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Prior Learning Assessment at a Small, Private Midwestern Institution

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Reena Lichtenfeld

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

Prior Learning Assessment at a Small, Private Midwestern Institution

by

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MEd, University of South Carolina, 1995

BA, University of South Carolina, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

A small college in the Midwestern United States has a prior learning assessment (PLA) program that has never been evaluated from the perspective of the faculty and staff. The problem is that campus leaders have a limited understanding of faculty and staff knowledge and their role in the PLA program. The study was approached from an appreciative perspective while exploring faculty and staff knowledge and perceptions related to PLA to address 3 research questions. The first 2 research questions were developed to better understand how faculty and staff describe their understanding of the PLA program and what they envision for the program. The final research question was a reflection of the descriptive data collected from the responses to the first 2 research questions. This formative program evaluation included an open-ended survey of 36 faculty and staff as self-selected to participate in the study from the entire faculty and staff population. Additionally, formal documents, including catalog, forms, and internet references associated with PLA were evaluated. Analysis was performed through manual methods including axial coding for the surveys, descriptive and axial coding for the formal documents, followed by thematic analysis. Faculty and staff reported that they had a limited understanding of the institution's PLA program and said they would like to have a stronger program than what they have now. Key results from the analysis indicate that the institution can improve the PLA program by clarifying the purpose, enhancing the policy supporting the program, improving processes, and further promoting the program. Positive social change can occur through the college developing improved PLA practices, thus helping to support students' education endeavors.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to the late Ann Rayner who introduced me to the problem by sharing the book *Harnessing America's Wasted Talent: A New Ecology of Learning*, by Peter Smith. She has been the wind beneath my wings, even though she no longer inhabits this earth.

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I would like to acknowledge those who have inspired and supported me through many years as I have sought to achieve the goal of completing my doctoral degree. First, my former and current supervisors and colleagues at Laureate, chiefly, Dr. Denise DeZolt, Dr. Darrell Luzzo, Wendy Colby, Jonathan Kaplan, and Dr. Eric Reidel. Without their steadfast support and encouragement, this doctoral study would have been unachievable. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Ronald Blankenship.

I dedicate this study to my committee members who provided support, guidance, and most importantly, were patient with me and motivated me whenever I felt stuck or frustrated. Thank you, Dr. Jennifer Mathes, Dr. Janet Reid-Hector, and formerly, Dr. Ramo Lord. Additionally, I want to acknowledge Dr. Kelly Costner and Dr. Kathryn Swetnam for their unwavering support.

Finally, I dedicate this to my family: my mother, Ethel Breuche; my father, Rafael Rubinstein; their spouses, Robert Breuche and Dr. Barbara Chasen, respectively; my sister, Laura Rubinstein, and her husband, Kevin Baker; my children, Hilary and Jacob Lichtenfeld. I love you all!

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

According to a report prepared by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, by the year 2020, the United States will be short approximately 5 million workers who hold postsecondary credentials, with 65% of all jobs requiring a credential beyond the high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). There are approximately 96.5 million adults in the current workforce over the age 25 who have only a high school credential and either some or no postsecondary degree or credential (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, consider that, “For the first time, graduates make up a larger share of the workforce than workers with a high school diploma or less” (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 3). In fact, “out of the jobs created in the recovery [since the 2008-2009 recession], 8.4 million have gone to those with a bachelor’s degree or higher, while high school jobs only grew by 80,000” (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 3). Fueling the problem is the cost of higher education, which has dramatically increased over the past several decades (Ripley, 2013). According to the Project on Student Debt in the Institute for College Access & Success, “Seven in 10 college seniors who graduated in 2012 had student loan debt, with an average of \$29,400 for those with loans” (Reed & Cochrane, 2013, p. 4). Even when institutions can attract students to start their educational journey, they struggle to retain students from term to term and meet other benchmarks indicative of student success (Hughes, 2013).

In a letter from the Department of Labor dated December 15, 2010, Assistant Secretary of Labor Oates outlined specific guidelines for workforce and trade agencies to meet the demand to increase the number of employees in the United States with postsecondary credentials. Although the letter was geared toward workforce-related agencies to address the problem, as opposed to a strictly educational perspective, the urgency of the issue was reinforced in the letter. Secretary Oates (2010) wrote, “The value of credentials to employers, workers, and society at large cannot be overstated” (p. 4). Not only is there an emphasis on increasing the number of citizens with credentials, but there is also a need to reverse a negative trend in the number of people earning credentials. In other words, there is ground that must be gained before accelerating completion rates.

The U.S. system and understanding of higher education has evolved through several milestones over the last 150 years, each one changing the landscape of higher education. With passage of the Morrill Act of 1862, the federal government granted land to states so they could establish state colleges (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). In 1944, President Roosevelt signed the GI Bill to help nearly 8 million World War II veterans to attend college (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The college completion imperative comes at a time when there are threats to college attainment, including escalating costs, completion gaps for low-income families, the increased demand from the workforce for candidates with college-level credentials, and myriad disruptive innovations in the higher education space, all of which have placed quality of education and assessment in the spotlight (Ripley, 2013).

More recently, prior learning assessment (PLA) was introduced to the discussion as an alternative mechanism for receiving college course credits related to experience and skills. The American Council on Education (ACE), which includes college presidents and other senior leaders representing institutions of higher education across the nation, supports PLA and offers resources for institutions (Fain, 2013). ACE provides services, research publications, and events on a variety of PLA topics as well as strong backing through organizations such as the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among others. ACE also provides ways for PLA to play a more prominent role in assisting students with college completion (Fain, 2013).

PLA options such as military credit, workforce programs, and even massive open online courses are reviewed by ACE evaluators for academic credit and can be produced on an ACE transcript for easy transfer to most institutions. According to Fain (2013), ACE will “be giving a boost to alternative credit pathways because of the college ‘completion agenda,’ workforce development, and money worries that are buffeting colleges” (para. 3). The changes to come in higher education will be multifold and will play out over time; however, PLA could position colleges and universities to expand their student base (Fain, 2012). Students’ ability to earn college credits prior to entering the classroom provides an alternative for students to reduce their college expenses as well as time to completion.

Just as there are backers, there are those in academia who still question the validity of prior learning and resist its adoption. Neem (as cited in Fain, 2012), an associate professor of history at Western Washington University, remarked, “Prior

learning assessment is a ‘shallow measure’” (para. 20). Additionally, many colleges still do not recognize credit for prior learning. Academics who oppose the notion of recognizing prior learning for credit argue that college-level learning is difficult to validate and is more of an art than a science (Ryu, 2013). Stenlund (2013) indicated that there are essentially two issues pertaining to the validity of PLA: predictive validity and “issues belonging to process . . . in which the assessment phase is part one” (p. 2). In this case, the assessment of prior learning, as it is referred to in some countries, is used to determine admissibility to an institution of higher learning and not just for academic credit. Therefore, the predictability that prior learning is a valid indicator of college success (much like the SAT) is an alternative way to apply PLA not yet adopted by institutions in the United States.

In addition to concerns of PLA being a “shallow measure” of college-level learning and the questions around validity of predictability and process of assessment, others cite concerns regarding the volume and array of knowledge that must be contained at a campus to validate the assessment of prior learning in an area or discipline. Wihak (2011) stated, “One of the dilemmas facing PLAR [prior learning assessment and recognition] researchers is that they represent many different disciplinary affiliations” (p. 145). This concern is valid, however it is not one that will be explored through the research questions of this study.

Description of the Local Problem

Acme College (a pseudonym), a small, private, liberal arts college in the Midwest, offers academic credit for prior learning; however, according to the director of adult

programs, the college is facing a local issue where these options are underused. The director of adult programs further stated that there is a need for understanding of how the faculty and staff understand and use PLA in their daily roles. The institution is interested in improving participation rates in its PLA program to address the problem. The research conducted in this study helped evaluate the PLA program from the faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program.

Acme College has offered educational opportunities to nontraditional, adult students since 1981. In 2012, when the Acme College Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) report was published, the adult student enrollment represented about 24% of the total enrollment. The institution is experiencing a downward trend in adult undergraduate enrollment. More specifically, enrollment of adult undergraduate students has declined by about 27% over the past 5 years.

The institution has taken some measures to address these trends to reverse them; for instance, the college has moved away from a weekend format (Friday & Saturday) to a weekday, evening format (Tuesday & Thursday). Despite the change to the Tuesday/Thursday evening format, enrollees in the program are still referred to as “weekend students.” In addition, the institution recently launched a hybrid program, where some courses include an online component, the objective of which was to reduce the need to be physically on the campus as frequently. Finally, the college reduced the number of programs that are offered for the adult student learning population from 17 to four programs. According to the director of adult programs, the institution was interested in evaluating the PLA program to understand why PLA options are not frequently used

by adult student learners. The hope among leaders of the college is to reverse the trend and promote more engagement in PLA among adult student learners. To gain a deeper understanding of the current PLA practice, in this program evaluation, I explored the knowledge of the PLA program as understood by the faculty and staff.

According to a study conducted in 2010 by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning ([CAEL], as cited in Klein-Collins, 2010), there is a correlation between students who have earned prior learning credit and positive student outcomes. These positive outcomes include retention, GPA, accelerating time to degree completion, and graduation rates (CAEL, as cited in Klein-Collins, 2010). Leaders of Acme College seek to explore the factors contributing to barriers preventing students from taking advantage of PLA. Furthermore, a study with emphasis on College Level Examination Program (CLEP), an examination-based type of PLA, shows that, "...passing CLEP exams leads to a 17% (5.7 percentage points) increase in associate degree completion for students at two-year colleges and a 2.6 percent (1.2 percentage point) increase in bachelor's degree completion at four-year colleges" (Boatman, Hurwitz, Lee, and Smith, 2017, p. 1). These studies support that PLA may be a viable solution to help address college completion rates.

Description of the Local Setting

In 2015, Acme College enrolled 2,381 students, of which, approximately 391 were adult undergraduate students, representing approximately 16.4% of the total enrollment. According to the director of adult programs at the institution, adult undergraduate students at Acme are those who enroll with at least 12 transfer credits and

are classified, internally, as weekend adult students (albeit attending on a Tuesday/Thursday format) where age is not a factor. The balance of the student population is 55% traditional undergraduate students and approximately 26% graduate students. According to Acme College factbooks for 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015, the institution has experienced a steady decline in enrollment of the adult undergraduate population.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

According to the director of adult programs at Acme College, the adult undergraduate enrollments have been on a steady decline from 2010–2015 (see Table 1). As noted in Table 1, the overall student enrollment, adult undergraduate enrollment, and the number of adult undergraduate students who earned credit for PLA via portfolio review has declined. Other types of assessment for prior learning, such as exams (e.g., College Level Education Program and DANTES Standardized Subject Test [DSST]), are also available to students at Acme College. Although credit for portfolio is only one way to earn academic credit for PLA, it is a representative view of a specific type of PLA and a telling indicator of the declining adult undergraduate enrollment problem.

Table 1

2010–15 Enrollment and Number of Adult Undergraduates Earning Credit for Portfolio Assessment

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Day	2096	2066	1958	1943	1945	1990
Adult	801	721	660	548	450	391
Total	2897	2787	2618	2491	2395	2381

% change YOY adult	-4.80%	-10.00%	-9.50%	-17.00%	-18.00%	-17.00%
Adult enrollment	38.22%	34.90%	33.71%	28.20%	23.14%	19.65%
# students with PLA credit	no data	4	0	2	5	0

Note. From factbooks made available via Acme College director of adult programs, 2017.

The decline in the adult student population over the 6-year period, although a slight decline compared to the overall enrollment from one year to the next, is a considerable amount when considering the adult undergraduate enrollment exclusively. From 2010 to 2011, there was a 10% decline; from 2011 to 2012, the adult student population declined by another 9.5%; from 2012 to 2013, this subpopulation declined another 17%; from 2013 to 2014, the adult student population declined another 18%; and from 2010 to 2015, the 6-year decline is 52%. Details regarding the number of students earning credit for portfolio credit are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Adult Undergraduates Earning Credit for Portfolio

Number of students by credits earned for portfolio credit	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
1–4 credits	No data available	4	0	1	2
5–8	No data available	0	0	1	2
9–12	No data available	0	0	0	0
13–20	No data available	0	0	0	1
Total students	No data available	4	0	2	5

Leaders at Acme College seek to improve engagement rates in PLA options by its adult undergraduate student population. Leaders of the college must first gain a better

understanding of how PLA is supported by its main internal supporters and stakeholders. In particular, the college must seek the perspective of administrative staff and faculty who are involved with the assessment of prior learning on campus. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the PLA program from perspective of faculty and staff, allowing campus leaders to be better positioned when developing and implementing policy. Furthermore, the purpose was to get a better understanding of each individual's role in the process of recognizing and awarding PLA.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Increasing enrollment of adult student learners and using PLA as a means by which to attract them is part of the solution for a national problem identified by former President Obama in his college completion agenda (Hughes, 2013). Outlined in the White House's College Completion Toolkit are seven strategies for institutions to consider to meet the demand for increasing college completion rates in all U.S. institutions. The last of the suggested strategies is focused on adult student learners and highlights the opportunity to leverage PLA as a mechanism to attract and retain the "nearly 50 percent of adults aged 25–64 (over 97 million) who have a high school degree or equivalent but no postsecondary degree" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, pp. 16). PLA has been identified as a possible solution to address the problem, in large part because of a study conducted by the CAEL in 2010.

In this 2010 CAEL study, researchers looked at over 62,000 students across 48 institutions representing both 2-year and 4-year and private and public institutions to identify potential differences between those students who earned credit through PLA and

those who did not (Klein-Collins, 2010). Findings indicated that not only did the students who earned credit for PLA graduate at a higher rate than their non-PLA counterparts, but they also had higher retention rates and higher average GPAs (Klein-Collins, 2010). PLA seekers were 33% more likely than their non-PLA counterparts to earn a college degree (Klein-Collins, 2010). Additionally, approximately 70% of PLA students achieved a 3.0 GPA or higher, whereas 64% of their non-PLA counterparts had a 3.0 or higher (Klein-Collins, 2010). PLA students earning a bachelor's degree saved an average between 2.5 and 10.1 months in earning their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Based on the results of the CAEL study, it is important to look at institutions that promote their PLA options and have a successful track record for PLA engagement at their respective institutions. Travers (2012) referenced a 2009 study in which factors influencing institutional practices in the assessment of prior learning across 32 institutions were reviewed. The outcomes of this 2009 research supported that institutions with an overt mission and commitment to support PLA offered more diverse methods to award academic credit (including PLA). Research supports that institutions that include a focus on supporting students' pursuits to attain their degree offer diverse options and should be reinforced by faculty and college administrators who are well versed in those options to best advise students (Travers, 2012). Travers and Evans (2011) proposed a 5-by-10 matrix, whereby the 10 standards of PLA, as adopted by CAEL, and the five outcomes revealed from Hoffman, Travers, Evans, and Treadwell's (2009) study are reviewed by the institution in terms of the current practice and overall assessment by the reviewing team. The responses provided an institution insight and direction to further

explore possible opportunities to improve aspects of the PLA program in terms of policy, process, promotion, and outcomes. A growing number of institutions can be benchmarked where PLA appears to be successful, as measured by the number of students participating and published research.

In response to the 2010 CAEL study, they also instituted a program called LearningCounts. LearningCounts offered students enrolled in college the opportunity to engage in portfolio preparation and assessment activities to then have the courses transcribed on an ACE or NCRRS transcript back to the institution in which they are enrolled. In 2017, CAEL conducted a study to measure the outcomes of the students who engaged in the LearningCounts program. The findings support the initial study summarizing that, “The data show that students with the highest level of engagement with LearningCounts – those who earned portfolio credits – had significantly better academic outcomes in terms of both degree completion and overall persistence...” (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017, p. 2).

When instituting a PLA program, there are some guidelines it should follow. Leiste and Jensen (2011) concluded that, “PLA must be motivating. . . . Second, it must enable success. Finally, it must use available resources efficiently” (p. 61). Furthermore, “PLA attracts a relatively small group of learners who are willing and able to deal with the challenges of PLA . . . they need more support” (Leiste & Jensen, 2011, p. 75). Capella University, for example, has a successful PLA program based on the measures Leiste and Jensen describe: engagement and published research (Leiste & Jensen, 2011). Capella began to offer PLA credit via portfolio assessment over a decade ago and since

that time, the institution has increased the number of portfolio assessment requests each year (Brooks & Karlso, 2012). As an example, in 2008, approximately 820 portfolio assessments were requested and, in 2012, just 4 years later, Capella nearly doubled that number.

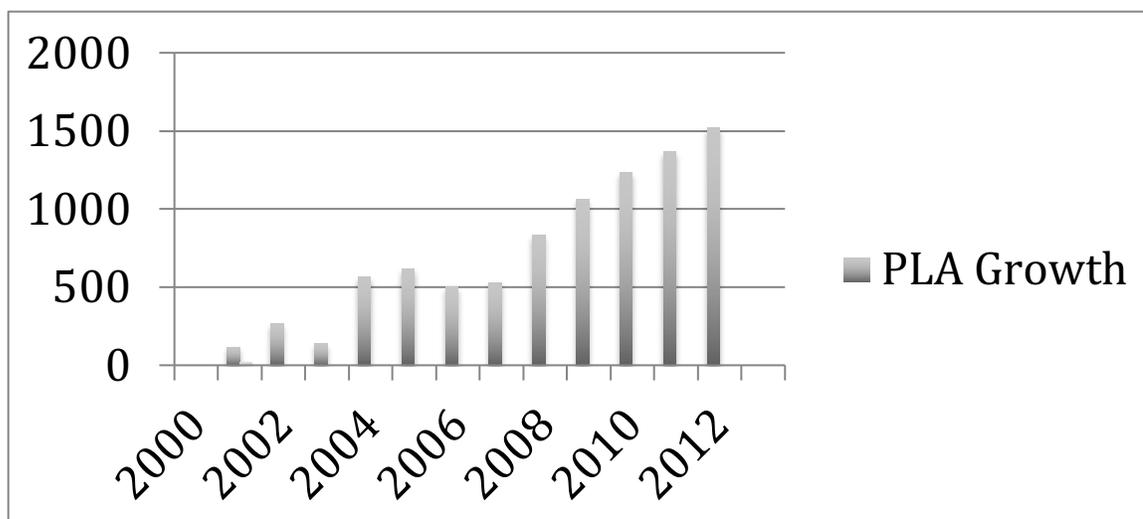


Figure 1. Capella University, PLA courses assessed since 2000. From *Toward Degree Completion: Policies, Practices, and Tools to Maximize Non-Traditional Credit*, by K. Brooks and C. Karlso, 2012, p. 25.

As shown in Figure 2, when enrollment is considered, there is a parallel growth trend.

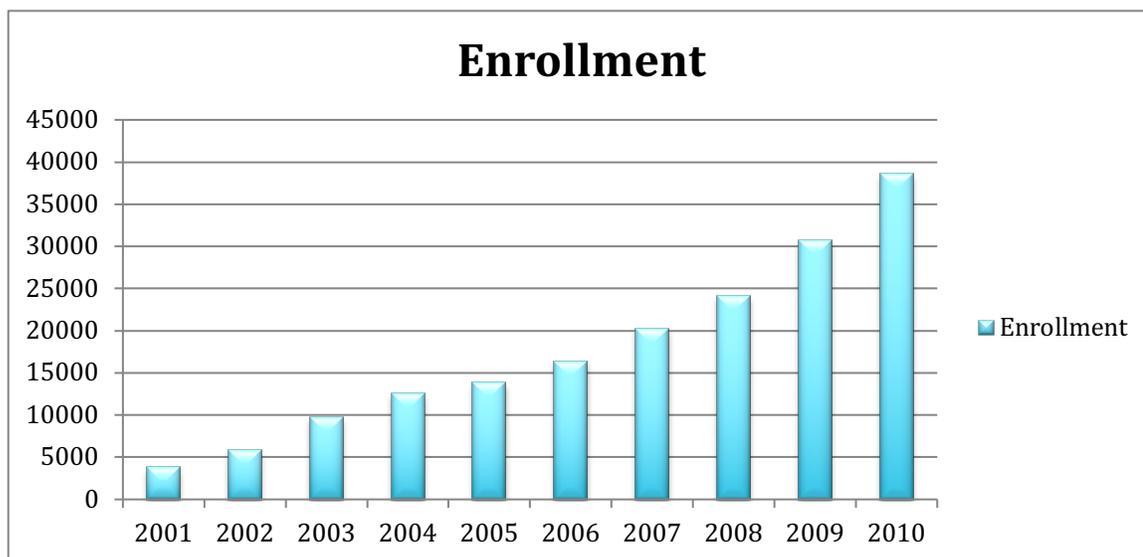


Figure 2. Enrollment at Capella increased as PLA credit offerings increased. From *Toward Degree Completion: Policies, Practices, and Tools to Maximize Non-Traditional Credit*, by K. Brooks and C. Karlso, 2012, p. 25.

Based on the example from Capella of portfolio course review growth and enrollment growth over the same period, there is compelling evidence that PLA could be a key to mitigating enrollment decline. PLA is not assumed to be the sole reason why enrollment increased over the same period. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the pattern of growth.

Supporting the idea that adult student learners require guidance to learn about their PLA options, Gambescia and Dagavarian (2007) stressed the importance for an institution to assess a number of factors regarding their PLA policies, institutional understanding of their policies and processes, and quality assurance measures. To assess the capacity of the institution to support options for PLA is just the beginning. In addition to taking inventory of policies, processes, administrative and academic support, and

quality assurance, the institution must be willing to make the commitment to follow up on what is learned upon review of the results of the assessment.

PLA research conducted in South Africa also supported that successful PLA programs are those that are flexible and where faculty/administrators are well informed and clear about the process (Motaung, Fraser, & Howie, 2008). The research revealed the impression that where there is a lack of formal documentation of PLA, the faculty do not support the policy or practice of PLA. Motaung et al. (2008) suggested that to reverse this impression, formalizing the documentation and promoting the opportunity among faculty would lend credibility to the practice and strengthen the program. Once again, the internal perceptions of faculty and administrators have an impact on the success and popularity of a PLA program.

Definitions

Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP): An accreditation pathway for institutions within the Higher Learning Commission regional accreditation body to demonstrate continuous improvement for the institution and is a critical self-evaluation that is authenticated and reviewed by the Commission for accreditation or re-affirmation of accreditation purposes (Higher Learning Commission, n.d., para. 1).

Adult undergraduate students: Adult undergraduate students at Acme College are those who enroll with at least 12 transfer credits, as confirmed by the Director of Adult Programs.

