

2011 Report to the Legislature: Credit for Prior Learning Experience in Washington

Executive Summary

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (E2SHB 1795), passed by the Legislature in 2011, identified prior learning assessment (PLA) as an innovative means for improving degree and certificate attainment and improving cost effectiveness and efficiency within Washington's higher education system. The Act defines prior learning as "the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions."

Research supports the benefits of awarding credits for prior learning. A 2010 nationwide study of 62,000 students found that it has a positive impact on student persistence and completion, especially for Hispanic and African American students. A report based on the research also concluded that awarding prior learning credits establishes a value on learning acquired by students on their own, helps identify additional knowledge they will need in order to achieve their personal goals, and cuts tuition costs by reducing the number of courses a student is required to take.

The legislation directed the HECB to convene an Academic Credit for Prior Learning Work Group to address goals outlined in the legislation. The HECB convened the work group, which was comprised of a broad range of stakeholders, in February 2011.

The work group reviewed earlier work on prior learning and examined evolving national and state best practices. It also reviewed current practices for assessing learning outcomes achieved through prior learning, and the practices used by Washington institutions to award college credit for prior learning.

The work group made progress in the following areas:

1. **Developed common definitions of prior learning and prior learning assessment.** Every college and university in Washington has some form of assessment for prior learning. A clear set of common definitions was developed that allows for the use of a variety of assessment methods: standardized tests such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and Defense Activities for Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES), course challenge examinations, portfolio assessment, and crosswalks between work force training and college courses. Common definitions were required in order to develop a consistent method of tracking PLA, including outcome measures for goals outlined in legislation. The first report of outcomes will be published December 2012.

2. **Identified primary campus contacts and convened a statewide conference.** A one day conference of 93 Primary Contacts and additional college faculty and staff was convened to share the PLA work group's progress. Information shared with campus representatives included current practices across the state, a proposed cost analyses, and set the agenda for implementation of recommendations across the system. The Primary Contact is being published on college and university websites, and a complete list is available on agency sites.
3. **Reviewed PLA best practices and produced tools for faculty and staff development.** National and state best practices were reviewed. A new survey identified how PLA is being implemented on baccalaureate campuses in Washington. The WA-Prior Learning Assessment web page 'wiki' is used as a forum for work group members and is now open to everyone interested in work group progress. The wiki collects and shares research, best practices, training materials, and resource documents.
4. **Evaluated options for consistently tracking data.** Data gathering processes do not currently exist across the system. The work group identified data gathering requirements and reviewed options.
5. **Developed PLA cost recommendations.** An assessment of current costs for PLA was completed by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and recommendations were developed that could be applied broadly across the system.
6. **Reviewed work-based and other common training programs and developed a template for career categories or clusters to assist in establishing program articulations.** A mechanism was developed through the Centers of Excellence to begin crosswalks between work-based learning and community and technical college courses. Additionally, examples for each career cluster were developed that will aid in establishing more articulation agreements.
7. **Initiated policy discussions with the regional accrediting association regarding acceptance of PLA credit.** The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) was contacted regarding revisions to policies that limit acceptance of experiential learning course credits.

Work Group Goals for 2012

The work group continues to develop recommendations for achieving goals identified in legislation that ensure more adult learners efficiently move through postsecondary education and enter the workforce well-prepared. Goals for 2012 include:

1. Develop and implement a tracking system for PLA students and credits.
2. Increase transparency and consistency of information available to students and stakeholders, faculty and staff. Develop a handbook for faculty.
3. Refine the cost analysis and fee structure for providing PLA at community and technical colleges and baccalaureate institutions.
4. Research and develop recommendations for financial aid options to support students pursuing PLA.
5. Increase recognition and acceptance of credit towards general education requirements based on nationally recognized and standardized examinations.
6. Explore options with the regional accrediting association (NWCCU) regarding experiential learning courses and credit acceptance.

E2SHB 1795 directed the HECB to annually report progress on the goals and outcome measures. Progress will be reported to Legislative Higher Education Committees in December 2012.



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Introduction

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (E2SHB 1795), passed by the Legislature in 2011, identified prior learning assessment (PLA) as an innovative means for improving degree and certificate attainment and improving cost effectiveness and efficiency within Washington's higher education system. The Act defines prior learning as "the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions."

