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Faculty Perspectives of Academic Preparedness of Nontraditional Students Who Earned Prior Learning Assessment Credits

Kerri Moseley-Hobbs
Walden University

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Kerri Moseley-Hobbs

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2017

Abstract

Faculty Perspectives of Academic Preparedness of Nontraditional Students Who Earned

Prior Learning Assessment Credits

by

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MBA, University of Maryland, University College, 2011

MS, University of Maryland, University College, 2010

BS, University of Maryland, University College, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Through prior learning assessment (PLA) programs, students' professional and life experiences are evaluated to determine if they equate to college program courses—removing the need for the student to complete traditional college courses to earn a postsecondary degree. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of faculty at the study site on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students. Knowles' andragogy theory guided the research questions on the academic preparedness of students earning prior learning credits and what characteristics of PLA programs faculty believe contribute to the academic success of these students. Thirty-six participants completed a survey where they provided narratives that were coded to determine overarching themes. The findings of this case study suggested that faculty believed that nontraditional students who earned credits through PLA are independent, motivated, and knowledgeable, but whether or not they are academically prepared seemed to vary by academic program. The findings also suggested that, while PLA programs have limitations because of student perceptions that may conflict with reality and the limited usability of PLA across academic programs, PLA programs provide a time benefit to students by allowing a shorter time to degree. The study supports positive social change by providing a resource for future development and growth of PLA programs to expand student access and options in obtaining postsecondary credentials while also lowering postsecondary education cost.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my son, Anthony Michael Hobbs. Somehow, by grace, we are both able to accomplish so much. Your patience has value you will never know. Thanks to Mom for being great and to Dad for convincing me early that I was a princess worthy of the best. To my village, thank you for being a solid foundation.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Postsecondary institutions in the United States have embraced the task of providing education that contributes to the betterment of people in a community and to a knowledgeable and able workforce. In the most recent 10-year span, postsecondary institutions have seen and welcomed student enrollment increases from 16 million in 2002 to over 20 million in 2012 (Freed & Mollick, 2010; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). As a result, postsecondary institutions, and more specifically colleges, have sought out innovative programs and academic platforms to provide and deliver education to this growing number of degree seeking students.

According to the NCES (2002, 2012), a significant portion of the increased enrollment at colleges is due to the increased number of nontraditional students. These students accounted for more than 70% of the increase in enrolled students after 2002 and for more than 40% of total enrollment by 2011 (NCES, 2002, 2012). The term nontraditional student has been used to refer to college students that meet specific characteristics that includes, but is not limited to, students that delay enrolling into college after high school and students who have dependents or are the head families. For the sake of this case study, the term nontraditional student refers to a student that meets at least one of the nontraditional student characteristics outlined by NCES. The NCES (n.d.) defines a nontraditional student as a student that has any of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrolling into postsecondary education after high school by at least 1 year, or who enrolled immediately after high school but only attended part time; (b) has family

responsibilities and financial constraints that include caring for dependents other than a spouse, functioning as a single parent, working full time while enrolled in postsecondary education, or being financially independent; and (c) did not received a standard high school diploma. It should be noted that in the context of discussing the nontraditional student, the term *adult student* is used to reference the same demographic of students who are the focus of this study.

Many colleges have developed, piloted, and currently offer innovative programs that seek to serve the increased population of nontraditional students. One such innovation is credit for prior learning assessment (PLA) programs. Through credit for PLA programs, students are provided the opportunity to earn credits towards a college degree based on the assessment of learning outside of the college classroom. Outside of the college classroom would include the variety of classroom platforms including face-to-face classes, online classes, and correspondence courses. Generally, PLA programs assess student work and life experience and it's equivalences to the course work required for the student's academic program. The PLA program innovations foster a culture that recognizes the value of learning throughout a person's lifetime (Brinke et al., 2008).

The first attempts of PLA programs began in the 1970s under the knowledge-based learning paradigm (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010; Freed & Mollick, 2010). The trend towards knowledge-based learning has continued to the present day and includes innovations coined as learning-centered paradigms. In the learning-centered paradigm, the focus is the student's acquisition and use of knowledge, instead of the student's retention of information received, which is the case in teaching-centered paradigms

(Huba & Freed, 2000). Faculty members at accredited institutions in Maryland have found themselves teaching under innovative educational programs that resemble a learning-centered paradigm. These innovative programs that embrace the learning-centered paradigm include programs like student self-paced learning, or competency-based education, and credits from PLA programs.

While some of these innovative programs may have changed since the 1970s, the purpose, features, and methods have not. Generally, students demonstrate prior learning through PLA courses, portfolio development, or examinations. As part of the process in credit for PLA programs, evaluators assess whether or not a student has demonstrated that they have work or life experience that is parallel to a portion of the courses in the student's enrolled academic program (Hoffman & Michel, 2010). Most often, these evaluators are college faculty or academic mentors. Past researchers, as I will discuss later, have found that students who earn credits through these PLA programs generally shorten the time they take to earn their degree leading to decreases in their overall academic cost. In addition to student outcomes, many studies pertaining to PLA were focused on the methods of assessment for academic credit for prior learning, how these methods are used by evaluators, and best practices for successful credit for prior learning programs. In this qualitative case study, I focused on a period between when a student has earned credits through PLA, but before the student completed or withdrew from their academic program. Simply stated, I focused on faculty perspectives regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs to complete college coursework.

The Local Problem

There are a number of colleges in Maryland that have established and currently offer credit for PLA programs, and many of these same colleges take pride in serving the nontraditional student. In a 2010 nationwide study that included the analysis of data for 62,000 adult students from 48 postsecondary institutions nationwide, including colleges in the state of Maryland, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL; 2010) found that adult students that earn credit for prior learning have higher graduation rates, persistence, and lower time to degree. An interesting insight the CAEL's presented in the findings to their study, was that while 70% of respondents in the study indicated that they believed their institution's PLA program should be expanded, 44% of responders projected an increase in demand for a prior learning program option in the future, and most respondents of the study indicated that their institution had no plans to expand or promote their program. There was no discussion presented that indicated that PLAs appeared to present any lack of academic abilities of the students, but rather that PLA programs and their use and expansion was limited by the postsecondary institution (CAEL, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore faculty perspectives about the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earn credits through PLA and what characteristics of PLA programs faculty believe contribute to the academic success of these students. In this study, I also sought to expand on the CAEL's finding of an impressive consistency that faculty believe that PLAs works best in specific academic areas. The findings from the CAEL (2010) study suggested that the academic areas that

PLA programs work best in are occupational and public service, criminal justice, early childhood education, business, computer science, and military training. Although the CAEL's study included schools in Maryland, the findings did not provide detail about Maryland schools individually. In this study, I further expanded on the CAEL's findings by localizing the issue to Maryland, and specifically asking faculty for their perspective on nontraditional student academic preparedness when they earn credits through PLA programs. This study was important because the findings could provide insight into why the participants of CAEL's study believed that prior learning programs are only beneficial for a narrow number of academic programs.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

There is a substantial interest in improving college affordability and academic program outcome assessments from both internal and external stakeholders of colleges in Maryland. One method to address these interests is through the use of PLA programs. The U.S. Department of Education, as well as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) that serves as the regional accreditation body for the state of Maryland, recently narrowed their focus on credit for prior learning programs (MSCHE, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Specifically, within their most recent report of accreditation standards and guides, MSCHE (2007) stated that they promote learning-centered paradigms that include PLA programs. The MSCHE (2007) also heavily suggested the inclusion of faculty in the development and continued learning assessments within these programs. Further in a July 31, 2014 Federal Register Notice, the U.S.

Department of Education (2014) announced an experiment to determine possible outcomes if the law allowed for students to use federal student aid to pay for PLA. Currently, the law prohibits these otherwise eligible students from doing that.

Locally, Maryland colleges, such as Allegany College of Maryland (ACOM), Towson University, and Stevenson University, have increased their efforts to serve nontraditional students by offering nontraditional students specific services. Each of these colleges acknowledged serving substantial populations of nontraditional students and had created specialized programs and student services that addressed students' unique needs. Some of these unique needs included flexibility with academic schedules, family freshman orientations, and consideration for the students' extensive personal and professional responsibilities outside of the classroom. For example, in 2013, ACOM (n.d.) reported serving 1,065 nontraditional students out of the 3,214 students enrolled, representing almost half of their enrollment. As a response they created, and as of the 2015–2016 academic year still offered, specialized nontraditional student personalized services and support through its Turning Point program. The Turning Point program at ACOM provides nontraditional students with program coordinators and student advocates to assist them with matters such as college applications, financial aid, scholarships, student success services, advising, career exploration, workshops, mentoring, advocacy, and the recognition of the life experience that their perspective brings to their academic study (ACOM, n.d.). Therefore, it appears that participating in a PLA program at a college in Maryland will provide access to a developed PLA and a substantial population of nontraditional students as evident at ACOM (n.d.).

In this qualitative case study, I illuminated the experience, comments, ideas, and feedback from faculty at a college in Maryland on the academic preparedness of their nontraditional students who earn credits through their PLA programs. For the purpose of this study, to protect the confidentiality of the participating faculty and their postsecondary institution, the local college under study will be referred to with the pseudonym of Maryland College. While this study is most beneficial to Maryland College as the participating institution, programs like the Turning Point program at ACOM could use the findings of this study to contribute to dialogue to further develop, enhance, and support their nontraditional students. Lastly, the study findings could be used for discussions and further development of faculty professional development initiatives that can support colleges' accreditation and reaccreditation reports and self-studies with MSCHE as well as colleges' internal program effectiveness assessments.

Definition of Terms

Adult student: A nontraditional student, or a student that is age 25 years old or older (NCES, n.d.).

Assessment: The evaluation of whether or not a student is meeting the college level learning measurements and standards experiential for the credit for prior learning program (MSCHE, n.d.).

Credit for PLA Program: A program at a college that has a process in place that evaluates college-level knowledge gained outside of the classroom through work and life experience for academic credit (CAEL, 2010).

Declarative knowledge: Obtaining disciplinary facts and concepts (Muller, 2012)

Formal learning: Learning based on the achievement of competences related to an awarded credential, often associated with declarative knowledge (Joosten-Ten Brinke et al., 2010; Muller, 2012).

Informal learning: Learning that is not intentional, structured, and does not award credential (Joosten-Ten Brinke et al., 2010).

Knowing-in-practice: The way an individual develops and studies knowledge and uses understood knowledge in practice (Arnold, 2010).

Nontraditional student: An adult student, or a student that has any of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrolling into postsecondary education after high school by at least 1 year, or who enrolled immediately after high school but only attended part time; (b) has family responsibilities and financial constraints that include caring for dependents other than a spouse, functioning as a single parent, working full time while enrolled in postsecondary education, or being financially independent; and (c) did not received a standard high school diploma (NCES, n.d.).

PLA: The process of evaluating college-level knowledge gained outside of the classroom through work and life experience for academic credit (CAEL, 2010; Hoffman & Michel, 2010; Travers, 2013).

Postsecondary institutions: An organization that provides education, often referred to as college-level learning, after traditional secondary school; postsecondary institutions include colleges, universities, vocational schools, trade schools, and other career colleges (NCES, n.d.).

Significance of the Study

The increase in enrollment of nontraditional students in postsecondary institutions has motivated colleges to offer innovative programs that better serve the needs, experiences, and educational expectations of these students. Some of these programs include the adoption of learning-centered programs that measure learning outside of normal credit and clock hour methods (CAEL, 2003). One adopted method is the credit for PLA program. In support of this method, accreditation agencies have redeveloped their assessment standards to recognize and support these programs (MSCHE, 2007). Through the agency's Standard 14, in addition to guidelines for student learning assessments, the MSCHE addressed the need to include faculty in the development of learning-centered assessments and reviews (MSCHE, 2007). As a result, colleges in Maryland that have adopted some version of a learning-centered paradigm, like PLA, are not only seeking ways to measure individualize student learning but also ways to include faculty in this process of developing these programs.

By focusing on the nontraditional student and PLA programs, in this study I provide faculty information about obstacles they may want to address when they are involved in the student learning assessment methods review and development as required by MSCHE. Through this study, I also provide colleges with information to identify opportunities for further innovation and organic change in their nontraditional student programs and services. Further, the results of this study support Walden University's mission to provide a diverse community of career professionals the opportunity to transform themselves as scholar-practitioners who can effect position social change.

Specifically, the completion of this study has provided me, as the researcher, with the opportunity to affect positive social change because this study is an opportunity to provide evidence of the importance of faculty inclusion in future development and expansion of PLA programs. Through this study, faculty are included in the continued conversations pertaining to the development and improvement of learning-centered initiatives, like PLA, and students in the community are able to benefit from the efforts of these initiatives.

Research Questions

Upon the review of past studies and articles on adult learners and PLA programs, studies like those conducted by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) appealed for additional studies and projects that develop a better picture and understanding of the adult student within the scope of prior college credit or PLA (Lane, 2012). Researchers also suggested that more research was needed on the development of best practices for advising and guiding these adult learners through their PLA process (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Additionally, researchers asked for more information on the different factors relating to PLA practices (Travers, 2013). With this study, I addressed these recommendations by focusing on nontraditional students in Maryland and the perspective of faculty at Maryland College on the academic preparedness of these nontraditional students that earn credit for prior learning. The results of this study provide a basis for understanding these students and can contribute to additional ideas for best practices in advising and guiding these students.

The guiding research questions (RQs) for the study were

RQ1: How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?

RQ2: Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these nontraditional students?

Assumptions

I made the following assumptions in this case study:

- Maryland College has a process that allows faculty members to be aware of which students have completed the college's PLA program.
- The PLA program at Maryland College currently meets the standards and requirements set forth by oversight authorities that include state or regional accreditation agencies and federal agencies, where applicable.
- The participating faculty at Maryland College has agreed to participate in the study because of an interest in improving faculty interactions with students that complete PLA programs.
- The participating faculty at Maryland College has answered questions honestly and has provided responses without feeling the need to withhold perceptions that may be perceived as unflattering to Maryland College.

Review of the Literature

I used the online research library at Walden University to complete the literature review for this study. The library was a valuable resource as it allowed for concurrent searches in multiple academic journal databases. These databases included searches in

ERIC, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, and SocINDEX. To accommodate the many versions of terms related to and used to refer to PLA and nontraditional students, when searching the databases, the keyword terms I used included *prior learning*, *prior learning assessment*, *prior-learning*, *adult student*, *non-traditional student*, and *nontraditional student*. Within these search terms, I discovered that the term *knowledge-based learning* was another common term related to the subject of prior learning and nontraditional students. Finally, the many search features in the databases also provided indicators that presented clarification as to whether the study or article appeared in a publication that was an academic journal, periodical, or web source. Not including government resources like NCES, for this study, only published studies and articles from academic journals were used as references.