Challenge exam: Assessments that students can take to earn course credit offered directly from the college. Many times, the challenge exam is nothing more than the course final examination (Colvin, 2012).

Portfolio: A document prepared by the student that may include a number of artifacts, such as resume, biography, learning outcomes narrative, sampling of work projects, and/or letters of reference. The portfolio is used to demonstrate acquisition of college-level learning to support a student's request for a review of experiential learning for academic credit (Colvin, 2012).

Prior learning assessment (PLA): Prior learning assessment or assessment of prior learning (APL), as it is called at Acme College, refers to the process by which an institution can assess college-level learning that has occurred outside of the classroom for academic credit usually applied to the attainment of a degree. Typically, prior learning may be assessed either by standardized or challenge examination or portfolio review (Klein-Collins, 2010). In this study, the acronyms PLA and APL are used interchangeably.

Standardized test: A test that is taken in a controlled testing environment where test takers are proctored, timed, and security measures are followed. Standardized tests are statistically valid and reliable. Standardized tests that are typically associated with PLA are College Level Education Program, Advanced Placement, Excelsior, DSST, and International Baccalaureate (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Underutilization: Low participation rates in PLA opportunities (Ganzglass, Bird, & Prince, 2011).

Significance

Evaluating the PLA program at Acme College would better position the campus leaders to make decisions when developing policies and procedures. Acme is a small, private institution and is highly dependent upon tuition revenue to maintain and sustain the institution. Taking specific and targeted action to improve adult student engagement, retention, and enrollment is imperative. PLA is an attractive opportunity to leverage because it is essentially a low-cost resource available to the institution and has the potential to make a tremendous difference in addressing the negative trend in enrollment.

Students from Acme College stand to benefit from learning they have achieved outside of the classroom being recognized, thereby accelerating their time to degree completion and lowering overall cost of earning the degree. As evidenced by the 2010 landmark CAEL study, the significance of increasing adult student engagement in PLA is correlated to degree completion. For the institution itself, quality of the academic programs, the student body at large, and the services Acme College offer only benefit when students enroll, continue, and graduate. When students enroll and are retained, their presence helps to bolster the overall student experience; it strengthens the academic integrity and reputation of the institution, lowers cohort default rates on student loans, and helps to produce graduates who will be earning higher wages (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011). The social significance is that graduates are contributing to the local, state, and country-specific economies.

From a domestic perspective, enrollment, retention, and degree completion is important as one way to combat the issue of poverty in this country (Christensen, Horn,

& Johnson, 2011). James (2012) showed that “over the last three decades, the value of college has increased substantially, with all of the gains going to those who actually complete the four-year degree” (p. 2). This phenomenon is best understood when looking at the impact of the last national recession. At its height, in January 2010, those with at least a baccalaureate degree gained jobs, whereas those with only an associate’s degree or some college lost around 1.75 million jobs and those with only high school diploma or less lost around 5.6 million jobs (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012). In addition, the earnings of those who hold a baccalaureate or better earn at least twice as high as their high-school-only educated counterparts (Carnevale et al., 2012).

College enrollment, retention, and completion are important at the global level, as well. The global economy is sensitive to the economics of the United States. As demonstrated in the most recent recession, the rest of the world suffered ripple effects and experienced economic instability in their own countries. Downward trends in Europe, Japan, and India were only some of the examples of the impact of the recession in those regions. The impact is better understood as, “When the U.S. comes down with a cold, the rest of the world experiences pneumonia” (Watkins, 2011, para. 9). The health of the U.S. economy is largely dependent upon the community of the citizens contributing to it.

Research Question

The purpose of this program evaluation was to better understand faculty and staff perceptions of PLA at Acme College, informing campus leaders on policy and program development and implementation. The current engagement level of adult undergraduates in PLA is reportedly low and the enrollment of this same population has declined

precipitously over the past few years. In many instances, for the students, their families, and the community the cost of leaving college is higher than the cost of staying when evaluated by student debt with nothing to show for that debt and the persistence of the depleted and underserved workforce demanding more qualified candidates. The research conducted was a program evaluation exploring the perceptions of faculty and staff about PLA and their role within it.

With Walden's IRB approval (#12-12-16-0333506), the research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA program?
2. What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA?
3. How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?

Review of the Literature

The philosophical and pedagogical foundation of PLA and adult learning theory dates to the "early decades of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1970s that adult educators themselves began to focus systematically on some of the distinguishing characteristics of adult learning" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 103). To understand the significance and importance of PLA is to understand the core underpinnings of adult learning theory, self-directed learning, transformative learning, and experiential learning theory. The review of these learning theories, framed through an understanding of PLA, helped to inform this study.

Framework

In this study, I used appreciative inquiry as the conceptual framework.

Appreciative inquiry is based on the positive attributes of an organization as the basis for exploring, developing, and implementing improvement plans and is distinctly different from the problem-solving approach rooted in deficit language (Marwah, 2012). Marwah (2012) stated that the current dominant practice is to analyze the negative side of the problem and remove it, where appreciative inquiry focuses the best of its resources to attain the desired result for the organization. Evaluating a specific problem or gap in practice is conducted to gain a better understanding regarding a practice of an organization (Dunlap, 2008; Johnson & Leavitt, 2001). The positive assets of the organization become the forefront of the initial problem exploration and work as a collective to determine what can lead to a learning experience to sustain the current and future success of the study site. Further to that, “Appreciative inquiry is a change process of identifying what is working well, deciphering why it is working well, and therein emulating more of those positive attributes” (Preston, 2017, p. 233). The use of PLA by Acme College can be explored beginning with what is currently viewed as the strengths of the institution and identify and appreciate what is currently done well. The discovery of what is currently the best of the PLA procedures at the institution and practice served as the foundation from which this project study explored the perceived role of PLA.

Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2005) argued that the positive core of an organization (the core strengths of the organization) is its greatest resource. This resource serves as the foundation from which change can be embraced, including those aspects

never thought possible (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider et al. further argued that human systems will grow in the direction to which questions and energy are pointed, thus being the most effective when the “means and the ends are positively correlated” (p. 8). For this project study, this notion becomes important when exploring the current understanding regarding PLA and its role in the organization. Appreciative inquiry provides the opportunity to explore the site where people have working relationships as well as a working history and from which their perceptions are needed to assist the organization to gain a deeper understanding of PLAs role and to identify and embrace the change in a positive and sustaining mode (Marwah, 2012). Cooperrider and Whitney argued that it is this form of exploration and analysis that is “at the heart of positive change” (p. 11). Through exploring and explaining the workers’ perceptions rooted in the positive core strengths of the institution, a collective and shared vision of where their practice could be and what it will be can be identified (Cooperrider et al., 2005).

Based on the work of Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), appreciative inquiry or AI, has four phases of evaluation:

1. discovery
2. dream
3. design
4. destiny

The discovery phase begins with determining the specific phenomenon that can be appreciated, thus being positively visualized for identifying similar patterns regarding the aspects that give the current understanding and practice of the phenomenon life

(Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). Through examining the current workers' articulation regarding the strengths and best practices of PLA at a college, the discovery of the best of *what was* and *what is* leads to appreciating the phenomenon and embracing what is good (Calabrese, 2006; Dunlap, 2008). Calabrese (2006) argued how discovery helps establish a trust through maintaining a positive and engaged collective capacity, possibly stimulating creativity. Cooper (2014) argued that appreciative inquiry directs its inquiry, arising from *why* questions as opposed to *what* questions. Cooper stated that the *why* questions are more dynamic and lead to deeper understandings and truer conversations, as opposed to the more static *what* questions. Discovering the constructed and microsocial practices and procedures grounded in and driven by the strengths of the college staff and faculty in this study helps all involved to gain an understanding and appreciate what the current reality is (Calabrese, 2006; Groen & Kawalilak, 2006). The understanding of the discovery phase was useful for the development of survey questions to elicit feedback regarding survey participants' experiences and perceptions of how PLA is used and its role at Acme College.

The dream phase involves evaluating and envisioning what might be, while grounded in the history of the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). The dream phase embraces the workers' visions, as informed by their day-to-day work roles and practices. Workers, through their experiences of *what was*, can positively challenge the status quo through daring to suggest improved and revised practices and policies, while being appreciated for their strengths and them appreciating the others' contributions and ideas (Calabrese, 2006). For Acme College, the

faculty and staff who draw upon the current practices regarding PLA and incoming students might have ideas that would facilitate improved understandings of students and their being assigned PLA credits.

Through envisioning a different way, the faculty and staff build their future together while embracing the students' needs and concerns (Cooperrider et al., 2005). In the mutual appreciation, the faculty and staff are positioned to create a clear results-oriented vision for Acme College and what the students' needs are calling Acme to do (see Dunlap, 2008). The dream stage includes not only explaining participants' discussions, but also helping in the development, along with the discovery phase, of the data collection tool of the individual survey results.

The third phase of appreciative inquiry is design. The design phase involves exploring and articulating what the organization should become in light of the current strengths and ideas from its existing positive core (Cooperrider et al., 2005). Design has importance when providing a foundation to realize the ideas uncovered in the dream phase and make them manifest as part of the structure of the organization (i.e., its ways of knowing and doing). This embodiment of the dream of the organization is manifested in a co-constructed platform of appreciating and supporting the collective vision of what Acme College will become (see Groen & Kawalilak, 2006).

The fourth phase is the destiny of the appreciative inquiry efforts (Cooperrider et al., 2005). This phase provides the structure to guide what was identified through the research findings as the organization builds for the future through worker learning and empowerment. The destiny phase is useful when discussing the findings of the study as

well as informing the project genre and the project. Cooperrider et al. (2005) argued that it is during the destiny phase that all stakeholders become engaged through sharing the visions of a positive future and contribute their thoughts on what will sustain the organization into the future. In this stage, data collected from the survey are analyzed.

The survey experience for this study provided the open space within which staff and faculty participants shared what has worked, what has not worked, and their perspective on building and sustaining momentum (see Cooper, 2014; see Johnson & Leavitt, 2001; see Marwah, 2012). The destiny phase moves beyond a deliverable or an action plan; these processes are generally focused on addressing the immediacy of gaps and problems (Cooperrider et al., 2005). The appreciative inquiry destiny phase is more aligned with continuous learning, driving long-term sustainability, and appreciating the evolving adaptation rooted in workers' strengths (Cooper, 2014; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). The destiny phase can help describe the vision of Acme College and how the institution can adapt its understanding and use of PLA as the college forges its sustainability into the future, thus better serving its student population.

Review of Topic Literature

Database search strategy. A systematic search of the databases was conducted to reach a saturation of the literature about the assessment of prior learning. Possible search terms from a generated list were entered into the databases individually. Search terms included *prior learning*, *portfolio assessment*, *experiential learning*, *PLA*, and *adult learning theory*. Peer-reviewed journals were collected from publication dates between January 2011 and January 2016 and taken from the following databases: ERIC,

Academic Research Complete, Education Research Complete, ProQuest Central, and Teacher Reference Center. Further sources were obtained through exploring the reference lists of the current articles and reviewing the literature used by the authors of those sources and secured those most relevant to this study.

Prior learning assessment. The virtual mosaic of adult learning theories discussed includes adult learning theory, self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning theory. All of these theories served to help frame and understand PLA. A historical frame of reference and a review of some current research in the field of PLA are explored in this section. The significance of these learning theories considered in aggregate and the impact seen in measurable outcomes such as performance, retention, and completion, are highlighted here as well.

Prior learning is being recognized more at institutions of higher education throughout the world, and the body of research on this topic is growing. A global central repository of research is maintained by the Prior Learning International Research Centre and a dedicated research journal to the field of PLA emerged: *PLA Inside Out: An International Journal on the Theory, Research, and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment* (Travers, 2012). This repository, although not the single source of research studies, was reviewed extensively for content pertaining to this study. In addition, the Walden Library and Google Scholar search engine were also researched for the most current peer-reviewed research.

A historical perspective on PLA and standards. PLA, emerged in its current form in the 1970s when adult learning theories gained popularity. In 1974, the CAEL was

established “to provide the umbrella organization to support the research, standards, and opportunities for life and workplace learning” (Hoffman & Michel, 2010, p. 114). Higher education professionals recognized the need to link together traditional, distance, and workplace learning to find common ground and recognize all types of learning as academic credit. In *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, & Procedures*, Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker (2006) outlined rules of engagement for institutions to follow to promote quality standards in the assessment process for prior learning.

PLA incorporates a range of options including standardized tests (e.g., College Level Education Program, Advanced Placement, and Excelsior exams), challenge exams, portfolio review for experiential learning, evaluation of military transcripts, and competency-based credit (Hoffman & Michel, 2010, p. 114). The variety of ways to earn credit for prior learning has broadened only slightly since the 1970s, encompassing many of the same avenues to get credit, but has gained popularity more recently, given the emphasis on degree completion and the rising cost of education.

The CAEL has conducted and sponsored extensive research on the impact of PLA on many facets of earning a degree. In 2010, CAEL published a study called *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* (a direct reference to the 2020 Initiative). With support from the Lumina Foundation, CAEL took on this first-of-its-kind massive study on PLA that was multi-institutional and different by type, size, and location. The mission of the Lumina Foundation for Education is to “ensure that 60 percent of Americans are college-educated by 2025” (Klein-Collins, 2010, p. 6). The 2010 study revealed that the students who earned credit for PLA graduated at a higher rate than non-PLA students, and they

also had higher retention rates and higher average GPAs. Additionally, PLA seekers were 33% more likely to earn a college degree than non-PLA credit seekers, and approximately 70% of PLA students achieved a 3.0 GPA or higher compared to 64% of non-PLA students. Finally, PLA students earning a bachelor's degree saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months in earning their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010). The results of this study show why PLA is not only relevant, but also a vital process to help institutions meet the challenge.

In the mid-1990s, the Kellogg Foundation supported international conversations and research about PLA. Inquiry and benchmark studies yielded findings that were of great interest from a student outcomes perspective. Hoffman, LeMaster, and Flickinger (1996) found that "PLA positively impacted retention rates and persistence toward the degree and that adult learners could successfully self-select into experiential learning programs" (as cited in Hoffman & Michel, 2010, p. 114). Other studies demonstrated that PLA students have expert-level problem-solving capabilities, whereas other institutions focused on best practices (Hoffman & Michel, 2010). It was not until a large-scale study conducted by the CAEL that a wider landscape of representative institutions really put PLA students and their outcomes to the test.

The largest U.S.-based study to date that was conducted on the outcomes of PLA by Klein-Collins (2010) has already been mentioned, but there are more results to highlight. In this study including 48 institutions and 62,000 students, researchers found that students who participated in PLA options had better academic outcomes. When compared on graduation rates, more PLA students received a degree (43%, as compared

to 15% of non-PLA students). Of those who did not earn a degree, more than half (56%) of the PLA students had earned more than 80% of credits toward a degree, whereas only 22% of the non-PLA students made similar progress (Klein-Collins, 2010). PLA students also earned more credit than non-PLA students, and they also had stronger patterns of annual enrollment and credit earning than non-PLA students. Finally, PLA students who did earn a baccalaureate degree saved time in earning their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010). In sum, the findings made a strong case for PLA's effect on retention/graduation outcomes. There is an important connection that can come from linking this information to the theoretical foundations of adult learning and what makes for a successful learning experience.

Although PLA has been shown to have positive outcomes, research has also shown the need for standards in quality assurance. In the conclusion of a cautionary study conducted in Texas, it was noted that although the Standards of Assessing Learning are accepted widely at the institutions investigated, which were public institutions of higher education in Texas that had a certain classification type, they do not consistently produce results consistent with the standards (Freed & Mollick, 2011). Freed and Mollick (2011) stated that there was only about 25% compliance (p. 10) with the Standards of Assessing Learning. PLA is not just about awarding credit for the sake of retaining students; the review and procedural processes must be tracked and audited on a consistent basis to measure not only the success of the outcomes but also to ensure that a quality practice is in place. Kawalilak and Wihak (2013) addressed the dichotomy and noted that

tension arises because the Adult Education curriculum stresses honouring the learner while the university context stresses honouring academic standards. We need a way to approach PLAR that can . . . reflect both of these influences for university-based Adult Education programs. (p. 2)

Their study was a reflective review of two individual accounts of their experience with PLA. Both accounts demonstrated the balance between helping the learner to extract his or her learning from the previous experiences and trying to measure those experiences against formal, curricular-based theories or platforms. In this study, in addition to the focus on PLA for academic credit, there was also a focus on a review for admission to an institution, whereby a student may gain admission not based on credentials but on an assessment of learning from experience. In fact, that is how the first contributor in this study was admitted to the institution from which she earned her degree—via admission based on her experience (PLA).

Whether PLA is recognized for credit and/or admission, the quality standards and process are repeatedly discussed in current research. The approach taken by the Alberta Council on Admissions & Transfer to pronounce its commitment to the national needs of Canada highlights this emphasis on quality standards. In its 2008 report, the Alberta Council on Admissions & Transfers outlined a comprehensive action plan that encompasses key component quality indicators based on desired outcomes. More specifically, the council sought to promote and inform, establish quality indicators for PLA programs, commit to furthering opportunities with PLA, and connect learners with the workplace. In the report, the council identified specific mid- and long-term goals and

expected achievement milestones. It is a good example to use to stress the significance of developing and promoting quality PLA programs on the national level for institutions, students, and employers.

Current research shows that there is a link between student outcomes and achievement of PLA credit. Research also places a premium the ability to monitor quality assurance in the review and award process. Additionally, although there are varying practices in the application of PLA, the focus remains on quality, access to information about PLA options, expanding PLA opportunities, and creating value through PLA for employers.

Implications

The administrators and faculty of Acme College recognize the implications of low engagement in PLA opportunities. The institution is leaving a deficit of potential degree candidates to inject into the workforce and the trend must turn around to fulfill the economic obligations for the United States. Stimulating participation in PLA is important in achieving this goal.

Understanding how the college can leverage PLA options for students and then implement changes that might help students earn more credit to accelerate their time to degree completion and reduce their overall costs is imperative to reverse the trend of declining enrollments. Domestically, the issues related to degree completion and reduction of cost is a national priority.

The purpose of this project study was to understand faculty and staff perceptions of PLA opportunities at Acme College. The implications of the study should help the

institution to address issues related to the underutilization of PLA opportunities. The study might result in a white paper for academic and administrative leadership of Acme College to consider.

Summary

A number of converging issues and national-level initiatives are prompting institutions of higher education to stimulate enrollments, shorten the time to degree completion, and reduce student loan debt. Confounding the concerns, there is a shortage of degree-qualified candidates to meet the growing demand in the U.S. workforce. Added to these concerns is the cost of higher education. Locally, Acme College is suffering from low engagement rates in PLA opportunities.

This program evaluation was focused on the understandings of the faculty and staff regarding their perceptions of PLA. What is known about PLA from previous studies is that students who have earned PLA credit have better student outcomes than their counterparts. The case study approach was used to gather the perceptions of the college faculty and staff regarding the current PLA program. This case study included open-ended surveys of faculty and staff, documentation that was reviewed, and information that was analyzed to identify trends.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

This project was a formative, qualitative program evaluation. Qualitative research differs from quantitative in that the research is inductive rather than deductive in nature. There is no hypothesis regarding how variables behave; rather, it is an inductive or building-up process to learn more about a phenomenon or subject matter to gain a deeper level of understanding about it. Merriam (2009) stated, “Basically, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). In this case, Acme College presented an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of faculty and staff perceptions of PLA. Qualitative methodology offers researchers the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in a variety of ways while being deeply entrenched in its natural setting (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Spaulding, 2014). One disadvantage of qualitative research is that it cannot be generalized beyond the local study site, which means the findings cannot be applied to other similar settings and that the same outcomes or analysis applies (Yin, 2009). Despite the lack of generalizability, the findings will add to the current conversation in the literature.

PLA Program Evaluation

Program evaluation was conducive to this study because this study was an examination of the understandings of the Acme College faculty and staff regarding the PLA program, and recommendations are expected to evolve from the analysis. A program evaluation allows for deeper examination in order to “make recommendations

for programmatic refinement and success” (Spaulding, 2014, p. 5)—in this case, a formative evaluation of a specific aspect (faculty and staff perceptions of PLA and vision for PLA) of the program. It is formative evaluation because faculty and staff were asked to reflect on their experience with the PLA program at Acme and make some kind of judgment on current state and how it can be improved (see Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010, p. 320). As Spaulding (2014) stated, formative evaluation is “data collection and reporting are focused on the now, providing ongoing, regular feedback” (p. 4). The conceptual framework for this study assumed a positive core of skills, knowledge, and practices (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) around PLA as the appreciative inquiry approach was taken; hence, the design and dream stages applied with regard to the improvement aspect of program evaluation. The specific evaluative model, working in concert with the appreciative inquiry framework to evaluate the PLA program, was the four steps of context, input, process, and product ([CIPP] Spaulding, 2014; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) argued that the CIPP model is used to evaluate learning in the doing, thus providing an understanding for program improvement. In this study, the CIPP model was used to guide the development of the survey question and later provided structure to the data analysis.

Context. The context is used to evaluate the best of what is and what gives life to the PLA program. Further, context is used to evaluate what the community (students) are calling for as being needed for higher education engagement. Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007) stated that the context is used to assess “needs, problems, assets, and opportunities within a defined community and environment” (p. 319). The context includes exploring

and evaluating the current PLA practice, associated tools, the people involved, and the formal documents published by the college describing PLA opportunities. The context also includes evaluating the boundaries of the setting as well as all associated stakeholders. Moreover, context is used to explore improvement opportunities for the PLA program and identifies possible barriers that might impede meeting the identified needs (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Input. In accordance with the appreciative inquiry framework, input is used to assess such items as identifying “what might be” and “what should be the ideal” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Input is used to explore “how should it be done” (Zhang et al., 2011, p. 64). Input also helps to evaluate the local resources of the setting, current system capabilities, and proposed alternative approaches as leveraged against proposed PLA activities and practices (Spaulding, 2014; Zhang et al., 2011). Input provides the structure to evaluate existing programs, with other entities helping to serve as a model and assess the program of the study site for feasibility responsiveness (Stufflebeam, 2007).

Process. The third CIPP component is process. Process guides the evaluation to identify if the program practice is in concert with what was planned (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Spaulding, 2014; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Process evaluation techniques are used to examine a number of items, among which are ratings, records, questionnaires, observations, and existing programming practices. This specific study included qualitative surveys of the faculty, staff, and administration and formal document collection to gain an understanding regarding the current PLA practice. The process

element helped identify congruence between what is formally written and the descriptions of what really happens regarding the PLA program. The identified inconsistencies may help to guide possible process revision.