Research supports the benefits of awarding credits for prior learning. A 2010 nationwide study of 62,000 students found that it has a positive impact on student persistence and completion, especially for Hispanic and African American students. A report based on the research also concluded that awarding prior learning credits establishes a value on learning acquired by students on their own, helps identify additional knowledge they will need in order to achieve their personal goals, and cuts tuition costs by reducing the number of courses a student is required to take.

A 2010 Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) study involved 62,000 students at 48 institutions across the United States.¹ Highlights from a 2011 CAEL report² reviewing this research concluded:

- Students who are awarded credit for prior learning are more likely to persist and complete.
- Hispanic students who received credit for prior learning earned Bachelor's degrees at a rate nearly eight times that of Hispanic non-PLA students.
- Awarding PLA credit decreases time to degree, with the most dramatic decrease in Black, non-Hispanic students.

CAEL's benchmarking study³ found that awarding credit for prior learning

- Validates the worth of learning students have achieved on their own.
- Identifies what students need to learn in order to achieve their personal, career, or academic goals.
- Shortens the time necessary to earn a college credential.
- Saves tuition by reducing the number of required courses.

¹ Brigham, C. and Klein-Collins, R. Availability, Use and Value of Prior Learning Assessment within Community Colleges. July 2010. Retrieved from http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_CommunityColleges.pdf

² Klein, Collins, R. Underserved Students Who Earn Credit Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree. April 2011. Retrieved from http://www.cael.org/publications/get_article.php

³ Council on Adult and Experiential Learning. 1999. Serving Adult Learners in Higher Education: Findings from CAEL's Benchmarking Study

E2SHB 1795 directed the HECB to convene an Academic Credit for Prior Learning Work Group comprised of a broad range of stakeholders to address the following goals:

- Increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning and the number of students who receive credit for prior learning that counts towards their major or towards earning their degree, certificate, or credential, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies.
- Increase the number and type of academic credits accepted for prior learning in institutions of higher education, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies.
- Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning.
- Improve prior learning assessment practices across the institutions of higher education.
- Create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding credit for prior learning and to share exemplary policies and practices among institutions of higher education.
- Develop articulation agreements when patterns of credit for prior learning are identified for particular programs and pathways.
- Develop outcome measures to track progress on the goals outlined in this section.

E2SHB 1795 directed the HECB to annually report progress on the goals and outcome measures. The remainder of this report summarizes progress made by the work group in 2011, and identifies work to be accomplished in 2012.

Progress on Goals Established in E2SHB 1795⁴

1. Definitions of Prior Learning and Prior Learning Assessment were developed

- a. **Legislative Goal Area:** Transparent policies and practices
- b. **2011 Outcome:** A single definition of Prior Learning and Prior Learning Assessment was developed.

The work group determined that before we could move forward with other goals of ESSHB 1795, operational definitions of ‘Prior Learning’ and ‘Prior Learning Assessment’ acceptable to all stakeholders were required.

ESSHB 1795 established a general definition for prior learning – “the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.”

In the broadest sense, options for prior learning assessment can include: ⁵

1. Direct transfer and awarding of credit from an accredited college or university. ⁶
2. Awarding of credit for taking nationally-recognized standardized examinations like:
 - a. AP - Advanced Placement Examinations administered by the College Board
 - b. IB – International Baccalaureate administered by the International Baccalaureate Organization
 - c. Cambridge Examinations administered by the University of Cambridge International
3. Awarding credit for taking other nationally-recognized standardized examinations that assess content knowledge of college level courses or examinations established by academic units. Examples include:
 - a. CLEP - College-Level Examination Program administered by the College Board
 - b. DANTES Subject Standardized Tests program (DSST) administered by the Educational Testing Service
 - c. ACT/PEP - The American College Testing Proficiency Examination Program
4. Course challenge examinations sponsored by college and university departments.

⁴ A wiki was created to facilitate work of the group. Reference materials, source documents, meeting minutes, and collaborative activities are located on the PLA Wiki and can be accessed by anyone interested in PLA in Washington at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>.

⁵ Gambescia, S.F. & Dagavarian, D. (2007). Review of prior learning assessment options for adult continuing education degree programs. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 55 (3), pp. 35-48.

⁶ Although included in the broadest definition of ‘prior learning,’ transfer credit for course work completed at a previous institution was not considered for prior learning assessment by the work group. National standards and practices for transfer credit evaluation used by all institutions in Washington follow guidelines outlined in a **Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit** available at http://www.acenet.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ProgramsServices/CLLL/Credit_Transfer.pdf.