It should be noted that NCES is a center within the U.S. Department of Education governmental agency. Most of the center's data on postsecondary education are housed and made publically available through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). While the research, data, and findings of the center may not be formally published in an academic journal, the center's research, data, and findings are commonly used as a reference for many of the studies and articles published in these journals. In fact, of the first 20 studies and articles I reviewed for this study, 15 were not publications of NCES directly, and of those 15 more than five of the researchers, including Freed and Mollick (2010), Kamenetz (2011), and Lane (2012), referenced NCES or IPEDS specifically as a source.

In addition to NCES or IPEDS, a source even more commonly referenced than NCES was the CAEL. Of the first 20 studies and articles reviewed, more than 10 of the studies and articles referenced the 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes by Klein-Collins (2010) for CAEL. However, it should be noted that the Klein-Collins' study published in 2010 used NCES as a source.

Individually, the studies and articles reviewed provided an idea of the relevancy of this study where I sought to explore the perspectives of faculty at Maryland College regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits through PLA. The NCES has published numerous findings and studies that provide a guideline as to who the nontraditional student is and what the educational trend for these students are. The center's data and trend analysis began as early as 1986 (NCES, n.d.) and continued until a study published in 2012 (NCES, 2012). Based on data from 1986 through 1992, NCES (n.d.) considers a nontraditional student to be a student that has characteristics related to delayed enrollment, family responsibilities, and financial constraints, as well as high school diploma attainment as indicators for a nontraditional student. However, there are other studies that provided a definition inconsistent with NCES of who is a nontraditional student. One example was a study by Complete College America (CCA; 2012). In studies such as that one, the researcher(s) referred only to the student's age, commonly 21 years of age and older, to indicate a nontraditional student. However, since many of the studies and articles I reviewed for this study referenced NCES data, I recognized the NCES definition of the nontraditional student.

In the following subsections, I will present a review of literature where I explore articles from peer-reviewed journals as well as studies on the subject of PLA programs. After review of the literature common ideas, theories, and themes were identified and this enabled me to identify what aspects of PLA that studies and articles thought were important to the subject of PLA. This section will include studies and articles that illuminated the importance of PLA in regards to the following: (a) determining successful and unsuccessful PLA program processes and assessment methods, (b) determinations of how college level learning is defined and measured for PLA, and finally, (c) student academic performance and learning outcome measurements after completion of PLA programs.

Theoretical Framework

To begin, the theoretical framework of the study was Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory. In the andragogy theory, Knowles differentiated adult education and adult learning as separate forms of education. Knowles provided four assumptions and principles of andragogy (a) that adult learning is self-directed, (b) that adult learners have experience that provide a learning resource, (c) that adult learners desire to learn is aligned to their social roles, and (d) that adult learners are problem centered and apply education more immediately than child learners (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy, 2011). Considering that PLA programs seek to provide nontraditional, or adult, students college credits for experience and life learning, in this study I sought to explore if Knowles' andragogy theory that experience and real life application contribute to adult learning was supported by PLA programs since these programs seek to award students

with academic credits based on the measurement of real life application and experience to classroom concepts. To do this, I gathered faculty perspectives of nontraditional students' academic preparedness to complete college level work when the student is awarded credits based on this measurement of real life application and experience.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

My review of studies and data analysis of trends about nontraditional students and alternative programs like PLA led to a few interesting points. One interesting point was that NCES has performed trend analysis and has tracked the growth of nontraditional students since 1986 (NCES, n.d.). The center noted that by the year 2000, 73% of undergraduate students in postsecondary institutions, or colleges, in the United States met at least one of their characteristics of the nontraditional student (NCES, 2002). Other studies expanded on the findings of NCES noting that NCES data shows that by fall 2011, students under the age of 21 only accounted for 29% of enrolled undergraduates at residential colleges (CCA, 2012).

As I stated before, the growth of the nontraditional student has inspired different postsecondary education initiatives with a goal to better serve the needs and educational expectations of these nontraditional students. As the number of nontraditional students attending brick and mortar college increases, the days when students used amenities that residential colleges offer like dormitories and campus facilities are quickly dissolving, as nontraditional students normally have responsibilities outside of the classroom that results in their spending less time on the college campus using campus based amenities (CCA, 2012). PLA programs are one initiative that has risen to popularity. These

programs attracted the attention of researchers who set out to measure the value and outcomes of these innovative programs and to determine best practices that support an effective and healthy PLA program. Freed and Mollick (2010), Muller (2012), Klein-Collins and Hain (2009), Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2010), and Arnold (2010) discussed the importance of determining the student's ability to learn through PLAs. To do this they defined what constitutes as college-level learning and which student learning models and methods can be incorporated into PLA to maximize learning measurements. There are also studies and reports that discussed the student's ability to take advantage of PLA programs. Brigham et al. (2010) reported that many nontraditional students do not receive credit for prior experience that equate to college-level learning, and Travers (2013) and Leiste and Jensen (2011) discussed factors that colleges should incorporate in their PLA programs to support a program that provides the greatest opportunity for students.

Student outcomes, overall program benefits, and program effectiveness were also subjects in past studies and reports. In studies by Quick (2012), the CAEL (2011), Klein-Collins et al. (2010), Lane (2012), and Lambe (2011), there were discussions of whether PLAs predict better writing performance. These studies also discussed whether these PLA programs improve adult student degree completion and retention rates. Lastly, Popova-Gounci and Tobol (2012), Hoffman et al. (2010), Traver et al. (2011), and Kamenetz (2011) each presented cases on best practices in PLA programs and ways in which these programs can be mismanaged. Such mismanagement may result in credits for prior learning being awarded to students who may have unrelated experience or to

students who lack the ability to practice their experiential knowledge in academic, analytical, or critical thinking application.

PLA Program Processes

In their study, Klein-Collins and Hain (2009) discussed the frequency of the use of PLA. The researchers referred to studies previously published by Klein-Collins that found that most postsecondary institutions used standardized exams, like those administered through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and Advanced Placement (AP), for PLA. The authors did note that their research found that, although portfolios were not the most commonly used method at the time, the use of prior learning portfolios to assess learning were on the rise. Furthermore, in the study the authors reported that prior learning portfolio methods were being offered by 66% of the institutions that participated in the study, which was an increase from 55% in 1996. Lastly, the authors suggested the need for more research to provide lessons and best practices to shape these programs and to understand how prior learning is being used throughout the United States (Klein-Collins and Hain, 2009). This suggestion for additional research supported the need for this study that provides faculty perspectives of student academic preparedness after they have earned credits in their prior learning programs. The findings of this study could provide an idea of whether or not the current practices are considerate to the academic needs of these students.

In an article that appeared in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Josten-ten Brinke et al. (2010) investigated the approach that prior learning portfolio assessors used to evaluate prior learning. The authors conducted open-ended interviews

and also asked the participants to complete questionnaires. The study included 10 assessors from six different educational programs. Based on the information that was collected, the authors found that there were three different types of assessors: course examiners, prior learning assessors, and assessment committees. Within these roles, the assessors in the study generally followed similar processes that included assessment of individual student portfolios that were further discussed in a team environment. The authors did not find consensus in a number of aspects and acknowledged areas that were inconclusive. This included nonconsensus on the overall PLA decision making process, where some participants thought that it was unfair to base prior learning solely on a portfolio. The authors also found inconclusive results on the assessors' perception of whether items included in prior learning portfolios were relevant, usable, and fair. In addition, the authors stated that additional research on assessor perceptions and approaches was still needed. While I did not did not focus on assessor perceptions of PLA programs this study, the Maryland College faculty participants of this study may not only teach students that earned credit through their prior learning program but may have also actually function as an assessor in their PLA programs. As a result, the results of this study expanded on the perception of the faculty which can serve as an indicator as to whether faculty believe that assessment methods are accurate in measuring the ability and knowledge of the students.

With a similar focus, Travers (2013) sought out to further expand on a previous 2009 study conducted in collaboration with Hoffman, Evans, and Treadwell. In that 2009 study, Travers et al. (2009) discussed best practices in PLA programs. The authors found

that there were five critical factors in best practices for PLA programs that included institutional mission and commitment, institutional support, program parameters, professional development, and program feedback and evaluation processes. In the 2009 study, Travers et al. acknowledged that these five critical factors needed to be systematically tested and that future research was planned to study the effectiveness of these five critical factors. In the 2013 study, Travers provided that future research by testing the method and measured the outcomes of this systematic testing. In the 2013 study, Travers found that there was a significant correlation between when PLA programs have institutional support and when PLA programs were included in the institution's mission and commitment. When an institution included its PLA program in its mission and commitment goals, then the program receives strong institutional support (Travers, 2013). However, in this 2013 study, Travers acknowledged that the five critical factors need to be further studied in its use as a program assessment model.

In terms of a positive learning experiences in PLA programs, a 2011 article by Leiste and Jensen titled *Creating a Positive PLA Experience: A Step-by-Step Look at University PLA*, took a detailed look at the PLA program at Capella University. The researcher identified which features of the university's program provided a positive prior learning experience. Overall the authors found that a PLA programs that provided a positive experience were motivating, enables success, and fosters efficiency (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). However, Leiste and Jensen acknowledged that further research was needed on how to motivate more students to attempt PLA. The researchers also suggested further research was needed in what training and professional development PLA faculty

and staff need, as well as what PLA methods can improve efficiency (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). By providing faculty perspective on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students that earn credits for prior learning, the researchers sheds light on what aspects of the prior learning programs faculty believe do or do not serve the students and their academic performance, and finally, possible starting points for efficiency improvements.

Other resources that continued to present cases on best practices in PLA programs included Popova-Gounci and Tobol (2012), Hoffman et. al. (2010), Traver et. al. (2011), and Kamenetz (2011). The researchers in each resource presented cases on best practices in PLA programs and ways in which these programs can be detrimental if they are mismanaged. In their 2012 study, Popova-Gounci and Tobol argued that prior learning should be a process rather than a snap shot assessment of learning. They also suggested that PLA should be viewed as a curriculum standard and not a onetime examination. The researchers also argued that, if mismanaged, prior learning programs can easily support diploma mill practices where unskilled or ill-knowledgeable students are awarded college degrees. However, the authors noted that, if PLA programs are managed correctly, they can support the educational needs of the nontraditional student (Popova-Gounci & Tobol, 2012).

Defining and Measuring College-Level Learning

The studies and articles by Muller (2012), Freed and Mollick (2010), Klein-Collins and Hain (2009), Joosten-ten Brinke et. al. (2010), and Arnold (2010) discussed the importance of using PLA to ensure college-level learning and determining the student's ability to learn. In one article, Muller indicated methods that use students'

written reflections to connect experience to college-level learning. Muller also referred to an experiential learning cycle that begins with the experience, ends with the application of what was learned in that experience, and includes steps in between that translate experience into learning. While in the article the author gave interesting narratives, including small amounts of student quotes that spoke positive about the method, it would have been beneficial if the author also provided information or data that indicated whether or not these methods translated to academic benefits for the students, or successful evaluation in the PLA process.

In the study “Using Prior Learning Assessment in Adult Baccalaureate Degrees in Texas” sought to identify existing PLA processes for nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs at postsecondary institutions in Texas. The authors also sought to identify if the Whitaker quality standards for prior learning programs were reached with the PLA process. The Whitaker quality standards were created by Dr. Whitaker who stated that a prior learning assessment program is valid when it includes ten standards of quality assurance. These ten standards include five academic standards and five administrative standards. The five academic standards are to award credits for: (a) learning and not experience, (b) college-level learning, (c) learning appropriate to the subject, (d) competence levels appropriate to the subject matter, and (e) appropriation to academic context. The five administrative standards are to: (a) monitor credit awards and transcripts to avoid duplication, (b) create assessment policy and procedures, (c) charge fees that are based on services performed and not by credits earned, (d) train staff involved in prior learning assessment, and (e) regularly assesses and audit programs

(DiStefano et. al. 2003). The study by Freek and Mollick used a mixed-model design and found that the most dominate PLA method used was a standardized exam, and that 60% of respondents indicated that credit was never awarded based on life experience alone. While the author goes on to find that majority of the respondents preferred PLA based on examination, it is unclear why the researcher chooses to base quality standards on Dr. Whitaker's standards. The authors did not address the selection of Whitaker's standards, even after the study acknowledges that the Whitaker quality standards may be dated since they date back to 1989. The authors also did not discuss challenges that they faced with completing the study, or addressed whether or not the Whitaker standards are still relevant when the researchers conducted the study in 2010.

In another approach, there are studies and articles that examined the importance of maximizing learning measurements. These researchers and authors suggested that learning measurements identify what constitutes as college-level learning and which student learning models and methods can be incorporated into PLA. Arnold sought to find a relationship between narratives in individual PLA and the integration of learning in postsecondary education. In the article the researcher argued that PLA and their autobiographical narratives bridge individual learning with postsecondary learning by utilizing an experiential learning method to associate life learning with academic context. Unfortunately Arnold did depend greatly on the unquestioned findings of others and failed to acknowledge shortcomings of the methods praised.

Academic Performance and Learning Outcome Measurements

Studies by Brigham et al. (2010), Travers (2013), and Leiste and Jensen (2011) discussed the ability of students to take advantage of PLA programs. In these studies the researchers present findings that suggest that students' desire and ability to participate in PLA programs is not as extensive and open as would be expected. In a study published by CAEL, Brigham et. al. found that, while most of the 88 respondents from 81 community colleges in 20 different states acknowledge that they have a PLA program, most respondents also reported that nontraditional students that could likely benefit from the program do not take advantage of it. The authors also found that although 72% of respondents saw an increase in the demand for PLA programs, only 68% thought that their program should expand. Furthermore most respondents acknowledged that the prior learning offerings within the institution varied by college and department, but that the programs were not promoted. One interesting aspect of the study by Bringham et. al. is the respondents' suggestion that PLA programs are better utilized in occupational and public service areas, as well as subjects in criminal justice, early childhood education, business, and computer science.

Quick (2012), Lane (2012), and Lambe (2011) discussed how postsecondary institutions use PLA programs, ways that students can improve their performance in PLA program essays, and correlations between PLA programs and adult student completion rates. The authors found higher completion rates among adult students that earn credit for prior learning (Lane, 2012). They also discussed the idea that when writing prior learning essays, students should follow essay writing methods that help to bridge life learning to

academic learning, and that postsecondary institutions should provide support to these students and clarify how their essays will be evaluated (Lambe, 2011). However, while the authors acknowledged the importance of faculty support, none of the authors state what support faculty either provide to these students or what support faculty believe these students require.