Product. The fourth CIPP element is product. Product evaluation aligns with the appreciative inquiry destiny phase; capability of the system is affirmed and the vision for positive change and improvement are built (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Spaulding (2014) stated that the product element focuses on the final outcomes of the program and evaluates if the PLA successfully met its stated objectives. Zhang et al. (2011) further argued that a product evaluation seeks to “measure, interpret, and judge” (p. 69) and programs’ outcomes in identifying if stakeholders’ needs were met.

Methodology

The program evaluation methodology provided the best approach, as opposed to experimental approaches because there were no variables that I sought to control. There was also no experimental hypothesis to test for, as would be expected in a quantitative-based study. This was not a phenomenological study because I was not interested in following a cohort of subjects over time or lived experiences. I did not study a group of people to “paint a portrait” of the group or its culture, so this was not an ethnographic study (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010, p. 267). Finally, grounded theory did not apply for this study because I did not seek to build a theory from the findings of my analysis (Lodico et al., 2010). The best application for the study was a case study in that I endeavored “to discover meaning, to investigate processes, and to gain insight into an in-

depth understanding” of the situation with PLA at Acme College (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 269).

Furthermore, this study was conducted in a bounded system where the policy, process, and procedures of the Acme College assessment for prior learning were studied (see Merriam, 2009). A bounded system is one in which boundaries are drawn around the phenomenon to be studied (Merriam, 2009). A case study can apply in this bounded system. The stages of design and dream in appreciative inquiry applied to this case study, as the inquiry came from the idea that there is a positive core around the existing issue. In this case, the generalization(s) were drawn based on probing to understand the positive core of PLA at Acme. As it relates to what the faculty and staff envision, the survey prompts were designed with the dream and design stages in mind in order to draw out what they hope to achieve in the future at Acme for PLA.

Participants

The inclusion criteria for participant selection was full-time administrative staff and faculty at Acme College who had responsibilities in the academic and/or administrative work related to the assessment of prior learning. Based on the criteria, this resulted in 110 potential participants and 36 actual respondents. This responsibility might have included the assessment of portfolios for credit, development or formal review of policy by academic governance, advisement of students, award credit for PLA in the student information system of the institution, conducting training or holding formal certification in PLA, and/or other related relationship to PLA as deemed appropriate or applicable to the study.

Participant Access

I was able to work with the director of adult programs to obtain a letter of cooperation from the Acme College provost, thus allowing access to the college data and staff for the purposes of this study. The letter is included in Appendix B; however, names have been redacted to maintain privacy of the institution and their participants. The surveys went out anonymously and responses could not be traced to any individuals; therefore, confidentiality of respondents was ensured. Beneficence of the research participants is of utmost concern. Participants were informed in the invitation e-mail that the survey was anonymous and therefore confidentiality would be kept (see Appendix C). Participants had the opportunity to agree to informed consent at the outset of the online survey by proceeding and taking the survey or not proceeding and not taking the survey.

Establishing Researcher-Participant Relationship

Establishing the relationship between the researcher and participant is important for a variety of reasons. Because the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Merriam, 2009, p. 52), bias could have been an area of concern. In the case of this research study, there is no direct physical or electronic contact with the participants. The data collection was conducted via an online qualitative survey, hence there was no interaction between me and research participants.

Measures for Participant Protection

The qualitative survey was issued in anonymity. There was no way to connect participants' responses to the list of potential participants who were e-mailed an invitation to participate. Because this was an anonymous survey, no participant identifiers

were collected. The informed consent form was included in the survey. An “agree” response was required prior to the participant continuing with the survey. Finally, when the survey invitation e-mail was distributed, it was sent via blind copy to all participants to ensure that the list of potential participants was blinded to all recipients. Not even I had insight to know who responded.

Data Collection

One of the data collection tools used for this study was a qualitative open-ended survey. The survey was administered via an online tool, SurveyMonkey. There were seven open-ended questions that aligned to the research questions regarding the perceptions of PLA and visioning of PLA at Acme. An e-mail invitation (see Appendix C) was sent to all eligible potential participants. The invitation included text regarding the confidentiality of the responses. Approximately one week after the initial e-mail was sent, another e-mail prompt was sent (see Appendix D) to encourage additional respondents to engage. Each message included a brief explanation about the study and approximated the time that would have been needed to respond to the prompts.

Data Collection Tools

Qualitative Survey

Qualitative data directly from study participants were collected via an online survey consisting of seven open-ended or free-form questions. The questions were unique to this study and were not derived from any other instrument or survey tool. The survey questions asked are included in Appendix E. The online survey delivery mechanism used was SurveyMonkey. SurveyMonkey allows respondents to take the survey with

anonymity. Therefore, the confidentiality of participants can be preserved. The e-mail inviting potential participants to respond to the survey explained that confidentiality would be maintained and explained that by taking the survey, they were providing their informed consent to participate in the study (see Appendix C & Appendix D). Finally, the first question embedded in the survey prior to the seven open-ended questions was confirmation of agreement to the informed consent statement. If they chose the option that disagreed with moving forward, the survey closed and the respondent was not advanced to the seven free-form questions.

Formal Documents Collection

In addition to the survey, other data collection processes included review of archival data and documents that outlined policy and/or procedures regarding the PLA options at Acme. Information was found in public domains including the institution website, catalog, student handbook, faculty handbook, and standard operating procedures manual or reference guides. Other nonpublic documentation, that might be referenced by staff or faculty of the institution, was also requested for review.

Acme College made available for review and data collection two published documents: (a) information contained in the student catalog, and (b) the PLA form that the students, faculty, and administrative staff utilize to request, review, and process, respectively, credit for prior learning. The catalog, form, and other documented policy/procedures were reviewed and analyzed as part of the data collection process for this study, allowing for verification of the survey responses. Reviewing the published

documents, whether in print or online, further informed the study in the spirit of discovery as critical to the appreciative inquiry framework.

Data Analysis

The process of qualitative research analysis involves identifying, linking, and structuring the data to build a system of categories and then searching for patterns in the data (Gläser & Laudel, 2013). The process of interpretation and analysis of the data and relating concepts and themes to the literature involves “working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, and synthesizing them, and searching for patterns” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested that when transcribing the data, coding, and looking for patterns, the researcher should keep the research questions and theoretical framework on a piece of paper nearby to keep the focus present.

Qualitative Survey

Data analysis was initiated by retrieving the participants responses from the survey tool, SurveyMonkey, and transferring the data into Word and Excel documents. Once completed, the data were initially analyzed for themes. Themes were identified by similar responses or ideas, usage of common descriptive words, and search for words and meanings echoing a repeated expression. The survey question structure provided through the CIPP evaluation model in the development of the survey questions allowed for further coding in accordance with the model elements of context, input, process, and product (Saldaña, 2012). Once the initial coding was complete, axial coding techniques helped

collapse the number of initial codes into a more parsimonious but exhaustive list of emerging key findings.

Formal Documents

The sections in the student catalog section discussing PLA and the college PLA form were transferred to a Word document for initial review and coding. The data were coded using descriptive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Descriptive coding consisted of assigning a key word or phrase to appropriately identify the specific passage. These themes were then compared to those of the survey for consistencies and disconnects between what was espoused as the PLA program and what the survey participants provided as grounded in their experiences.

Role of the Researcher

First, it is important to clarify my role as the researcher. In this case, because the study was a program evaluation, I crafted questions for the survey tool to extract information that helped to address the research questions. Then, I served as analyzer of the results to better understand the faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program at Acme College. In addition to understanding the descriptions of the perceptions of the PLA program at Acme, I used surveys to gain a better understanding of how PLA, from the faculty and staff perspective, might be continuously improved. In addition, I reviewed all documented information about PLA to verify feedback provided by participants. Then, I analyzed and triangulated information gathered from the survey responses and the information found on the website and policy in the catalog to identify themes and broad

generalizations, as guided by the principals of a program evaluation. Finally, I developed recommendations based on information reviewed and analyzed.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the survey tool did not allow for probing to get deeper meaning and understanding of the responses. Most respondents provided only surface level reactions to the questions. Had the institution allowed for face-to-face interviews, I would have been able to ask probing questions to gain better understanding of the responses.

Another limitation was the inability to identify whether it was a staff or faculty member who was responding. It may have been more meaningful to have that background information and even have a bit more information like if a faculty member was responding, in which department do they teach, if they have reviewed portfolios before and perhaps more about their academic assumptions and perceptions of credit for prior learning. The questions that were asked in the survey did ask about perceptions of the PLA program, however, focusing on the academic aspects a bit more from a faculty perspective would have added another layer and more dimension to this study.

Results of Analysis

The problem is that campus leaders have a limited understanding of faculty and staff knowledge and their role in the PLA program. The purpose of this study was to understand faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program and to ascertain how they might envision the future of the PLA program at the institution. The research questions:

- 1) How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA

program; 2) What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA; and 3) How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College, served to guide the open-ended survey questions that went out to those faculty and staff who are involved in the PLA process at Acme College.

Additionally, archival data such as catalogs, forms, faculty handbooks, online information, and the institutional factbooks were reviewed and analyzed.

The research questions and the corresponding open-ended survey questions constructed via the C.I.P.P. framework are shows in Table 3.

Table 3

Research Question and C.I.P.P Identifier

Research question addressed	C.I.P.P. Survey Question
RQ 1: How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA program?	Survey Q#1. Context: Describe for me your experiences with the college's assessment for prior learning program.
	Survey Q#2. Process: Describe the process by which a student engages in the assessment of prior learning at the college.
	Survey Q#3. Process: Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process.
	Survey Q#4. Input: What do you see as working in regards to the college's APL program?
RQ 2: What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA?	Survey Q#5. Product: Describe what you envision as the ideal APL program.
	Survey Q#7. Product: What do faculty & staff need to do to better position them for the assessment of prior learning?
RQ 3: How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?	Survey Q#1 -7. The responses to the survey questions pertaining to Research Questions 1 & 2 are analyzed to better understand the responses to the C.I.P.P based survey questions to quantifiably support the feedback.

The Director of Adult Education at Acme College identified and sent the survey request to one-hundred and ten total members of the faculty and staff who might play some role in the PLA process. As part of their duties, faculty may have the responsibility to review portfolio submissions but only on an as-needed basis. It is important to note that by virtue of the fact that very few students engage in the process annually, it is reasonable to assume that while faculty who were selected to participate in this study could be involved in a portfolio review they may never actually have conducted one and/or they may not have a very high awareness that it is part of their job responsibilities. Similarly, staff who were selected to participate in the survey from the advising, registration, and admission offices may play a role in the advisement or processing of PLA but due to infrequency of use may not be aware that it is part of their job responsibilities. Thirty-six faculty and staff participated in taking the survey. The next section includes a detailed analysis of the respondents' answers to the survey questions and how each address the respective research question. Following that, a discussion of the themes that emerged as a result of the analysis.

RQ1: How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College APL program? There are five different survey questions relating to this research question. In response to Question 1, "Describe your overall experience with the college's APL program", faculty and staff reflect having a limited understanding and experience with the college's APL program. For example, Respondent 23 with a relatively long tenure with the college stated, "In 16 years, I have evaluated three PL portfolios." Furthermore, Respondent 13 said, "We don't have one [APL program]". The

fact is that Acme College does have an APL program so it is interesting this respondent, who is part of a group identified by the college as either a faculty and staff who holds some role in the APL program, is indicating that the college has no such program. Also, it is important to note that many respondents actually skipped this question. It is difficult to put concrete meaning to this, however, it could be inferred that the respondents did not know how to respond or what to say if they have no experience with the college's APL program.

Several of the respondents mentioned that they have experience with and an understanding of the college's APL program. Respondent 11 offered feedback in this regard and provides some suggestions for improvement: "I have evaluated several different portfolios for students. Some were submitted in a very thorough and complete manner, others were very haphazard. Students are much better off to talk with faculty before submitting an APL." Additionally, Respondent 12 added more context about their role in the overall process: "As a department chair, I have helped Academic Advising and the Registrar's office update course equivalencies and implement new transfer agreements, and supervised scoring of skills assessments for incoming students." These respondents provided insights to possible improvements and areas that are being addressed in the academic support units at the college.

In answering Survey Question 2, "Describe the process by which a student engages in the assessment of prior learning at Acme College", there is again a reflection of a limited understanding of the process. For example, Respondent 21 said, "we have no process". Respondent 26 stated, "I am not sure how this happens currently on campus"

while Respondent 27 says, “Unclear – I do not know”. In fact, there are respondents who indicated that they do not know, are unsure, or they have a limited or even incorrect understanding of the process.

In contrast, some respondents were able to articulate or provide some information about the process. In some cases, a few provided details and even links to the information on the website. Respondent 23 said:

The student fills out a request for APL through the registrar’s office. The registrar’s office contacts the department chair who will determine the instructor with the expertise to evaluate the PL. The student meets with the instructor for an explanation of the process, course objectives to be met by the portfolio, rubrics, and due dates. Instructor evaluates the portfolio and makes a determination of sufficient prior knowledge.

Respondent 13 provided insight to the perception of how difficult the process is and said, “complicated process of developing a portfolio. Faculty/department then review”.

Overall, the responses to this question about how the faculty and staff understand the APL process showed that some have a fairly good understanding of the process while many others do not. In other words, there is a wide spectrum of understanding. This exposes an opportunity to better communicate and articulate information to the wider population of campus constituents involved with the assessment of prior learning about the operational and academic review processes.

Survey Question 3, “Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process”, provided an opportunity for faculty and staff to describe a specific PLA method

– portfolios. For those who did have a good understanding, they could articulate details.

For example, Respondent 13, stated:

Student pulls together documentation of training, experiences, projects and any course syllabus that pertain to a specific class offered here at Acme. The faculty and student review the documentation. Faculty may request additional papers or tests to verify learning outcomes. This is done on an individual basis, with faculty using their own process as they see appropriate to their course.

Similarly, Respondent 22 wrote:

Student requests review or is advised on process, standards and requirements set forth to student portfolio compiled with evidence to meet standard reviewed by faculty with expertise in area (faculty also provided with \$250 stipend for review) written summary of review submitted with grade to the registrar.

However, there are many respondents who admitted to having limited or no understanding of the process express their feedback as such. For example, Respondent 5 stated: “I don’t really have an understanding of the portfolio review process...”. And, Respondent 23 simply said, “I have no knowledge of this”. Again, as was identified with Question 2, there is a very wide range of understanding of the process. Among those who could articulate process there was disparity in the understanding of the academic review of portfolios.

For Survey Question 4, “What’s working with the APL program?”, while framed from a positive core, many respondents admitted to not have enough information about the college APL program and others were able to respond with some level of detail.

From this question, I was probing for aspects or qualities of the faculty and staff perceptions of the APL program that are working and could perhaps be leveraged. Several respondents indicated that taking experience into account to verify prior learning works. In contrast to that positive feedback, others stated that there is nothing that works, there is not enough knowledge about it, or that there is a desire to specify the process.

Respondent 5 provided a personal view of the value of APL:

I think students are taught by life experiences... not by faculty in the classrooms. Traditionally, faculty in the classrooms can plant seeds for students to draw on when life gives them the opportunity to learn something. We give parables for people to reflect on. BUT, people can do this work on their own. The APL seems to be a way for acknowledging this... and respecting the lived experiences of our students.

Further support for what is working, Respondent 9 said, "I think our process does verify prior learning". And, Respondent 12 contributed, "Students have an opportunity, at least, to make a case".

From the opposite perspective, Respondent 18 provided the following point of view:

The process is labor-intensive for all involved. There doesn't seem to be much that is working well. It is unclear how much interest our students have in this process (or would have if it were better supported) and how much effort they are willing to expend or how much effort we should expect them to expend in order

to earn credit for prior learning. At a small institution with limited resources, it is important that we find ways to build some economies of scale.

Here again, we see a wide range of perspectives about what is working with the college's APL program. The view that Respondent 18 provided suggestions for support and hints at simplifying processes to possibly improve the program.

Survey Question 6 asked, "Tell me to what extent you see the students needing APL for degree completion and/or retention". Not unlike responses to the other questions, the respondents provided a wide-range of feedback. Also, more respondents opted to skip this survey prompt. From a positive perspective, several of the faculty and staff responded that APL does help students to be more competitive. To support this, Respondent 4 provides a great deal of feedback, as follows:

Adult students are typically in a time in their life where they want a quality education that fits with their busy schedule, complete a degree as soon as possible, and cost effective. By having APL, it opens an opportunity for adult students to receive credit for their prior experience and this shortens their timeline to earn their degree which is makes

Acme more appealing. This also saves the student cost on their education which makes it more compelling for them to select Acme as a top choice to enroll in. This would then encourage their degree completion which is their motivation to stay retained with the institution. For retention, when adult student's experiences are counted for credit, in the classroom, they would be more excited to talk about their experience and share their knowledge inside the classroom to

support their peers and the faculty discussions. This continues the retention of the student where they are staying engaged in the classroom and continue to create dialogue with their peers and build a stronger relationship with faculty.

Additionally, Respondent 9 offered: “I think APL could provide credits towards completion. It might help retention if students don’t feel like they are having to take courses that are redundant.”

Most respondents who answered the question did seem to support APL in that it does help with degree, as well as retention. However, those that had a more negative response pointed to process and lack of clarity about APL in general. For example, Respondent 12 said, “My perception is that the major issue for us might be that students who seek APL don’t choose us because we’re not as fully equipped to respond to that request as other institutions”. Also, Respondent 13 echoed this with: “I see a need for a clear process so that we can use it for recruiting purposes”. This response brings in another layer of potential positive outcomes with APL on the recruitment aspect of attracting students.

Research Question 2: What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA? Two of the seven open-ended survey questions investigated this research question. Question 5 asked respondents to describe what the ideal vision for the APL program would be. Responses to this question is where more information is revealed about the need to highlight the purpose and process regarding PLA. For example, Respondent 25 stated, “That there would be a student information guide that details an exact process, that faculty and department heads would know and use a clear process”.

And Respondent 12 suggested: “We provide better guidelines and develop more internal expertise; we remove any barriers for students; we make the process as easy as possible; we assign the work of coordination to an office or person”. Other feedback, similar to the two above also accentuates guidelines, processes, academic rigor, and dedicated resources that would be needed to support the program.

A few respondents answered that they could not comment or state a vision because they did not know what it was. Also, there was a respondent who believes that the institution cannot award credit for prior. Their response was as such, “we cannot grant credit for prior learning as a requirement of our accrediting body”. This is factually inaccurate but representative of a belief of one of the respondents.

Question 7 asked what faculty and staff need to do to better position them for the assessment of prior learning and seeks to further address the research second research question by probing respondents to address what is needed to better position them for the APL program. Respondents offered substantive feedback in this regard. Topics regarding resources, support, relationships, communications, and training were all brought up through respondents’ answers. Specifically, in terms of resources, standards, and training, Respondent 21 stated, “clear criteria for assessment; guidelines for what is considered evidence...possibly a rubric where faculty create some inter-rater reliability...what are the requirements for pass/no pass”. Respondent 4 also spoke to similar needs, as such: “Create an office/department of Continuing Education that supports students with APL, Non-Degree Seeking, and Guest students along with hiring staff to support the office on recruiting, marketing, building support services for adult students, and providing

engaging events to retain students”. Here, the respondent is advocating for promotion of the program in an effort to retain students.

In addition to resources, support, promotion, and standards/guidelines, many respondents touch upon working relationships in and among the college constituents themselves. For example, Respondent 1 said, “Better working relationships, and that program reputation is earned through robustness and challenge, not just on “getting a degree”. This response also hints and the need to ensure high rigor and quality standards to ensure the program reputation is preserved. Another respondent also addressed the working relationships and goes beyond by emphasizing the importance of having support at the highest leadership levels at the college:

...Faculty and staff who work with this cannot be just “a little bit” familiar with the process. They will need to know the process very well to insure that the awarding of credit is consistent and academically sound. There needs to be very strong support for this throughout the College -- especially from the Provost and Deans.

This is actually a very important point based on the responses throughout the survey. Support for improving the APL program must come from the highest levels in order to appoint resources, invest in training, standardize and simplify the process, and promote the APL program.

RQ 3: How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs’ current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?

After reviewing all of the responses from each survey question as it is presented in response to Research Question 1 (Survey Questions 1 – 4 & 6) and Research Question 2 (Survey Questions 5 & 7) above, it was easy to identify ‘buckets’ or summary responses for each question in an effort to simplify and code the data. For example, someone who said something like, “I have a limited understanding of the APL process” or “I don’t know” fell into a summary response of “Limited or no understanding”. I was able to validate these summary responses by going through and initial identification of each individual response and bucketing them into the summary response category then, set that initial bucketing aside and taking just the summary responses going through the responses again (blind from the initial bucketing) and once again assign individual responses to the summary response and had a 100% match. The summary responses were of my own assignment (not pre-identified). It is important to point out that it is possible that another reviewer could come up with different summary responses and bucket individual responses differently. That said, the outcomes and themes would likely be very similar. In Figures 3-9 below, the y axis represents the summary response specific to each survey question, and the x axis represents the number of respondents that fell into that summary response.

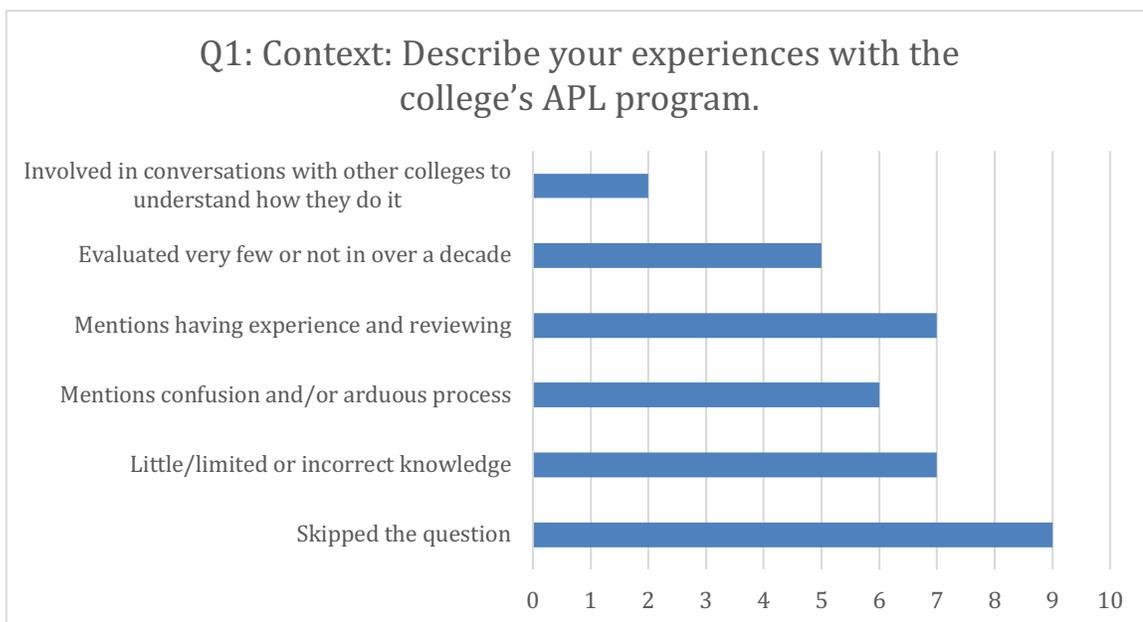


Figure 3. Open-ended survey data analysis question 1.

