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**New Jersey Health Professions Consortium:
A Collaboration of
Community Colleges**

Issue Brief

**Prior Learning Assessment Policy and Practice in
the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to
Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)**

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Prior Learning Assessment Policy and Practice in the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP)

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In 2010, the Northern NJ Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC) received a Health Professions Opportunity Grant from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The 10 college consortium from across Northern NJ had a mission to create pathways in Health Professions education leading to gainful employment. In 2014, The Consortium received a TAACCCT grant from the USDOL and became known as the New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NJHPC). At this time the Consortium grew to 12 colleges¹ across the State of NJ and broadened its career pathways focus to include non-credit – credit credentials, prior learning assessment and employment. Overall, NJHPC has represented and continually connects with the community colleges in the State. Its focus is to build, develop and foster communication and collaboration to ensure students enter and complete educational programs in the health professions leading to family sustaining wages in this high-demand sector. The TAACCCT grant ended in 2018 after serving 3,500 New Jersey residents. NJHPC has commissioned Rutgers to prepare this brief describing lessons learned throughout the Consortium.

Commonly, nontraditional students enroll in college with previous school, work, or military experience and knowledge. However, this preexisting set of skills is not always acknowledged by institutions. In many cases, students have to repeat courses they have taken previously or “re-learn” information they already know. This can increase time to completion, discourage students, and add to credentialing costs. As a result, students – especially adult learners, who often need to get through school quickly to seek or return to employment – may drop out before finishing a credential. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is one solution to this challenge.

PLA is a mechanism by which academic credits are awarded for skills and knowledge individuals have gained outside the classroom. Skills could have been obtained in a variety of settings including the workplace or the military. There are many approaches to granting students credit for prior learning. These include national standardized exams in specified disciplines such as Advanced Placement (AP) exams or College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests; institutional challenge exams developed for specific courses; or individualized assessments through portfolios or other methods. Likewise, non-college programs can also be evaluated. For example, evaluations of corporate or military training, or work evaluated by national bodies designed to perform such evaluations including the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or the American Council on Education’s ACECREDIT service.

PLA may play a particularly important role in the context of curricular reforms aimed at building or redesigning *career pathways* – systems that allow individuals to enter and exit educational programs to advance within a career. PLA provides an opportunity to recognize existing skills in ways that can accelerate movement through an educational program.

Studies have shown that, compared with students who do not earn PLA credits, recipients of PLA credits are more likely to persist through their program, and they have both higher grade point averages (GPAs) and higher graduation rates.² Moreover, earning PLA credits reduces college and university tuitions and helps students, especially adult students, make it to graduation and get there faster.³ In 2010, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) examined adult student records from 48 colleges and universities and found that over half of PLA recipients 25 and older had graduated from a

degree program – giving them a graduation rate more than double that of students in this age group who had not received PLA credit (21%).⁴

Colleges implement PLA because it can be beneficial to both the student and the institution. CAEL's 2010 survey found that the top reasons colleges put PLA policies in place were to allow students to save time and money and to avoid forcing students to complete redundant coursework. Additionally, institutions view PLA as a useful tool in their efforts to promote credential and degree completion and to attract nontraditional students to higher education. PLA may also have some social justice implications. It allows for the recognition of learning from a range of life experiences and can be particularly useful for working students, students in the military or with military backgrounds, and economically disadvantaged students.⁵

Looking at how PLA is being implemented at colleges is a very important step in changing policies and practices. According to CAEL, "understanding the landscape of PLA provides a useful starting point from which to develop a comprehensive strategy for change and innovation."⁶ To this end, this brief examines the efforts of a consortium of 12 community colleges (hereafter referred to as the Consortium) working to develop and implement a broader program of career pathways in the healthcare sector. PLA reform was used as one tool to smooth educational pathways for students. These results can be instructional for other schools at which PLA reform is being considered. The Consortium secured a Round 4 TAACCCT grant in New Jersey for their project, the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP), which sought to help program participants acquire the skills, competencies, and credentials needed to access jobs in the region's healthcare sector.⁷