5. Awarding of credit in advanced standing for Educational Credit by Examinations recognized by the American Council on Education (ACE). Options include:
 - a. Military formal courses and/or occupations
 - b. Other formal and well documented training programs conducted by non-collegiate sponsors
 - c. University of the State of New York Board of Regent's National Program on Non-collegiate Sponsored Instruction (National PONSI)
 - d. International Association for Continuation Education and Training (IACET)
6. Awarding of credit or advanced standing from Portfolio Assessment.
 - a. The portfolio is a complex written document through which a student assesses learning from prior work/life experience and demonstrates that this learning meets the substantive theoretical and practical learner objectives commensurate with a college-level course.
 - b. Experience, per se, does not necessarily mean learning took place. Credit is awarded for learning and not simply for experience.

The Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) references Prior learning assessment (PLA) as a term used to describe “the process by which an individual’s experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.”⁷

ESSHB 1808 (the Launch Year Act) was adopted by the 2011 Legislature and addressed dual enrollment/dual credit programs that include:

- Advanced Placement (AP)
- International Baccalaureate (IB)
- University of Cambridge International Examinations
- Early College
- Gateway to College
- Running Start
- Technical College Direct Funded Enrollment Programs
- Tech Prep

The work group determined that dual enrollment/dual credit programs, although considered prior learning assessment in the broadest sense, did not meet the intent of ESSB1795 and would be excluded from our definition.

Clear definitions of PLA were necessary to develop a consistent method of tracking PLA and begin developing outcome measures for goals outlined in ESSHB 1795. The definitions include flexibility to allow for a variety of assessment methods.

⁷ <http://cael.org/home> accessed December 12, 2011.

Definitions⁸

Prior Learning is the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.

Prior Learning Assessment is accomplished through standardized tests (i.e. CLEP and DANTES), course challenge examinations, portfolio assessment, and crosswalks between work-based learning and college courses.

2. Primary Contacts at all institutions in Washington were identified and published

- a. **Legislative Goal Areas:** Develop transparent policies and practices, improve PLA practices, create tools and share practices, develop articulation agreements, and develop outcome measures
- b. **2011 Outcomes:** Primary Contact identified for each college/university, information posted to web pages, and convened the first meeting of Primary Contacts

The first recommendation of the 2010 SSB 6357 work group was to identify a Primary Contact (PC) on every campus for students interested in Prior Learning Assessment. In 2010, fewer than half the institutions surveyed in Washington were able to identify a primary contact for PLA.

As of November 2011, at least one primary contact was identified for colleges and universities in Washington:

- 42 at Community and Technical Colleges
- 10 at Public Baccalaureates
- 29 at Private Baccalaureates (including for-profit and non-profit institutions)

As mentioned previously, the work group is comprised of 68 members that are points of contact within their sectors for information regarding PLA.

The work group convened the first gathering of all Primary Contacts on November 15, 2011.⁹ Colleges and universities were encouraged to send teams of participants that included the Primary Contact, faculty, and representatives of enrollment services units that process and record PLA credits. More than 90 participants attended this full-day conference where work group members shared their progress, informed campus representatives of current practices and future plans, reviewed the cost analyses, learned of mechanisms for creating articulation agreements and of crosswalk development by the Centers of Excellence and Veterans programs, and found resources for continued support (e.g. training materials, website development). Teams of participants identified which recommendations they would implement first on their campus and the first action they would take. Participants also provided feedback that helped set the agenda for follow-up meetings requested by those in attendance.

⁸ Further information is available in Appendix B and on the Washington-PLA Wiki located at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>.

⁹ The November 15th Conference agenda, results of participant input on PLA expansion in Washington, and a roster of Primary Points of Contact are available on the Washington-PLA Wiki located at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>.

Primary Contacts are being posted to college and university websites, online at both the HECB and SBCTC PLA sites, and on the WA-Prior Learning Assessment wiki.¹⁰

3. PLA Best practices were reviewed and tools produced for faculty and staff development.

- a. **Legislative Goal Areas:** Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning, improve prior learning assessment practices across the institutions of higher education, create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding credit for prior learning, and share exemplary policies and practices among institutions of higher education.
- b. **2011 Outcomes:** System wide policies and practices were reviewed. A wiki was developed that includes: current policies, examples of national research and best practices, multimedia presentations, reference materials, and training aides.