The first survey question asking respondents to, “describe your experiences with the college’s APL program”; based on that analysis, the answer appears to be that most are not clear or knowledgeable about the program and/or they find it to be a difficult process. Of those who answered the question, a significant number of respondents (48%) indicate that they have a limited or incorrect understanding of the APL program while an additional 22% say that it is a confusing or arduous process. Just over a quarter (26%) actually indicate that they have experience with the process and/or have reviewed portfolios for credit.

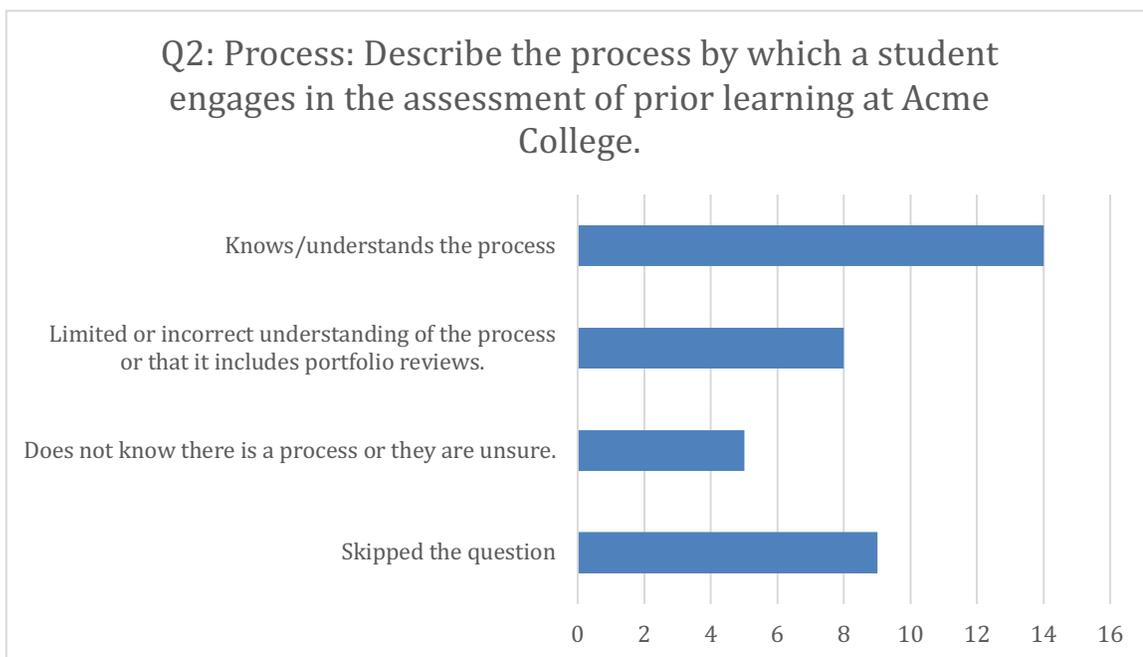


Figure 4. Open-ended survey data analysis question 2.

As it relates to the first research question, Survey Question 2, “describe the process by which a student engages in the assessment of prior learning at Acme College” attempts to gain a level of understanding by the faculty and staff of the process by which a student can earn credit for prior learning. Here again, of those who responded, a significant number of respondents (48%) have a very limited (if any) understanding of the process. However, 52% of those who answered, have indicated that they know or have an understanding of the process. Hence, there is a wide margin between those who know and those who do not.

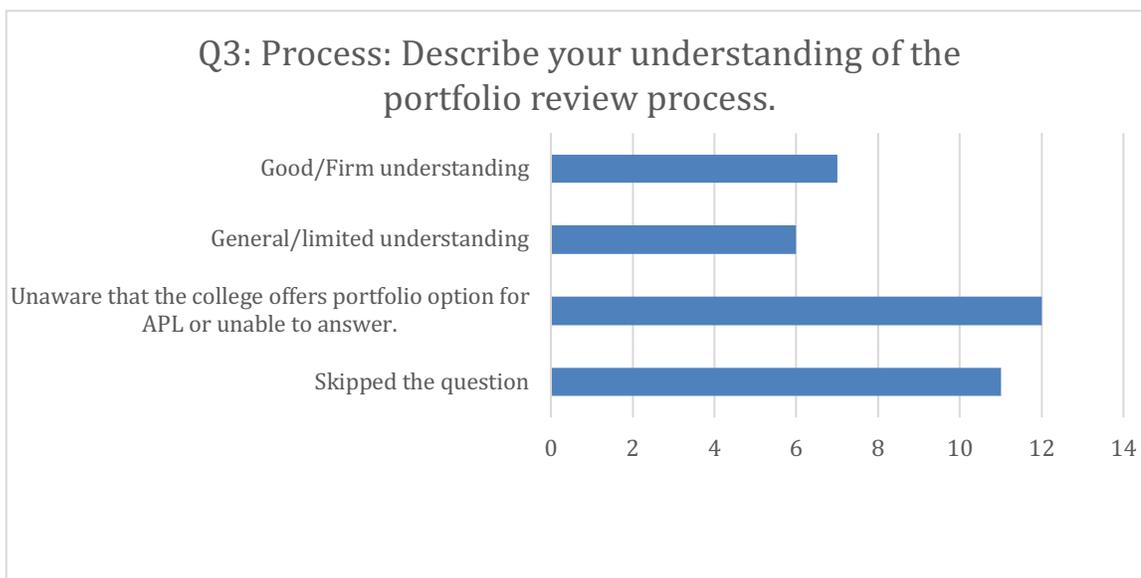


Figure 5. Open-ended survey data analysis question 3.

Survey Question 3, “describe your understanding of the portfolio review process,” is designed to address the first research question by addressing a specific methodology of PLA, the portfolio review. It was designed to be similar but different to identify if the respondent could distinguish the difference between the various units needed to be involved with the assessment of prior learning from a holistic operations perspective versus the academic rigor and pedagogy that needs to be applied specifically when reviewing portfolios. For example, at many institutions, there are standards and sometimes rubrics to follow when reviewing portfolios. In some cases, 28%, respondents had a good understanding of the distinction and spoke to it, however, the majority of those who responded, 48% could not – either because they had no knowledge of the APL program and therefore unable to answer or they just had a very limited understanding.

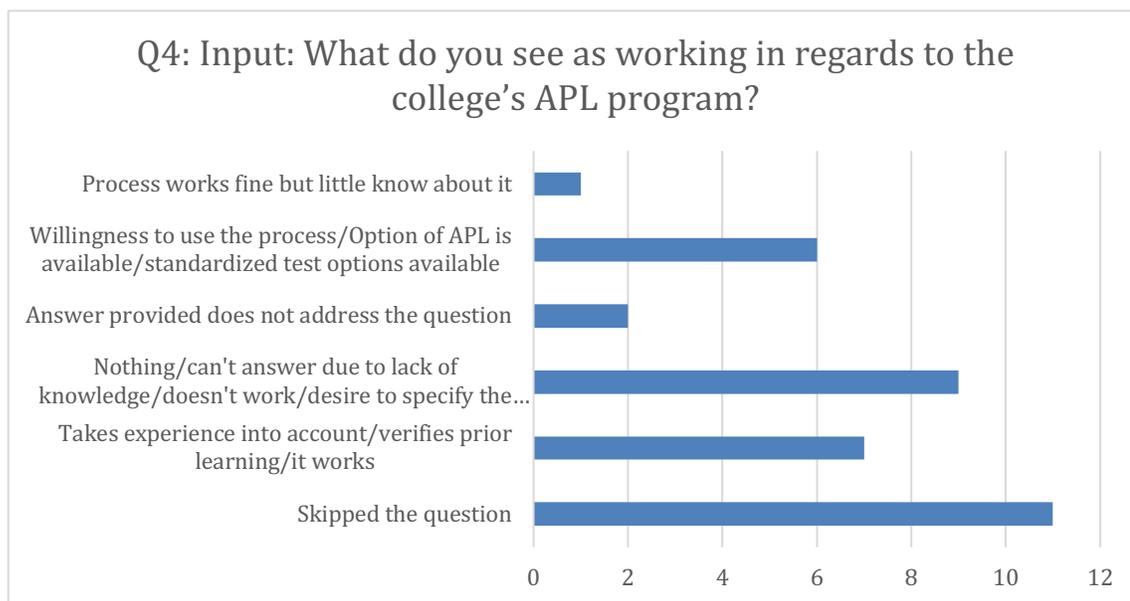


Figure 6. Open-ended survey data analysis question 4.

In response to Question 4, “What do you see as working in regards to the college’s APL program,” of those who answered this question, 48% indicate that they either “know little about it (APL), the answer did not address the question, or nothing/can’t answer due to lack of knowledge/ doesn’t work/desire to specify the process.” So, even coming from a positive core, nearly half of the respondent really didn’t have anything to contribute here. Of those who did have some feedback, 52%, they said that what they see working is that “APL takes experience in to account/ verifies prior learning/it works and willingness to use the process/ option of APL available/ standardized test option available”. These are all aspects to be highlighted so that all of the faculty and staff involved with APL, and even campus constituents who are not involved with APL, should aware of and share with colleagues and students.

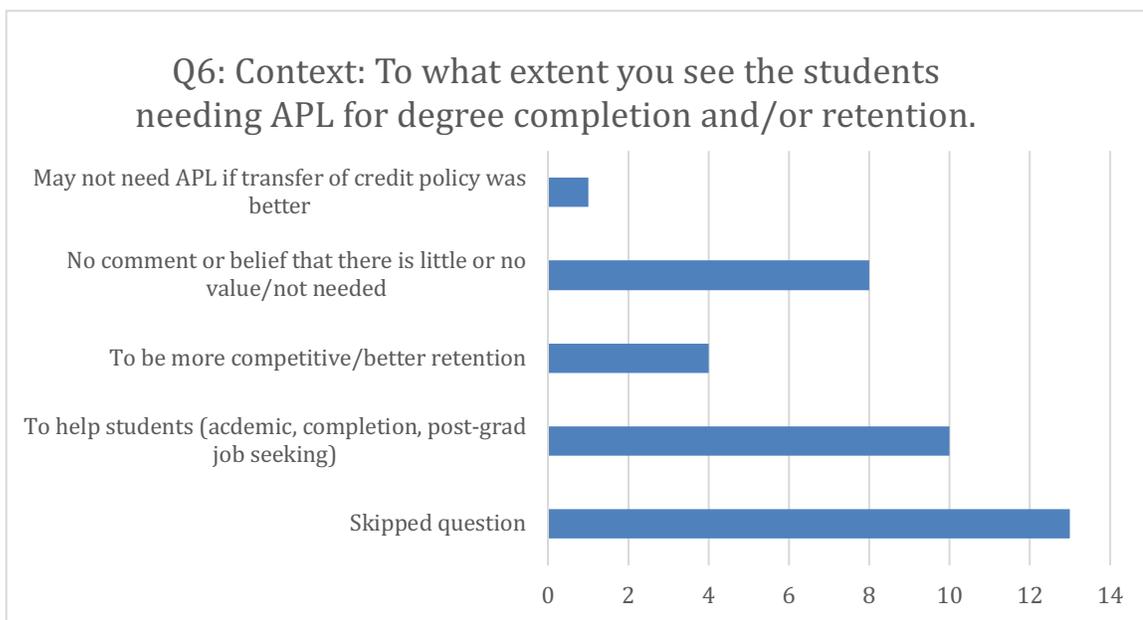


Figure 7. Open-ended survey data analysis question 6.

Survey Question 6 asks, “To what extent do you see the students needing APL for degree completion and/or retention?” Despite the lack of understanding about PLA policies and practices at the institution, about 61% of the respondents indicate that PLA helps students (academic, completion, post-grad job seeking) or that it helps students to be more competitive and positively influences retention.

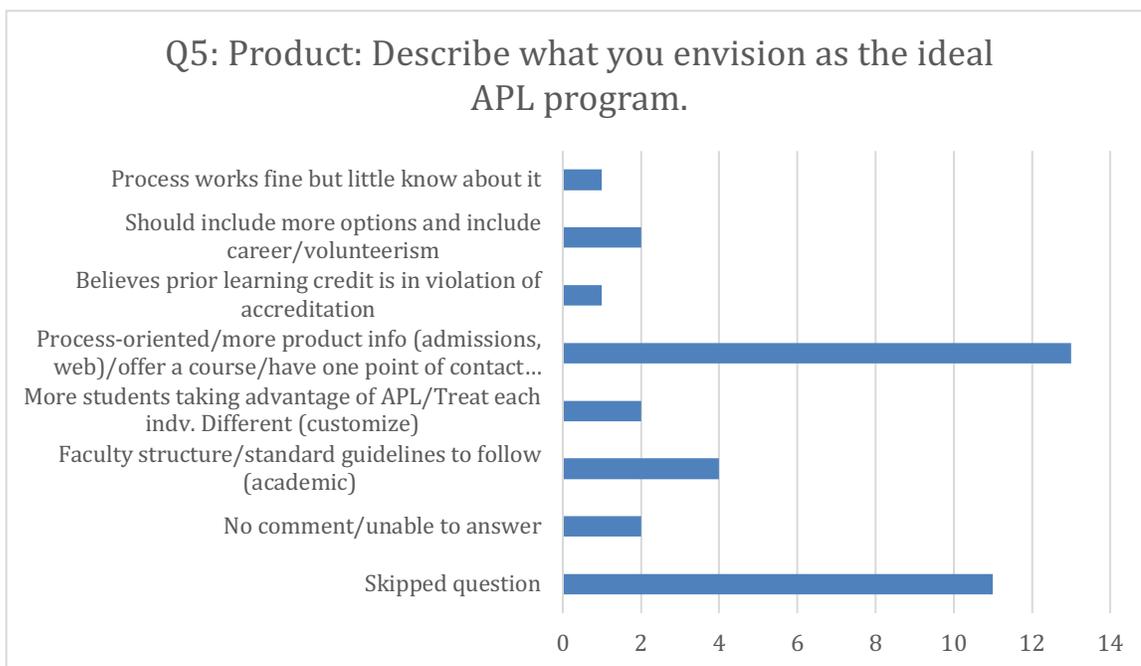


Figure 8. Open-ended survey data analysis question 5.

Survey Question 5 asking, “describe what you envision as the ideal APL program”, is one of three questions asked around the Research Question 2 regarding what faculty and staff envision for the future of the APL program at the institution. The responses provide great insight to what may not currently be addressed to an adequate level. For example, 52% of the respondents say that the ideal program is, “process oriented/ [has] more product info (admissions, web)/offer a course/have one point of contact”. Another 24% say that the ideal program is, “more students take advantage/treat each individual different (customize) or faculty structure/standard guidelines to follow (academic)”. The responses touch on different gaps that require attention. More about this when themes from the analysis are discussed in the next section.

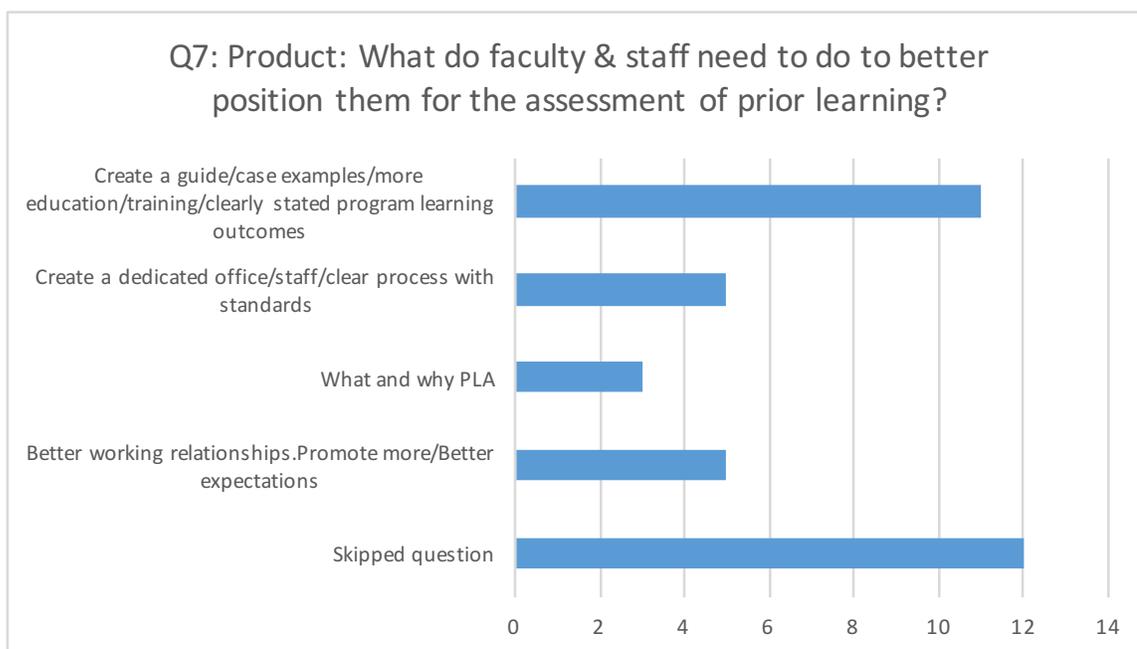


Figure 9. Open-ended survey data analysis question 7.

Survey Question 7, “what do faculty and staff need to do to better position them for the assessment of prior learning”, also seeks to address the second research question regarding what faculty and staff envision for the future of the APL program at Acme College. Again, the respondents provided insight as to the areas that may need to be addressed with the future APL program. Of the respondents who answered this question, 100% of them provide details about what is needed from a better understanding of why the APL program exists, dedicated staff, better collaboration, standards, processes, and promotion.

Themes

Based on the data that were extracted, coded, and analyzed of the survey feedback and the archival information and four themes emerged: (a) purpose, (b) promotion, (c) policy, and (d) process. The institutional feedback and areas of opportunity fell into one

of these four major thematic categories or groupings of these themes where multiple themes may have applied to individual responses. Figure 10 shown immediately below provides a summary of the frequency of responses by theme or thematic grouping. Note that the y axis represents the theme or theme group (combination of themes) and the x axis represents the number of responses that fell into each theme or thematic grouping. Following that is a discussion about each theme.

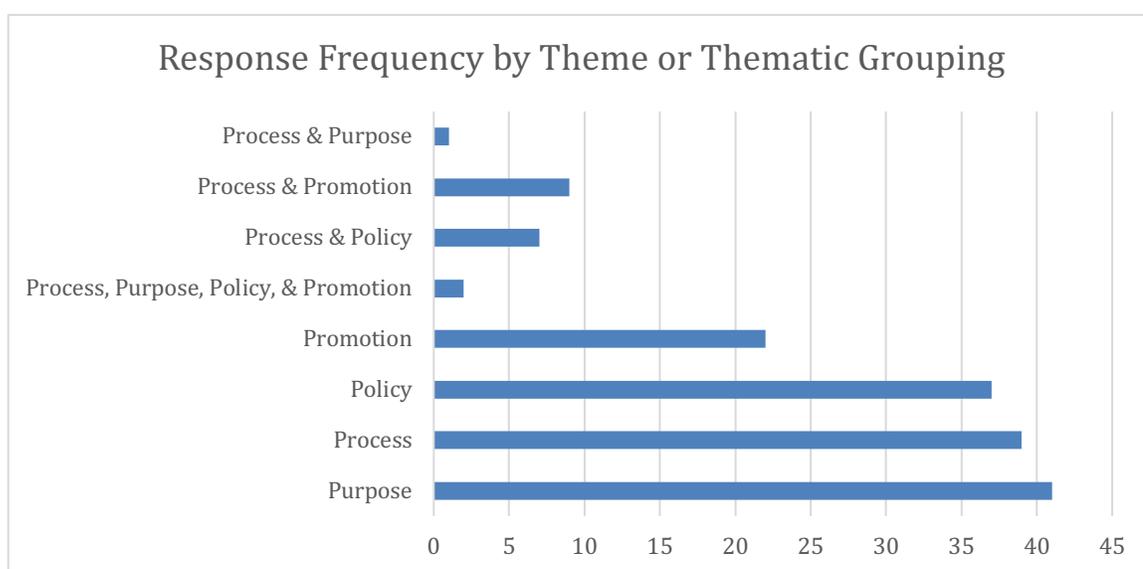


Figure 10. Response frequency by theme or thematic grouping.

Purpose

Unpacking tacit knowledge from applied experience and aligning that to college-level learning outcomes from a formal academic curriculum is a powerful yet challenging task. When done appropriately, this “[d]rawing on tacit knowledge leads to new understanding and thus to new learning” (Colvin, 2012, p. 91). Consider Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning and the importance of this type of learning. Kolb’s model has four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization,

and active experimentation (Colvin, 2012). It is in the reflective observation stage where things start to click and stick, “Learning happens only when there is reflective thought and internal ‘processing’ by the learner, in a way that actively makes sense of an experience and links it to previous learning” (Kolb, as cited in Colvin, 2012, p. 94). The writing process a student undertakes when constructing his or her portfolio for assessment takes the process of reflective observation and puts it into action. In reviewing the survey feedback and the archival data, there appeared to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the purpose of PLA. What is the purpose of having PLA as an option for students at the institution and what is the real benefit?

To further illustrate that last point, one of the context-oriented survey questions that seeks to elicit feedback about the nature and scope of Acme’s PLA program was, “Tell me to what extent you see the students needing PLA for degree completion and/or retention.” Respondent 36 answered, “While PLA can help with retention and progress to degree, a recognition is that students need a leg up/refresher on some aspects of their learning to better position their academic success and competitiveness post-graduation should be paramount.” Here, the responder seemed to get the purpose of PLA; however, the respondent also reflected that there appeared to be lack of recognition more broadly across the institution. Additionally, a sub-theme of purpose emerged in that academic success and the competitive nature of the workforce is also applicable to the purpose of PLA.