One of NJ-PREP's goals was to work with colleges to both understand and standardize approaches to PLA across the Consortium. The grant proposal noted that, while the 12 partner colleges all had PLA policies and practices in place prior to the grant period, those policies were uneven, and few students took advantage of the opportunities that existed. Throughout the grant period, the Consortium worked on a variety of tactics to address these challenges, including working with Thomas Edison State University (TESU) on a credit review of commonly offered healthcare coursework in the curriculum. The colleges also worked to adopt a PLA policy developed under another New Jersey-based TAACCCT grant. These consortium-wide PLA strategies will be discussed in detail in the final evaluation report. In this brief, we examine the specific PLA policies and practices – and how they are perceived – at the colleges participating in the grant, providing an understanding of the current landscape from which change can occur. This analysis therefore serves as a "baseline" summary of the current state of PLA across the Consortium. We conclude the brief by highlighting themes that emerged from the interviews and offer suggestions for next steps.

The purpose of this analysis is to better understand institutional perspectives on PLA policy and practice at NJ-PREP colleges. Through interviews with grant staff, administrators, and faculty, we were able to begin to document the PLA landscape across the Consortium. This brief addresses the following research questions:

- ❖ Are Consortium colleges interested in pursuing PLA as an institutional goal?
- ❖ What do existing PLA practices at NJ-PREP colleges look like?
- ❖ How do NJ-PREP institutions share information about PLA with students?
- ❖ In what ways, if any, have institutions changed PLA policy and practice during the grant period?

This issue brief is one of three that explore different facets of career pathways development through the NJ-PREP project. One brief in the series, *Reflections on Career Pathways in Healthcare*,⁸ examines the broader ecosystem of career pathways, describing how these pathways involved both the cooperation and collaboration of two key stakeholder institutions: schools and employers. The brief describes the connections between education and employers in career pathways and how these pathways were viewed by stakeholders in the education, employer, and student populations. The other brief, *Noncredit-to-Credit Connections*,⁹ explores what can be a major chokepoint in the educational component of career pathways: the transition from noncredit to credit programs. Finally, in this brief we explore how the Consortium colleges worked to deploy PLA as a tool to build connections between noncredit and credit programs.

METHODS

This qualitative brief encompasses data from interviews and focus groups conducted over a period of three years (2015–18) during multiple site visits. Interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken either on-site or from the audio recordings. Notes were uploaded, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 11, a qualitative data management system. Data were first divided into themes and categories, and those groupings were later coded again to further define data into subcategories. A total of 274 interviews and focus groups were conducted over the entire grant period (fall 2015 through spring 2018), including 111 interviews with college leadership (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, deans, associate deans, and members of the grant leadership team), 109 interviews with staff (e.g., program staff, student counselors, and advisors), 23 interviews with instructors, 13 interviews with employers, 2 interviews with workforce partners, and 16 focus groups with students (ranging from 3 to 10 students each).

Interviewees shared information about the PLA options available at their institutions. We also asked them questions about students' awareness of PLA on their campuses. Finally, participants discussed whether any changes were being made to PLA under the TAACCCT grant and if so, what those changes entailed. During our interviews with college staff and administrators, we talked about the existent policies and whether and how the TAACCCT grant was being used to help them improve PLA practices on campus. These conversations were fruitful in identifying current challenges, possible next steps, and goals for PLA.

FINDINGS

In this brief, we examine key elements of PLA policy and practice across the NJ-PREP Consortium. Our analysis focuses on three essential elements of PLA across the 12 colleges: 1) their interest in pursuing PLA as an institutional goal, 2) the PLA practices they already had in place, and 3) how they shared information about PLA with their students. We then examine whether and how PLA practices changed at each institution during the grant period.

Interest in PLA

For many community colleges, PLA is a departure from historic and typical methods used to award credit.¹⁰ Embracing the idea of PLA requires institutional buy-in – from leadership, faculty, and staff – to the idea that learning at the college level can occur outside of a classroom.¹¹ For the most part, those we interviewed were interested in PLA as a tool, and many felt that it was important that their college move forward with PLA policy and practice. It should be noted that interviewees were all TAACCCT-related faculty and staff, and these views may not be shared by higher education faculty and staff in general.

