior learning programs not only provide students with an alternative option for credit beyond taking courses, but also validate and recognize the non-

traditional learning (knowledge, skills and experience) that adult learners bring with them to college.

Since PLA is an alternative method of awarding credit, it requires additional support and effort beyond traditional academe. It can take many forms:

- **Credit by exam:** the process of earning college credit through a credit-by-exam program.
- **Credit by essay or portfolio:** a process through which a student documents college-level learning based on nontraditional learning experiences.
- **Credit by licensure or certification:** the process of recognizing competencies demonstrated through successful completion of professional certifications or licenses.
- **Course by arrangement:** the process through which a student petitions to document major-

course learning outcomes and course equivalent competencies. Faculty provide self-directed comprehensive course instructions and assignments.

In addition to providing adult learners with these prior learning program options, adult learners need support to fully realize the benefits of participation. Through effective marketing, advising and feedback during student processes, prior learning programs can have multiple benefits. This could include increased student satisfaction, increased retention, and faster degree completion.

Achieving successful student outcomes with prior learning programs requires support throughout the student lifecycle, including their time before, during and after they engage in prior learning processes. For National Louis University (NLU) in Chicago, this realization didn't occur overnight. It took years of trial and error until we found the right balance of support. As a result, there was an increase in the number of students using PLA programs and in successful student outcomes.

Supporting Students Before They Engage in PLA

Prior learning programs are as unique as the institutions (and

students!) they represent so there's not one correct way to provide them. What we do know is this: adult learners need to feel validated. They need to know that their experience and knowledge has value and worth.

To provide support and create awareness, institutions should develop intentional and purposeful outreach strategies, validating nontraditional learning and encouraging participation. The message that their nontraditional learning is of value needs to be supported and communicated by all student-facing services and faculty. Institutional professionals should strive to build relationships across the institution via college and departmental meetings; on-going marketing outreach to create and sustain awareness; and faculty engagement and involvement. A community that supports PLA messaging further validates PLA's purpose, encouraging student participation.

At NLU, outreach initiatives have been created to provide a message of support and encouragement. These initiatives include:

- Creating a PLA video showcasing our students who have used the various PLA processes and how these processes have supported and benefitted them.

- Creating a newly designed website providing student testimonials of support and encouragement for reasons to invest in PLA processes.
- Creating program information sheets designed to demonstrate the program specific PLA processes available to students.

These efforts accomplish multiple goals. Certainly, they exist as outreach and information to students. But they also serve to educate and reinforce messaging about PLA programs to our faculty and staff. They exist as information and examples for other institutions to consider for their practice or reach out to learn more about our practices.

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Supporting Students while Engaged in PLA Processes through: Equity, Access, Flexibility and Academic Support

At NLU, our institutional legacy is defined by its mindfulness in ensuring access to a diverse student body. With this in mind, we have made it our

mission to provide **equitable** PLA opportunities for all students, supporting their unique and individual backgrounds. Below are some of the ways this is demonstrated in our PLA programs:

- Our undergraduate portfolio program provides over 50 essay topics, working to take into consideration personal, social and work circumstances for a diverse student population.
- Our portfolio program for major credit gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their course competencies through a student-driven portfolio, minimizing the courses needed to complete their major requirements.
- Our credit by licensure and certification program makes students eligible to receive credit for both undergraduate elective credit and some major elective courses within identified programs for credentials already earned.
- Testing options include CLEP and DSST, as well as New York University Language Proficiency exams.

Providing multiple opportunities to a diverse population empowers and enables students by offering

choices to apply unique learning outcomes towards their degree completion requirements.

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Offering programs that are both **accessible and flexible** has proved to be a game-changer with respect to growth in numbers of students using our programs at NLU. We strive to deliver options that will support and meet the needs of our adult learners, including the following options:

- Credit by portfolio for undergraduate students is offered online every term, with 8 to 10 sections a year.
- Credit by portfolio for major courses is offered online every term. Students are provided guidance and support by their faculty assessor throughout the course.
- Credit by Licensure and Certification is available at both the undergraduate and graduate level, for both

elective and major elective credits.

- Credit by examination is offered at three of our locations with multiple time options.

Flexible and accessible learning environments have lent themselves to an increase in our overall adult student satisfaction, including an increase in program usage and successful PLA student outcomes.

In an effort to ensure that our students feel **supported academically** while engaged in PLA processes, we partner with our colleagues to assist with academic challenges and concerns of our students.

- We work closely with our learning support staff to provide the needed writing and test-taking support for students engaged in the portfolio and exam programs.
- We have developed a strong relationship with academic advisors, student coaches and faculty to provide personal support and encouragement for our students.
- Within our portfolio courses, we provide ongoing information and updates related to technical support for online students.

Through these efforts, students gain confidence in their ability to successfully complete their PLAs while providing them with the tools necessary for future academic success.

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Providing Support After PLA Engagement

Providing continuous support for our portfolio students through the portfolio forum increases the probability of retention and degree completion. This personal outreach effort has been very effective with positive outcomes for both students and the institution.

Students enrolled in our undergraduate portfolio course have the option to write additional experiential essays after they have successfully completed the course. To provide this group of students with ongoing access to all the materials necessary to write additional papers, we have created a portfolio forum. Students who wish to write additional

essays are given access to the forum, available to them 24/7. The PLA office monitors this forum, providing up-to-date information, answering questions and process all additional essays submitted. The forum also provides a self-directed, convenient process for students seeking to continue writing essays.

NLU has seen firsthand how PLA programs and student outcomes can benefit from supporting adult learners before, during and after they engage in PLA. Achieving successful student outcomes requires a community that fully supports PLA throughout the lifecycle of the student.

Discuss In Detail at CAEL’s Conference

This November 6-8, The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)’s annual conference will be held in Chicago at the Palmer House Hotel. As the Chicago partner, we invite you to stop by NLU’s information table or attend one of our conference sessions to learn more about our PLA programs and the strategies we employ to support our adult learners through PLA. If you haven’t already registered, we recommend attending either in person or via livestreaming. The conference provides a number of opportunities to learn and network with other institutions as we

share ideas that relate to better supporting adult learners through PLA.

We look forward to seeing many of our colleagues there and would love to talk more about what you’re doing at your institutions, too!