Another illustration of the opportunity to further clarify and promote the purpose of PLA was provided in response to an input prompt: “What do you see as working in

regards to the college's PLA program?" Nine out of 25 respondents provided answers that fell into the coded area of "Nothing/can't answer due to lack of knowledge/doesn't work/desire to specify the process." That is to say, more than one-third of the respondents had difficulty in connecting purpose to the institution PLA program. More specifically, Respondent 12 simply said "Unknown" in response to this prompt, and Respondent 27 said "NC," for "no comment." Respondent 28 replied, "Currently, not so much." Furthermore, in response to a process-oriented prompt, "Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process," 12 of the 25 respondents provided answers that fell into the coded category of "Unaware that the college offers portfolio option for PLA or unable to answer," and an additional six respondent provided answers that indicated only general or limited understanding. That is to say, that nearly two-thirds of the respondents do not understand or know the portfolio review process nor fully connect to its purpose.

Miller and Morgaine (2009) documented that when a student successfully goes through the PLA process, that "reflection can be an awakening for students and serves to distill the meaning from experiences" (p. 10). In this way, students identify in a new way with their experiences and the learning they have extracted. Conrad (2008) supported this notion and expressed that prior learning is "honoring and building on mature learners' past experiential learning" (p. 140). Students at Acme College may have a positive PLA experience with an opportunity to connect their experience with their academic interests and persist.

Promotion

PLA is an important part of any institution of higher education, but in particular for those that have a specific adult learner population. Students have many options now as to where they may pursue their educational goals. To that end, Leiste and Jensen (2011) remarked,

In addition to program offerings, two main deciding factors are time to completion and total cost of the program. PLA offerings can help to reduce both.

Therefore, the option to undertake a PLA may be a factor in the decision to attend a particular institution. (Leiste & Jensen, 2011, p. 66)

Institutions that offer a PLA program should promote and effectively communicate the program to help attract and retain students. One respondent said, “The admissions and campus advising staff should be VERY familiar with the process and be able to explain it to prospective and current students. . . . The information should be easy to find online in a Google search.”

This discussion is a good place to promote the findings of the CAEL (Klein-Collins, 2010) study on the impact of PLA referenced earlier; that discussion mentioned that students who earn credit for PLA have overall better student outcomes than their non-PLA earning counterparts, as measured by GPA, persistence, graduation, time to degree completion, and total cost of attendance. Respondent 19, in answering Question 7, “Tell me to what extent you see the students needing PLA for degree completion and/or retention,” remarked,

I think in terms of admissions-specific viewpoint on this question, it is one of the primary reasons students do not choose to enroll at this college, which is directly related to retention and degree completion because they do not matriculate in the first place. (Respondent 19)

Given these data, the institution should be interested in promoting the PLA program and opportunities for the students to earn credit for learning gained via experience. However, the feedback from the survey indicates that this is not the case at Acme. Question 1 was a context-derived prompt that asked study participants to describe the college PLA program. Seven of the 27 (28%) of respondents answer that they did not know or had little knowledge about the program. Respondent 25 said, “We don’t have one.” Respondent 10 said, “In 16 years, I have evaluated three PL portfolios.”

Another product-driven question asked respondents to describe what they envisioned as an ideal PLA program. Thirteen of the 25 respondents (52%) answered in the following category: “Process-oriented/more product information (Admissions, web)/offer a course/have one point of contact specific to PLA.” Respondent 9 stated the vision of a “clear process stated online,” and Respondent 2 further supported the vision by stating, “That there would be a student information guide that details and exact process, that faculty and department heads would know and use a clear process.” In other words, more than half have envision better/more promotion and process of the PLA program.

Policy

Clarity around the academic rigor and assessment process for PLA is vitally important for the governing body and faculty of an institution to fully support and buy into the program. Along with this notion, consistency in application of the standards for assessment is also important, particularly as one surveys the college from one department to the next. Having disparate or inconsistent standards promotes confusion, distrust in the process, and erodes the perceived academic validity of the program. Therefore, having a clear policy and understandable assessment standards across the institution is critical.

While there may be some agreement about this notion, “Much has been written on quality assurance (e.g. Mishra, 2007), but little has focused on appropriate frameworks for evaluating program learning assessment programs (Van Kleef, et al., 2007; Van Kleef, forthcoming 2011)” (Travers & Evans, 2011, p. 124). That said, “Accreditation processes (e.g., Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges) provide institutions with some type of overarching framework and critical questions from which the institution can conduct a self-study to assess their institution and programs” (Travers & Evans, 2011, p. 124). At Acme, one theme that emerged was some level of confusion about the policy and that perhaps there is some inconsistency from one department to the next in how portfolios may be assessed. There are some general guidelines provided in the undergraduate catalog and on the portfolio form; however, they are general statements speaking to the notional learning that is expected to be ascertained from portfolios. The undergraduate catalog provides the following guidance regarding portfolio development and submission:

In completing the evaluation of a student's previous learning, the faculty team applies the following criteria:

- There is documentable evidence of a cognitive component in the previous learning experience that involved prescribed or systematic study of content material found within liberal arts coursework.
- The learning has been objectively verified by individuals in addition to the presenting student.
- The learning lends itself to both qualitative and quantitative measurement.
- The learning relates well to the student's educational goals.
- The learning and skills involved are current and could be used at the present time. (Acme College, Undergraduate Catalog, 2016, p. 60)

In addition to the archival data, feedback from the survey also provided insight into this critical thematic area. In answer to a product-oriented question, "What do faculty and staff need to better position them for the assessment of prior learning," 11 of the 25 respondents to this question provided answers that fell into the category of "Create a guide/case examples/more education/training/clearly stated learning outcomes." Otherwise stated, nearly half of the respondents desired clarity on the process of awarding credit in the portfolio review process. More specifically, Respondent 14 offered, "Students would be better served by ensuring we continue to look closely and progress our transfer credit policies." This respondent went on to explain that if better transfer credit policies existed, perhaps the need to have PLAs would lessen. He continued, "I hear more complaints about transcribed coursework not transferring than

the inability to earn credit for life experiences.” Here, a sub-theme has emerged as the need to look at the overall transfer credit policy in addition to the PLA policy.

Process

Having a clear, easy, and documented process to follow for all involved, including students, faculty, and staff, in the assessment of prior learning program is essential. Process as a theme covers a few different ideas. First, process includes the mechanics involving how a student comes to request a portfolio review or other type of PLA, the logistical operational process steps that follow (submitting to faculty, faculty assessing and sending results to the student and registrar office, and so on), as well as the process for academics to follow when assessing a portfolio. As discussed earlier, Capella University has developed a strong policy and process for its students:

Until 2007, PLA at Capella University were supported by staff members in individual academic departments. A centralized team was formed to improve efficiency and create additional resources for learners. The team has worked to determine best practices, develop helpful tools for PLA learners, improve operational practices, and increase outreach to learners. The number of learners participating in PLAs at Capella University is growing steadily each year. (Leiste & Jensen, 2011, p. 65)

Capella captured the essential ingredients to developing a successful PLA program: academic rigor, tools for students, centralized operations, and outreach to promote. Also, by making it a centralized process, Capella not only helped with the process questions, but also provided a level of consistency for portfolio assessment outcomes. While

Capella is only one example of how PLA is handled at a particular institution, there are many other models to consider with the central themes at the forefront.

Processes, as a theme, came forward from the survey responses. In response to Question 4, “Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process,” Respondent 34 stated, “Registrar oversees the portfolio review process. I have little knowledge of this process.” To further illustrate the uncertainty about process, in response to Question 5, “What do you see as working in regards to the college’s PLA program,” Respondent 9 said, “The process works fine. There are few people who know the process exists so there seems to be little use of it.” Others could articulate, in brief, different aspects of the process. In answer to Question 4, of the 25 who provided responses, answers from 13 (52%) were coded as having either a limited or firm understanding of the process; however, 12 (48%) were either unaware that the college had a PLA program or were unable to answer the question due to lack of knowledge. For example, Respondent 12 simply answered, “Unknown.” The responses were varied in terms of understanding the process, with some having the ability to articulate the process with some level of clarity, while others were completely unaware that a PLA program existed. Respondent 10 provided a response indicating having a fairly good grasp of the process and cited website addresses and forms where a student might be directed for further information.

Conclusion

This program evaluation was developed to elicit information and explore faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program at Acme College. Participants included faculty members and staff who were surveyed to gain a better understanding of their respective

experience with and perceptions of awarding credit for prior learning. Ethical standards and practices were applied by informing survey respondents that their responses would be anonymous. Additionally, names of those who were sent the survey were kept confidential and safety measures to protect data were followed.

Finally, data were reviewed, analyzed, manually coded, and grouped into themes. Coding the data and linking findings back to the research questions and theoretical framework allowed for the emergence of themes. The themes reflected four broad categories: purpose, promotion, policy, and process. Faculty and staff had trouble connecting the purpose or why the PLA program exists to student success. Additionally, many faculty and staff felt that while they have a PLA program, it is not well promoted on campus nor is it supported by policy that promotes academic standards for consistency. Finally, the faculty and staff seemed to have limited knowledge about the process of PLA at the institution. These themes supported outcomes that pointed the recommendations that were generated and shared in Appendix A of this study.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Using a formative program evaluation, I examined the perceptions of PLA among the faculty, administration, and staff at Acme College who are involved with PLA from an appreciative inquiry framework to better understand the positive core of the PLA program and how it might be improved to promote better engagement among students. The approach included an analysis of a qualitative survey sent to the target population, written documentation found about the PLA program at Acme College, and finally a review of the triangulated data points to find common themes, opportunities, and/or other relevant information that might inform the study. A program evaluation was chosen as the path of such research because the intent was to “examines [sic] programs to determine their worth and make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success” (Spaulding, 2014, p. 5). The aspects of PLA being reviewed are the faculty and staff perceptions along with the documentation found about PLA at Acme.

Research Design and Approach

This program evaluation followed a decision-based approach that was designed to evaluate a program based on responses to questions. In this case, Stufflebeam’s (2007) CIPP model was applied; questions were developed, guided by the frame of these general areas of inquiry: context, input, process, and product (Spaulding, 2014). With this framework, “[c]ontext in the CIPP model is understood as the nature and scope of the problem in relation to the setting” (Spaulding, 2014, p. 48). Furthermore, input refers to the resources that are put forth to support the program and interactions of people involved

with the program and those resources (Spaulding, 2014). When examining the process aspect of the CIPP model, the steps and procedures of the program are considered. The product prompts review of answering the question, “Was the desired outcome of the product/program attained?”

The qualitative survey consisted of seven open-ended questions constructed from the CIPP framework (Spaulding, 2014) in the spirit of appreciative inquiry. The questions were constructed using the CIPP framework while taking into account the 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry: discovery, dreaming, designing, and delivery (Reed, 2007). The aim was to elicit responses from survey participants that will help inform the understanding of the perceptions of campus constituents who are involved with the assessment of prior learning at Acme College and assuming a positive core. The positive core is an essential component of the appreciative inquiry framework where the researcher approaches questions, making good faith assumptions in program inputs and outcomes rather than a critical “something must be wrong” perspective.

The goal in eliciting such responses is to better understand these perceptions so that the discovery, dreaming, designing, and delivery may be aligned to what the campus constituents believe are the positive attributes of PLA and what are the primary areas of opportunity for improvement. The product of this study is a white paper and presentation of the research with recommendations for the institution. A white paper was chosen because it provides a platform to convey the results and clearly outline specific recommendations based on the research. It is designed to enable campus leadership to take clear and precise action. As the assessment for prior learning has been deemed

underutilized by the campus leadership, ascertaining feedback from involved campus constituents provided further insight into some systemic, policy, process, or other areas to probe further. There may be enrollment and/or retention gains to earn if these issues are brought to light and addressed.

Description and Goals

This program evaluation was based on an appreciative inquiry approach to examine the perceptions about the Acme College PLA program to better understand why PLA is underutilized, as communicated by campus leadership. An anonymous, open-ended, qualitative survey was sent to faculty and staff at Acme who are involved with the assessment of prior learning. Additionally, documentation found on the Internet about the Acme program was reviewed in light of the three research questions, which were (a) How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA program? and (b) What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA? Questions were constructed to better understand the context, input, process, and product aspects of the PLA program while assuming a positive core via the appreciative inquiry approach. As a result, themes regarding the opportunities for the PLA program emerged, allowing recommendations to follow. The primary goal of the project was to better understand the opportunities that can be addressed to improve the PLA program at the college to make specific and actionable recommendations via a white paper and presentation.

Rationale

The local problem was identified as the underutilization of the existing PLA program at Acme College. Program evaluation is considered to be a way to review and

evaluate a program to make recommendations for improvements to better realize intended outcomes (Spaulding, 2014). Therefore, the net outcome of the program evaluation has resulted in a white paper and presentation for campus leadership to consider where areas of opportunity for improving the PLA program exist. The white paper outlines the general thematic areas that arose from the survey, correlated recommendations, and a proposed action plan for improvement.

Review of the Literature

I conducted the literature review using the Walden University library and Google Scholar to aid my research. The databases used to explore the topics included Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Proquest, Walden doctoral study and dissertation database, and American Doctoral Dissertations. Terms used to research included a variety of combinations of the following topics: *white paper*, *policy paper*, *position paper*, *prior learning assessment*, *adult learning*, *adult education*, *appreciative inquiry*, and *portfolio assessment*. The literature review consists of three sections: the research framework (program evaluation), how the research topic relates to the framework, and the research product genre (white paper).

The Research Framework

In this literature review, I have explored formative program evaluations and research in PLA informed this research. Program evaluation has been applied in the education realm and has a long history at the local, state, and national level in hopes of improving programmatic outcomes and student success. A formative program evaluation approach was applied whereby, as Lodico et al. (2010) suggested, the data collected are

analyzed to understand how to make the program better. For the purposes of this study, the stakeholders were the faculty, staff, and administration. Their perceptions of the Acme PLA program and the documents available about PLA were used as the data points of collection and analysis because the institution sought to identify opportunities for improvement to increase enrollment and student retention.

This genre of research includes important questions addressing stakeholders' needs and are at the heart of worthwhile evaluations. As Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers (2011) noted, "Useful evaluations lead to descriptions, insights, judgments, recommendations, and other processes that meet the needs of those requesting the evaluation" (p. 5). Stakeholders are an important aspect of this research because, as Adams, Nnawulezi, and Vandenberg (2015) noted,

First, stakeholders can use the evaluation findings to improve their understanding or modify their thinking about aspects of the program. . . . Second, the evaluation process can be used to promote changes in individual thinking and behavior as well as organization procedure and culture. (p. 243)

In this case, at Acme, stakeholders played a critical role in terms of willingness and interest to participate in the research itself and interest in receiving the results and recommendations that resulted. Furthermore, because the stakeholders at Acme were interested in examining the program and learn of ways to potentially improve it, a formative program evaluation was an appropriate choice for the research genre.

Product Outcome: White Paper

This project study resulted in a white paper that informs the institution not only of the findings, but also recommends actions to improve. In the spirit of appreciative inquiry, the recommendations were formed as a result of assuming a positive core whereby faculty, staff, and administrators were given an opportunity to express their observations (discover) and what they envisioned (dream) as improvements. The recommendations are also positioned from the appreciative inquiry framework, whereby the leaders may design (consider options and prioritize) and embark on their destiny (put a plan into action). Hyde (2015) described white papers as, “business documents designed to convey policy, present technical information, or propose a problem and solution” (slide 2). White papers are organized to provide the reader with information about the problems and how they were identified, proposed solutions, and a conclusion (Hyde, 2015).

White papers have been used across many different industries, including education, but have their roots in government (Willeron, 2013). Many institutions and third-party organizations that provide services to the education sector publish white papers, as do many non-profit organizations supporting education. For example, *Education Week*, a K–12 education-focused newspaper has a designated page on its website dedicated to white papers in education. *University Business*, largely now an online resource, publishes materials and highlights technical service provides for the higher education sector; they, too, have a section dedicated to white papers.

In a handbook published for the Northeast Resiliency Consortium, Travers (2015) discussed the significance, research, and five critical areas of focus for PLA. This handbook, essentially a policy paper, assumed a positive core at a given institution while providing instructive guidance to follow to grow and develop PLA programs. Travers outlined five critical factors in a successful PLA program: (a) institutional mission and commitment, (b) institutional support, (c) program practices, (d) professional development, and (e) program evaluation and improvement. Not only did this guidance fit with the research findings in this study, but organizing the factors via the handbook helped to validate construction of a white paper to lay out the findings and recommendations. Furthermore, this publication served as an exemplar of a position paper (or white paper). As Stelzner (2005) stated, “white papers are well-reasoned, visually appealing documents that resemble research papers but are strategically crafted to marshal support for an idea” (p. 2).

Prior Learning Assessment

Recognition of prior learning for college credit is important on many levels and to a variety of stakeholders, first and foremost to students; however, most students are not aware of opportunities to earn credit for prior learning through a formal program like the Acme College PLA program. Awarding credit for prior learning has made it to the mainstream of federal and state-wide initiatives to incentivize college completion at many public institutions. Sherman, Klein-Collins, and Palmer (2012) asserted, “According to Lumina Foundation, the U.S. needs to educate nearly 800,000 more college graduates each year between now and 2025 to meet the growing needs of the

workforce” (p. 1). Acme College not only has a huge opportunity to improve retention and graduation rates by increasing participation in the PLA program, but also the institution would contribute to meet a growing need in the country to produce more college graduates. Klein-Collins and Wertheim (2013) remarked, “As noted by the National Commission on Higher Education Attainment in its January 23, 2013, open letter to college and university leaders, PLA has emerged as an important strategy for helping more people cross the finish line to degree completion” (p. 52). As such, many institutions of higher education of all types (public, private, community) have examined their own programs; their work helped to inform this project study.

While it is an important strategy, research on the topic of PLA is limited. In fact, PLAR [prior learning assessment and recognition] as a field of practice and research is, however, still emerging and hence it is important to articulate what consensus we have about what we know and how we gauge trustworthiness of that knowledge. (Harris et al., 2014, p. 28)

Harris et al. (2014) recognized a need to catalog and critique the research that has been done to date to gauge research, identify gaps, and note where there is a need for further research on the topic. As Harris et al. explained, from 1974 to 2012, only 47 master’s and doctoral theses were cataloged in the Prior Learning International Research Center database. This low level of attention underscores the need for further research on this topic. That said, Harris et al. offered 433 pages of information and detail. The research topics mentioned by Harris et al. range from lifelong learning and recognition of

prior learning in the learning society, labor markets and national qualification frameworks, professional development in the field, technology and RPL, and more.

Although the research in the field on a global scale is emerging, there has been a focus on PLA in the United States, given the high demand for credentials in the workforce and the acute focus on the rising cost of higher education. Sherman and Klein-Collins (2015) remarked,

State leaders are increasingly aware of PLA's value in helping adult learners complete a degree faster and at a lower cost. Many are taking steps to encourage the offering and use of PLA throughout entire systems of colleges and universities. (p. 4)

The demand and economic imperative have driven government and state authorities to incentivize acceleration of degree attainment, and awarding credit for prior learning is a viable way to do just that. In Washington state, for example, legislation was passed in 2011 that requires the Washington Student Achievement Council to convene a PLA working group to coordinate and implement on seven stated goals described in a statute for promoting credit earned for prior learning via PLA (West & Light, 2014). The statute contains seven goals, several of which are pertinent to the outcomes of the research outcomes of this study. In particular, goals 1, 3, and 4 relate to increasing the number of students who receive credit for prior learning, developing transparent policies and practices, and developing faculty and staff in the field of PLA (West & Light, 2014). Noteworthy goals articulated in the 2013 update to the legislation include expanding and improving communications to faculty and students about PLA and to encourage more

crosswalks between the workforce and institutions of higher education in the state (West & Light, 2014). Montana, Texas, and Ohio have also trended toward establishing state-wide capacity building models (Sherman & Klein-Collins, 2015). Of note, “In Texas, an initiative called College Credit for Heroes was written into Section 302 of the state’s labor codes” (Sherman & Klein-Collins, 2015, p. 21). Colorado, Oregon, Maryland, and Hawaii also support state institution network policies and practices (Sherman & Klein-Collins, 2015).

Another state model to highlight is Tennessee. Not only is the state government dedicated to the outcomes desired for 2025, but also the state has offered financial incentives to institutions of higher education in the state (including community colleges) to graduate more students. In an early progress report published by the Lumina Foundation, the incentive program does appear to be working (Johnson & Yanagiura, 2012). Johnson and Yanagiura (2012) reported “strong growth since formula implementation that appears clearly linked to the new funding policy, with 174% total growth in short-term and 27% in long-term certificate awards” (p. 5). The state of Tennessee operates a federally grant program, Tennessee Reconnect (n.d.), and website specifically to aid the effort of driving adults to attain higher education credentials. The site promotes earning credit for what adults already know and highlights PLA as a viable path to earn academic credit toward degree completion.

Colorado also received funding from the federal government to focus on development and emphasize the importance of PLA for adults in the state seeking a credential. Community colleges in Colorado received a grant from the U.S. Department

of Labor in November 2014, part of which was slated to be used to “review and redesign of the state’s existing prior learning assessment (PLA) policy and implementation of that policy within all 13 CCCS colleges” (Colorado Community College System, as cited in McKay, Cohn, & Kuang, 2016, p. 196).

At the institutional level, support for accelerating the use of PLA has gained momentum because of the degree completion agenda, state support (such as the legislation in Washington State), and financial incentives (such as those offered in Tennessee). Rust and Ikard (2016), who conducted research at a large public institution, asserted students with credit for PLA portfolios had improved student outcomes. Specifically, the researchers tested four hypotheses: (a) students who complete PLA portfolios would show graduation rates superior to national rates for PLA students who participate in PLA in all forms; (b) persistence rates would be higher for PLA portfolio students versus non-PLA students; (c) final grades in the PLA portfolio students culminating project course would be superior to non-PLA portfolio students; and (d) PLA final grades at graduation would improve prior to completing PLA portfolio. Findings supported all but one of the hypotheses—persistence rates were not necessarily higher, but were the same for PLA portfolio students (Rust & Ikard, 2016).