Most interviewees were interested in using PLA as a tool on their campus. Many spoke about the value of PLA for students in terms of saving both time and money. Others went further, noting that the practice was particularly important for adult students. As one respondent said: “If returning adults could get credits that would get them into the system for less money, that is important.”

Staff at some colleges were particularly interested in using PLA as a tool in their work with veterans, like those at Passaic. Others talked about the importance of PLA as being both a recruiting mechanism and a necessity due to consumer awareness. One administrator at Bergen thought that community colleges were going to need to move forward with PLA due to demand from the marketplace: “Consumers are becoming much more aware of PLA - especially with the competition from online universities. . . . PLA is unavoidable, and if they [colleges] do not start offering this [PLA], students will just go to places that will.”

How PLA is implemented was important to many interviewees. Believing their view to be common among staff at schools considering the implementation of a more robust PLA policy, one respondent felt the process needed to be done very carefully so that learning could be validated: “Nobody wants to water it [the process] down.” The concern here was that the PLA process be implemented thoughtfully and for the benefit of the students, not just for the sake of doing it. Others also noted

concerns about academic rigor, alluding that the process must be done correctly to ensure students' rigor in learning were equal. One respondent said,

I think it's a great opportunity for students to earn acknowledgement for knowledge that they already have. I think there is a misunderstanding a lot of times in academia of what that is and making sure that we're not giving students credit for not the same equivalent of content that you'd get for sitting in a classroom.

Some interviewees noted that the college might not be ready for the widespread adoption of the practice. Some respondents reported that although they were on board and interested in PLA, not everyone at their college was receptive to the idea of using PLA for credit. Some, like a respondent at one Consortium college, wished there was wider acceptance PLA on campus – especially in health care. This respondent stated that there is a lot of potential and interest among students to build off prior work experience in the field as a way to earn credits toward a degree but sensed there is not a lot of interest in college departments to move toward making that happen. In their 2015 study, Lakin et al. found that a strong infrastructure for PLA is more likely to exist if PLA is important to the overall mission of the institution. Studies also demonstrate the importance of faculty engagement in the development and implementation of PLA policies and procedures.¹² When faculty are involved in these processes, they are more likely to be supportive of PLA. Gaining the support of leadership and tying PLA to institutional culture can also be important drivers in moving successful implementation of PLA forward.¹³ The findings of these studies lead to the following hypotheses: In order for PLA to be successful at Consortium institutions, buy-in and interest from faculty and staff will have to be cultivated along with additional support from leadership. Aligning PLA with the institutional mission will also be important.

Existing PLA Practices

PLA practices varied considerably across the Consortium. Each college had a different set of policies and practices, and departments within those colleges often varied in terms of the degree to which they used PLA and whether students were informed about it.

All colleges had a PLA policy in place prior to the grant, but most had never been updated. Research shows that while having a PLA policy is important, a policy alone is not sufficient to enable its implementation and ensure its use.¹⁴ This was apparent at many of the Consortium colleges. Respondents described PLA policies as being “old” and, in some cases, suggested that they were rarely used. For example, an administrator noted, “there is [an] old process on the books,” but while that old policy was functional, according to the administrator, it was not commonly used. The same administrator explained, “What we have currently, we’re looking to expand and refine. We don’t find that our PLA [policy] is as effective as it could be.”

Most schools used an “informal” process for PLA. While a formal policy exists at each of the schools, most Consortium colleges seemed to lack a formal process for using it. In fact, many staff members at Consortium colleges described their processes for evaluating prior learning for credit as “informal.” This informality in implementation resulted in variance in how PLA policies were applied across the Consortium because there were no clear and defined procedures. When asked how PLA is handled on their campus, an administrator at one college bluntly said, “not well.” This respondent described the process for PLA as being conducted on a case-by-case basis. An administrator at a different college made a similar observation, stating that the college had “a long way to go” where PLA was concerned. At still another college, the PLA policy was referred to as “cumbersome,” and administrators felt that if it were to be used more often, it would have to be revised.