Pertaining to strong prior learning assessment programs, Hoffman et. al. (2010) found that PLA programs benefited: (a) from experience evaluators across different varieties of academic areas, (b) from evaluations that are supported by a strong academic foundation, (c) from programs that support student-centered learning, and (d) from program that have a clear commitment to providing ample time for a detailed and fair assessment process. Lastly Kamenetz (2010) provided a student view and experience of the prior learning portfolio process noting that the process was described by the student as a grueling. The author also provided an observation that they believed that the prior learning portfolio processes required tenacity and strong writing skills. The author goes on to provide resources available to PLA students outside of the postsecondary institution. Unfortunately, Kamenetz's article did not provide information on student outcomes in academic performance, or whether the student participants actually earned credits through prior learning assessment.

Regarding the need for additional research, the study by Popova-Gounci and Tobol noted the shortcomings of PLA curriculums and that these programs need to be designed in a way that allows survival in a constantly transforming society where the population and their needs constantly change (Popova-Gounci & Tobol, 2012). In

comparison, Hoffman et. al. (2010) specifically called for additional research that clarifies whether PLA programs focus on the performance of the student or the evaluator.

Overall, the literature reviewed provided a number of interesting points and findings. To begin, the authors' literature provided information on methods of assessing and evaluating college-level learning, the frequency of the use of these methods, as well as ways to best support a positive learning experience. Additionally, the authors expanded on the variety in definitions of college level learning and present cases of whether these varieties have negative consequences to PLA programs. Finally, some studies discussed the academic performance and outcome measurements of students after they have completed PLA programs. These performance and outcome measurements included correlations between PLA programs and adult student completion rates, which academic programs of study appear to better compliment PLA programs, as well as how the experience of the program evaluators affect outcomes. The findings of this study also contribute to the discussions of which academic programs of study appear to better compliment PLA programs.

Implications

In this study I explored the perspectives of faculty at Maryland College regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earned credits for prior learning. Specifically, I illuminate faculty ideas on PLA program methods, the relevance of PLA outcomes in classroom performance, the overall general use of PLA programs by the student population, and the overall places for improvement in PLA programs. The faculty and administration at a college may find this study helpful when they are

developing their credit for prior learning and faculty development programs because it provides ideas on what they should focus on when developing or redeveloping their PLA program. Maryland College can use the findings of this study to develop or enhance their PLA programs since the data and findings directly relate to their institution and their PLA program.

For this study I attempted to recruit faculty participants from Maryland College from a variety of academic programs. It should be noted that the college used in this study has been identified as offering seven different methods of PLA, and as serving a substantial population of nontraditional students. Specifically, Maryland College provided that by fiscal year 2015 96% of its students are nontraditional students based solely being age 21 years old and older. Of that 96%, 55% are 30 years old and older. The college's demographic information to identify whether they serve nontraditional students was found through their reported demographic information made available on the college's website, and compared to the demographic data available through the U.S. Department of Education's NCES.

As the source of data for this study, faculty responses were analyzed to identify trends and phenomenon to develop the coding categories used during data analysis. These coding categories modeled preset and open codes that emerged through the analysis. The preset codes included common terms that have definitions that are used in a consistent manner. For example, the terms nontraditional student, adult student, and adult learner were used to create a code for the theme of nontraditional student. The findings of this study also summarize and present these coding categories.

Summary

In Section 1, I presented the problem and purpose of the study. I also outlined the significance of the study and the research questions, defined important terms, and provided a review of the extant literature. In the detailed literature review, I provided the findings of previous studies on PLA programs as well as suggestions for further research. In Section 2, I will describe the methodology for the study including the methods that I used to collect data. Finally, in Section 3 I will continue to outline the project and the findings, and Section 4 will conclude the study with my recommendations for social transformation and future research.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

Innovative adult education programs like PLA have presented nontraditional students additional options to pursue and complete postsecondary education. While there have been multiple studies on PLAs, including matters of best practices and student outcomes, many of the findings of these studies suggested that additional studies be shared amongst postsecondary institutions and other stakeholders to contribute to communal understanding of PLA programs (CAEL, 2011; Joosten-ten Brinke et al., 2010; Leiste & Jensen, 2011).

In this qualitative case study, I explored faculty perspectives at Maryland College regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earn credits through PLA. Upon completion, the results of this study will be available to the postsecondary community. As previously stated, in this study I focused on Maryland College because they offered seven different PLA options and in fiscal year 2015, Maryland College reported that 96% of its students were nontraditional students. The findings of this study also responded to studies such as those by Brinke et al. (2007), who suggested a need for additional studies that explored how to support students who earn credits for PLA. The results of this study also respond to Hoffman et al.'s (2010) recommendation that future research include detailed and specific demographic data.

In the subsequent portions of this section, I will describe the research design and the role of the study participants. The subsequent section also addresses my role as the researcher and ensures the removal of bias based on my professional and personal life.

Lastly, the subsequent portion of this section also describes the process for participant selection, data collection methods and strategies, and data analysis methods and processes.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Based on the literature I reviewed, there appears to be an abundance of studies that collected and analyzed quantitative data on student matriculation and retention rates, the number of prior learning credits granted, and the average grade point average earned. Some of the researchers requested and suggested additional research in descriptive areas of best practices and perceptions that are best supported by qualitative research methods. As an approach that allows for the exploration of the experience, ideas, and thoughts of faculty participants (Hennink et al., 2011), a qualitative research method was the most appropriate method to explore faculty perspectives at Maryland College regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earn credits through PLA.

Within the realm of qualitative research, the design I chose for this study was a case study. A case study design allows for the exploration of the in-depth experience of the participants. As a case study, the findings are transferable to other schools in Maryland because they provide a constructivist philosophy. Through a constructivist philosophy, those that review the study can associate the findings with their own experience (Walden University, n.d). This philosophy ultimately supports the idea that the results of this study can be used by postsecondary institutions in Maryland to assist in efforts to improve and develop PLA programs.

Other qualitative designs, such as a phenomenological design, grounded theory, or ethnographic design, would not have been appropriate based on their purposes. A phenomenological design seeks to explore the participant's experience as it occurs. In this study, I illuminated faculty perspectives based on what had already happened; the faculty member has had the opportunity to teach a nontraditional student that has earned credits for prior learning. A grounded theory design was not appropriate because in the study I did not assume or believe that there was an issue with nontraditional students' academic performance and did not seek to develop a theory based on such a problem. Finally, an ethnographic design would not have been appropriate because with this study I did not seek to describe the characteristics or to describe a culture of students. Finally, a quantitative approach was not suitable because in this study I reviewed dialogue that provided descriptions of thoughts, ideas, and experiences.

As the researcher, my role was to identify and select participants, compose and distribute all necessary and related documents for the study, supply the survey, collect and analyze the data, and present the findings. During the study, I was a policy liaison and implementation specialist in matters of federal student aid for the U.S. federal government. Within this capacity I did not have, and at the time of the publication of this study will still not have, influence or jurisdiction over faculty at postsecondary institutions or on PLA programs at postsecondary institutions. However, my employment in matters of federal student aid for the U.S. federal government did give me influence and jurisdiction on ensuring that programs at postsecondary institutions that are eligible for federal Title IV student aid adhere to federal statute, regulation, and public guidance.

During this study, conflicts of interest were eliminated because, as of the 2015–2016 award year and currently projected to remain in effect through the 2017–2018 aid award year, PLA programs are not eligible for federal Title IV funds. Therefore, my capacity as a policy liaison and implementation specialist gave me no influence or jurisdiction over the faculty participating in the study, the postsecondary institution, or the applicable PLA program.

A nominal level of bias may have occurred in this study because at the time of the study I was employed by the U.S. federal government. This bias includes my involvement in an experimental site's program where I sought to collect data on the outcomes of PLA programs if they are allowed access to federal Title IV student aid. However, at the time of publication of this study, the experimental site's program with the federal government had not been fully launched, and with the design of the experiment I did not make any assumptions and does not seek any specific outcome for PLA programs. This is true for both student academic preparedness and student academic outcomes. As a result, my professional bias lay solely in the fact that my employer has scientific interest in PLA programs, not in any desired outcome.

Participants

In this qualitative case study I used a purposive sampling method where participants were selected based on preselected criteria applicable to the research questions (Northeastern University, n.d.). Specifically, participants were selected because they have taught nontraditional students who earned credits through the PLA program or were directly related to PLAs at Maryland College. To reiterate, Maryland College was

selected as the study location based on their acknowledgement that they offered a comprehensive PLA program, and, as they provided in their 2015 demographic data, serve a large population of nontraditional students. As previously stated, Maryland College offers seven different options for PLA in their PLA program. Those options include PLA through portfolio assessment, AP completion and testing, departmental exams, articulated credit by industry/apprenticeship, the CLEP, Dante's Subject Standardize Tests, and International Baccalaureate.

I selected Maryland College as the location for this study based on the college's location, the college's knowledge of what faculty members were involved in their PLA program, and their knowledge of what faculty was aware that they taught these students. The target sampling size of this study was eight to 10 faculty members to allow for in-depth inquiry per individual participant. An eight to 10 faculty member sample size appeared to be sufficient considering that previous studies, like those conducted by CAEL, suggested that prior learning credit programs are not widely used by students or promoted by postsecondary institutions and that the resource of faculty members to serve these students is kept relatively small. For example, in their study, Brigham and Klein-Collins (2010) found that, of the 81 responding institutions, 76% had a student population of 4,000 or more and only four institutions responded of having 101 or more students earning credits for prior learning. In addition, in the study by Hoffman et al. (2010), the researchers indicated substantive responses from 14 study participants. This suggested that the number of faculty members that have experience with nontraditional students in credit for PLA programs may be relatively small. The relatively small number of

experienced faculty members gives way to theoretical saturation. This means that interviewing more than 10 faculty members may not provide any more insight than what 10 faculty members would provide (Marshall et al., 2013).

To gain access to participants, I worked closely with Maryland College to determine their process to permit the study to be conducted at the institution and to contact their faculty members to request their participation in the study. This included proceeding through Maryland College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the development of a plan to identify and recruit participants at the college. In collaboration with Maryland College's required process, the participants' rights and ethical interest were protected according to set standards. This included written agreements between myself and Maryland College and signed letters of informed consent from faculty participants. Both of these documents outlined the confidentiality of the participants' identities in the final study and described the purpose and methods of the study. In addition, because of my role in the federal government and because an Internet search of my name will associate me with my professional position in the U.S. federal government, the agreements and letter of informed consent addressed my role and my position and guaranteed that this study was for the purposes of the completion of the Doctorate of Education in Higher Education Leadership at Walden University and not within the realm of my professional position in the federal government.

In consideration that in this study I explored faculty members' perspective of students' academic preparedness, faculty members that mentor or guide students through a PLA program were considered for participation. This was because PLA programs like

portfolio-based assessments generally require a substantial amount of academic effort and substantive interaction between a faculty member and the student. Such instances were evident in the study of best practices for prior learning portfolio evaluators by Hoffman and Michel (2010), where they noted that many of the PLA program portfolio evaluators that participated in their study also taught PLA portfolio development courses. As a result, it should be noted that these faculty members can provide a perspectives of the academic preparedness of students that earn these credits for prior learning since they are academically interacting with the student who are attempting to meet the institution's academic standards when completing and presenting the prior learning portfolio.

Data Collection

I collected the data for this case study using a survey of unstructured questions made available on the Internet through a survey website. Unstructured questions were used because they allow for open dialogue. These unstructured questions also supported the trustworthiness of this study by allowing for deviations from my assumptions based on personal experience with PLA (Merriam, 2009). How I accessed participants was determined by Maryland College's personal preference and request. In an attempt to increase the chances of faculty opting to participate in this study, Maryland College thought it best that the invitation to participate come from their director who oversees the PLA program. This same contact also sent study reminders to potential faculty members. Faculty participants that sent their completed letter of informed consent to participate in the study were provided a code name that they were referred to for the data collection as well as for the study outcome discussion of the study.

Selected participants were provided a link that gave them access to the study survey on the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey.com. Through the online survey, I provided participants confidentiality because they were asked to only provide the code name assigned to them when they are sent the SurveyMonkey.com link through e-mail. Code names were randomly selected and assigned by me. As the researcher, I tracked what code names were assigned to the participant to ensure accuracy during the member checking process as described later in the section. Much like the actual name of Maryland College, the participant personal information will not be publically available or disclosed in this final study.

SurveyMonkey.com served as a sufficient instrument because it offered a number of features including real-time results, text analysis, and custom reports. The online service also provided extensive detail on the security features it maintains to protect the data that their instrument collects. As stated by the online servicer, SurveyMonkey uses some of the most advanced technology for Internet security that is commercially available today (SurveyMonkey.com, 2013). The online service also provided a detailed Security Statement that provided assurance for application and user security, physical security, availability, network security, storage security, organization and administrative security, software development practices, and security breaches. Data exported outside of SurveyMonkey were protected by security features through Norton Security Suite that was included on a private computer. For the purpose of this study, I registered for a Select Level SurveyMonkey.com account which allowed for up to 10 question and 1,000 responses. This account level also allowed for 24 hours a day 7 days a week e-mail

support, cross-tabs and filters, and the ability to export the data and generate reports. The online tool also allowed for free form, which is a method that allowed the participant to provide a detailed narrative in relation to the unstructured question that they are asked. At any time during the period of the survey, SuveyMonkey.com provided a general report of all the narrative free form responses. The general report could be printed or saved into multiple formats including Microsoft Excel and Word. For this study, data collected were maintained in a Microsoft Word document to allow for review and coding. Once coding occurred, the data were analyzed for trends in thoughts, subjects, ideas, and opinions. With consideration to saturation and the small sample size, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire within a 30 day time span to provide a deadline for data collection so that all respondents were accounted for, and so that the time that I used to complete the study did not bleed into an overly extensive amount of time.

Survey Completion

As previously stated, data for this case study were collected using a survey of unstructured questions made available through SurveyMonkey.com. Unstructured questions were used because they allow open dialogue and support the trustworthiness of this study by allowing for deviations from my assumptions based on personal experience with PLA (Merriam, 2009). To ensure the dependability of the survey instrument, before the study participants were provided access to the survey, both the director who oversaw the PLA program at Maryland College and their assistant tested the survey on the SurveyMonkey.com website to ensure that the survey functioned correctly. To ensure that their responses were identifiable so that their data would be omitted from the final

data analysis and study results, the director and their assistant were provided with the code names “Rabbit” and “Turtle.” Both the director and their assistant were omitted from the study data because, as the director stated, while both of them are familiar with the PLA program at the college, neither of them are faculty members so they should not be included in the results of the study.