The work group was fortunate to hear several presentations and have ongoing dialog with Amy Sherman of the Council of Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL). Presentations included national best practices, results of extensive nationwide research studies demonstrating the value of PLA, and ongoing discussions on improvements in the expansion of PLA nationally and in Washington. In addition, best practices by institutions in Washington were reviewed, including presentations by: Edmonds Community College, Highline Community College, Whatcom Community College, Bellevue College, South Seattle Community College, Pierce College, City University, Eastern Washington University, private colleges and universities represented by the Independent Colleges of Washington, and Western Governors University (WGU) Washington. This research set a foundation for work group progress and informed progress in all other goal areas.

A survey of practices at the community and technical colleges was completed in 2010 by the previous work group. In late 2011 baccalaureate institutions were surveyed to determine how PLA was being implemented at each institution. Results will be reviewed by the work group in February 2012 and will help guide further development of transparent PLA policies in Washington.

An online ‘wiki’¹¹ established a place for Washington Prior Learning Assessment work group members to collect background information and resources, and become the online center for sharing information and training materials across the system. The site is actively used by work group members to discuss issues, add new information and comment on proposals, and provide new resource documents and training materials.

The wiki was originally developed for use by group members as a means of expanding collaborative work. The wiki was opened to anyone interested in PLA in Washington in December 2011 to improve transparency and provide tools for all faculty and staff. The wiki is not static – it is a living and evolving resource of information for all interested in moving PLA forward in Washington and is continuously updated with new information.

¹⁰ The Washington-PLA Wiki is located at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>

¹¹ A “wiki” (Hawaiian word meaning fast or quick) is a website whose users can add, modify, or delete content via a web browser. Wikis are created collaboratively by multiple users.

4. Data gathering processes do not currently exist across the system. Options for a consistent method of tracking data were evaluated.

- a. **Legislative Goal Areas:** Develop a process to measure legislative goals to increase the number of students receiving PLA and number of PLA credits accepted towards degrees, certificates or credentials.
- b. **2011 Outcome:** Colleges are looking at their systems and determining identification and measurement tools. The work group is researching options.

The 2010 SSB 6357 report identified the following challenge regarding data collection:

- **Coding and tracking:** PLA is virtually impossible to track. Currently in the community and technical colleges, PLA is noted in the comments section of student transcripts, but with no conformity. This makes it extraordinarily difficult to obtain accurate numbers of students who are receiving PLA and for which courses.

A survey of community and technical colleges conducted in 2010 by the SSB 6357 work group indicated that they were unable to provide data because there was no tracking mechanism in place for PLA. A 2011 survey of baccalaureate institutions determined a variety of methods being used to award PLA credit but did not identify a methodology for reporting PLA data. Both surveys supported the need for a consistent, clear definition of PLA in Washington in order to develop data tracking methods.

Discrete data elements do not exist in the Public Centralized Higher Education Enrollment System (PCHEES)¹² used to collect data for the public baccalaureate. Likewise, data elements specific to PLA students or credits do not exist in the Data Warehouse that is used to collect data for community and technical colleges.

Primary Contacts attending the November 15th Conference responded to the question: “Which of the PLA work group recommendations would you most like to implement on your campus,” by saying that their top priority was development of a consistent method of tracking PLA credit, including a database for collecting PLA participation data.

As mentioned previously in this report, a single definition was developed by the work group and we are now moving forward to determine processes to collect data that describe the number of students receiving PLA credit and the number of PLA credits accepted towards degrees, certificates or credentials.

¹² The Office of Financial Management (OFM), in partnership with Washington state public four-year higher education institutions and the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) created PCHEES in 1998 to collect data from the four-year public baccalaureate institutions. PCHEES has recently been updated.

5. A cost study to determine clear and consistent fee structures for PLA options was completed by SBCTC. Recommendations were developed.