PLA processes also varied from department to department within Consortium institutions. PLA work was often handled by individual departments without too much (or any) guidance or professional development with regard to how to conduct that work. At several of the colleges, each individual academic department is responsible for doing the work of advising on and assessing learning for its own PLAs. This meant that implementation tended to vary a great deal from department to department. A respondent spoke about variance in PLA at their college resulting from the fact that each department dealt with PLA individually. This respondent talked about the need for uniformity: “We need to do something different going forward. . . . We need something that works with all the departments.” An administrator from another college talked about the informality

and the lack of use of the PLA policy leading to a need for faculty to re-learn the policy and practice of PLA each time an assessment needed to be conducted:

Our PLA policy is functional, but every time it comes up you have to do a whole tutorial on it. For instance, the dean for natural science and I had a lot of talks about how you arrive at the number of credits. If you accept the CNA as credit, how many credits are you going to give them? Phlebotomy class? How many credits for that?

This reality of handling the process department-by-department also means that some departments are more savvy and knowledgeable about PLA than others. For instance, at one college, the Information Technology department was described as having a good structure for PLA based on industry certifications, while other departments did not use the process often and were not guided by clear industry standards. Research shows that centralizing or consolidating administrative functions around PLA can be helpful in making sure that all students get the same PLA experience and that practices are implemented uniformly.¹⁵ Having clear and recognized policies and procedures across all departments is important to making sure that all students have access to PLA and, when PLAs are performed, that the process is uniform and consistent.

How prior learning is evaluated also varied at Consortium institutions. As mentioned above, prior learning can be evaluated in a variety of different ways: using national standardized exams; institutional challenge exams developed for particular courses; portfolios; or evaluations from non-college programs. Providing different methods for the evaluation of prior learning can open more opportunities for students to earn credit for knowledge acquired outside of the college. However, some review methods, like portfolios, can be challenging and time-consuming for institutions, especially when there is no designated system for reviews in place.

PLA Case Study: Thomas Edison State University Portfolio Reviews

Thomas Edison State University (TESU) works in conjunction with the New Jersey Prior Learning Assessment Network (NJ PLAN) to conduct portfolio reviews as a service to other colleges. Launched in July 2014, NJ PLAN is a consortium of New Jersey colleges and universities partnering to provide the opportunity for their students to earn credit toward their degrees through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). TESU provides assessment services for members of the NJPLAN consortium and also serves as a prior learning assessment consultant to member institutions. Assessments are complemented by the subject-matter expertise of faculty members from partnering institutions, which also share best practices from their assessment and academic programs (<https://www.tesu.edu/njplan/how-it-works>). This service is currently used by two Consortium colleges, Ocean and Essex. According to multiple respondents from Ocean, TESU through NJ PLAN provides the college with a very helpful service. PLA reviews, especially portfolio reviews, require some expertise in the field of study, and OCC does not always have full-time faculty with the required knowledge base on-site or available to conduct reviews. NJ PLAN and TESU help the college fill those voids, and their work was noted as being high quality and using the best practices in the field.

Other NJ-PREP colleges have considered joining NJ PLAN but to date have not done so. The governance council at Hudson, for example, discussed the issue of whether to outsource portfolio reviews to TESU, but in the end, they decided to keep their portfolio review process in-house. This decision was primarily made due to the cost to students. The college felt that the costs associated with the outside review would burden students and thus decided to continue to review portfolios in-house. Other colleges, such as Morris, have not joined NJ PLAN but choose to outsource portfolio reviews to TESU on occasion.

While joining NJ PLAN provides the capacity for offering portfolio reviews to all students, there is still a lot of work to do to make sure portfolios are used as a PLA tool. Representatives from Ocean acknowledged this, stating that even though they have a process for reviewing portfolios, it is not marketed; as a result, students only use this method if they stumble upon it or do their own research: "We offer [portfolio reviews] through NJ PLAN, but they're not marketed. They're only used if you are 'in the know' or if students fall upon it. There's a lot of growth that can happen there."

Consortium colleges relied mainly on challenge exams or evaluations of non-college programs for PLA. In theory, all four kinds of credit review are available at most of the colleges, but as was expected, many of the colleges that we spoke with evaluated prior learning most often using either challenge exams or evaluated non-college programs. Portfolio reviews were used infrequently, and when used, were often conducted by faculty. Despite the low use of portfolios currently, many of those to whom we spoke expressed an interest in the portfolio process and in being able to offer that option to students.