In a recent study at a large, public institution, researchers examined student perceptions of and experiences with the PLA course and portfolio review process (Rust & Brinthaup, 2017). The researchers tested five hypotheses, of which two supported by the findings are most pertinent to the present study. First, Rust and Brinthaup (2017) were

interested in the perceptions and experiences of those completed the PLA portfolio course and what the perceived gains were from taking the course. More specifically,

There was strong support . . . that students would report positive affective responses toward the course and portfolio. This result was like prior research findings showing that the PLA portfolio process can produce gains in student self-confidence and self-awareness. (Rust & Brinthaupt, 2017, p. 121)

Additionally, Rust and Brinthaupt (2017) found students had a greater sense of belonging and connectedness with the institution, even in the online portfolio course environment, as a result of having gone through the PLA portfolio course. As leadership of Acme consider the recommendations from the findings of this study, the knowledge reported by Rust and Brinthaupt are important to take into consideration. While the present study was focused on the faculty, staff, and administrators' perceptions of PLA at Acme, the study by Rust and Brinthaupt puts into perspective students' perceptions and outcomes Acme would be seeking to pursue.

Implementation

The white paper included in Appendix A outlines specific next steps based on the recommendations and requirements needed to be successful in following through on the recommendations. As a first step, it will be important to connect with the director of adult learning at Acme College to present the white paper and suggest a meeting with the institutional leaders who supported the study. It will be necessary to first align on the recommendations and suggest a format for presenting the findings (a meeting and PowerPoint deck).

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The potential resources and existing supports at the institution will need to be identified in collaboration with the director of adult learning. A suggestion is that an individual be appointed with PLA oversight as his or her primary and sole responsibility. Currently, there is no full-time role dedicated to PLA at Acme College. Another suggestion is that a working group is established (to include the individual with primary responsibility for PLA oversight). There are many faculty and staff at the college who hold some part of the PLA process responsibilities, so it is likely that resources among that population may be selected to be involved in the working group.

Potential Barriers

Potential barriers to success include lack of institutional leadership support. If PLA is not made a priority for Acme, then the requirements and recommendations will get lost among the other institutional priorities and status quo will prevail. Without institutional leadership support, it is possible that an individual will not be assigned PLA oversight responsibility, which will cause difficulty in following through on activities that have been outlined for the working group. These activities include aligning on a PLA value proposition; articulating the mission, vision, and values for a PLA program; working on a strategic vision, and developing a long-range plan. The institution must first decide whether refocusing on PLA as a strategic tool to address enrollment and retention to be successful is a worthwhile endeavor.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The suggested timetable of the requirements and recommendations, which spans approximately 6–9 months (see Table 4), can be accelerated or decelerated, depending on the institutional leadership preferences.

Table 4

Proposed Implementation Timetable

Date	Activity	Responsible Owner
To Be Determined	Review findings, white paper, and recommendations	Director of adult learning
1–2 weeks after initial review with director of adult learning	Present findings and PowerPoint presentation to institutional leadership	President, provost, selected deans or program directors and other academic administrators identified
2–3 weeks after presenting findings*	Appoint an individual with PLA oversight as main priority/area of responsibility. * This may take longer if there is a need to hire for the role rather than appoint an existing FTE	Director of adult learning and/or other appointed responsible party who will be the supervisor for this FTE.
6–9 weeks after PLA Oversight appointment	Organize a PLA working group and hold meetings to identify the requirements: PLA value proposition, identify resources, state mission, vision and values, develop strategy and long-range plan	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
2–3 weeks after working group identifies requirements	Organize the series of workshops to address what PLA is and why the college offers it, understand the specific PLA options along with roles and responsibilities of those involved; and finally learn and apply standard review and assessment techniques involved with the PLA portfolio review.	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Workshops delivered over the course of a semester or term	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Simultaneous to the workshop development, the working group should work on identifying grants and begin the application process to continue to strengthen the vision and strategy to expand the PLA program.	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Simultaneous to the workshop development and grant planning, the PLA oversight FTE and working group shall work to reinforce each aspect of the findings from the study: purpose, policy, promotion, and process.	1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified

Note. FTE = full-time equivalent.

Roles and Responsibilities

In the case of managing a PLA program, the costs are primarily associated with people managing the process and assessment. Additional costs are associated with the cost of the assessment itself, but there is typically a fee associated with portfolio review so, if anything, there may be revenue to be realized. The primary question of resources centers around whether or not the PLA program is managed by people in a centralized or decentralized manner (or somewhere in between). A great PLA program can be managed effectively either way, but what matters is the ability to be clear about roles and responsibilities and workflow.

Travers (2015), a well-known PLA expert from SUNY Empire State College, offered a table outlining roles and activities associated with the different methods of PLA. The table (see Table 4) has been replicated for the working group to consider. As it pertains to the question of centralization or decentralization, the roles in the table should be identified and defined for Acme as it exists now at the campus or perhaps what it may be in the future. In addition, some of the PLA methods in the table may or may not pertain to the current policy and practice at Acme. Leaders of the institution will want to have discussions regarding expansion of the PLA program to potentially include additional methods.

Table 5

Activities and Roles in the PLA Method Process

Activity/role	PLA method						
	Institutional transcripts	Military transcripts	Standard exams	Pre-evaluated professional Learning evaluations	Challenge exams	Individual portfolio Assessments	
Student advisors	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Course/workshop Instructors							•
Faculty assessors						•	•
Student academic document review (e.g. ACE, NCCRS)	•	•	•	•			
Credit acceptance	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Credit posting	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
PLA program oversight	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

Note. Adapted from *PLA is Your Business: Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model. Findings from a National Survey of PLA Program Leaders*, by R. Klein-Collins, 2015, p. 17. Copyright 2015 by CAEL.

Regardless of whether a centralized or decentralized model of PLA is followed, the PLA program oversight role should be considered as a stand-alone role to help coordinate the many aspects that need to come together to have a successful PLA program. Some examples of those responsibilities include metrics tracking, policy oversight, workshops/training, coordinating workflow, student support, faculty/assessor support, new faculty on-boarding, surveys (students and faculty/staff) promotion (internal and external), and benchmarking.

Project Evaluation

Regardless of whether the institution decides to implement the requirements and recommendations for this study, the survey of the administration, faculty, and staff

should be conducted again within the next 12 months. The initial survey results may serve as a benchmark going forward of any progress (or lack thereof) on the effectiveness of the PLA program at Acme College.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community Implications

The community in which Acme College is located stands to gain tremendously by graduating more adults with college credentials. According to the Office of Higher Education in the state where Acme College is situated, the percentage of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 with an associate's degree or higher is approximately 51.5% for that particular metropolitan area within the state. While the region ranks highly among metropolitan areas in the United States, there is an opportunity (49.5%) to move toward credentialing. According to Metropolitan Council (2014), despite having one of the most educated populations in the United States (according to the U.S. Census Bureau), the metropolitan area, "has some of the largest racial and ethnic disparities in socioeconomic outcomes in the nation" (p. 1).

In particular, people of color, specifically Hispanics and African Americans, have much to gain from earning a college credential (Metropolitan Council, 2014). Underrepresented minorities average a per capita income (\$16,500) which is about half of that of the White population in the metro area (\$38,000; Metropolitan Council, 2014). Part of the Acme College institutional mission states, "the education . . . is shaped by its urban and global settings" (Acme College homepage, 2017, para 1). If that is the case, the institution has a responsibility to address this racial gap and find measures to increase the

income for the underrepresented minority population of the region. The best way to do that is by helping them to realize the goal of earning a college degree and attaining jobs in the workforce that will improve their incomes.

One of the recommendations of this study is about promoting or marketing to external constituents of the PLA program. Reflecting back to the envisioning question (Q5), one respondent said they, "...would like to see more students take advantage of it [PLA]. Another respondent said, "there would be a student information guide that details an exact process, that faculty and department leads would know and use a clear process". Another respondent further stated that they envision a PLA program that, "should be clear and understandable. It should include example application and types of activity that would usually result in credit. The admissions office and campus advising staff should be VERY familiar with the process and be able to explain it to prospective and current students. The instructions should be clear, the information should be easy to find online in a Google search." To further expand upon that specific recommendation in light of these findings, it would behoove the institution to reflect on its mission and find ways to promote the PLA program and the notion of accelerating time to degree completion while reducing the overall cost of education. The local community stands to benefit if Acme can attract, retain, and graduate more people. A renewed focus on PLA can be a strong differentiator, and more adult learners will want to enroll and stay at Acme if they have a positive experience—the national research indicates that this would be true. With more graduates in the workforce with a higher degree, graduated students can potentially earn more, adding to the economy of the region, increasing average incomes, home values,

and infrastructure. With higher enrollments and improved retention, the institution can invest in other areas of need—academics, campus improvements, innovation, and more. Having more graduates of Acme College would be a win for the students, for the constituents of the institution, and the local community.

Far-Reaching Implications

There is a need to be addressed that was brought about President Obama’s college completion agenda (see pages 8 – 9). The need is to address the growing gap between the jobs that will require at least a college credential outpacing the number of adults with that credential by 2020. PLA is a viable pathway to help the qualified adult population earn a college degree. With more adults able to meet the requirements of jobs of the future, the gap can be reduced and a crisis averted.

PLA research in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon. There are many different areas associated with PLA that warrant research, including academic rigor, process, standards, assessment procedures, pedagogy, engagement, and student outcomes. In a recent discussion with a representative from the CAEL, there was great interest in learning more about the research that I conducted at Acme College and I was encouraged to present at the 2018 national conference. The CAEL representative explained that understanding faculty perceptions and promoting PLA to the campus community is of great need and interest. The research conducted at Acme was a scholarly endeavor with practical application that should be appealing for the academic community.

Conclusion

In summary, to better understand faculty and staff perceptions about the current state of the Acme College PLA program and to capture what leaders of the institution envision for the future of PLA at Acme, a program evaluation was conducted. In addition to a thorough review of artifacts found in the campus catalog and website, a survey was distributed to more than 100 faculty and staff who were identified by the college as people who are involved in some capacity with the PLA process. The survey questions were constructed with an appreciative inquiry approach and leveraged the CIPP framework. Approximately 33% of the invitation recipients responded. Data were analyzed and four primary themes emerged: purpose, promotion, policy, and process.

The genre selected to express the findings is a white paper. A white paper format allows for findings to be revealed along with the recommendations and suggestions for next steps. The white paper is practical in that it can be used as a reference guide for taking specific actions based on the findings of research that was conducted at the institution to address the outcomes. As it pertains to PLA specifically, there are many examples of white papers being used as a way to assist with taking action on a global, national, state, and institutional level.

Acme College and the local region it serves stand to gain greatly from taking action on the recommendations outlined in the white paper (Appendix A). More specifically, in the metropolitan area where Acme is located, the greatest need is among underrepresented minorities. If Acme College can leverage a renewed PLA program to differentiate the institution and the robust program to help support time to degree

completion and reduce the cost of earning a college credential, the local area and the institution have much to gain by attracting, retaining, and graduating more adult learners. Additionally, the research conducted in this study contributes to the overall field of study regarding PLA. If Acme can enroll, retain, and graduate more students, it will help fill the gap between need in the U.S. economy for a more credentialed workforce and the deficit reality we currently face.

In sum and in answer to the three research questions, Acme College's faculty and staff perceptions of the existing PLA program is largely that they have a limited understanding of the program, why it exists, and do not fully understand the processes and policies associated with the program. Furthermore, they envision a PLA program that is supported by clear policy, processes, and is promoted. Finally, the data collected and analyzed supports that the faculty and staff do not have a comprehensive understanding of the current PLA program at Acme and can envision a program that is better from a policy, policy, promotion, and process perspective.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

Reflection is a key part of any academic journey. Reflection “includes two key elements: (a) making sense of experience; and importantly (b) reimagining future experiences” (Ryan & Ryan, 2015, p. 15). This is also what the PLA portfolio process is all about—reflection on experience and how it has engendered the learning experience. Reflection and then artful expression of the learning from the experience earns students credit from prior learning. Similarly, through the doctoral study process, I have had the opportunity to experience the learning process in a new and unique way.

Schön (1971, 1983) and Mezirow (2000) asserted that the ability to reflect promotes transformative learning (Bennett, Power, Thomson, Mason, & Barlett, 2016). Transformative learning may be described as the process of construing, validating, and reformulating the meaning of an experience (Cranton, 1994). From this perspective, of reflective and transformative learning, in this section I look back at the doctoral study and development of the white paper and share what I have learned. I conclude with suggestions for future research on this topic.

Project Strengths

The problem I looked at in this doctoral study was the decline of adult student enrollment at Acme College, a small, private institution in the Midwest. The purpose of this program evaluation was to understand faculty and administrative staff perceptions of the PLA program and how they might envision the program in the future. National research supports that students with credit for PLA have better student outcomes on

nearly all measures (e.g., GPA, time to degree completion, retention, and graduation rates; Klein-Collins, 2010). The doctoral study led to a white paper as a way for the institution to address the problem in that, if the PLA program is enhanced and used by students, the institution might have a program to differentiate itself and thereby entice better enrollments and retain more students as well.

The overarching themes that emerged from the study indicate that the institution needs to focus on the following key areas for its PLA program: purpose, promotion, policy, and process. The recommendations include (a) providing a series of workshops to address purpose and process, (b) appointing a grant search and writing committee to garner more support for the expansion of the program, and (c) improve the overall infrastructure of the PLA program to support each of the thematic areas. To be successful in following these recommendations, the institution needs to address some requirements where support from institutional leadership and leaders' commitment is central. From there, a PLA oversight person should be appointed (preferably a FTE). Additionally, a working group to dig into a variety of other requirements is also required. This working group would need to articulate a PLA value proposition, as well as a mission, vision, and values statement for the reimagined PLA program. The members of this working group will also need to work on strategic goals and a long-range plan. With those requirements in place, the recommendations may be addressed in a comprehensive and meaningful way.

The white paper itself is a strength of the study because it will allow the institution to act immediately with the research-based analysis of key themes and the

subsequent recommendations/requirements. Recommendations are based on best practices from the industry and the review of the literature. The executive summary and recommendations by themselves will be useful and actionable by any interested party or stakeholder who does not have time or interest to read the entire white paper.

Aside from the white paper, I believe that another strength of the research is that the outcomes are a result of analyzing the comments of the individuals directly involved with PLA at the institution. The appreciative inquiry and positive core approach allowed faculty and administrative staff to put their guard down and explore their current understanding of the Acme College PLA program and how they might envision a future version of their PLA program. Hence, many of the analyses and recommendations were contributed by the constituents of the college itself.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

Despite the many strengths of the study, there are some limitations to consider for future research endeavors. First, it would have been ideal to interview rather than survey the faculty and administrative staff. Interviewing would have allowed for a deeper probe of each question. Several of the responses deserved more clarity or to be taken to another level to better understand what else the participants could offer.

In addition, if students could have been included in the survey, that would have provided a more comprehensive view of the problem. In this case, permission was not granted to survey or interview students. With students' perspectives, a more comprehensive understanding of some of the issues related to the thematic areas could be

achieved. The student voice in this assessment is missing and should be considered for future undertakings.

While the survey did aim at CIPP-oriented considerations, other areas of the PLA process could have been probed. For example, additional questions about the academic review process, the training program, and prior experience with portfolio review could have revealed more aspects about the PLA program at Acme. Also, the survey responses represent merely a snapshot in time. Additionally, the nature of qualitative research is such that it is not generalizable to the population at large; rather, it can inform only about the sample reported (Merriam, 2009). Perhaps a mixed methods approach for future study can alleviate this concern.

Scholarship

Completing this doctoral study has been a journey filled with revelation about the research process, myself as an individual and what piques my interest, and a much deeper level of appreciation for scholarly endeavors. From the prospectus, through connecting with representatives at the research institution, to conferring with my chairs along the way, it is clear that scholarship is about synthesizing the past, present, and future while connecting with people and the information they find to be important to any given problem. That information may be found in the many journals, libraries, and books or via interviews, surveys, and observations, but at the heart are people and how they connect with the world around them.

From the beginning of my doctoral journey, even prior to the residency or the prospectus course, I had an idea that I wanted my topic to be on PLA. Narrowing in on

the specific research case to tackle was a process in learning in and of itself. Learning how to hone in on one specific problem about the general topic and find a suitable place to research that problem was a process that took many months, conversations, and iterations. Learning to take on a scholarly endeavor such as a doctoral study, it is important to be focused on the problem one seeks to address. Furthermore, it is important not to predetermine the method to address the problem. For many months during the study, I was determined to conduct interviews at the campus. As fate would have it, that was not the best method to address the issue I wanted to probe.

Crafting the research questions based on the problem—not the preferred method—was another revelation. Once the problem was clearly articulated, the research questions came much more naturally than trying to craft the questions based on how I initially thought the research would be conducted.

The literature reviews, both in Section 1 and Section 3, illuminate where the problem is seen in other areas and what gaps can be addressed to fill the spectrum of understanding about the problem. Also, the literature review in Section 3 helps frame the analysis and recommendations. Scholarship is about learning how to take the past research, integrate it with the present study, and project what can be addressed in the future. Scholarship is about always asking questions and integrating that information to move forward in an informed and deliberate way. Scholarship is about learning and connections.

As I reflect upon the doctoral study journey and perceive myself as a scholarly practitioner, I can better appreciate the research that has come before me and have a newfound respect and understanding for future problems I will address.

Project Development and Evaluation

The white paper that emerged as the project genre came as a result of the analysis of the research data and findings. It was not clear at the outset of the study that a white paper would be the end result. The outcome could have very easily been a professional development or policy outcome; however, the findings led to the need for a more comprehensive way to address the themes that were discovered.

To that end, the white paper suits the evaluation and analysis of the study. Acme College benefits by having a comprehensive review of the current state of affairs regarding enrollment challenges, the PLA program as perceived by the faculty and staff, their vision of a future PLA program, and specific recommendations and requirements to address the problem and realize the vision. Another genre would not have adequately addressed the analysis and findings.

Leadership and Change

Those of us who have chosen higher education administration as a career have a huge responsibility—to support the education of the next generation of leaders and contributors to society. What I have learned about leadership and change is that this responsibility cannot be taken lightly and that it is critical to safeguard the institution of higher education by making informed decisions based on evidence—not assumption.

The challenge is that competition is fierce and fewer academics with a scholarly approach are in positions of leadership at colleges. We see more and more leaders coming from the business sector. That is not to say that business leaders are incapable of a scholarly approach or that they do not appreciate the need for scholarship in academia at the leadership level. This is where I come back to understanding scholarship as an discipline of connections to people and research. Interweaving the scholarly approach with the rapid succession of change and keeping up with new regulations, more and more competition, and enrollment challenges will be the next level of leadership to achieve in my personal journey.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

Metamorphosis is one of nature's most amazing phenomenon. Tremendous change happens slowly over time, transforming that caterpillar into a butterfly, but a series of conditions have to be present to allow for that change to happen. Similarly, the metamorphosis of moving from a practitioner to a scholar-practitioner has been somewhat of a metamorphic event for me.

As a scholar, I now know that the problem is everything. To understand what it is that one is trying to solve and become excruciatingly clear about that drives the questions. As a researcher, I need to have good questions about the problem to map out a plan. To be able to map out that plan, one must have a somewhat comprehensive understanding of the research options. As a scholar, I have become more well-read and well-versed in understanding how to understand a problem, craft questions, and decide on an approach to address the questions. To analyze the results and synthesize the findings

into themes takes practice and skill. As a scholar, I rely upon previous research to help guide my analysis and recommendations. Each stage of the doctoral journey has been challenging and contributed to the metamorphosis.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a practitioner in higher education administration for the last 20 years, the doctoral study process has certainly expanded my view as a practitioner and one who is now a scholar practitioner. I now question more than I have in the past. I want to make evidence-based decisions and am more comfortable with challenging those who bring forth ideas regarding change without substantiating their position.

As a practitioner, I am more confident in my field as I adopt the scholarship and research methods in to my everyday work. I believe that I can now bring more credibility and value to discussions as a result of going through the doctoral journey.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

Project development was an appealing part of this doctoral study. Developing projects and operational execution is an area of strength and interest for me. I enjoy looking at a problem and contemplating ways to examine the problem from multiple perspectives: that of myself as the research, the survey taker, the administrator, analyzer, and other roles. Given the many variables, I like to consider different options for execution. While writing a white paper was a relatively new experience, it is one that I enjoyed and could see myself doing again in the future on other scholarly or work-related projects. I also like the consultative nature of developing and executing the project with another institution.

While this is an area of strength, there is always room for improvement. I will endeavor to continue to learn more about project development. Additionally, I will seek feedback from the director of learning about the project and get an understanding from his perspective about what he thought went well and what could be improved. With this knowledge and critical feedback, I believe that I can be an even better project developer in the future as I take on more scholarly projects.

Potential Impact on Social Change

One of the reasons why I chose to study with Walden University was its positive social change mission. Along the journey, not only have I become more keenly aware of the importance of this particular study, but also I have reflected upon myself as an individual in society and made more of a commitment to my local community by becoming involved with a number of non-profit organizations where I can apply my knowledge and skills. As an example, I have been a volunteer scholarship reader for CollegeBound, a wish grant volunteer for Make-A-Wish foundation, an arts volunteer with K.A.R.I.N.A., and more. I made a conscious decision to be more contributory as I have tried to live the Walden mission.

As it pertains to this study, the potential impact on the local community and national crisis is great. If Acme College can make the changes based on the recommendations presented to improve enrollment, retention, and graduation rates, the local communities in which Acme College serves stands to benefit by having more qualified people in the workforce earning higher wages that will come back to the

community through taxes and commerce, and reduce the need for government-assisted programs such as welfare and WIC.

At a national level, the growing gap between the need for a credentialed workforce by 2020 and the qualified population may be narrowed if a greater emphasis can be placed on PLA programs nationwide. Acme College stands to serve as a model for other institutions struggling with similar challenges regarding the purpose, promotion, policy, and process of their PLA programs.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

It is difficult to know at this stage how the findings and recommendations will be received by the institution. Leadership of Acme College will have to weigh the potential impact and resources required to execute on the recommendations and requirements among all of the other priorities they have set for the year and years to come. As has been discussed, based on prior national research, the institution has potential to see a great return on the investment if they can focus on improving the PLA program. If received well, I will propose a follow-up study in a year to see what the perceptions of the PLA program are like at that point and to see if any impact has been made in that regard. I will also probe again on the vision members of the institution have for the PLA program, given any change that has been perceived to see if the institution is on the right track or if another review may be required.