- a. **Legislative Goal Areas:** Improve PLA practices across institutions, develop transparent policies, and share exemplary practices
- b. **2011 Outcome:** A clear and consistent fee structure with options was developed and is being shared for review by institutions in all sectors

The Community and Technical College system investigated a standard approach to recovering the costs for specific methods of prior learning assessment:

- Portfolio review
- Formal examinations
- Practical assessments or demonstrations of skills
- Oral interviews

Discussions by leaders within the community and technical college system produced the following assumptions used in developing this cost analysis:

1. There is no standard for this work and multiple forms of assessing prior learning credit based on the unique experiential background of students that seek this service are required
2. Faculty hold the core competency for making prior learning assessments
3. Students are expected to save both time (fewer courses to take) and money (less tuition and fees paid and fewer textbooks purchased)
4. Institutions will not necessarily save money (state allocations). Currently, student demand exceeds course supply. Any savings achieved by requiring fewer courses for any one student will be applied to meeting unmet demand
5. Increased application of PLA needs to be cost-neutral and will require a fee structure for the colleges to recover costs of significantly more assessments.

These assessment methods were analyzed to understand average time and resources consumed in the assessment, average credits awarded following each assessment, and how the colleges currently charge students for prior learning assessments. The study recommended that a consistent method for determining fees for assessing prior learning be adopted across the higher education system.

Cost recovery for prior learning assessments should include

- Direct costs unique to the assessment process. This is the proportional share of faculty salary and benefits dedicated to the assessment
- Indirect costs - the proportional share of costs directly associated with supporting faculty in their role as prior learning assessment leaders. Facilities and grounds, libraries, and targeted academic programs (e.g. corrections education) are excluded from the indirect cost allowance.

A generic formula for determining fees was proposed that might be used by all institutions across the system:

Direct Cost Rate: Average full-time faculty hourly rate, including benefits

Indirect Cost Rate: A percentage of the direct cost rate determined by the institution

Direct Cost Rate $+$ Indirect Cost Rate \times Time of Assessment $=$ Maximum Rate for Course

Based on survey data from the community and technical colleges, a “typical” prior learning assessment takes two to three hours and rarely exceeds five hours per student. This is confirmed by anecdotal information from baccalaureate institutions engaged in PLA.

An Example:

- An average full-time faculty member has an hourly rate (including benefits) of \$45 per hour.
- The indirect cost rate does not exceed 50.7% of the direct rate
- These two combine for a maximum of \$68 per hour.
- Multiply by five hours (the maximum time anticipated for faculty to complete a prior learning assessment) for a maximum rate of \$340 for a five-credit course.

Using this formula and applying institution-specific information, a college or university could determine a rate to recover all direct and indirect costs while the student saves a small amount off of regular tuition with even greater savings achieved from avoiding specific course fees, the textbooks associated with course, and time that can be better spent completing remaining courses towards a degree, certificate, or credential.

If implemented, it is recommended that this rate be increased annually by an inflation measure and the maximum fee should be published every spring along with tuition schedules for the following academic year.

6. Work-based and other common training programs were reviewed and a template for career clusters developed to assist in establishing program articulations.

- a. **Legislative Goal Areas:** Develop articulation agreements for particular programs and pathways, develop transparent policies, and improve prior learning assessment practices.
- b. **2011 Outcome:** Programs were reviewed by Centers of Excellence and a template created for development of further articulation agreements.

The work group developed a mechanism through the Centers of Excellence and a model ‘template’ to begin crosswalks between work-based prior learning and community and technical college courses. This mechanism will lead to a matrix describing these opportunities across the state to be posted to agency, college, and university websites. Centers build and sustain Washington’s competitive advantage through statewide leadership and focus on targeted industries that drive the state’s economy.

Centers have a reputation for fast, flexible, quality education and training programs and the work group hopes to use this expertise to expand articulation agreements.¹³

Information on Center activity was discussed and examples of agreements under development reviewed. Skagit Valley College's Marine Maintenance Technology Center provides an example of what could be developed throughout the system. Many students have prior learning (both formal and informal) in automotive electronics and could potentially pass an assessment of the learning outcomes for Marine Electrical Systems I for 4 credits, and enroll directly into Marine Electrical Systems II.

Olympic College has several Aerospace and Advanced Manufacturing examples that are being aligned using the PLA work group templates. The Agriculture Center is currently working with colleges that offer courses in preparation for the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Pesticide Licensing Exam and the WSDA Certification & Training program that lead to specific college learning outcomes. Pierce College is working to provide a crosswalk for the Child Development Associate credential. Homeland Security has completed the template for Highline's Criminal Justice program based on the Basic Law Enforcement Training program, and the Center of Excellence for International Trade, Transportation and Logistics has completed an example from Highline's International Business program and the Certified Global Business Professional exam qualifications.