Dissemination of Information

Throughout interviews it became clear that variance in policies between departments led to variance in how information was disseminated to students. In addition, awareness and marketing was often limited or nonexistent.

Some schools had appointed a clear ‘point-person’ for PLA, while other schools had not. Some colleges had designated a very clear point person to provide initial information about PLA as well as ongoing support to interested students. At Bergen, for example, the dean of student success was described as the “face” of PLA at the college. Interested students were directed to her office, where she explained the process and connected them with the appropriate next step. After students met with her, they often were directed to the appropriate department where their knowledge could be assessed, and credit awarded. At other schools, however, interviewees were not aware of any particular staff member managing the PLA process. During the grant period, Ocean identified this as a problem and began to look for an appropriate point person/group of people to handle PLA inquiries and services. As of the conclusion of our interviews, this person or unit had not yet been decided on.

Most interview respondents saw PLA as a low-demand resource. At some Consortium colleges, faculty and staff in TAACCCT programs and some administrators viewed the frequency of PLA requests (including the use of placement testing as well as portfolios) as low, and many interviewees stated that they had not seen a lot of demand for credit assessments. It could be that this is mostly a trend among TAACCCT-type allied healthcare programs, although some high-level administrators also noted the issue. For example, a respondent from one college estimated that there had been fewer than 50 requests for PLA over the last three years. As a result, some felt that time and effort could be better spent on other initiatives. Other consortium colleges had higher rates of use for PLA and thus viewed PLA as a necessary institutional tool. Revision of PLA policy and practice at an institution only has value if PLA is accessed and used by students and if faculty support it. This can result in a “chicken or egg” problem – institutions do not see demand for PLA, so they don’t put resources into promoting it, while at the same time, students may not be demanding PLA because they are not aware it exists. Research shows that institutions tend to rely on their websites, printed materials, and academic advisors to inform students about the opportunity to earn credit via PLA. But in a 2014 survey, CAEL found that 25 percent of respondent institutions did not actively promote PLA at all¹⁶. If students do not know that PLA is available, it is not surprising that they are not using it. Faculty and staff at institutions can and do make assumptions based on this perceived lack of demand and the value of PLA to their students and institutions.

Most colleges did not actively market PLA as a student resource. PLA information was shared most commonly through websites and word-of-mouth. In some cases, interviewees did not know where information on PLA could be found. One respondent who was not sure where students could find PLA information at her institution also stated that PLA was not something she saw people at the college discussing with students as something they could pursue. At Mercer, PLA information is located on the college website, but for a student to find it they would likely have to already be searching for it. A staff member there said: “It’s not something advertised. It’s on the website, but it’s not readily apparent. I’m not sure how many [students] even use it.”

Respondents from Ocean felt that, historically, the college had not done a great job promoting PLA. The hope was that once a department was selected to be the “home” of PLA, the college could invest in its promotion. At another college, sharing information about PLA to improve uptake was described as a “challenge.” The college had plans to change this process but were still in discussions about what changes to make. There were thoughts that a dual approach – using both marketing and advising – might be most appropriate and beneficial. One administrator said,

Our head of PR is now on our executive team, so we talk about those things [PLA] all the time. We don't have a plan in place yet, but we are discussing it. He is focus[ing] on career and technical programs, which will help. The other piece was advising.

Some schools felt they were doing a good job with awareness. At Sussex, respondents thought students were aware of PLA because they were told about it during the recruitment process. The need for raising awareness was clear to others; for example, at Mercer it was thought that improving the visibility of PLA would help the college with enrollment, particularly with some special populations of interest: "It [PLA] will be more visible and attract more students to the college, which might help us recruit more veterans and those with a trade background."

Changes Under TAACCCT

The TAACCCT grant provided an opportunity for Consortium colleges to examine how PLA was handled on their campuses and to think about and implement improvements to PLA policy and practice. The 12 colleges used the opportunity to differing degrees to further the PLA agenda at their institution.