After their review of the survey, the director and the assistant agreed that the survey instrument was valuable because it provided an easy to access and time efficient method for faculty to complete the survey. As the director noted, neither they nor I expected for faculty participants to require more than 30 minutes to complete the survey. Additionally, the survey instrument was valuable because it was an instrument that most if not all of the faculty members would be familiar with because the college also uses this instrument for their own internal surveys. In fact, as will be discussed later, two weeks before I conducted this study with Maryland College, the director of the PLA program had conducted their own internal study where they asked faculty to provide feedback, thoughts and ideas, on Maryland College’s current PLA programs and opportunities for improvement. To further enhance the analysis of this study, in what could be considered an additional indicator of the value of this study, the director of the PLA program at Maryland College, with the approval of the college’s IRB, offered to share the data of their study to help enhance the findings of this study. Subsequently, the Walden University IRB approved this study and the use of this shared data under Walden University IRB approval number 02-15-16-0367219. The approved use of this shared data improved the validity of this study by enhancing triangulation when the results of the

survey by Maryland College show convergence with the results of Maryland College's survey (Carter et. al., 2014). It should be noted that Maryland College's survey was mixed method, meaning that it included both quantitative data to determine a count of faculty that agreed with a provided selection of responses (i.e., yes, no, or unsure), and qualitative data when faculty participants were asked why they thought that the college's PLA program would or would not work as a tool for their department. Since Maryland College's survey occurred adjacent to this study, the data for the college's survey are discussed later in the data analysis section to determine any like trends.

As a reminder, the RQs for this study are as follows:

RQ1: How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?

RQ2: Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?

In an effort to provide a visual reference, the following chart (Figure 1) provides an indication of which RQs each of the unstructured survey questions are asked to explore:

Research Question	Unstructured Survey Question
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	a. How do you define academically prepared?
	b. Is there a difference in preparedness between types of programs (i.e. humanities, business technology, health, etc)?
	c. Is there a difference in preparedness between type of courses (i.e. general education, cores, etc)?
	d. Do you find that the academic preparedness of these students is predictable or unpredictable?
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	a. Are there characteristics of the prior learning program at your college that you think are negative? If so, what are they?
	b. Are there characteristics of prior learning programs at your college that you think are positive? If so, what are they?
	c. Are there characteristics of prior learning programs that you have previously experienced that you think are missing from the prior learning programs at your college? If so, what are they?
	d. What characteristics of prior learning programs at your college do you think are most beneficial?

Figure 1. The study research question and its related survey question.

After a 30 day period of data collection, study participants had the opportunity for member checking. During member checking, participants were given the option to review their narrative responses for accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012). As a further enhancement of member checking, the survey instrument provided study participants an opportunity to review their responses before submitting it to the survey system. SurveyMonkey.com presented participants with their responses as one comprehensive webpage so that they could review their responses. Participants also had an option to edit their responses before submission if they determined that a change needed to be made. Still, participants were provided an opportunity to edit their responses after they submitted their study during a formal member-checking period. After the 30 day data collection period ended, the participants were contacted via email for an opportunity to review their response and to make any changes. The same communication that provided them the information to perform member checking also reminding participants that they could also withdraw their data from the study should they choose to do so. As provided in the e-mail correspondence that informed participants of the opportunity for member checking, study participants were informed that they could change their response, or add narrative to their original response by submitting those changes to me by providing a Microsoft Word document or e-mail. The participants could either provide a clean document, or they could use the “track changes” feature in Microsoft Word that shows changes made to an original document. Participants were also given the option to use a “new” Microsoft Word document because I am aware of a technique in Microsoft Word to compare two documents to identify changes even if the changed document did not use the “track

changes” feature. In either case, this feature could be used so that I can address any drastic changes in narrative during my analysis of the data of the study.

Data Analysis

After the 30 day data collection period for this study, only one potential study participant, code name MARCH, completed the survey. However, the data from the internal survey conducted by Maryland College included 203 faculty members. While in this study I did not reach the target sample size of eight to 10 faculty participants, the data obtained from MARCH was still valuable because the detailed narrative provided by MARCH cross referenced with the data of the 203 faculty members that responded to the internal survey conducted by Maryland College. The use of these two data sources provides usable data for analysis, and enhanced study validity through triangulation. Thus, I completed a data analysis on the data collected through the survey created for this study, as well as on the data provided by Maryland College from the internal survey they conducted adjacent to this study. Considering the efforts to also analyze the data provided through Maryland College’s internal survey, it is important to clarify, as was done in Figure 1, what questions Maryland College asked on their internal survey and how those questions relate to the RQs and the related survey questions for this study:

Research Question	Unstructured Survey Question	Maryland College Survey Question
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	a. How do you define academically prepared?	a. Do you feel that PLA is a valuable tool for recruitment, retention, and completion?
	b. Is there a difference in preparedness between types of programs (i.e. humanities, business technology, health, etc)?	b. Would PLA work as a potential tool that would benefit your department?
	c. Is there a difference in preparedness between type of courses (i.e. general education, cores, etc)?	c. Would PLA work as a potential tool that would benefit your department?
	d. Do you find that the academic preparedness of these students is predictable or unpredictable?	d. Do you feel that PLA is a valuable tool for recruitment, retention, and completion?
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	a. Are there characteristics of the prior learning program at your college that you think are negative? If so, what are they?	a. Why would PLA work as a potential tool that would benefit your department?
	b. Are there characteristics of prior learning programs at your college that you think are positive? If so, what are they?	b. If you know of any PLA that your department uses, please select it. You may select multiple answers. c. Why would PLA work as a potential tool that would benefit your department?
	c. Are there characteristics of prior learning programs that you have previously experienced that you think are missing from the prior learning programs at your college? If so, what are they?	d. Are you familiar with Prior Learning Assessment* (PLA) at [redacted]?
	d. What characteristics of prior learning programs at your college do you think are most beneficial?	e. Are you, or someone in your department using PLA? You may select multiple answers. f. Why would PLA work as a potential tool that would benefit your department?

Figure 2. The study research question, the related study survey question, and related Maryland College survey question

I performed an analysis of both data resources using a coding system based on Gorden's (1992) basic steps in coding. These steps included defining coding categories, assigning category symbols, classifying relevant information, and testing coding reliability (Gorden, 1992). As a result, the data analysis resulted in the following:





Defined Coding Categories	Assigned Category Symbols
Characteristics of academically prepared students	 (highlight and underline)
Student college/classroom performance	 (highlight and circle)
Positive characteristics of a PLA program	 (underline)
Negative characteristics of a PLA program	 (circle no highlight)

Figure 3. The coding categories and category symbols

After coding categories were defined, and category symbols were assigned, I analyzed data to classify the relevant information in the narratives provided by MARCH and the qualitative narratives provided in the Maryland College survey to the appropriate category. The relevant information was identified as the narrative was read and reread using the assigned category symbols. All of this was completed manually. The coding was tested for reliability by testing identified relevant information for synonymies.

Complimenting Gorden's steps, I used the coding system to identify data trends by acknowledging recurring words or ideas. I identified recurring ideas during the review of narratives provided in both the data collected from the survey for this study, and the internal survey by Maryland College. As previously stated, Maryland College's internal survey was mixed method in that it included both quantitative data, which were counts of

faculty that agreed with a provided selection of responses, and qualitative data, which was faculty participants narrative responses of why they thought that the college's PLA program. In regards, 17% of the faculty participants of Maryland College's internal survey provided data to the qualitative portion of the college' survey. I identified recurring words and then coded them for their relationship to ideas, thoughts, or opinions related to the RQs for this study. The outcomes of coding and the identification of recurring words identified in the analysis of the survey are summarized in the following chart:

Research Question	Defined Coding Categories	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Study Survey)	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Maryland College Survey)
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	Characteristics of academically prepared students	Motivated Focused Multi-Tasker Independent	Skilled Worker Motivated
	Student college/classroom performance	Knowledge Knowledge depth Knowledge application Knowledge concepts Foundation Independent	Active participant Developed Worker Know how Experience
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	Positive characteristics of a PLA program	Time Time benefits Faster program completion Options Independent	Time Recognition of knowledge obtained
	Negative characteristics of a PLA program	Less engagement With faculty With peers Wrong expectations Less work, faster degree	Outdated/inapplicable skills Abused Program limitations

Figure 4. The coding outcome of the study data, and the recurring words that emerge.

Credibility

It has been noted earlier of my efforts to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings of this study. One such effort was allowing for the study participant, MARCH, to member check their responses to the survey for this study. The participant was given the opportunity to review their narrative responses for accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012) both while completing the survey on the website SurveyMonkey.com before submitting their responses, and after the 30 day study collection period where the participant was allotted another 14 days to review their responses before the responses were considered final.

Another effort taken to ensure accuracy and credibility was by addressing potential researcher bias. As previously discussed, a small level of bias may occur with my employment for the U.S. government. This potential bias was projected to be small because my employment only entails PLA as part of an experimental sites program. That program is seeking to collect data on student academic outcomes of credit for prior learning programs and federal student aid received; specifically what the academic achievement outcome would be if the U.S. government allowed access to federal Title IV student aid to pay for prior learning assessment programs. Currently federal Title IV student aid cannot be used to pay for prior learning assessment. Bias was kept controllable during this study because the U.S. government experimental program had not been fully launched at the time of this study, and there are no expected or stated outcomes for the U.S. government experimental program that may contribute to

assumptions related to this study. Simply stated, I have no ideas or opinions on the outcome of either this study or the U.S. government experimental program.

This case study ensures creditability and validity through a number of different general academic methods including member checking, coding, addressing bias, and purposive sampling. The Figure 5 provides a summary of these efforts:

Internal Validity and Credibility	Member checking both– At survey completion After 30 data collection period
	Study participant access to researcher for questions/concerns/changes
	Study site collaboration/adjacent survey
	Audit trails
Reliability, Consistency, Dependability, and Accuracy	Code definitions
	Synonymous terms
	Statements to code terms
External Validity and Transferability	Addressing Bias
	Purposive Sampling
	Study site collaboration/adjacent survey

Figure 5. How the accuracy and creditability of the study are supported

Perhaps the most academic effort I took to ensure accuracy and creditability of this study is best explained by the idea of constructive philosophy and triangulation. As a case study that utilizes purposive sampling, the findings of this study are transferable to other schools in Maryland because they provide a constructivist philosophy. By a constructivist philosophy, those that review the study can associate the findings with their own experience (Walden University, n.d). Triangulation supports the validity and creditability of this study by allowing for convergence to be identified between the data from the survey for this study, and the data provided by the internal survey by Maryland College. The availability of the college's internal survey specifically allows for data

source triangulation where different data sources provided consistency (Patton, 1999). The study is provided creditability through constructive philosophy by the fact that a cross reference of the responses from the study participant for this study, and the responses by faculty for the internal study by Maryland College shows like themes in faculty ideas, thoughts and options. This means that while the survey for this case study and Maryland College's internal survey used different questions and methods, a data analysis identified trends in faculty perspectives that showed related, and in some cases, identical trends in participant narratives.

Demographic Information

As previously stated, this study focuses on Maryland College because they offer seven different prior learning assessment options. Maryland College offers prior learning assessment through portfolio assessment, AP, departmental exams, articulated credit by industry/apprenticeship, the CLEP, the DSST, and IB. In May 2016 Maryland College announced the development of an additional option for military experience. Maryland College's demographic of students also included a student pool where 96% of its students are nontraditional students based solely on age characteristics of 21 years old and older; 55% are 30 years old and older.

Participant Characteristics

According to Maryland College, the potential faculty participants can be qualified as either 10-month employees or 12-month employees, and have been specifically identified as working in the PLA program. In this case study I used a purposive sampling method where the participant pool was identified by Maryland College because of their

work with the college's PLA program (Northeastern University, n.d). The sampling size of eight to 10 faculty participants was chosen to allow for in-depth inquiry per individual participant. An eight to 10 faculty participant sample size appeared to be sufficient considering previous studies, like those conducted by CAEL, indication that PLA programs were not widely used by students or promoted by postsecondary institutions resulting in a low number of faculty members that would have experience in serving these students (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010).

Maryland College identified potential faculty participants for this study based on specific characteristics. The most obvious characteristic is that the faculty were involved in the PLA program so that they are aware of which students have earned credit through their PLA program. However, the director of the PLA program at Maryland College provided additional participant characteristics including characteristics of the PLA programs. This included identifying faculty who were a part of the 24 academic programs that awarded PLA credits at least three times in the 2014–2015 academic year, the 2015–16 academic year, or both. Maryland College noted that there were a few academic programs that awarded PLA more than 20 times each year, although most academic programs awarded PLA credits five to 10 times. This information is why Maryland College noted that there may be low response for this specific study and suggested that the communication about this study come from the director and not from myself. This information also implied why the target sample size of eight to 10 faculty members was not achieved.

The communication from the director of the PLA program at Maryland College included information of what characteristics they had that lead to the director contacting them. The communication to faculty included the fact that the potential faculty participants were receiving the communication from the director because their program awarded PLA credit at least three times in at least one of the last two academic years. The communication also clarified that, for the purpose of this study, PLA included: articulation agreements other than high school, departmental exam/credit by exam, military credit, and credit by portfolio. As previously stated, only one faculty member provided a letter of informed consent to participate in the study. That faculty member was provided the code name MARCH to ensure their confidentiality. In comparison 203 faculty members participated in Maryland College's internal survey, 35 of who provided narrative for the qualitative portion of the college's survey. The college's survey was also confidential.

Limitations

While in this qualitative case study I focused on faculty perspectives, the questions presented to the participating faculty did not ask for or require the disclosure of student specific information or class cohort specific academic performances. Although in this study I illuminated faculty perspective on student academic preparedness, in the study I did not collect numerical data on such performance, or request information from the faculty or from Maryland College of what policy the college has set as measurements for satisfactory academic performance or progress. The lack of this information affected any assumption that a faculty member's perspective of whether or not a student is

academically prepared also translates to an indication of the student's academic performance.

Data Analysis Results

As a reminder, it is important to understand that the data for this qualitative case study was collected by using a survey of unstructured questions made available on the internet through the website SurveyMonkey.com. Unstructured questions were used because they allow open dialogue. These types of questions also supported the trustworthiness of this study by allowing for deviations from my assumptions based on personal experience with PLA (Merriam, 2009). The director of the PLA program at Maryland College sent communication to potential faculty participants seeking participants for this study. In an attempt to garner faculty interest to participate in the study, the director of PLA program sent two correspondences to the college's prior learning assessment faculty pool: once during the launch of the study, and again 14 days into the study collection period. Faculty participants of the study were allotted 30 days to complete the survey. It should be noted that while the data collection period was 30 days, at any time during the 30 day data collection period, if a faculty member had responded with a letter of informed consent to participate in the study, that faculty member would have been allotted 30 days from the date of their letter of informed consent to complete the survey.

The target faculty participant sample size for this study was eight to 10 PLA faculty. By the end of the data collection period, only one faculty member, code name MARCH, completed the survey. Although I did not reach the target sample size of eight

to 10 faculty participants, because the qualitative study was conducted as a case study, the data obtain from MARCH was still valuable. Furthermore, failure to reach the target sample size for this study was cushioned by the adjacent internal mixed-method survey on the prior learning assessment program at Maryland College. Maryland College conducted their survey on faculty's perspectives of their prior learning assessment program two weeks before outreach to potential faculty participants for this study. The data from the survey conducted by Maryland College included 203 faculty members. Seventeen percent, or 35 of the 203 faculty members, provided data for the qualitative portion of the college's survey.