In 2010, SBCTC implemented a statewide articulation agreement between the colleges and community-based early childhood education training organizations. The articulation agreement allows students who have completed community-based training by a college-approved instructor to seek two credits of State Training and Registry System (STARS) training from a local community or technical college. These credits are applied toward certificate or degree completion.

HB 1418 and SB 5307 were both passed by the 2011 Legislature and instructed the Department of Health and Department of Labor to award licensing credit to military personnel that have completed military education and training.¹⁴ The work group considered the impact this legislation will have on colleges offering related programs and if PLA will be involved. Further research is required to integrate directives from this legislation with PLA in Washington.

7. Policy discussions were initiated with the regional accrediting association regarding acceptance of experiential learning course work.

- a. **Legislative Goal Area:** Increase the number and type of academic credits accepted for prior learning while ensuring that credit is awarded for course level competencies.
- b. **2011 Outcome:** Conversations were initiated. Input was gathered from state stakeholders.

The limitation on acceptance of experiential learning credits (i.e. PLA) by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), the regional accrediting organization for Washington, was a concern raised on several occasions by the work group. In addition, it was mentioned during the Primary Contact Conference and during presentations to numerous groups focused on transfer and articulation across the state.¹⁵

¹³ Further information on Centers of Excellence is located in Appendix C.

¹⁴ Military training and education covered by these two bills is available on the Washington-PLA Wiki at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>

¹⁵ PLA presentations were made to the following groups in 2011: Intercollegiate Relations Commission (ICRC). Joint Transfer Council (previously known as JAOG - Joint Access Oversight Group), Washington Council for High School

NWCCU standard 2. C.7 states:

Credit for prior experiential learning, if granted, is: a) guided by approved policies and procedures; b) awarded only at the undergraduate level to enrolled students; c) limited to a maximum of 25% of the credits needed for a degree; d) awarded only for documented student achievement equivalent to expected learning achievement for courses within the institution's regular curricular offerings; and e) granted only upon the recommendation of appropriately qualified teaching faculty. Credit granted for prior experiential learning is so identified on students' transcripts and may not duplicate other credit awarded to the student in fulfillment of degree requirements. The institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution's review process.

A review of other regional accrediting associations standards related to PLA suggest NWCCU, along with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) appear to be the most restrictive in evaluation and acceptance of credits from experiential learning. Further review is required to determine how PLA-related standards are operationalized by colleges and universities under to purview of other regional accrediting organizations, and what steps are required to review these standards in our region.¹⁶

Work Group Goals for 2012

A strong foundation for expansion of PLA in Washington was set by both SSB 6357 and current ESSHB 1795 work groups. The work group will continue to develop solutions to goals identified in the legislation that ensure more adult learners move through postsecondary education as efficiently as possible, enter the workforce well-prepared, and help the state meet goals for degree and certificate attainment as identified in the Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education. Following are preliminary work group goals for 2012.

1. Develop and implement a tracking system for PLA students and credits

This is the Work Group's number one priority. A process for tracking PLA students and PLA credits does not exist in Washington but needs to be developed quickly. Options recommended by Primary Contacts and discussed by the work group include the following:

- Colleges and universities develop proprietary tracking systems and report information to the HECB for a report to the Legislature
- Implement system-wide best-practice tracking systems that currently exist at selected colleges and universities in Washington. Edmonds Community College has a well-integrated home grown system that has the potential for expansion within the SBCTC system. Other colleges and universities – Highline Community College, Eastern Washington University, and City University of Seattle – also have systems that could be reviewed with an eye towards broader implementation.

College Relations (WCHSCR), Community College Advisors Workshop, Baccalaureate/Community College Transfer Group (BACC/CTC), Workforce Development Council Regional Directors, and SkillUp Washington.

¹⁶ A review completed by the HECB of experiential learning standards at each regional accrediting association is located on the Washington-PLA Wiki at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>.

- The community and technical college system currently has a method for tracking Tech Prep classes and participants. This method of using a course section code to track students, courses, and credits could possibly be used for PLA students and credits within that system. Section codes do not display on transcripts, so another method would be required to meet regional accrediting association requirements.

The community and technical college system is embarking on an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) project known as “ctcLink.”¹⁷ This is the implementation of a new, integrated software infrastructure to support the educational and business processes of the entire community and technical college system. The current 30 year old proprietary system is dated and limits the colleges' collective ability to support the information needs of students, faculty and staff. Conversations could be initiated now for inclusion of PLA tracking in this new system.