Some schools used the TAACCCT grant as an opportunity to hold discussions about the future of PLA at their institution. While no colleges conducted a total overhaul of their PLA activities over the period of the grant, there were many discussions about changes that could be made. For instance, Ocean, Passaic, Bergen, Mercer, Middlesex, and Raritan Valley all had extensive conversations about PLA. In some cases, like at Ocean, the college also made some important steps to improve PLA on campus and make it more available to students.

Some talked about the importance of the TAACCCT grant in moving conversations about PLA forward at their schools. Others discussed how these conversations were influencing various aspects of the college. At Middlesex, one staff member said discussions about PLA spurred by the grant were helping to create "stronger bridges from noncredit to credit" programming at the school. Others talked about how the grant had inspired them to think more about PLA and to become an "advocate" for it at their college.

While all Consortium colleges used the TAACCCT grant as an opportunity to further discuss plans for PLA at their institution, some schools are further along in this process than others. Some have used funds from multiple grants to refine PLA at their institution. Passaic is a good example of how an institution can leverage one or more grants to move forward an agenda focused on PLA. See the case study below.

PLA Case Study: Passaic County Community College

Staff and administrators at Passaic Community College put considerable work into their PLA policies as part of a Round 3 TAACCCT grant. Interviewees discussed how the Round 4 grant gave them an opportunity to both continue and expand on that work. Through their Round 3 grant, they hired a PLA director, and the Round 4 grant allowed them to maintain that position for another year, giving them time to consider how to sustain the role institutionally. The college was interested in managing the PLA process in-house in a high-quality way. Passaic's work relative to PLA provides a scalable example for other colleges – both inside the Consortium and beyond – as they begin to consider PLA reform. Passaic is not yet finished with their PLA reforms, but the lessons learned to date are important and touch on many of the challenges that other colleges in the Consortium are facing. The college was able to accomplish a great deal over the course of its two grants. They began this work by making PLA a part of their institutional mission and by making sure that the leadership was on board and vocal about the importance of PLA to the college. (continued on next page)

PLA Case Study: Passaic County Community College (continued)

The president of Passaic said that PLA work through both of their TAACCCT grants was “a big plus. . . . We learned a lot about PLA.” He reported that the most valuable lesson learned was that the process could be accomplished incrementally, which is the approach they used over the course of the two grants. He also spoke about moving forward with changes and learning from them: “It is hard, but it doesn’t have to be that complicated. You can take baby steps. You don’t have to fully implement a full PLA. You can learn how to do it; you can kind of work toward it.”

One of the most important tasks at Passaic was getting faculty on board with PLA. To do this, the college decided to hire a consultant from outside the college to talk to faculty about PLA. Those we spoke to said that this was essential because it was particularly important that the presentation be non-threatening and that it create space for open discussion. Having an outsider lead the session helped to create this atmosphere. A senior leader at the college noted that a piece of advice he would give schools considering PLA implementation would be to approach the topic as “a discussion; don’t try to shove it down anyone’s throat.”

The president also noted that leadership was important to the effort. He worked to create an atmosphere of openness on campus about PLA and to let faculty and staff know that there was not one right way to implement it. He also made it a priority for faculty and staff and an issue that had to be addressed. He felt that these conversations and the session with the outside consultant led faculty and staff to understand the importance of PLA for their students. Additionally, it prompted them to be a part of the process to develop a policy and put practices in place at the college.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Some recommendations on PLA policy and practice emerged from our interviews. These recommendations are echoed in the PLA literature. These were also issues that Passaic dealt with in their own reforms. As the Consortium colleges continue their work with PLA, these recommendations may be useful during that process:

- Having a PLA policy is important, but a policy alone is not sufficient to enable its implementation and ensure its use. Colleges should examine their policies and possibly revisit them. They should also look at the landscape and data on PLA to better understand whether and how PLA is being used at their institution.
- Having clear and recognized policies and procedures is important to making sure that students have access to PLA and to ensuring that, when PLA is put into practice, the process is uniform and consistent.
- Centralizing or consolidating administrative functions around PLA can be helpful in making sure that students get the same PLA experience and that practices are implemented uniformly.
- A strong infrastructure for PLA is more likely to exist if PLA is important to the overall mission of the institution.
- Embracing the idea of PLA requires that there be institutional buy-in from leadership, faculty, and staff to the idea that college-level learning can occur outside of a classroom.
- Faculty engagement in the development and implementation of PLA policies and procedures can lead to buy-in.
- Awareness among the student body is important for use and uptake of PLA.
- Where possible, funding opportunities should be leveraged to continue discussion, planning, and redesign of PLA at individual institutions.