The data analysis of both data resources was performed using a coding system based on Gorden's (1992) basic steps in coding. These steps included defining coding categories, assigning category symbols, classifying relevant information, and testing coding reliability (Gorden, 1992). After coding categories were defined, and category symbols were assigned, the relevant information was identified as the narrative was read and reread, and the data was analyzed to classify the relevant information in the narratives to the appropriate category symbol. All of this was completed manually and the coding was tested for reliability by testing identified relevant information for synonymies. The coding outcomes where as follows:

Research Question	Defined Coding Categories	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Study Survey)	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Maryland College Survey)
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	Characteristics of academically prepared students	Motivated Focused Multi-Tasker Independent	Skilled Worker Motivated
	Student college/classroom performance	Knowledge Knowledge depth Knowledge application Knowledge concepts Foundation Independent	Active participant Developed Worker Know how Experience
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	Positive characteristics of a PLA program	Time Time benefits Faster program completion Options Independent	Time Recognition of knowledge obtained
	Negative characteristics of a PLA program	Less engagement With faculty With peers Wrong expectations Less work, faster degree	Outdated/inapplicable skills Abused Program limitations

Figure 6. The recurring words that emerge from the data analysis for the study.

Data Themes

The findings for this study were developed by analyzing the responses to the survey for this study. However, further analysis was conducted on the data provided by the internal survey conducted by Maryland College. As stated earlier, the data for both studies were analyzed using a coding method that allowed for the identification of recurring words and themes. Based on the analysis of the data, there appears to be recurring themes of foundational knowledge, independence, motivation, time, and program limitations. First, the response to the survey for this study by faculty member MARCH, was used to set a foundation for data themes. As presented in Figure 7, MARCH's response to the survey provided the themes of foundational knowledge, independence, motivation, time, and limitations. The data provided by the internal survey by Maryland College includes some of the same themes identified in the response by MARCH, but further expands on limitations.

Research Question	Defined Coding Categories	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Study Survey)	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Maryland College Survey)	Data Themes
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	Characteristics of academically prepared students	Motivated Focused Multi-Tasker Independent	Skilled Worker Motivated	Independence Motivation
	Student college/classroom performance	Knowledge Knowledge depth Knowledge application Knowledge concepts Foundation Independent	Active participant Developed Worker Know how Experience	Knowledge
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	Positive characteristics of a PLA program	Time Time benefits Faster program completion Options Independent	Time Recognition of knowledge obtained	Time Motivation
	Negative characteristics of a PLA program	Less engagement With faculty With peers Wrong expectations Less work, faster degree	Outdated/inapplicable skills Abused Program limitations	Time Knowledge Limitations

Figure 7. A summary of data themes that emerged during data analysis.

Generally it appeared that both the data provided by MARCH and the data provided on Maryland College's internal survey showed that the faculty participants think some of the same things about students that earned credits through the college's PLA program. Data showed that the participating faculty thought that students were motivated, knowledgeable, and were able to work independently and take advantage of time benefits when they complete the PLA program. However, the data from Maryland College's internal survey also showed that faculty believes that there are limitations to PLA. Those limitations will be discussed in more detail later.

Findings for RQ 1

The first RQ for this study was: How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs? This question was asked to obtain an idea of what faculty thought about students' academic performance after they earn credits through PLA programs. While no outcomes were expected, there was an underlying question that, regardless of the student's professional knowledge and experience, did faculty find that students can translate this knowledge and experience into college level academic performance? To allude to this information, the RQ was supported by specific survey questions. Those questions were:

- a. How do faculty *define* academically prepared?
- b. Is there a difference in preparedness between types of programs (i.e., humanities, business technology, health, etc.)?

- c. Is there a difference in preparedness between type of courses (i.e., general education, cores, etc.)?
- d. Do faculty find that the academic preparedness of these students is predictable or unpredictable?

MARCH provided that academically prepared nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA at Maryland College had a knowledgeable foundation, were motivated, focused, multi taskers, and knew how to work independently. In fact, within their response, MARCH mentioned these themes by frequently stating that these students were motivated, engaged, independent, individualistic, focused on performance, predictable, and able to demonstrate their knowledge. Further MARCH provided that:

“There are students who are academically prepared for college-level work because they (1) are highly motivated; (2) have learned to work independently with good results; (3) have been engaged in similar curricula in their previous institutions or experiences and (4) have had to multi-task in ways that are expected in the college environment.The academic preparedness of nontraditional students varies based on a number of factors: exposure to the pre-college curriculum; time out of academically-rich environment; ability to focus/concentrate and delve into college-level work with minor distractions to academic performance. Oftentimes, these students have learned to function in an individualistic environment, not having, necessarily benefitted from collectivistic opportunities like "group work". They oftentimes prefer not to have

cooperative learning experiences, unless they have a leadership role in the activity..... Students who seek credit for prior learning tend to be more predictable. When the student is able to demonstrate the awareness and basic knowledge of a topic area, it serves as a predictor of the foundational knowledge necessary to scaffold higher level learning (MARCH).”

Additionally, responses provided by MARCH also addressed the seemingly over-reaching idea of academic preparedness, and how the data theme of knowledge is relative. In one response, MARCH suggested that there is a difference in academic preparedness between students in humanities majors, and students majoring in technical areas like business or mathematics. This may suggest that the level of academic preparedness and the relationship of the data themes identified in this study are relative to the student’s major.

“In the humanities, the focus tends to concentrate on ethereal instead of theoretical or formulaic. These students "get" the "big picture" to the depth that allows more conversation and engagement. Those majoring in business, social sciences, math and technical areas pay greater attention to being able to apply formulas and theories to their learning. Therefore, they are more likely to look for the "one right answer" and not be interested in the richness of the learning process. These individuals focus on the performance and presentation of information

instead of the articulation of the nuances involved in the learning enterprise (MARCH).”

Furthermore, MARCH’s data provided a notion that faculty that teach students who earn credit for PLA may be able to identify these differences in academic preparedness. MARCH suggested that students who seek to earn credits through PLA are more predictable than students who do not seek to earn credits through PLA, and are able to demonstrate foundational knowledge.

Findings for RQ 2

The second RQ for this study was: Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these nontraditional students? This question was asked to identify if faculty feel like the academic preparedness of students who seek to earn credits through prior learning assessment is attributed by the PLA program itself. The RQ was presented to give faculty an opportunity to identify if there is any relationship between the designed PLA program and the student’s academic performance.

The responses from MARCH as well as the qualitative data from the survey conducted by Maryland College presented the data themes of time and limitations. Within their responses, MARCH provided that the PLA program at Maryland College gave students great time advantages because the students were able to finish their academic program faster.

“The fact that students can earn up to 75% of their requirements with PLA's is exceptional... this institution offers more PLAs than my previous institution...The fact that there are a number of PLAs is key. The fact that students can earn up to 75% of their credits with PLAs gives the student a faster "time to degree"; is more cost-efficient; and honors the learning that the student brings to the college environment (MARCH).”

MARCH also presented limitations from two different views: (a) a positive view that the PLA program at Maryland College removes barriers to students by providing a number of PLA options, and (b) a negative view that the PLA program distorts academic expectations.

“It needs to be understood that the PLAs have to be done well (i.e., portfolio assessment) and have to demonstrate the requisite knowledge for the major/program. Most of the PLA's at this institution focus on giving a student an overall sense of the foundational knowledge they will be required to know in order to be successful in the college classroom...Typically, the experiences are positive ones because they are (a) time-limited; (b) available at varying times; and (c) provide timely outcome data so that they student is able to take advantage of the curriculum offered... While the College has an 75% acceptance of PLAs, this lessens the students' opportunity to engage with faculty and students

around the coursework. This can be seen as a "negative." It is not the programs that are negative, but sometimes, the degree to which students believe that the material will be easy or a "quick remedy" to fulfilling their academic goals (MARCH).”

Discussion of RQ 1

RQ 1 of this study focused on how the faculty described the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs. The data provided by MARCH revealed that academically prepared nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA have a knowledgeable foundation, are motivated, focused, multitaskers and know how to work independently. Additionally the findings provide that academic preparedness is relative to the academic major because there may be a difference in academic preparedness between students in humanities majors, and students majoring in technical areas like business or mathematics. However, the findings suggested that once faculty are experienced in PLA they will find that students were more predictable in their academic performance and were able to demonstrate foundational knowledge. What is likely most interesting is that the data provided by MARCH appeared to be in alignment with the data provided by the qualitative portion of the internal survey conducted by Maryland College.

As a reminder, the qualitative portion of the survey conducted by Maryland College asked faculty to expand on the question of whether the faculty thought that PLA would work as a potential tool that would benefit their academic program. Related to the this study, the internal survey by Maryland College provided data that suggest that

faculty thought that students that take advantage of PLA would be motivated, have technical skills, and extensive knowledge of industry vocabulary.

“I see how PLA is a valuable tool for student recruitment.”

“...some of them might benefit from an exam about specific industries they've worked in that includes bilingual training, and how extensive their vocabulary is within that industry.”

“I'm all for allowing students multiple ways to demonstrate their abilities, and to more accurately place them, however.”

“We have many career changers who return to start their education at [Maryland College]. Giving the opportunity for them to earn credit from work experience would serve as a motivation for people in similar circumstance who may feel that going to school represents a "do over" versus a continuation of their professional experience”

However, the faculty at Maryland College also suggested issues and limitations in the foundational knowledge that the students have and, like MARCH, shared the relative view of academic preparedness and the use of PLA across academic majors. While more detail into PLA programs and it's usage across academic majors is discussed below with RQ 2, the faculty that responded to Maryland College's survey suggested that even

foundational knowledge cannot be translated into prior learning credits. They also suggested that not all students in all academic programs can utilize PLA programs.

“I’m not sure if it works in courses where active participation and assessment of that participation is part of the grade.”

“Because many of our courses tend to be survey courses, there are not very many experiences one would have that expose someone to all that is covered in a course.”

“Philosophy is pretty specifically academic, and it's difficult to think of anything but college transfer credit that would satisfy our common core requirements”

“We need to revise PLA options for English credit, and we need to develop additional types of assessments.”

“I’m in chemistry and folks don't tend to pick that up through lived experience. I think it's a wonderful idea though.”

“Students need to have updated skills, assessing PLA on out-dated skills would be a waste of time for both the student and the faculty.”

Discussion of RQ 2

RQ 2 for this study was: Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these nontraditional students? This question was asked to give faculty an opportunity to identify if there is any relationship between the PLA program at the college and the student’s academic performance. The responses from MARCH as well as the qualitative data from the internal survey conducted by Maryland College presented data themes of time and limitations. MARCH provided that the PLA program at Maryland College gave students the opportunity to finish their academic program faster, and presented two views of limitations: (a) a positive view that the PLA program at Maryland College presents a number of different opportunities at different times, and (b) a negative view that the PLA program distorts academic expectations as students expected faster results, and an easier way to meet academic requirements. The findings presented in the internal survey conducted by Maryland College presented some of the same insights including limitations to the academic preparedness of these students based on a student’s life and professional experience, and limitations on the student’s academic performance depending on the availability of PLA in the student’s academic major. In short, while the insight on MARCH’s data focuses on the limitations on the *student*, the faculty that

participated in the college's internal survey focused on *program* limitations based on academic majors.

In the qualitative portion of the internal survey conducted by Maryland College, the faculty participants noted that, while PLA programs are great in theory, there are limitations to the use of PLA in different academic programs. First, the faculty noted that PLA programs cannot be used in academic programs that are heavily dictated by organic accreditation agency and state requirements. As examples they cite licensure and health programs. On a related note, even when programs are not heavily dictated by accreditation agency and state requirements, some faculty members noted programs and industries where the knowledge can become outdated, or where knowledge, even if in seemingly the same field is not translatable. For an example of knowledge that seems to be in the same field but cannot translate to measurable knowledge for the associated academic program, the faculty noted military veterans with healthcare experience that is not the same as civilian standards.

“Many veterans want a health career based on their military experiences. Their experiences do not meet the expectations of the civilian standards, code of ethics and professionalism.”

“Our department falls under the School of Health Professions and is very specific about the certifications and education required to obtain work as a licensed professional. The curriculum really must be completed through an accredited program.”

“Being a licensed Program we need to follow our governing body for accreditation issues.”

The nursing program is select admission and needs specific criteria in which to compare one student to another.”

One last interesting insight was the faculty’s concerns with how PLA credits translate outside of Maryland College. This is another limitation presented by the faculty who completed the internal survey conducted by Maryland College. In the survey faculty express concerns that credits awarded based on PLA are not transferable outside of Maryland College.

“It is beneficial, but my understanding is that the credits count at [Maryland College] but often don't transfer to a 4-year university, which is a problem.”

“PLA sounds good in theory but some institutions do not recognize PLA credits. Transfer students who wish to attend a four year school that does not accept PLA credits will find themselves taking the class(s) elsewhere at a much higher cost. I wonder if we are doing them a favor or a disservice by accepting PLA credits.”

For example, if the students needed 67 credits to finish their associates degree program at Maryland College, and that student earned 30 credits through PLA, and earned 12 credits through traditional coursework, then if the student transferred out of Maryland College, the student's new college would evaluate the 12 credits of traditional coursework for transfer into the student's new program, but not the 30 credits earned through PLA. This is an interesting point, but it fails to acknowledge another outlook. For example, while PLA credits are not transferable outside of Maryland College, if the student completed their degree program at the college, the degree would be recognize as completed, and would be accepted for transfer, employment, or admissions to a new program. So, for the same example, if the same student earned 30 credits through PLA, and then earned 37 credits through traditional coursework, then the student would have completed their academic program and would have earned an associate's degree. As a result, if the student enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at another college that accepted the student's associate degree as a recognized degree, then because the new college accepted the associates degree, they have inadvertently also accepted the prior learning credits. While a new college would not accept prior learning credits solely for transfer, a new college would accept an earned degree for transfer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a qualitative case study was chosen to allow for the collection of narrative data that explores the in-depth experience of the faculty participants. The data that Maryland College provided from their internal survey on their faculties' perceptions of the college's PLA program shares some of the same insights as the data collected for

this study. The project for this case study will be a white paper that will provide that the findings suggested that faculty believe that nontraditional students at Maryland College who earned credits through PLA are independent, motivated, and knowledgeable, but whether or not they are academically prepared can vary by academic program. The findings also suggested that PLA programs provide a time benefit to students because they are able to earn their degree in a shorter time span. However, PLA programs also have some limitations. These limitations include students having unrealistic expectations of the ease of which they should be able to earn credits through PLA, and limitations in how well current PLA programs can be used across a variety of academic programs. In Section 3, I will present an additional outline of the project conducted for this study including the rationale, description, evaluation, and the findings relative to the literature review.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

As previously stated, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to gather faculty perspectives regarding the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earn credits through prior learning. The findings of this study are presented in a white paper that can be used for further development of credit for PLA programs and faculty professional development initiatives. By focusing on the nontraditional student and PLA programs in this study, I provided faculty a resource to identify potential obstacles when addressing student learning assessment methods. This focus also allowed me to provide colleges with information to identify opportunities for further innovation in their nontraditional student programs and services.