The work group reviewed Edmonds and Highline Community College solutions and thought a combination of the two for implementation statewide is something that could be explored further.

The work group will pursue solutions for data collection through continued conversations with the Education Research and Data Center (ERDC), State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), the Council of Presidents (COP), and individual colleges and universities.

2. Increase transparency and consistency of information available to students and stakeholders, faculty and staff

Primary Contacts identified this as the second most important work group recommendation to be implemented on their campuses. Information should be readily available to prospective and current students. A clear description of PLA policies and processes should be published in the college catalogue and on college websites, and students should be informed of the location of PLA information through quarterly schedules and in other marketing materials. The work group will pursue increased visibility and access to PLA on campus and agency websites, catalog and other print material modifications and complete an inventory on improvements for reporting in 2012.

In addition, the work group identified the need for students to clearly understand how PLA credits are accepted at receiving institutions. This information will be published on college, university, and agency websites and on the Washington Prior Learning Assessment Wiki.

Faculty and staff training is a related issue noted separately as the fourth most important implementation item by Primary Contacts. Further development of an online handbook and other training materials for faculty and staff will be completed in 2012.

¹⁷ Information is available on the SBCTC website at <http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/i-ctclink.aspx>.

3. Refine the cost analysis and fee structure for providing PLA at community and technical colleges and baccalaureate institutions

Improving clarity and increasing consistency of fee structures for students was the third most important Primary Contacts recommendation for implementation on their campuses. Costs (financial and time) need to be reasonable for students and for colleges. It makes sense to have each college consider agreed upon guidelines as outlined in this report and then develop their own pricing structure. Fewer restrictions may equate to more agreement across the system. Concrete contract examples will be collected to assist colleges in implementing PLA. Further discussion and continued follow-up with public and private baccalaureate institutions is required.

4. Research and develop recommendations for financial aid payments for PLA options

PLA options are not eligible for student financial assistance. The work group will explore with state and institution financial assistance staff and other providers possible options that might be available for students using PLA.

5. Increase recognition and acceptance of credit towards general education requirements from nationally-recognized standardized examinations

The work group will review policies on acceptance of standardized examinations in other states with the intent of making recommendations to increase credits through this path that apply towards general distribution requirements. Examinations to review include: CLEP (College-Level Examination Program), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, and ACT/PEP (The American College Testing Proficiency Examination Program).

Other states are moving forward with policy revisions in this area that will facilitate movement of more adult learners through postsecondary education more efficiently and to help meet state goals for degree and certificate attainment. For example, in 2010, the Academic Senate of California State University unanimously endorsed a policy providing guidelines for the use of CLEP examinations as the basis for awarding general education credit.¹⁸ The California Community College system developed a general education CLEP exam score equivalency list that is aligned with the CSU score equivalency lists, and the University of California system is also looking at policy changes related to CLEP examination acceptance.¹⁹

6. Continue conversations with the regional accrediting association (NWCCU) regarding experiential learning courses and credit acceptance.

There is interest across the system in Washington to pursue conversations regarding possible changes (based on other regional associations' experiential learning guidelines) in experiential learning policy that might allow for broader acceptance of PLA credits and how these credits are identified on the transcript. More information is needed to determine how other regional accrediting associations' standards are being operationalized by colleges and universities within those regions. The work group will continue conversations with NWCCU and explore practices within institutions located in other regions.

¹⁸ California State University coded Memorandum AA-2009-11 available on the Washington-PLA Wiki at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>.

¹⁹ More information is available on the Washington-PLA Wiki at <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>

Conclusion

A crucial component of increasing educational attainment is decreasing the number of students who get lost in transitions such as those between work force education and certificate and degree completion at a community and technical college or baccalaureate institution. The work group found that improving transitions for students is necessary to reach the overall goal of increasing all levels of educational attainment in Washington in support of the *Master Plan for Higher Education*.

Outcome measures are becoming more important across all levels of education. Faculties have identified measurable learning outcomes and assessments to measure achievement of the outcomes for their courses. In most cases, the assessment method (though perhaps not exactly the same assessment tool) might be the same for students who complete the course in class and for students who are assessed for outcomes achieved through prior learning. It may be necessary to create new assessments for some courses. It should be clear that students may opt to take an assessment and request credit for prior learning, whenever feasible.