The TAACCCT grant has given the 12 Consortium colleges the opportunity to open discussions about and plan for future changes relative to PLA. It has also allowed some schools that had previously made positive changes in PLA policies to build on them and expand. While reforming PLA can seem a daunting task, there are many steps a school can take to make positive changes relative to the evaluation of prior learning for credit. Incremental change can help an institution secure necessary buy-in as well as set a foundation for future work. Where buy-in is already present, more substantial changes can help institutions expand their PLA offerings.

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¹ The colleges funded through the TAACCT Round 4 grant, whose activities are the subject of this brief include: Bergen Community College (Lead Agency), Brookdale Community College, County College of Morris, Essex County College, Hudson County Community College, Mercer County Community College, Ocean County College, Passaic County Community College, Raritan Valley Community College, Sussex County Community College, and Union County College.

² Klein-Collins, R. (2010). *Fueling the race to postsecondary success: a 48-institution study of prior learning assessment and adult student learning outcomes*. Chicago, IL: Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. [Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes. Executive Summary](#)

³ Hayward, M., and Williams, M. (2014). Adult learner graduation rates at four U.S. community colleges by prior learning assessment status and method. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35(1), 44–54. [Adult Learner Graduation Rates at Four U.S. Community Colleges by Prior Learning Assessment Status and Method](#); Klein-Collins, 2010.

⁴ Klein-Collins, 2010.

⁵ Klein-Collins, 2010.

⁶ CAEL (Council on Adult and Experiential Learning). (2015). *State system PLA adoption: Lessons from a three-system initiative*. Chicago, IL: Author. <https://www.cael.org/pla/publication/state-system-pla-adoption-lessons-from-a-three-system-initiative>

⁷ In these briefs, we use the term “career pathways” to describe the broader concept of education-to-career pathways. The term “educational pathways” is used to describe a subset of career pathways: the routes students take through the institution of higher education in preparation for entry and advancement in employment. As a community college-based grant, the bulk of the reforms in NJ-PREP career pathway development happened in the educational portion of the pathways.

⁸ Haviland, S., & Van Noy, M. (2018, June). *Reflections on career pathways in health care: College, employer and student perspectives on the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP) (Evaluation Issue Brief #1)*. New Brunswick, NJ: Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University.

⁹ Haviland, S., & Van Noy, M. (2018, June). *Noncredit-to-credit connections: Lessons from the New Jersey Health Professions Pathways to Regional Excellence Project (NJ-PREP) (Evaluation Issue Brief #2)*. New Brunswick, NJ: Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University.

¹⁰ Lakin, M. B., Seymour, D., Nellum, C. J., Crandall, J. R., and Kanter, M. J. (2015). *Credit for prior learning: Charting institutional practice for sustainability*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. [Research Report: Credit for Prior Learning](#)

¹¹ Lakin et al, 2015.

¹² Lakin et al, 2015; Edwards, R., McKay, H., & Kuang, Li. (2018). *Colorado Helps Advanced Manufacturing Program: Prior learning assessment implementation and early outcomes*. New Brunswick, NJ: Education & Employment Research Center, Rutgers University.

¹³ Lakin et al, 2015; Edwards, McKay & Kuang, 2017.

¹⁴ Lakin et al, 2015; Edwards, McKay & Kuang, 2017.

¹⁵ Lakin et al, 2015.

¹⁶ Klein-Collins, R., & Olson, R. (2014). Random access: The Latino student experience with prior learning assessment. Chicago, IL: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning & Excelencia in Education. Retrieved from [Accelerating Degree Completion for Latinos through Prior Learning Assessment](#)

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