The findings from this study may be applied to any institution facing similar challenges. The white paper can serve as a useful reference guide for any institution

looking to improve the infrastructure of its PLA program. Future research and findings may enhance or improve the recommendations and requirements.

Future research should include perceptions of the students. Also, faculty and staff who are not involved with PLA may be included to better understand a wider range of perceptions among the campus community. Additionally, the interviews may be integrated to achieve greater depth on particular questions and their respective responses. Beyond perceptions about the PLA program itself, future research may probe deeper into the learning itself that is referred to in PLA and how faculty assessors go about the assessment process.

Conclusion

Reflection as a part of the learning process is essential. As I review what has been shared about my experience as a scholar, researcher, and practitioner and reflect on my metamorphosis through the doctoral journey, I can say that I believe I have positively contributed to the body of scholarly work on PLA. Given that, I believe that this study will help Acme College address its problem, have a positive impact on social change, and add to the body of scholarly work in the field.

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Appendix A: The Project White Paper
Assessment of Prior Learning at Acme College
Recommendations Based on Program Evaluation



Executive Summary

According to the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, by 2020, the United States will be short approximately 5 million workers who hold postsecondary credentials. with 65% of all jobs requiring a credential beyond the high school diploma (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). There are approximately 96.5 million adults in the current workforce over the age of 25 who have only a high school credential and either some or no postsecondary degree or credential (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, consider that, “For the first time, graduates make up a larger share of the workforce than workers with a high school diploma or less” (Carnevale, Sundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 3). In fact, “out of the jobs created in the recovery [since the 2008-2009 recession], 8.4 million have gone to those with a bachelor’s degree or higher, while high school jobs only grew by 80,000” (Carnevale, Sundera, & Gulish, 2016, p. 3). Fueling the problem is the cost of higher education, which has dramatically increased over the past several decades (Ripley, 2013).

Increasing enrollment of adult student learners and using prior learning assessment (PLA) as a means by which to attract them are parts of the solution for a national problem identified by former President Obama in his college completion agenda (Hughes, 2013). Outlined in the college completion tool kit are seven strategies for leaders of institutions to consider to meet the demand for increasing college completion rates in all U.S. institutions. The last of the suggested strategies focuses on adult student learners and highlights the opportunity to leverage PLA as a mechanism to attract and retain the “nearly 50 percent of adults aged 25–64 (over 97 million) who have a high

school degree or equivalent but no postsecondary degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 17). A 2017 study with emphasis on College Level Examination Program (CLEP), a type of PLA, shows that, “...passing CLEP exams leads to a 17% (5.7 percentage points) increase in associate degree completion for students at two-year colleges and a 2.6 percent (1.2 percentage point) increase in bachelor’s degree completion at four-year colleges” (Boatman, Hurwitz, Lee, and Smith, 2017, p. 1).

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of research conducted at Acme College and recommendations on the existing PLA program at the college. The qualitative research was a program evaluation grounded conducted using an appreciative inquiry approach involving the concepts of discover, dream, design, and destiny. Open-ended survey questions were sent to faculty and staff at Acme College who are involved with the college assessment for prior learning program. The context, input, process, and product (CIPP) framework was employed to design questions and interpret responses. Research supports the notion of awarding credit for prior learning is important because it promotes better student outcomes on a number of measures: performance, persistence, and graduation.

With Walden’s IRB approval (#12-12-16-0333506), the research questions posed in this study were:

1. How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA program?
2. What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA?

3. How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?

Findings revealed four themes: (a) purpose: a lack of understanding of why assessing prior learning is important and why it should be more broadly used and accepted; (b) promotion: PLA is not promoted at the institution; (c) policy: opportunities exist to clarify and standardize PLA policy and a sub-theme of an opportunity to visit the regular transfer of credit policy because it may be too limited; and (d) process: the process is perceived to be labor-intensive and unclear.

The findings, supported by previous research and review of the literature, resulted in the following recommendations:

1. Strengthen the infrastructure of the program to reinforce and clarify: purpose, promotion, policy, and process;
2. The college should develop a series of workshops to address what PLA is and why the college should offer it and ensure the assessment practices are shared and standardized;
3. Expand resources to support the program; to that end, a grant campaign may be in order.

The Problem

By 2020, the United States will be short approximately 5 million workers who hold postsecondary credentials, with 65% of all jobs requiring a credential beyond the

high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2013). A 2016 study from Georgetown University's, Center for Education and the Workforce, indicates that the large majority of jobs (95%) since the last recession has gone to those holding a post-secondary credential as opposed to those with a high school diploma or less (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish).

PLA has emerged as an important way to aid students in their pursuit toward higher education degree completion (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). As Rust and Brinthaup (2017) asserted, "The impetus for a renewed focus on adult learners comes from recent college completion agendas initiated by national and state groups" (p. 115).

According to a landmark study conducted in 2010 by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning ([CAEL] Klein-Collins, 2010), there is a correlation between students who have earned credit for prior learning and positive student outcomes such as retention, GPA, time to degree completion, persistence, and graduation rates. The findings of this study promoted the emergence of many national and state programs that encourage, fund, or incentivize the use of prior learning assessment.

At Acme College, the problem has been the declining adult student enrollment. The research conducted in this study was to understand how the facts of the national problem (the forthcoming chasm in the supply of adults in the workforce with higher

Importance

2010 CAEL
Study:
62,475

Students at 48
different types of
institutions

25% with PLA;
75% without PLA

*35% MORE with
PLA earned a
degree than non-
PLA students*

*For degree
completers, those
with PLA credit
saved between
6.6 – 10.1 months
as compared to
their non-PLA
counterparts*

education credentials and the rising cost of education), the findings of the landmark CAEL study (that students with PLA have better student outcomes), and the current state of the PLA program at Acme could be leveraged to help improve enrollment and retention, with a specific focus on improving the PLA program.

Adult student enrollment at Acme College has been on a steady decline for several years (see Table 1). Leaders of the institution has taken some measures to combat these trends; for instance, they moved away from a weekend format (Friday & Saturday) to a weekday, evening format (Tuesday & Thursday). Despite the change to the Tuesday/Thursday format, members of the program are still referred to as weekend students. In addition, the institution launched a hybrid program in which some courses include an online component to reduce the need to be physically on the campus as frequently. Finally, Acme College reduced the number of programs that are offered for the adult student learning population from 17 to four. The institution was interested in evaluating the PLA program to understand why PLA options are not frequently used by adult student learners. Leadership hopes to reverse the trend and promote more engagement in PLA among adult student learners. To gain a deeper understanding of the current PLA practice, this program evaluation explored the knowledge of the PLA program as understood by the faculty and staff of Acme College.

Table A1

2010–2015 Enrollment and Number of Adult Undergraduates Earning Credit for Portfolio Assessment

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Day	2096	2066	1958	1943	1945	1990
Adult	801	721	660	548	450	391
Total	2897	2787	2618	2491	2395	2381
% change YOY adult	-4.80%	-10.00%	-9.50%	-17.00%	-18.00%	-17.00%
Adult enrollment	38.22%	34.90%	33.71%	28.20%	23.14%	19.65%
# students with PLA credit	no data	4	0	2	5	0

Note. Adapted from factbooks made available via director of adult programs, 2017.

The decline in the adult student population over the 6-year period reflected in Table 1, while only a seemingly slight decline when compared to the overall enrollment from one year to the next, is different from the story of adult undergraduate enrollment for this time period. From 2010 to 2011, there was a 10% decline; from 2011 to 2012, the adult student population declined by another 9.5%; from 2012 to 2013, the adult student population declined another 17%; from 2013 to 2014, there was another 18% decline. From 2010 to 2015, the 6-year decline was 52%.

Importance

Evaluating the PLA program at Acme College would better position the campus leaders to make decisions when developing policies and procedures. Acme is a small, private institution and is highly dependent upon tuition revenue to maintain and sustain the institution. Taking specific and targeted action to improve adult student engagement, retention, and enrollment is imperative. Prior learning assessment presents an attractive opportunity to leverage because it is essentially a low-cost resource available to the

institution and has the potential to make a tremendous difference in addressing the negative trend in enrollment.

Students from Acme College stand to benefit when the learning they have achieved outside of the classroom is recognized, thereby accelerating their time to degree completion and lowering overall expense of earning the degree. As evidenced by the landmark CAEL study (Klein-Collins, 2010), the significance of increasing adult student engagement in PLA was found to be correlated to degree completion. For the institution itself, quality of the academic programs, the student body at large, and the services Acme College can offer only benefit when students enroll, are retained, and graduate. When students enroll and are retained, their presence helps to bolster the student experience. It strengthens the academic integrity and reputation of the institution. It lowers cohort default rates on student loans, and it helps to produce graduates who will be earning higher wages (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011). The significance is that graduates are contributing to the local, county, state, and national economies.

From a domestic perspective, enrollment, retention, and ultimately degree completion are an important way to combat the issue of poverty in this country (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011). James (2012) noted, “Over the last three decades, the value of college has increased substantially, with all of the gains going to those who actually complete the four-year degree” (p. 2). This sentiment is best understood when looking at the impact of the last national recession. At its height, in January 2010, those with at least a baccalaureate degree actually gained jobs, whereas those with an associate’s degree or only some college lost approximately 1.75 million jobs, and those

with only a high school diploma or less lost approximately 5.6 million jobs (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012). In addition, consider that those who hold a baccalaureate or better earn at least twice as much as their high school-only educated counterparts (Carnevale et al., 2012).

College enrollment, retention, and completion are important at the global level, as well. The global economy is highly sensitive to the economics of the United States. As demonstrated in the most recent recession, the rest of the world suffered ripple effects of economic instability. Downward trends in Europe, Japan, and India were only some of the examples of the impact the recession had in those regions. The impact is better understood as, “When the U.S. comes down with a cold, the rest of the world experiences pneumonia” (Watkins, 2011, para. 11). The health of the U.S. economy is largely dependent upon the community of citizens contributing to it.

Appreciative Inquiry

This study, a program evaluation, applied appreciative inquiry as the conceptual framework. Appreciative inquiry is based on the positive attributes of an organization as the basis for exploring, developing, and implementing improvement plans and is distinctly different from the problem-solving approach rooted in deficit language (Marwah, 2012). Marwah (2012) stated that the current dominant practice is to analyze the negative side of the problem and remove it, whereas appreciative inquiry focuses the best resources of the organization to attain where the organization dreams. Evaluating a specific problem or gap in practice is conducted to gain a better understanding regarding the practice of an organization (Dunlap, 2008; Johnson & Leavitt, 2001). The positive

assets of the organization become the forefront of the initial problem exploration and work as a collective to determine what can be, leading to a learning experience to sustain the current and future success of the study site. Further to that, “Appreciative inquiry is a change process of identifying what is working well, deciphering why it is working well, and therein emulating more of those positive attributes” (Preston, 2017, p. 233). Usage of PLA at Acme College can be explored beginning with what is currently viewed as the strengths of the program and identify and appreciate what is currently done well. It was the discovery of what is currently the best of the PLA procedures and practice at Acme that served as the foundation from which this project study explored the perceived role of PLA.

Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2005) argued that the positive core of an organization (its core strength) is its greatest resource that serves as the foundation from which change can be embraced, including those aspects never thought possible (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) further argued that human systems will grow in the direction to which questions and energy are pointed, thus being the most effective when the “means and the ends are positively correlated” (p. 8). For this project study, this correlation becomes important when exploring the current understanding of PLA and its role in the organization. Appreciative inquiry provides the opportunity to explore the site where people have working relationships as well as a working history and from which their perceptions can assist the organization to gain a deeper understanding of the role of PLA and to identify and embrace the change in a positive and sustaining mode (Marwah, 2012). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) argued

that this form of exploration and analysis is “at the heart of positive change” (p. 11).

Through exploring and explaining the workers’ perceptions rooted in the positive core strengths of the organization, a collective and shared vision of where their practice could be and what it will be can be identified (Cooperrider et al., 2005).

Based on the work of Cooperrider and Whitney (2005), appreciative inquiry has four phases of evaluation:



Figure 1. The four phases of appreciative inquiry. Adapted from *Appreciate Inquiry Handbook for Leaders of Change*, by D. L. Cooperrider, D. D. Whitney, and J. M. Stavros, 2005. Copyright 2005 by Berrett-Koehler.

The discovery phase begins with determining the specific phenomenon that can be appreciated, thus being positively visualized for identifying similar patterns regarding the aspects that give the current understanding and practice of the phenomenon life (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). Through examining the workers’ current articulation of the strengths and best practices of PLA on campus, the discovery of the best of what was and is leads to appreciating the phenomenon and embracing what is good (Calabrese, 2006; Dunlap, 2008). Cooper

(2014) further argued how discovery helps establish a trust through maintaining a positive and engaged collective capacity, possibly stimulating creativity.

Cooper (2014) argued that appreciative inquiry directs its inquiry rising from *why* questions as opposed to *what* questions. Cooper (2014) stated that the why questions are more dynamic and lead to deeper understandings and truer conversations as opposed to the more static what questions. Discovering the constructed and microsocial practices and procedures grounded in and driven by the staff and faculty strengths helps all involved to gain an understanding and appreciate what their current reality is (Calabrese, 2006; Groen & Kawalilak, 2006). Understanding of the discovery phase was also useful for the development of survey questions to elicit feedback regarding survey participants' experiences and perceptions of using PLA and its role at Acme College.

The dream phase evaluates and envisions what might be, all the while grounded in the history of the organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). The dream phase embraces the workers' visions, as informed by their day-to-day work roles and practices. Workers, through their experiences of what was, are able to positively challenge the status quo through daring to suggest improved and revised practices and policies, all the while being appreciated for their strengths and them appreciating the others' contributions and ideas (Calabrese, 2006). For Acme College, the faculty and staff draw upon the current practices regarding PLA, and incoming students may have ideas that would facilitate improved understandings as it relates to students and their being assigned PLA credits. Through envisioning a different way, the faculty and staff build their future together, while embracing the students' needs and concerns

(Cooperrider et al., 2005). In the mutual appreciation, the faculty and staff are positioned to create a clear results-oriented vision for Acme College and what the students' needs are calling for Acme to do (Dunlap, 2008). The dream stage finds use when not only explaining participants' discussions, but also when helping in the development and discovery phase of the data collection tool.

The third phase of appreciative inquiry is design. The design phase explores and articulates what the organization should become in light of the current strengths and ideas from its existing positive core (Cooperrider et al., 2005). Design has importance when providing a foundation from which to realize those ideas uncovered in the dream phase and make them manifest as part of the structure of the organization (i.e., its ways of knowing and doing). This embodiment of the dream of the organization is manifest in a co-constructed platform of appreciating and supporting the collective vision of what Acme College will become (Groen & Kawalilak, 2006).

The fourth phase is the destiny of the appreciative inquiry efforts (Cooperrider et al., 2005). This phase provides the structure to guide what was identified through the research findings as the organization builds for the future through worker learning and empowerment. The destiny phase will be of use when discussing the findings of the study as well as informing the project genre and the project. Cooperrider et al. (2005) argued that all stakeholders must become engaged through sharing the visions of a positive future and contribute their thoughts on what will sustain the organization into the future. As the survey data were analyzed and results emerged, results provided the open space where the staff and faculty participants shared what has worked, what has not worked,

and their perspective on building and sustaining momentum (Cooper, 2014; Johnson & Leavitt, 2001; Marwah, 2012).

The destiny phase moves beyond a deliverable or an action plan; those items generally focus on addressing the immediacy of gaps and problems (Cooperrider et al., 2005). The appreciative inquiry destiny phase is more aligned with continuous learning, driving long-term sustainability, and appreciating evolving adaptation rooted in workers' strengths (Cooper, 2014; Cooperrider et al., 2005; Dunlap, 2008). The destiny phase will help describe the visions of how Acme College can adapt its understanding and use of PLA as the college forges its sustainability into the future, thus better serving its student population.

Purpose and Design

This program evaluation is based on an appreciative inquiry approach, leveraging qualitative case study to examine the perceptions about the Acme College prior learning assessment program to better understand why PLA is underutilized. An anonymous, open-ended, qualitative survey was sent to faculty and staff at Acme who are involved with the assessment of prior learning. Additionally, documentation found on the Internet about the program at the college was reviewed in light of the three research questions:

1. How do faculty and staff describe their understanding of the Acme College PLA program?
2. What is the vision of Acme College faculty and staff regarding PLA? How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?

3. How does the data reflect the faculty and staffs' current understanding and future vision of PLA at Acme College?

By evaluating the faculty and staff feedback from the carefully constructed survey questions framed from an appreciative inquiry, positive core in seeking to understand the context, input, process, and product aspects of the PLA program, themes regarding the opportunities emerged, allowing recommendations to follow.

The primary goal of the project was to better understand the opportunities that can be addressed to improve the PLA program at the college to make specific and actionable recommendations via a white paper and presentation.

The qualitative survey consisted of seven open-ended questions constructed from the CIPP framework (Spaulding, 2014) in the spirit of appreciative inquiry. The questions were constructed using the CIPP framework while taking into account the 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry: discovery, dreaming, designing, and delivery (Reed, 2007). The aim was to elicit responses from survey participants that will help inform understanding of the perceptions of campus constituents who are involved with the assessment of prior learning at Acme College and assuming a positive core. The positive core is an essential component of the appreciative inquiry framework, according to which the researcher approaches questions by making good-faith assumptions in program inputs and outcomes rather than a critical "something must be wrong" perspective.

In this case, Stufflebeam's CIPP model was applied; the questions that were developed are guided by the frame of these general areas of inquiry: context, input, process, and product (Spaulding, 2014). With this framework, "Context in the CIPP

model is understood as the nature and scope of the problem in relation to the setting” (Spaulding, 2014, p. 48). Input refers to the resources that are put forth to support the program and interactions of people involved with the program and those resources (Spaulding, 2014). When examining the process aspect of the CIPP model, the steps and procedures of the program are considered. Finally, the product essentially prompts review of answering the question, “Was the desired outcome of the product/program attained?”

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program and to ascertain how they might envision the future of the PLA program at the institution. The research questions framed the open-ended survey questions that went out to those faculty and staff who are involved in the PLA process at Acme College. Additionally, archival data such as catalogs, forms, faculty handbooks, online information, and the institutional factbooks were reviewed and analyzed.

The data were extracted, coded, and analyzed from the survey feedback and the archival information and four themes emerged:



Figure 2. The four themes resulting from appreciative inquiry.

The institutional feedback and areas of opportunity can be categorized into one of these four major thematic areas.

Purpose

Unpacking tacit knowledge from applied experience and aligning that to college-level learning outcomes from a formal academic curriculum is a powerful yet challenging task. When done appropriately, this process of “[d]rawing on tacit knowledge leads to new understanding and thus to new learning” (Colvin, 2012, p. 91). Consider Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning and the importance of this type of learning. Kolb’s model has four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Colvin, 2012). It is in the reflective observation stage where things start to click and stick, “Learning happens only when there is reflective thought and internal processing by the learner, in a way that actively makes sense of an experience and links it to previous learning” (Colvin, 2012, p. 94). The writing process a student undertakes when constructing his or her portfolio for assessment takes the process of reflective observation and puts in to action. In reviewing the survey feedback and the archival data, there appears to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the purpose of prior learning assessment. What is the purpose of having PLA as an option for students at the institution and what is the real benefit?

To further illustrate that last point, one of the context-oriented survey questions that speaks to the nature and scope of Acme PLA program was, “Tell me to what extent you see the students needing PLA for degree completion and/or retention?” Respondent 36 said, “While PLA can help with retention and progress to degree, a recognition on that students need a leg-up/refresher on some aspects of their learning to better position them academic success and competitiveness post-graduation should be paramount.” Here, the

respondent seems to get the purpose of prior learning assessment; however, the respondent also reflects that there appears to be lack of recognition more broadly across the institution. Additionally, a sub-theme of purpose emerged in that academic success and competitiveness in the workforce is also applicable to the purpose of PLA.

Another illustration of the opportunity to further clarify and promote the purpose PLA, in response to an input prompt, “What do you see as working in regards to the college PLA program?” Responses from nine out of 25 responders were categorized into the coded area of “Nothing/can’t answer due to lack of knowledge/doesn’t work/desire to specify the process.” That is to say, more than one-third of the respondents have difficulty in connecting purpose to the PLA program of the institution. More specifically, Respondent 12 simply said “Unknown” in response to this prompt. Respondent 27 said, “NC” for no comment. Respondent 28 replied, “Currently, not so much.” In response to a process-oriented prompt, “Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process,” answers from 12 of the 25 respondents could be categorized as “Unaware that the college offers portfolio option for PLA or unable to answer” and an additional six respondents provided an answer indicating they had only a general or limited understanding. That is to say, nearly two-thirds of the respondents do not understand or know the portfolio review process or fully connect to its purpose.

Miller and Morgaine (2009) documented that when a student successfully goes through the PLA process, “reflection can be an awakening for students and serves to distill the meaning from experiences” (p. 10). In this way, students identify in a new way with their experiences and the learning they have extracted. Conrad (2008) supported this

notion and expressed that prior learning is “honoring and building on mature learners’ past experiential learning” (p. 140). Students at Acme College may have a positive PLA experience with an opportunity to connect their experience with their academic interests and persist.

Promotion

Prior learning assessment is an important part of any institution of higher education, but in particular for those that have a specific adult learner population. Students have many options as to where they may pursue their educational goals. To that end, Leiste and Jensen (2011) remarked,

In addition to program offerings, two main deciding factors are time to completion and total cost of the program. PLA offerings can help to reduce both.

Therefore, the option to undertake a PLA may be a factor in the decision to attend a particular institution. (p. 66)

Institutions that offer a PLA program should effectively promote and communicate the program to help attract and retain students. One respondent said, “The admissions and campus advising staff should be VERY familiar with the process and be able to explain it to prospective and current students. . . . The information should be easy to find online in a Google search.”

Again, this discussion is the best place to promote the findings of the CAEL (Klein-Collins, 2010) study on the impact of PLA referenced earlier. Students who earn credit for PLA have overall better student outcomes than their non-PLA-earning counterparts as measured by GPA, persistence, graduation, time to degree completion,

and total cost of attendance. Respondent 19, in answering Question 7, “Tell me to what extent you see the students needing PLA for degree completion and/or retention,” said,

I think in terms of admissions-specific viewpoint on this question, it is one of the primary reasons students do not choose to enroll at this college, which is directly related to retention and degree completion because they do not matriculate in the first place. (Respondent 19)

Given these data, the institution should be interested in promoting the PLA program and opportunities for the students to earn credit for learning gained via experience. However, the feedback from the survey indicates that this is not the case at Acme. Question 1 is a context-derived prompt that asks the respondent to describe the PLA program at the college. Seven of the 27 respondents (28%) answered that they did not know or had little knowledge about the program. Respondent 25 said, “We don’t have one.” Respondent 10 said, “In 16 years, I have evaluated three PL portfolios.” Another product-driven question asked respondents to describe what they envision as an ideal PLA program. Thirteen of the 25 respondents (52%) answered in the following category: “Process-oriented/more product information (Admissions, web)/offer a course/have one point of contact specific to PLA.” Respondent 9 stated that he or she envisions “clear process stated online,” and Respondent 2 further supported the vision by stating, “That there would be a student information guide that details and exact process, that faculty and department heads would know and use a clear process.” In other words, more than half have envision better/more promotion and process of the PLA program.