Description and Goals

To begin, the project for this evaluation is the evaluation itself and the position paper is the product in which the project is presented. In this qualitative case study, I sought to illuminate the experience, comments, ideas, and feedback from faculty at Maryland College on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA. The goal of this study is to also provide a tool for Maryland College to evaluate their PLA programs.

In this study, I expanded on CAEL's finding that faculty believe that PLA works best in specific academic programs because the findings of this study suggested that students are knowledgeable, but the idea of academic preparedness is relative to the academic program in which the student is enrolled. The data for this study suggested that

academic programs can be grouped into two categories: (a) theoretical majors and (b) formulaic majors. The study presented by CAEL (2010) agreed as their findings suggested that PLA works best in academic areas including occupational and public service, criminal justice, early childhood education, business, computer science, and military training.

An additional goal of this study was to narrow the issue to the confines of Maryland. Although CAEL's study included schools in Maryland, the report did not provide detail about Maryland schools individually. In this study, I further expanded on CAEL's finding by localizing the issue to Maryland, specifically asking faculty for their perspectives on nontraditional student academic preparedness when they earn credits through PLA programs at Maryland College. Lastly, through the findings of this study I also provide resources for further development of PLA programs and faculty professional development initiatives. The results of this study can also be used as a resource for Maryland College's accreditation and reaccreditation reports and self-studies with MSCHE as well as the colleges' internal program effectiveness assessments.

Rationale

The rationality of this study can be traced back to the evidence of the problem at a local level. The increased interest in improving college affordability and academic program outcome assessments has resulted in PLA programs garnering increased attention by colleges throughout the United States, including the state of Maryland. However, the subject of PLA programs was localized to Maryland because the MSCHE, which serves as the regional accreditation body for the state of Maryland, had recently

narrowed their focus on PLA programs (MSCHE, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In MSCHE's most recent report of accreditation standards and guides, the accreditation agency promoted learning-centered paradigms, which would include PLA programs. The MSCHE (2007) also heavily suggested the inclusion of faculty in the development and continued learning assessments within these programs.

Additional evidence of the problem at the local level was evident when colleges in Maryland, such as ACOM, Towson University, and Stevenson University, took action to increase their efforts to serve nontraditional students by offering nontraditional student specific student services as well as credit for prior learning programs. Each of these colleges acknowledged serving seemingly substantial populations of nontraditional students and had created specialized programs and student services that addressed these students' unique needs. Some of these unique needs included flexibility with academic schedules, family orientations, and consideration of the student's extensive personal and professional responsibilities outside of the classroom (ACOM, n.d.). For example, the Turning Point program at ACOM provides nontraditional students with program coordinators and student advocates to assist them with resources in subjects such as college applications, financial aid, scholarships, student success services, advising, career exploration, workshops, mentoring, advocacy, and the recognition of the life experience that their perspective brings to their academic study (ACOM, n.d.). Studying a credit for prior learning program at Maryland College provided access to a developed credit for PLA program, as well as a substantial population of nontraditional students.

Finally, while this study is mostly beneficial to Maryland College because they are the participating institution, programs like the Turning Point program at ACOM can use this study to contribute to the dialogue that they may have to further develop, enhance, and support their nontraditional students. Likewise, educational leaders at other colleges may find this study a useful tool as they discuss and further develop their PLA and faculty development programs. These educational leaders may also find this study useful because this study provides feedback from faculty who has taught these students. Through this feedback, educational leaders can develop ideas of how these students performed academically and what support services and academic interventions these students may require to succeed academically.

Review of the Literature

As noted previously in this section, a few findings, theories, and suggestions for additional research derived from the literature review were evident and reflected in the findings of this study. This included the suggestion that the theoretical framework of this study, Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory, is still relevant. This is because the findings of this study suggested that these adult students are knowledgeable and motivated and that PLA offerings vary by academic programs and departments.

Study Findings and Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

First, the NCES has performed trend analysis and have tracked the growth of nontraditional students since 1986. The center noted that by the year 2000, 73% of undergraduate students in postsecondary institutions in the United States met at least one of their characteristics of the nontraditional student (NCES, 2002). Other studies

expanded on the findings of NCES noting that NCES data showed that by fall 2011 students under the age of 21 only accounted for 29% of enrolled undergraduates at residential colleges (CCA, 2012). This study found that by 2016, 96% of students at Maryland College were considered nontraditional students by age alone. The growth of nontraditional students has inspired different colleges, like Maryland College, to develop initiatives to better serve the needs and educational expectations of these students. Initiatives like these support studies like those of Freed and Mollick (2010), Muller (2012), Klein-Collins and Hain (2009), Joosten-ten Brinke et al. (2010), and Arnold (2010). These researchers discussed the importance of determining the student's ability to learn through PLAs by determining what constitutes as college-level learning and which student learning models and methods can be incorporated into PLA to maximize learning measurements.

Additionally, Brigham et al. (2010) reported that many nontraditional students do not receive credit for college-level learning because they do not enroll into these programs, while Travers (2013) and Leiste and Jensen (2011) discussed factors that colleges should incorporate in their PLA programs to support a program that provides the greatest opportunity for students. The findings of this study suggested the same ideas in that the data analysis shows that what constitutes as college-level learning and which methods of PLA should be used depends greatly on the academic program. The findings of this study also suggested that measurements and methods will need to be designed in a way that recognizes the different academic programs and the different capstones of knowledge, either theoretical or formulaic.

Studies by Quick (2012), the CAEL (2011), Klein-Collins et al. (2010), Lane (2012), and Lambe (2011) discussed whether PLA programs specifically predicted better writing performance and whether these PLA programs improved adult student degree completion and retention rates. In relation, Popova-Gounci and Tobol (2012), Hoffman et al. (2010), Traver et al. (2011), and Kamenetz (2011) each presented cases on best practices in credit for prior learning programs and ways in which these programs can be detrimental if they are mismanaged. The authors noted that examples of mismanagement included mistakenly awarding credits for prior learning for unrelated experience or awarding credits to students who lack the ability to practice their experiential knowledge in academic, analytical, or critical thinking application. These ideas agreed with the findings of this study in that PLA may need to be designed in a way that addresses differences in knowledge based on academic programs. These ideas are also conducive with the limitations noted in this study as some faculty believed that not all knowledge can be translated across the same field. The example used by one faculty was that military knowledge, while in the same field, is sometimes not to the same standards as civilian knowledge.

Study Findings and Prior Learning Assessment Program Processes

Klein-Collins and Hain (2009) discussed PLA methods and the frequency of their use. They found that most institutions used standardized exams like those administered through the CLEP and AP for PLA. The authors did note that their research found that, while portfolios were not the most commonly used method at the time, prior learning portfolio methods were on the rise. In the study, the authors reported that prior learning

portfolio methods were being offered by 66% of the institutions that participated in the study which was an increase from 55% in 1996. The quantitative data of the adjacent internal survey conducted by Maryland College found that, of the seven PLA methods offered by Maryland College, CLEP/AP, departmental examinations, and portfolio were the most widely used PLA methods. The quantitative portion of Maryland College's survey found that 30% of faculty stated that their academic department used credit by external examination like CLEP/AP, 23% use credit by departmental examination, and 18% use portfolio assessments. These usage percentages were compared to the other PLA options where usage ranged from 5% for apprenticeships to 13% for military credits.

In an article by Josten-ten Brinke et al. (2010), the authors conducted open-ended interviews and provided questionnaires to 10 assessors from six different educational programs. Based on the information that was collected, the authors found that there were three different types of assessors: course examiners, prior learning assessors, and assessment committees. Within these roles, the assessors generally followed similar processes that included the assessment of individual student portfolios that were further discussed in a team environment. The authors did not find consensus in a number of areas resulting in nonconsensus on the overall PLA decision making process and inconclusive results on the assessors perception of whether items included in prior learning portfolios were relevant, usable, and fair. This finding in their study suggested that there is validity to the findings of this study that PLA may not work as a one size fits all model across academic programs as students' academic preparedness and knowledge depends on academic program.

In terms of a positive learning experience in PLA programs, Leiste and Jensen (2011) took a detailed look at the PLA program at Capella University. The researchers sought to identify which features of the program at the university provided a positive PLA experience. Overall, the authors found that a PLA program that provided a positive experience was motivating, enabled success, and fostered efficiency. However, Leiste and Jensen stated that further research was needed on how to motivate more students to attempt PLA, what training and professional development PLA program faculty and staff need, as well as what methods can improve efficiency. The findings of this study provided further research and suggested agreement with Leiste and Jensen's findings because the findings of this study presented the idea that faculty at Maryland College believe that students that earn credits through PLA *are* motivated. The findings of this study also suggested that, in what could be considered as improving efficiency, that clarification is needed of what an easier degree means.

Lastly, other resources that presented cases on best practices in PLA programs were Popova-Gounci and Tobol (2012), Hoffman, et. al. (2010), Traver, et. al. (2011), and Kamenetz (2011). The authors discussed ways in which these programs can be detrimental if they are mismanaged. For example, in their 2012 study, Popova-Gounci and Tobol warned that prior learning programs can easily support diploma mill practices where unskilled or ill-knowledgeable students are awarded college degrees (Popova-Gounci & Tobol, 2012). The findings of this study suggest that PLA programs should be designed in a way that addresses the possibility not that all experiences and knowledge, while in the same field, translate to college-level learning.

Study Findings and Defining and Measuring College-Level Learning

The studies and articles by Muller (2012), Freed and Mollick (2010), Klein-Collins and Hain (2009), Joosten-ten Brinke, et. al. (2010), and Arnold (2010) discussed the importance of using PLA to determine the student's ability to learn. They also discussed methods to ensure that college-level learning is measured correctly. For example, in the study, "Using Prior Learning Assessment in Adult Baccalaureate Degrees in Texas" Freek and Mollick attempted to identify existing PLA processes for nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs at postsecondary institutions in Texas. They also attempted to determine whether or not Dr. Whitaker's quality standards for PLA programs were reached. In the study the researchers used a mixed-model design and found that the most dominate PLA method used was a standardized exam, and that 60% of respondents indicated that credit was never awarded based on life experience alone. This may relate to the data provided for this study because the quantitative portion of the internal survey by Maryland College presents that 41% of academic programs provide prior learning credits through examination. The findings of this study also suggested, like Freek and Molicks' finding, that students believed that prior learning was not measured by life experience alone, that students expect an "easier degree".

Study Findings and Academic Performance and Learning Outcome Measurements

In their studies, Brigham et al. (2010), Travers (2013), and Leiste and Jensen (2011) discussed the ability of students to take advantage of PLA programs. These studies presented findings that suggested that students' desire and ability to participate in PLA programs is not as extensive and open as would be expected. In a study published

by CAEL, Brigham et. al. found that, while most of the 88 respondents from 81 community colleges in 20 different states acknowledge that they have a PLA program, most respondents also reported that nontraditional students that could likely benefit from the program do not take advantage of it. One interesting aspect of the study by Brigham et. al. coincides with the findings of this study, that PLAs usability and student academic preparedness depends on the academic program. Brigham et. al. reported that PLA programs are better utilized in occupational and public service areas, as well as subjects in criminal justice, early childhood education, business, and computer science.

Quick (2012), Lane (2012), and Lambe (2011) discussed the use of PLA programs, ways that students can improve their performance in prior learning program essays, and correlations between prior learning programs and adult student completion rates. The authors discussed higher completion rates among adult students that earn credit for prior learning (Lane, 2012). This appears to agree with the findings of this study that students that earn credits at Maryland College through PLA are motivated and earn their degree in a shorter amount of time. On a related note, Hoffman et. al. (2010) found that PLA programs benefited from experienced evaluators across different varieties of academic areas. The authors also found that the evaluations provided to students should be supported by a strong academic foundation, support student centered learning, and have a clear commitment to giving the student's assessment ample time for a detailed and fair assessment process. Lastly, providing further triangulation to the limitations of student expectations of an "easier degree," Kamenetz provided a student view of their

experience in a prior learning portfolio process noting that the student described the process as a grueling.

Project Description

As previously discussed, postsecondary institutions are seeking innovative ways to better serve the increased population of nontraditional students. PLA programs is one way that they have been able to achieve this because these programs provide nontraditional college credits for professional experience and life learning. In this study I provided that Knowles' andragogy theory, which states that experience and real life application contribute to adult learning, is supported by PLA programs because these programs seek to award student's academic credits based on the measurement of real life application and experience of classroom concepts. To show that PLA programs support Knowles' andragogy theory, this study explored faculty perspectives at Maryland College of nontraditional student academic preparedness to complete college level work when the student is awarded credits based on this measurement of real life application and experience.

Maryland College's access to faculty for the participation in this study, as well as the access to the data from their internal study provided a resource to the support and tools needed to complete this study. A barrier to completing the white paper was the threat to the outcomes of the study because of the potential low faculty participation rates. However, this barrier was address as Maryland College shared the data from their internal study to be included with the analysis of data that was collected specifically for this study. The information presented in the white paper was completed at the time of the

data analysis for this study and suggest that the findings of this study support Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory, which is the theoretical framework of this study by suggesting that students who earned credits through PLA: (a) are independent, (b) have foundational knowledge, and (c) are motivated. The following chart presents a visual alignment of the findings of this study with Knowles' andragogy theory:

Knowles' Andragogy – Principles of Andragogy	Study Findings
1. Adult Learners are self-directed	1. Students who earn credits through prior learning assessment are independent
2. Adult Learners have experience that provides a learning resource	2. Students who earned credits through prior learning assessment have foundational knowledge
3. Adult learners desire to learn to align to social roles	3. Students who earned credits through prior learning assessment have foundational knowledge and are motivated
4. Adult learners are problem centered and apply education more immediately	5. Students who earned credits through prior learning assessment have foundational knowledge and are motivated

Figure 8. How Knowles' andragogy theory relates to study findings

Project Evaluation Plan

As previously noted, the first attempts of PLA programs began in the 1970s under the knowledge-based learning paradigm (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010; Freed & Mollick, 2010). The trend towards knowledge-based learning continued to the present day and includes innovations which were considered to be learning-centered paradigms. In the learning-centered paradigm the focus is the student's acquisition and use of

knowledge, instead of the student's retention of information received, which is the case in teaching-centered paradigms (Huba & Freed, 2000). The findings of this study are presented in a summative white paper and present an interesting snap shot in time showing that the knowledge-based learning trend continued to evolve into today's versions of PLA programs. A summative white paper seems appropriate since the data is qualitative and provided as narrative data, and because Maryland College is interested in a presentation on thoughts and suggestions based on the narrative provided by faculty.