Appendix A**Text of Section 28, Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1795
Effective August 24, 2011**

A new section is added to chapter 28B.76 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The board, the state board for community and technical colleges, the council of presidents, the four-year institutions of higher education, the private independent higher education institutions, and the private career schools shall collaborate to carry out the following goals:

(a) Increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning and the number of students who receive credit for prior learning that counts towards their major or towards earning their degree, certificate, or credential, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies;

(b) Increase the number and type of academic credits accepted for prior learning in institutions of higher education, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies;

(c) Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning;

(d) Improve prior learning assessment practices across the institutions of higher education;

(e) Create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding credit for prior learning and to share exemplary policies and practices among institutions of higher education;

(f) Develop articulation agreements when patterns of credit for prior learning are identified for particular programs and pathways; and

(g) Develop outcome measures to track progress on the goals outlined in this section.

(2) The board shall convene the academic credit for prior learning work group.

(a) The work group must include the following members:

(i) One representative from the higher education coordinating board;

(ii) One representative from the state board for community and technical colleges;

(iii) One representative from the council of presidents;

(iv) Two representatives each from faculty from two and four-year institutions of higher education;

(v) Two representatives from private career schools;

(vi) Two representatives from business; and

(vii) Two representatives from labor.

(b) The purpose of the work group is to coordinate and implement the goals in subsection (1) of this section.

(3) The board shall report progress on the goals and outcome measures annually by December 31st.

(4) For the purposes of this section, "prior learning" means the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.

Appendix B

Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Experiential Learning (Commonly referred to as Prior Learning Assessment or PLA)

What is Prior Learning?

From ESSHB 1795, Section 28, passed by the 2011 Washington State Legislature:

Prior Learning is the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions.

What is Prior Learning Assessment?

Prior Learning Assessment is a means of determining whether or not the knowledge, skills, and abilities a student has gained through prior learning match the knowledge, skills, and abilities a student would gain by completing a specific course.

Prior Learning Assessment is accomplished through standardized tests (i.e. CLEP and DANTES), Course Challenge Examinations, Portfolio Assessment, or Crosswalks.

When Does Prior Learning Equate to Course Credit?

If Outcomes of prior learning = outcomes of a specific course

Then Credit may be awarded for prior learning

PLA: A 3-Step Process

1. A student applies for prior learning credit for a course offered at a college or university.
2. An assessment as defined above is administered to determine whether or not the student has achieved the course **outcomes**.
3. If the student has achieved the outcomes for the course through prior learning, the student may be awarded credit for the course.

Credit for Prior Learning Does...

- Shorten the student's time to degree or completion of certificates.
- Improve student retention and completion rates.
- Acknowledge the diversity of methods of learning which result in achievement of learning outcomes.

Credit for Prior Learning Does Not...

- Include awarding credit without assessment of the student's prior learning.
- Apply if prohibited by specific industry licensure or certification.

For further information, contact Jim West, JimW@HECB.WA.GOV or Noreen Light, nlight@sbctc.edu

Appendix C

Centers of Excellence

Centers are flagship institutions that build and sustain Washington's competitive advantage through statewide leadership. Each Center focuses on a targeted industry that drives the state's economy and is built upon a reputation for fast, flexible, quality education and training programs. A targeted industry is identified as one that is strategic to the economic growth of a region or state.

Centers are guided by industry representatives to lead collaborative and coordinated statewide education and training efforts to build a competitive workforce in a global economy. Centers perform as an information resource and solution-provider for model information technology education programs, best practices, up-to-date research, information dissemination, and instructor professional development in new and emerging technologies.

Centers of Excellence Website Links

Center of Excellence for Information and Computing Technology ([CoE for ICT](#)) - Bellevue College

[Pacific Northwest Center of Excellence for Clean Energy](#) - Centralia College.

[Center of Excellence for Aerospace and Advanced Materials Manufacturing](#). Co-hosted by Edmonds and Everett Community Colleges

The [Washington State Center of Excellence for Careers in Education](#) - Green River Community College

[Center of Excellence for International Trade, Transportation and Logistics](#) - Highline Community College

[Center for Excellence in Homeland Security](#) – Pierce College

[Construction Center of Excellence](#) – Renton Technical College

The [Northwest Center of Excellence for Marine Manufacturing and Technology](#) – Skagit Valley College

[Agricultural Center of Excellence](#) – Walla Walla Community College

[Allied Health Center of Excellence](#) - Yakima Valley College