Policy

Clarity around the academic rigor and assessment process for PLA is vitally important for the academic governing body and faculty of an institution to fully support and buy into the program. Along with this notion, consistency in application of the standards for assessment is also important, particularly as one surveys the college from one department to the next. Having disparate or inconsistent standards promotes confusion, distrust in the process, and erodes the perceived academic validity of the program. Therefore, having a clear policy and understandable assessment standards across the institution is critical.

While there may be some agreement about this notion, “Much has been written on quality assurance (e.g. Mishra, 2007), but little has focused on appropriate frameworks for evaluating program learning assessment programs” (Travers & Evans, 2011, p. 124). That said, “Accreditation processes (e.g. Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges) provide institutions with some type of overarching framework and critical questions from which the institution can conduct a self-study to assess their institution and programs” (Travers & Evans, 2011, p. 124). At Acme, one theme that emerged was some level of confusion about the policy and that perhaps there is some inconsistency from one department to the next in how portfolios may be assessed. There are some general guidelines provided in the undergraduate catalog and on the portfolio form; however, they are general statements speaking to the notional learning that is expected to be ascertained from portfolios. The Acme College 2016 undergraduate catalog provides the following guidance regarding portfolio development and submission:

In completing the evaluation of a student's previous learning, the faculty team applies the following criteria:

- There is documentable evidence of a cognitive component in the previous learning experience that involved prescribed or systematic study of content material found within liberal arts coursework.
- The learning has been objectively verified by individuals in addition to the presenting student.
- The learning lends itself to both qualitative and quantitative measurement.
- The learning relates well to the student's educational goals.
- The learning and skills involved are current and could be used at the present time.

In addition to the archival data, feedback from the survey also provides insight to this critical thematic area. In answer to a product-oriented question, "What do faculty and staff need to better position them for the assessment of prior learning," answers from 11 of the 25 respondents to this question could be categorized into the area of "Create a guide/case examples/more education/training/clearly stated learning outcomes."

Otherwise stated, nearly half desire clarity on the process of awarding credit in the portfolio review process. More specifically, Respondent14 said, "Students would be better served by ensuring we continue to look closely and progress our transfer credit policies." This Respondent explained that if better transfer credit policies existed, perhaps the need to have PLA would lessen. Respondent 14 continued, "I hear more complaints about transcribed coursework not transferring than the inability to earn credit for life

experiences.” Here, a sub-theme has emerged as the need to look at the overall transfer credit policy in addition to the PLA policy.

Process

Having a clear, easy, and documented process to follow for all involved—including students, faculty, and staff—in the assessment of prior learning program is essential. Process as a theme covers a few different ideas. First, process includes the mechanics involving how a student comes to request a portfolio review or other type of PLA, the logistical operational process steps that follow (submitting to faculty, faculty assessing and sending results to the student and registrar office, and so on), as well as the process for academics to follow when assessing a portfolio. As discussed earlier, Capella University has developed a strong policy and process for its students. Leiste and Jensen (2011) noted,

Until 2007, PLA at Capella University were supported by staff members in individual academic departments. A centralized team was formed to improve efficiency and create additional resources for learners. The team has worked to determine best practices, develop helpful tools for PLA learners, improve operational practices, and increase outreach to learners. The number of learners participating in PLAs at Capella University is growing steadily each year. (p. 65)

Capella captured the essential ingredients to developing a successful PLA program: academic rigor, tools for students, centralized operations, and outreach to promote. Also, by making it a centralized process, it not only helped with the process questions, but also provided a level of consistency for portfolio assessment outcomes.

While Capella serves as only one example of how PLA is handled at a particular institution, there are many other models to consider with the central themes at the forefront.

Processes, as a theme, came forward from the survey responses. In response to Question 4, “Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process,” Respondent 34 stated, “Registrar oversees the portfolio review process. I have little knowledge of this process.” To further illustrate the uncertainty about process, in response to Question 5, “What do you see as working in regards to the college PLA program,” Respondent 9 said, “The process works fine. There are few people who know the process exists so there seems to be little use of it.” Others could articulate, in brief, different aspects of the process, but in answer to Question 4, of the 25 who provided responses, responses from 13 (52%) were coded as having either a limited or firm understanding of the process; however, 12 (48%) respondents were either unaware that the college had a PLA program or unable to answer the question due to lack of knowledge. For example, Respondent 12 simply answered, “Unknown.” The responses were varied in terms of understanding the process, with some respondents having the ability to articulate the process with some level of clarity, while others were completely unaware that a PLA program exists. Some, like Respondent 12, stated, “Unknown,” while Respondent 10 provided an answer indicating a fairly good grasp on the process and cited website addresses and forms where he or she might direct a student for further information.

Conclusion

This program evaluation explored faculty and staff perceptions of the PLA program at Acme College. Participants included faculty members and staff who were surveyed to gain a better understanding of their respective experience with and perceptions of awarding credit for prior learning. Ethical standards and practices were applied by informing survey participants that their responses would be anonymous. Additionally, names of those who were sent the survey were kept confidential, and safety measures to protect data were and will continue to be followed.

Finally, data were reviewed, analyzed, manually coded, and grouped into themes. Coding the data and linking findings to the research questions and theoretical framework allowed for the emergence of themes. The themes began to tell the story about the problem being studied. The themes are summarized into four broad categories: purpose, promotion, policy, and process. This summary helped lead to outcomes that pointed to the recommendations that are discussed in the next section.

Recommendations

Summary

These results, along with the research and review of the literature, support the following recommendations and action steps for Acme College to take, including developing a workshop series, expanding resources, and strengthening the overall infrastructure of the program. More specifically,

1. The college should develop and offer a series of workshops for faculty and staff to
 - a. address what PLA is and why the college offers it,

- b. understand the specific PLA related roles in the college to clarify roles and responsibilities, and finally
 - c. learn and apply standard review and assessment techniques in the portfolio review process.
2. Based on responses to vision (dream)-based questions, expand resources. In this regard, the institution should:
 - a. organize a focus group to identify and secure grants for expanding the PLA program, and
 - b. appoint a grant-writing committee (it may be the same or different working group) to work aggressively toward securing a grant.
3. Strengthen the overall infrastructure of the PLA program to reinforce each aspect of the areas needing focus and attention to improve the PLA program:
 - a. purpose,
 - b. policy,
 - c. promotion (Marketing—external and internal), and
 - d. process.

Each recommendation requires the following commitments:



Figure 3. The required areas of focus for successful follow-through on recommendations

Next Steps

Next steps to take action on each recommendation are vital and are discussed in this section. Taking action begins with the commitment to the requirements mentioned above, namely, commitment by institutional leadership, allocation of necessary resources, articulation of mission, identification of vision and value for the PLA program, statement of a clear strategy, and development of a long-range plan to improve and expand the program. When leadership of Acme makes the PLA program a priority, they will more than likely see improvements in enrollment and likely retention of the adult undergraduate population, based on the national research (Klein-Collins, 2010). Communication at all levels will also be key in this effort. The following paragraphs outline the requirements in greater detail prior to a full discussion of the recommendations.

Requirements for Successful Implementation of Recommendations

Institutional commitment. At the highest levels, including the president, provost, deans, program directors, faculty, and administrators, commitment to making the PLA program a priority is necessary. With the PLA program identified as a priority for Acme College, then the faculty, staff, and administrators can advance on the recommendations as outlined.

To that end, the CAEL published a resource: *PLA is Your Business: Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model, Findings from a National Survey of PLA Program Leaders* (Klein-Collins, 2015), which might help the institution align efforts from a business perspective to more clearly identify the value proposition that a vibrant PLA program may bring. Central to attaining commitment from institutional leadership, the PLA value proposition should be outlined. One of the recommendations is to dedicate a working group to help secure funds. The first order of business for this working group would be to align around and share the PLA value proposition. To summarize, Table 2 outlines the questions and key considerations for the working group to discuss.

Table 2

Working Group Questions and Key Considerations

Important questions to the PLA value Proposition	Key consideration areas	Key consideration questions
What value does PLA deliver to the students?	Key activities	What key activities does our value proposition require?
What student problems is PLA helping to solve?	Student segments	For whom are we creating value? Do different categories of students value PLA differently or have different kinds of PLA needs? How big is the need or the market?
What are our assumptions about what makes for a good PLA program.	Student relationships	How do we recruit students to PLA? How do we grow the number of students using PLA? How can we provide superior student support to enhance the PLA experience?
How does PLA strengthen our academic brand?	Key resources	What key resources does our value proposition require?
How does PLA improve our relationships with our community and employers?	Key partners	Who are our key partners in offering PLA? Which key activities do partners perform? How do they bring value to our students?
	Cost structure	What are the most important costs inherent to our business model?
	Revenue	What are our sources of revenue? What are our students willing or able to pay? What do other institutions charge for PLA?

Note. Adapted from *PLA is Your Business: Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model, Findings from a National Survey of PLA Program Leaders*, by R. Klein-Collins, 2015, p. 7. Copyright 2015 by CAEL.

The working group may use a variety of resources, including Klein-Collins's (2015) publication, as well as the results and analysis of this research study, to answer many of the value proposition questions posed above. Klein-Collins provided an entire page of "research supporting the value proposition" (p. 10). Another important topic covered by Klein-Collins's report that is important for the working group to include is how the expanded and reprioritized program will ensure academic rigor and integrity.

The working group may want to make proposals such as the introduction of exploring the possibility of integrating PLA planning with each and every adult learner as part of the academic program. Taking that thought one step further, they may want to establish PLA as a 'default experience' for both prospective and matriculated students. Having this kind of comprehensive approach to PLA is an important way to emphasize the value of PLA and build it into the DNA of a program or the institution as a whole. (Klein-Collins, 2015, p. 15).

Resources. In the case of managing a PLA program, the costs are primarily associated with people managing the process and assessment. Additional costs are associated with the assessment itself, but there is typically a fee associated with portfolio review so, if anything, there may be revenue to be realized. The primary question of resources centers around whether or not the PLA program is managed by people in a centralized or decentralized manner (or somewhere in between). A great PLA program can be managed effectively either way, but what matters is the ability to be clear about roles and responsibilities and workflow.

Travers (2015), a well-known PLA expert from SUNY Empire State College, offered a table outlining roles and activities associated with the different methods of PLA. Table 3 is a replica of Travers's table for the working group to consider. Because the roles in the table pertain to the question of centralization or decentralization, the roles should be identified and defined for Acme as the PLA exists now at the campus or perhaps what it may be in the future. In addition, some of the PLA methods in the table may or may not pertain to the current policy and practice at Acme. Leaders of the institution will want to have discussion regarding the expansion of the PLA program to potentially include additional methods.

Table 3

Activities and Roles in the PLA Method Process

Activity/role	PLA method						
	Institutional transcripts	Military transcripts	Standard exams	Pre-evaluated professional Learning evaluations	Challenge exams	Individual portfolio Assessments	
Student advisors	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Course/workshop Instructors							•
Faculty assessors					•		•
Student academic document review (e.g. ACE, NCCRS)	•	•	•	•			
Credit acceptance	•	•	•	•	•		•
Credit posting	•	•	•	•	•		•
PLA program oversight	•	•	•	•	•		•

Note. Adapted from *PLA is Your Business: Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model, Findings from a National Survey of PLA Program Leaders.*, by R. Klein-Collins, 2015, p. 17. Copyright 2015 by CAEL.

The PLA program oversight role, regardless of whether a centralized or decentralized model is applied, should be considered as a stand-alone role to help coordinate the many aspects that need to come together to have a successful PLA program. Some examples of those responsibilities include metrics tracking, policy oversight, workshops/training, coordinating workflow, student support, faculty/assessor support, new faculty on-boarding, surveys (students and faculty/staff) promotion (internal and external), and benchmarking.

Mission, vision, value statement. Based on the research in this study, Acme faculty and staff do not have a clear understanding about why the PLA program is in place (purpose). Once the institutional community can better understand the why about the PLA program, there can be better support and engagement. Mission, vision, and value statements that are conceived and understood by the institutional community can help bring alignment and galvanize the institution around a refreshed PLA program.

Mission and vision statements. A mission and vision statement for the PLA program is important. It should tie to the institutional mission of being responsible citizens, critical thinkers, and responsible community leaders. As Kezar and Lester (2009) remarked, the

mission creates a shared vision and sense of purpose. . . . People are looking to understand what the priorities, values, and norms are; if there is no articulated statement then they look to existing structures and rewards to try to understand what the institutional values are. (Kezar & Lester, 2009, pp. 61–62)

Based on the results of this study, that level of understanding of priorities, values and norms of the PLA program is currently lacking. Having clearly stated mission, vision, and value statements would help clarify and align the institutional community to that shared mission and vision.

Value statement. Articulating values as part of the mission and vision statements places the focus on what the institutional community will hold sacred in the journey toward achieving the mission. For example, the stated mission and vision might be something along the lines of offering the students a variety of methods for attaining academic credit for prior learning to support students on their academic journey toward degree completion. The vision might be something like, “All adult learners earn credit through at least one method of prior learning assessment.” Then the values that the institution adopts to support the mission and vision are critical. The working group may want to consider values such as fierce dedication to the academic rigor and integrity of the assessment program and ensuring that there is ample faculty and student support throughout the process, as just two examples. In other words, how might the mission and vision be realized by the institution and what is valued along that journey?

Stated strategy (short-term). Once there is institutional support, dedicated resources, and an alignment on the mission, vision, and values, then the institution can consider a strategy. The strategy should be based on a specific (simple, sensible, significant), measureable (meaningful, motivating), achievable (agreed, attainable), relevant (reasonable, realistic and resourced, results-based), and time-bound (time-based, time limited, time/cost limited, timely, time-sensitive [SMART]) approach and have at

least a 1-, but preferably 2-year trajectory. The institution should not expect to build a refreshed PLA program overnight, so developing strategic goals that extend over a projected roadmap with tangible and measurable milestones will be needed. Along with that measure, the roles and responsible owners resource that was mentioned earlier will also be required in building out the strategy.

Long-range plan (long-term). Finally, along with all of the other requirements mentioned above, the institution will need to fold the PLA program into its long-range planning efforts and annual planning. A great deal of financial planning based on projected enrollment and retention goals embedded in the strategic planning will be needed to project out for 5 years. To expand upon resources that will be needed, leaders of the office of institutional assessment and financial planning will need to help PLA oversight personnel best understand the financial input required to get the outputs that are expected.

An example of some variables that will be needed to best understand the goals in the context of SMART are

1. potential enrollment gain as a direct (or indirect) result of a refreshed PLA program (allocate a percentage of tuition revenue to this metric). For example, if leadership believe the institution could realize a 3–5% increase (conservatively speaking) by having a robust PLA program, what percent of revenue might be “allocated” toward the support of the PLA program (5–10%, maybe?);

2. potential retention gain as a direct (or indirect) result of a refreshed PLA program (allocate a percentage of tuition revenue to this metric). For example, if leadership believes the institution could realize a 10–15% increase in retention, what percent of revenue might be “allocated” toward the support of a PLA program (10–20%, maybe?);
3. assessment fees that can be collected for different PLA methods;
4. credit fees that can be collected for different PLA methods;
5. cost of assessment;
6. cost of any additional personnel needed; and
7. cost of professional development.

So, that spreadsheet might look something like Figure 4:

Revenue/Cost	Assumptions	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
PERCENT OF ENROLLMENT INCREASE	At 5% of the increase	\$250,000	\$257,500	\$265,225	\$273,181.75	\$281,377.20
PERCENT OF RETENTION INCREASE	At 15% of the increase	\$1,500,000	\$1,545,000	\$1,591,350	\$1,639,090.50	\$1,688,263.22
ASSESSMENT FEES COLLECTED	Year 1 iassumes 300	\$22,500	\$24,750	\$27,225	\$29,948	\$32,920
CREDIT FEES COLLECTED	Year 1 iassumes 300	\$60,000	\$66,000	\$72,600	\$79,860	\$87,780
ASSESSMENT COSTS	Year 1 iassumes 300	\$45,000	\$49,500	\$54,450	\$59,895	\$65,835
PERSONNEL DEDICATED	Year 1 assumes 1 FT and .5 FT each year after UNTIL 2021	\$70,000	\$105,000	\$140,000	\$140,000	\$140,000
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Assumes 4 sessions	\$16,000	\$16,000	\$16,000	\$16,000	\$16,000
Net Revenue Projected		\$1,701,500	\$1,722,750	\$1,745,950	\$1,806,184.75	\$1,868,505.17

*assumes a 3% improvement each year in both enrollment and retention and an increase in students participating each year by 10%

Figure 4. Sample spreadsheet.

There are many other variables to consider; only the major variables are highlighted in the discussion above. These are also gross estimations and serve only to model what the assumptions for a long-range plan could look like with all rates and percent increases. Variable should change depending on actual data and trends.

Next is the discussion for each of the recommendations. These recommendations should be undertaken with the considerations listed above. The first step that must happen

is to appoint a working group to ensure the requirements above and recommendations below are satisfied.

Recommendation 1

The college should develop and offer a series of workshops to

- address what PLA is and why the college offers it,
- understand the specific PLA-related roles in the college to clarify roles and responsibilities, and finally
- learn and apply standard review and assessment techniques in the portfolio review process.

According to the findings of this research, one of the major issues to address is regarding purpose and process. By implementing a series of workshops each addressing different aspects of the PLA program, leaders of the institution will be able to address these specific concerns. With work around the institutional commitment, resources, and the mission/vision/value statements, the workshops may be better defined in the context of the strategy to improve the program. The different workshops concerning the what and why of PLA may be designed to be casual (e.g., a brown bag lunch series) or formal, depending on the intended audience and frequency.

The roles and responsibility workshops would likely be more formal and pertain predominantly to those involved with the PLA process and should be required for those individuals, but optional for the rest of the faculty and staff. The objective is to promote knowledge among campus constituents.

Workshops pertaining to the PLA assessment review, process, and standards to follow should be mandatory for faculty and staff involved with the direct assessment of PLA and/or those who advise students who go through the process. Leaders of the institution may want to consider formal training by a third-party vendor or at least have select members attend a “train-the-trainer” development session offered by a third party, such as CAEL.

Recommendation 2

Based on vision (dream) question-based responses, expand resources. In this regard, the institution should

- organize a focus group to identify and secure grants for expanding the PLA program, and
- appoint a grant-writing committee (it may be the same or different working group) to work aggressively toward securing a grant.

Lumina Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Association, and many other private and public organizations are focused on the degree completion agenda and may have grants available to institutions interested in improving their program. A focus group charged specifically with identifying and securing grant(s) for the expansion of a PLA program may help aid the institution in accelerating the expansion of the PLA program to make it more of a focus.

Then, once grants have been identified, either the same or a different committee should work on writing the grant. This study, along with the research cited and other research, may aid in the development of a grant application.

Recommendation 3

Strengthen the overall infrastructure of the PLA program to reinforce each aspect of the areas needing focus and attention to improve the PLA program:

- purpose,
- policy,
- promotion (marketing—external and internal), and
- process.

The building blocks to clarify the purpose of PLA at the institution, improve and communicate the policy and process, and then promote the PLA program are there. If these recommendations and requirements are followed, the suggested strategic plan should include details about each of these four component areas of focus. A potential timeline for implementation is offered as Table 4.

Table 4

Potential Timeline for Implementation

Timeframe	Activity	Who
TDB	Review findings, white paper, and recommendations	Director of adult learning
1–2 weeks after initial review with director of adult learning	Present findings and PowerPoint presentation to institutional leadership	President, provost, selected deans or program directors and other academic administrators identified
2–3 weeks after presenting findings*	Appoint an individual with PLA oversight as main priority/area of responsibility.	Director of adult learning and/or other appointed responsible party who will be the supervisor for this FTE.
6–9 weeks after PLA oversight appointment	Organize a PLA working group and hold meetings to identify the requirements: PLA value proposition, identify resources, state mission, vision and values, develop strategy and long range plan	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
2–3 weeks after working group identifies requirements	Organize the series of workshops to address what PLA is and why the college offers it, understand the specific PLA options along with roles and responsibilities of those involved; and finally learn and apply standard review and assessment techniques involved with the PLA portfolio review.	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Workshops would be delivered over the course of a semester or term	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Simultaneous to the workshop development, the working group should work on identifying grants and begin the application process to continue to strengthen the vision and strategy to expand the PLA program.	PLA oversight FTE and PLA working group
1–3 months after the workshop series have been identified	Simultaneous to the workshop development and grant planning, the PLA oversight FTE and working group shall work to reinforce each aspect of the findings from the study: purpose, policy, promotion, and process.	1 – 3 months after the workshop series have been identified

Note. * This may take longer if there is a need to hire for the role rather than appoint an existing FTE.

Closing Thoughts

Acme College is on the cusp of being able to make great improvements in its PLA program to address a declining enrollment trend in the adult undergraduate student population. The potential return on investment is enormous, and the requirements and recommendations outlined should provide a roadmap for the institution to follow. The leadership of Acme was supportive of this study, which is an indicator of the level of commitment and interest they have to see potential change in this area.

It would be important for the institution to continue to not only survey faculty and staff, but also survey students as the PLA program is enhanced. In this regard, the institution will have guideposts and feedback to use as markers for improvement.

Finally, I would like to thank the leadership, administration, faculty, and staff for allowing me to conduct the research at the institution. I hope the findings and recommendations prove to be helpful and make a difference.

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Appendix B: Questions for Participants

1. Describe the process by which a student engages in the assessment of prior learning at the college.
2. Describe for me your experiences with the college's assessment for prior learning program.
3. Describe your understanding of the portfolio review process.
4. What do you see as working in regards to the college's PLA program?
5. Describe what you envision as the ideal for the PLA program.
6. Tell me to what extent you see the students needing PLA for degree completion and/or retention.
7. What do the faculty and staff need to better position them for the assessment of prior learning?