It should be noted that the target sampling size of this study was eight to 10 faculty members. This appeared to be sufficient sampling size because other studies on PLA suggested that PLA programs are not widely used by students or promoted by postsecondary institutions. Studies also suggest that the pool of faculty members to serve these students is kept relatively small. The director of the PLA programs at Maryland College provided the same warning when reaching out to faculty for participants for this study. In fact, the director projected the small participant pool of less than the eight to 10 faculty member targets. This is why Maryland College offered to share the data of their own internal survey to assist with the analysis for this study. Their offering to provide the data from their internal survey not only help to alleviate issues with only having one faculty member responding to this study, but provided a strong case for triangulation because the internal survey provided data to show that 30% of the 203 faculty that completed their internal survey generally agreed with the one faculty member who provided detailed narrative for this study.

Lastly, the stakeholders for this project include nontraditional students who may find PLA a valuable tool in their pursuit of postsecondary education, but also postsecondary institutions like Maryland College who are serving large populations of nontraditional students. As I have provided in this study, student demographic data at Maryland College supports the growing nontraditional student trends that have been tracked by NCES since 1986 and studies by organizations like CAEL. As previously provided, the nontraditional student population of Maryland College was reported at 96% when viewed only by the nontraditional student characteristic of age.

Project Implications

Local Community

Maryland College's large population of nontraditional students provided evidence of the need for postsecondary institutions in Maryland to develop and provide programs and services that meet the needs of nontraditional students as balance course work and life. The use of a PLA program also means that students lower the cost to their degree by decreasing the amount of time they must take complete their academic program. There is a direct positive effect on the community as nontraditional students are able to better manage their work, life, and educational obligations. This study supports positive social change by providing a resource that can be used during program and faculty development as colleges consider creating or expanding PLA programs.

Far-Reaching

Another social change that this study presents is addressing the perception of the value of postsecondary education in the general community. This study suggests important insight on how prepared students are for the college courses and in completing the PLA program. As the findings of the study suggest, faculty believe that students have a misconception on the benefits of PLA as some students expect an easy degree rather than a faster degree. However, the efforts of postsecondary institutions to design PLA programs to be more beneficial to the student than the college, by decreasing cost and time to degree, may improve on social perception on the value of higher education. This means that the community may begin to view colleges as improving their morale as they appear more concerned with educational outcomes than financial gains.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experience, comments, ideas, and feedback from faculty at Maryland College on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA programs. The findings that I present in this study suggest that faculty believe that nontraditional students at Maryland College who earned credits through PLA are independent, motivated, and knowledgeable. The findings also suggest that the PLA programs provide time benefits to students, by allowing them to complete their degree in less time resulting in lower cost. Finally, the findings suggest that there are limitations in PLA programs. This includes unsupported expectations where student assume the ease of which they should be able to earn credits through PLA, and limitations of how well current PLA programs can be used

across a variety of academic programs. In Section 4 I would provide reflections of my experience in conducting this study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experience, comments, ideas, and feedback from faculty at Maryland College on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students that earn credits through credit for prior learning programs. My findings seem to agree with Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory. In andragogy theory, Knowles provided four assumptions and principles of andragogy: (a) that adult learnings are self-directed, (b) that adult learners have experience that provides a learning resource, (c) that adult learners desire to learn is aligned to their social roles, and (d) that adult learners are problem centered and apply education more immediately than child learners (TEAL, 2011). The findings of this case study agreed with Knowles' theory as they suggested that faculty believe that nontraditional students at Maryland College who earned credits through PLA are independent, motivated, and knowledgeable. However, faculty concluded that whether or not that translates to the students being academically prepared depends on the academic program that the student is seeking credits towards.

While faculty at Maryland College seemingly has a positive outlook on the nontraditional students who earned credits through the PLA programs, the findings of the study also suggested that there are limitations in PLA. These include unsupported student perceptions of the ease of which they should be able to earn credits through PLA and how well PLA programs can be used across a variety of academic programs. In this section, I will conclude the study with my reflections on this study as the researcher, as a student of Walden University, and as a postsecondary education practitioner.

Project Strengths and Limitations

I identified two general strengths to this project. The most prominent strength was Maryland Colleges' seemingly full support and personal investment into this study. While the approval of the IRB at Maryland College is a general indication that the college would allow access to their faculty for this case study, the college's willingness to share its internal survey on the same subject spoke volumes of their personal investment in this study. The college's willingness to share their internal survey, along with the fact that the survey was within the same subject matter and conducted around the same period of time, added strength to this study by providing triangulation and elevating the project's validity.

Another strength of this project was Maryland College's large population of nontraditional students and the well-developed PLA program. Maryland College is a college that appears to dominate in the enrollment of nontraditional students. The college's participation in this study strengthened the study because their participation displays relevance to not only the geographical area of Maryland but also to the college specifically as it seeks to review and improve its own practices.

The most obvious limitation of this project was the fact that the target sample size of eight to 10 faculty participants was not reached. However, the willingness of Maryland College to share the data from their own internal survey helped to address, and in some ways alleviate, the level of which that failure affected this study. Failure to reach a target sample size of eight to 10 faculty participants was alleviated because the internal survey conducted by Maryland College included a qualitative portion which was answered by

30% of the 203 faculty members that responded to the survey. In addition, Maryland College sharing their survey increased the triangulation of this study to a level in which the outcomes of the study addressed the potential doubt of its validity and relevancy.

Another potential limitation of this project was its applicability to postsecondary institutions without PLA programs or with programs that are not as developed or comprehensive as Maryland College's program. As MARCH stated in the study, the PLA program at Maryland College offered more PLAs than their previous college. This fact suggested that Maryland College's faculty will have a perspective on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who earn credits for PLA at a college that has a well-developed PLA. In short, this means that a limitation of this project is that the faculty was providing a prospective based on an experience from a well-developed and well-run program, which may not be the case in all PLA programs at colleges in Maryland.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

As previously stated, the limitation of not receiving the target sample size of this study was remediated when Maryland College shared its internal survey for this study. The college's internal survey asked for the perspective of their faculty on not only the availability of PLA programs at the college but also the faculty's perspective on strengths and weaknesses of PLA programs at the college. The internal survey conducted by Maryland College included 203 faculty, many of which would have been the same potential faculty pool for this study. It is hard to determine if the low rate of faculty participants for this study was because the faculty had just completed a survey in the

same subject for the college or if the low rate of participants was because the faculty was simply not interested in participating in the study. I would be inclined to believe that the low response to this study was from low interest since the director of the PLA program at the college warned, even during the IRB process, that they did not believe many faculty would respond to participate in the study. Maryland College projected low participation because of faculty work load and low student PLA activity. The fact that the college conducted their survey about two weeks before this study was a huge benefit to this study. That stated, should a study on PLA be conducted, a way to remediate possible low study participant rates, is to work as closely or in collaboration with the post postsecondary institution to help identify and recruit faculty participants.

To remediate the limitation of this project in its applicability to colleges without well-developed PLA programs, readers may want to consider using the faculty perspectives in this study as a tool to identify measurements to assess their own program. For example, if a college conducts its own survey of its PLA program and findings suggested that faculty generally have a negative view of the program, the results of this study showed that there cannot likely be an assumption that faculty do not *like* PLA, but rather there are aspects of the PLA program at the college that can be improved. Furthermore, other researchers and colleges may want to ensure that their research questions are clear about what opinion is being asked. Be clear about whether the potential study aims to find out more about the students, the college, or the program itself.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

As a result of this study, I learned that the best scholarship is based on collaboration and that scholarship is relative. While initiatives like PLA are great in theory, this study has taught me that how well initiatives work depends on design, feedback, and reaction. This study has also taught me that, when seeking to learn about a subject, it is best to approach learning in a way that no assumptions are made about outcomes that may be based on previous experience. I honestly conducted this study with no ideas or personal preferences in outcomes. I was not previously invested in Maryland College, so I had no desire for the college to appear as a strong PLA program in this study. I am also not a personal advocate for PLA and had no vested interest in its usage or success. In consideration, I had no bias in what I wanted to learn from this study.

As a postsecondary practitioner with more than 15 years of postsecondary education administration experience, it would have been easy to come into this study with a focus on my own scholarship and expertise. This study has taught me that approaching all scholarship as a new learning opportunity instead of a new layer to knowledge already acquired improves the experience and learning that occurs. This has allowed me to see potential limitations in a PLA program that I may have discounted or disregarded before I conducted this study under the assumption that any program can work if administered correctly.

It will seem as if I have repeated this, but the biggest lesson that I have learned about project development and evaluation is that it is best when it is done in collaboration and with the investment of others. Maryland College had a major role in the completion

of this study and the insights provided during evaluation. Additionally, a great deal of thanks are due to Maryland College and its director of PLA for their flawless communication, not only during the study, but also during the preliminary discussions of whether or not this study could be conducted at the college.

What I learned about leadership is that good leadership recognizes change is not a synonym for failure. I learned this because Maryland College's director appears to be a thorough and well-developed leader. Not only did they communicate well during this study, but the fact that they were conducting their own internal survey leads me to believe that this leader is invested in the growth and improvement of their program. This also leads to change. There may be a positive history of change at Maryland College. This suggestion was made apparent because the faculty member that participated in this study seemed to speak positively of the PLA program at Maryland College. This suggestion was also made apparent because, in the qualitative portion of the college's survey, the faculty responses did not appear to be frustrated or critical of the PLA program at the college. Instead, the faculty participants used a voice as if it was within the normal culture of the college to seek faculty feedback and to take action based on that feedback. These things showed me that good leadership knows that change is viewed as good when it is approached in collaboration with those that would be effected by the change and when it is presented as a change for the better.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

What I learned about myself as a scholar is that I am willing and eager to learn from others. I also learned that I can effectively avoid assumptions. This means that I can

continue to work to ensure that I understand when I should ask questions and that I should approach opportunities as a time to be taught something that I did not know or understand.

Learning that I am willing and eager to learn from others and that I can effectively avoid assumptions to better understand others means that I have developed an awareness of a skill that is useful during my work with the federal government. Learning this about myself will be useful in the workplace since the work that I do affects all of the different demographics of people across the United States. As a practitioner I can only influence policy and rules based on my own knowledge and experience. As a scholar, I can ensure that I seek out opportunities to be exposed to the experience of others so that I have well-rounded thoughts that contribute to overall policy.

As a project developer, I am satisfied with my decision to begin the process of finding a partner for this study early in the process. This provided an opportunity to give all those invested in this project time to reflect on the request and requirements. Using this approach, I was able to meet with Maryland College on a few occasions before beginning the IRB process. This meant that ideas and plans on faculty outreach were generally developed before IRB approval so that when approval was reached, I could quickly begin the study. Beginning early also meant that as a researcher, my communication with the college was not urgent or made in a way that appeared to rush them. By planning early I was able to respect the other obligations and responsibilities of the professionals at Maryland College. I think this was the best approach and is an approach that I will continue to use in other projects.

The study impacts positive social change by providing a resource that can be used during faculty and program development. The findings of this study and its impact in improving PLA programs means that colleges can continue to benefit their community by providing educational opportunities for nontraditional students that allows them to manage their work, life, and educational responsibilities. It also means that colleges can continue to adjust to meet the needs of its students by adjusting to the knowledge and ability that students bring to the college instead of requiring students to fit into an already developed mold of postsecondary credential delivery.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study suggested there are additional opportunities to learn, not only how prepared nontraditional students who earn credits through PLA are for college courses, but also how prepared they are to complete the PLA program itself. There are also opportunities to study how PLA works in the different academic programs. As the findings of the study suggested, faculty believed that students have a misconception on the benefits of PLA as some students expect an “easy degree” rather than a “faster degree.” Because of the limitations of this study, what an “easy degree” means could not be addressed. This presents an opportunity for further research. As the literature review showed, many researchers of PLA have focused on quantitative and measureable student outcomes like retention, graduation, and whether or not a PLA program is completed. There may be an additional research opportunity on more qualitative approaches in topics such as student expectations of PLA and how those expectations agree or disagree with faculty expectations. Additionally, there may also be

research opportunities in determining if the goal and purpose of a college's PLA program is understood and followed by the PLA practitioners.

This study presented an opportunity to improve community perception of postsecondary education. When colleges provide students opportunities to earn credits in a way that appears more beneficial to the student than to the college there is possible improvements on the community's perspective of postsecondary education. If postsecondary institutions continue to develop initiatives like PLA programs that work to the benefit of the student, the community may begin to believe that colleges are improving their moral standing by being more concerned with educational outcomes than financial gains.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experience, comments, ideas, and feedback from faculty at Maryland College on the academic preparedness of nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA programs. The findings of this case study agree with Knowles' (1984) andragogy theory as the findings suggest that faculty believe that nontraditional students at Maryland College who earned credits through PLA are independent, motivated, and knowledgeable. There appears to be two strengths to this project. The first strength that appears in this project was that Maryland College seemed in full support and personally invested in this study, and the second strength that appeared in the project was Maryland College's large population of nontraditional students and well developed PLA program provided an excellent resource. The most prominent limitation of this project was the fact that the target sample size of eight to 10

faculty participants was not reached. However, this limitation was remediated when Maryland College shared its internal survey on faculty perspectives of the college's PLA program to compliment this study. Another potential limitation of this project was its applicability to colleges without PLA programs or with program that are not as developed and comprehensive as Maryland College's program. To remediate this limitation, readers may want to consider using the faculty perspectives in this study as a tool to determine measurements that may indicate if their PLA program is on track to becoming a strong program.

This study taught me that it is best to approach learning in a way that does not leave room for assumptions. This study has also taught me that, during project development and evaluations, it is best to collaborate with others that are invested in the subject. I also learned that good leadership requires actions that foster ideas and thoughts of others who would be affected by any decision that is made. Additionally I learned that change is not synonym for failure, and that early communication with partners allows researchers to respect the other obligations and responsibilities that your participants have.

Finally, this study impacts positive social change by providing a resource that can be used during faculty and program development. The findings that I present in this study and its impact to improving PLA programs means that colleges can continue to benefit their community by providing educational opportunities for nontraditional students so that they can balance their work, life, and educational goals and obligations. Additionally, while many researchers that author studies about PLA focus on student outcomes like

retention, graduation, and whether or not a PLA program is completed, there may be additional research opportunities in qualitative approaches in subjects such as student expectations of PLA and how those expectations agree or disagree with faculty expectations, and determining if the goal and purpose of a college's PLA program is understood and followed by the PLA practitioners.

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Appendix: The Project

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) notes that a significant portion of the increased enrollment at colleges is due to the increased number of nontraditional students. Further, the NCES defines a nontraditional student as a student that has any of the following characteristics: (a) delayed enrolling into postsecondary education after high school by at least 1 year, or who enrolled immediately after high school but only attended part time, (b) has family responsibilities and financial constraints that include caring for dependents other than a spouse, functioning as a single parent, working full time while enrolled in postsecondary education, or being financially independent, and (c) did not received a standard high school diploma (NCES, n.d.). Based on data published in 2012, the NCES reports that nontraditional students accounted for more than 70% of the increase in enrolled students after 2002, and for more than 40% of total enrollment by 2011 (NCES, 2002; 2012). Maryland College has comparable nontraditional student enrollment levels. The student demographic at Maryland College is comprised of a significant amount of nontraditional students, notably more than the 40% total enrollment that the NCES has noted.

Maryland College has likely also noted that the U.S. Department of Education and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), which serves as the regional accreditation body for the state of Maryland, have narrowed their focus on credit for prior learning programs (MSCHE, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In their 2007 report of accreditation standards and guides, MSCHE promotes learning-centered paradigms that include prior learning assessment (PLA) programs. The MSCHE

also heavily suggested the inclusion of faculty in the development and continued learning assessments within these programs (MSCHE, 2007). Additionally, in 2014 the U.S. Department of Education announced an experiment that would allow for students enrolled in PLA programs at postsecondary institutions participating in their experiment, to use federal student aid to pay for PLA cost.

The literature review completed for the study associated with this white paper suggests reoccurring theories and ideas on the importance of PLA in regards to: (a) determining successful and unsuccessful PLA program processes and assessment methods, (b) determinations of how college level learning is defined and measured for PLA, and finally, (c) student academic performance and learning outcome measurements after completion of PLA programs. In addition, many of the studies reviewed either referenced or depended on data from the NCES, further suggesting the importance of the work that the NCES has complete in this area to date.

Maryland College was selected as a location for this study because of the college's location in Maryland, the college's knowledge of what faculty members were involved in their PLA program, and the college's knowledge of which faculty were aware that they taught these students. The target sampling size of this study was eight to 10 faculty members. An eight to 10 faculty member sample size appeared to be sufficient considering that previous studies, like those conducted by CAEL, suggested that PLA programs are not widely used by students or promoted by postsecondary institutions, and that the resource of faculty members to serve these students is kept relatively small. For example, in their study Brigham and Klein-Collins (2010) found that, of the 81

responding institutions, 76% had a student population of 4,000 or more and only four institutions responded of having 101 or more students earning credits for prior learning. The small number of experienced faculty members gives way to theoretical saturation. This means that interviewing more than 10 faculty members may not provide any more insight than what 10 faculty members would provide (Marshall, et. al, 2013).

Survey Protocol for Participants

To gain access to participants, a plan was developed in collaboration with Maryland College's IRB and PLA director to identify and recruit participants at the college. In an attempt to increase the chances of faculty opting to participate in the study, the invitation to participate in the study was sent from the college's director who oversees the PLA program. This same contact also sent study participation reminders to potential faculty members. Faculty participants that sent their letter of informed consent to participate in the study were provided a code name that they would use for data collection as well as for the study outcome discussion.

Selected participants were provided a link to access and complete the study survey on the online survey tool SurveyMonkey.com. Through the online survey, participants were provided confidentiality because they were asked to only provide the code name assigned to them when they are sent the SurveyMonkey.com link through email. Code names were randomly selected and assigned by the researcher.

Summary of Study Findings

The findings of this study suggested that faculty believe that nontraditional students at Maryland College who earned credits through PLA are independent,

motivated, and knowledgeable. The findings also suggest that the PLA programs provide time benefits to students, but they also present limitations. These limitations include student expectations, which may not align with PLA program design and goals, and the student's ability to use PLA across academic programs. Finally, the findings of this study are triangulated by the internal survey by Maryland College on the faculty's perception of the college's PLA program. The survey conducted by Maryland College showed that about 30% of the 203 faculty that completed their internal survey suggest that the students who earn credits through PLA are motivated and knowledgeable, but that there are limitations to which academic programs can actually use the PLA programs.

Data Analysis Results

The data for this study were collected by using a survey of unstructured questions made available on the internet through the website SurveyMonkey.com. Unstructured questions were used because they allow open dialogue. Only one faculty member, code name MARCH, completed the survey specifically for this study. Failure to reach the target sample size of eight to 10 faculty member for this study was cushioned by the adjacent internal mixed-method survey on the PLA program at Maryland College. Maryland College conducted their survey on faculty's perspectives of their PLA program two weeks before outreach to potential faculty participants for this study was sent. The college was able to collect data on 203 faculty members. Seventeen percent, or 35 of the 203 faculty members, provided data for the qualitative portion of the college's survey.

The data analysis that I conducted of both data resources was coded to identify recurring words and recurring themes. The recurring words and themes were identified as follows:

Research Question	Defined Coding Categories	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Study Survey)	Coding Outcome – Recurring Words (Maryland College Survey)	Data Themes
1. How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of non-traditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs?	Characteristics of academically prepared students	Motivated Focused Multi-Tasker Independent	Skilled Worker Motivated	Independence Motivation
	Student college/classroom performance	Knowledge Knowledge depth Knowledge application Knowledge concepts Foundation Independent	Active participant Developed Worker Know how Experience	Knowledge
2. Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students?	Positive characteristics of a PLA program	Time Time benefits Faster program completion Options Independent	Time Recognition of knowledge obtained	Time Motivation
	Negative characteristics of a PLA program	Less engagement With faculty With peers Wrong expectations Less work, faster degree	Outdated/inapplicable skills Abused Program limitations	Time Knowledge Limitations

Figure 1 - A summary of data themes that emerged during data analysis

Findings for Research Question (RQ) 1

The first RQ for this study was: How do faculty at Maryland College describe the academic preparedness of nontraditional students who have earned credits from prior learning programs? Participant MARCH provided that academically prepared nontraditional students that earn credits through PLA at Maryland College have a knowledgeable foundation, are motivated, focused, multi-taskers and know how to work independently. MARCH also mentions these themes by frequently stating that these students were motivated, engaged, independent, individualistic, focused on performance, predictable, and able to demonstrate their knowledge. MARCH also addressed academic preparedness, and how the data theme of knowledge is relative. In one response, MARCH suggests a relationship between academic preparedness and the student's major.

“There are students who are academically prepared for college-level work because they (a) are highly motivated; (b) have learned to work independently with good results; (c) have been engaged in similar curricula in their previous institutions or experiences and (d) have had to multi-task in ways that are expected in the college environment.The academic preparedness of nontraditional students varies based on a number of factors: exposure to the pre-college curriculum; time out of academically-rich environment; ability to focus/concentrate and delve into college-level work with minor distractions to academic performance. Oftentimes, these students have learned to function in an individualistic

environment, not having, necessarily benefitted from collectivistic opportunities like "group work". They oftentimes prefer not to have cooperative learning experiences, unless they have a leadership role in the activity..... Students who seek credit for prior learning tend to be more predictable. When the student is able to demonstrate the awareness and basic knowledge of a topic area, it serves as a predictor of the foundational knowledge necessary to scaffold higher level learning (MARCH).”

“In the humanities, the focus tends to concentrate on ethereal instead of theoretical or formulaic. These students "get" the "big picture" to the depth that allows more conversation and engagement. Those majoring in business, social sciences, math and technical areas pay greater attention to being able to apply formulas and theories to their learning. Therefore, they are more likely to look for the "one right answer" and not be interested in the richness of the learning process. These individuals focus on the performance and presentation of information instead of the articulation of the nuances involved in the learning enterprise (MARCH).”

MARCH also suggested that students who seek to earn credits through PLA are more predictable than students who do not seek to earn credits through PLA, and are able to demonstrate foundational knowledge. The internal survey by Maryland College also

provided data that suggest that faculty thought that students that take advantage of PLA would be motivated, have technical skills, and extensive knowledge of industry vocabulary.

“I see how PLA is a valuable tool for student recruitment.”

“...some of them might benefit from an exam about specific industries they've worked in that includes bilingual training, and how extensive their vocabulary is within that industry.”

“I'm all for allowing students multiple ways to demonstrate their abilities, and to more accurately place them, however.”

“We have many career changers who return to start their education at [Maryland College]. Giving the opportunity for them to earn credit from work experience would serve as a motivation for people in similar circumstance who may feel that going to school represents a "do over" versus a continuation of their professional experience”

However, the faculty at Maryland College also suggested issues and limitations in the foundational knowledge that the students have and, like MARCH, share the relative view of academic preparedness and the use of PLA across academic majors. While more detail into PLA programs and it's usage across academic majors is discussed with RQ 2, the faculty that responded to Maryland College's survey suggest that sometimes even

foundational knowledge cannot be translated into prior learning credits. They also suggested that not all students in all academic programs can utilize PLA programs.

“I’m not sure if it works in courses where active participation and assessment of that participation is part of the grade.”

“Because many of our courses tend to be survey courses, there are not very many experiences one would have that expose someone to all that is covered in a course.”

“Philosophy is pretty specifically academic, and it's difficult to think of anything but college transfer credit that would satisfy our common core requirements”

“We need to revise PLA options for English credit, and we need to develop additional types of assessments.”

“I’m in chemistry and folks don't tend to pick that up through lived experience. I think it's a wonderful idea though.”

“Students need to have updated skills, assessing PLA on out-dated skills would be a waste of time for both the student and the faculty.”

Findings for RQ 2

The second RQ for this study was: Which characteristics of credit for prior learning programs do faculty at Maryland College believe contributed to the academic success of these non-traditional students? MARCH provided that the PLA program at Maryland College gave students great time advantages because the students were able to finish their academic program faster. MARCH also presented limitations from two different views: (a) a positive view that the PLA program at Maryland College removes barriers to students by providing a number of PLA options, and (a) a negative view that the PLA program distorts academic expectations.

“The fact that students can earn up to 75% of their requirements with PLA's is exceptional...this institution offers more PLAs than my previous institution...The fact that there are a number of PLAs is key. The fact that students can earn up to 75% of their credits with PLAs gives the student a faster "time to degree"; is more cost-efficient; and honors the learning that the student brings to the college environment (MARCH).”

“It needs to be understood that the PLAs have to be done well (i.e., portfolio assessment) and have to demonstrate the requisite knowledge for

the major/program. Most of the PLA's at this institution focus on giving a student an overall sense of the foundational knowledge they will be required to know in order to be successful in the college classroom...Typically, the experiences are positive ones because they are (a) time-limited; (b) available at varying times; and (c) provide timely outcome data so that the student is able to take advantage of the curriculum offered... While the College has an 75% acceptance of PLAs, this lessens the students' opportunity to engage with faculty and students around the coursework. This can be seen as a "negative." It is not the programs that are negative, but sometimes, the degree to which students believe that the material will be easy or a "quick remedy" to fulfilling their academic goals (MARCH).”

Data from the internal survey presented some of the same insights including limitations to the academic preparedness of these students based on a student's life and professional experience, and limitations on the student's academic performance depending on the availability of PLA in the student's academic major. In short, while the insight on MARCH's data focused on the limitations on the *student*, the faculty that participated in the college's internal survey focused on *program* limitations; limited use of PLA across academic majors.

Faculty noted that PLA programs cannot be used in academic programs that are subject to frequently changing accreditation agency and state requirements. As examples

they cite licensure and health programs. Other faculty members noted programs and industries where the knowledge can become outdated, or where knowledge, even if the knowledge appears to be in the same industry, may not be translatable. For an example the faculty noted military veterans with healthcare experience and standards that are not the same as civilian standards.

“Many veterans want a health career based on their military experiences. Their experiences do not meet the expectations of the civilian standards, code of ethics and professionalism.”

“Our department falls under the School of Health Professions and is very specific about the certifications and education required to obtain work as a licensed professional. The curriculum really must be completed through an accredited program.”

“Being a licensed Program we need to follow our governing body for accreditation issues.”

The nursing program is select admission and needs specific criteria in which to compare one student to another.”

Lastly, faculty express concerns that credits awarded based through PLA are not transferable outside of Maryland College.

“It is beneficial, but my understanding is that the credits count at [Maryland College] but often don't transfer to a 4-year university, which is a problem.”

“PLA sounds good in theory but some institutions do not recognize PLA credits. Transfer students who wish to attend a four year school that does not accept PLA credits will find themselves taking the class(s) elsewhere at a much higher cost. I wonder if we are doing them a favor or a disservice by accepting PLA credits.”

For example, if the students needed 67 credits to finish their degree program at Maryland College, and that student earned 30 credits through PLA, and earned 12 credits through traditional coursework, then if the student transferred out of Maryland College before completing their degree, the student's new college would evaluate the 12 credits of traditional coursework for transfer into the student's new program, but not the 30 credits earned through PLA. While this concern is worth noting, the perspective does not address when PLA credits are inadvertently transferable outside of Maryland College when the student completes their degree program at Maryland College, and uses the degree to enroll in another program at another college; for example earning an associate's degree and enrolling in a bachelor's degree with the associates degree credential.

Suggested Next Steps

The study suggested that PLA programs should not be designed as a one size fits all model. While Maryland College provides seven different PLA options, the college may want to consider an overall exploration of which methods work best with the different academic programs that it provides, and determine which methods of PLA compliment the knowledge of the students. To further expand on its variety of PLA program offerings, Maryland College may want to explore if there are opportunities to designed PLA program options specifically for academic programs. For example, the college's portfolio version of PLA may need to be designed in a way that allows for different presentations of knowledge between theoretical knowledge, dependent on convincing the faculty of knowledge based on experience and life outcomes, and formulaic knowledge, dependent on proving knowledge with facts supported by data.

Another suggestion that the data analysis for this study provided, is that there may be a need for clarification regarding the time to complete PLA. While the faculty agree that there are time benefits to PLA because students are able to decrease the time it takes to earn their degree, the faculty also suggest that students still have an unrealistic expectation of the ease of earning credits through PLA. The data analysis suggested that while earning credits through PLA allows the student to earn their degree faster, students have mistaken the time benefit of a faster degree to translate to an easier degree. The college may want to address student expectations of an easier degree when presenting PLA options to students. The college may want to do this by either clarifying to faculty that the college intends for the PLA program to lead to an easier degree, however easier

is define, or by clarifying to students that the program is not designed to lead to an easier degree just a faster degree.

The suggestions derived from the data analysis of this study are conducive to some of the conclusions and suggestions for additional research as provided in studies and articles reviewed during the literature review for this study. This includes, but is not limited to, suggestions that PLA programs improve degree completion rates, should accurately measure knowledge conducive to academic programs, if managed correctly, can be motivating to students, and vary by academic programs and departments.