In July 2011, the Office of Academic Affairs disseminated the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Academic Planning and Policy Task Force Findings to UW Provosts and Vice Chancellors for Academic Affairs and UW System Faculty Representatives. Provosts were asked to broadly share the PLA Task Force report with constituency groups within their institutions. Provosts were invited to collect and share comments with the Office of Academic Affairs and were informed that comments will be compiled for consideration by both the Office of Academic Affairs and the PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee as they consider the implications and potential implementation Task Force recommendations. A copy of the report is available through the Office of Academic Affairs. Please email your request to Diane Treis Rusk at dtreisrsk@uwsa.edu.

As of November 1, 2011, several institutions provided written comments through their Provost’s Office or their PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee representatives. UW Colleges, UW-Milwaukee, UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh, UW-Stevens Point, and UW-Superior offered written comments. UW-Green Bay, UW-Stout, and UW-Whitewater, offered verbal input. This document serves as a summary of the comments provided by institutions. The comments are organized into three sections to align with those presented in the PLA Task Force Report, Principles and Guidelines, Policy Observations and Recommendations and Additional Recommendations. The names of specific institutions are removed from the summary comments.

**Principles and Guidelines for Credit for Prior Learning**

The PLA Task Force Report contained a set of guidelines intended to support UW System institutions in developing PLA programs and opportunities at their institutions that are based on a commons set of principles. The Task Force’s development and adoption of recommended academic principles and guidelines was informed and guided by PLA principles and procedures in place at UW System institutions, peer systems and institutions, and, in part, on standards established and disseminated by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). A full outline of recommended principles and guidelines may be found on pages 10 through 13 of the PLA Task Force Report.

Based on these principles, the Task Force developed academic guidelines for each of the three PLA categories: nationally recognized examinations; course-specific examinations designed by college or university faculty; and portfolio review. The guidelines vary by category, but for all three of these categories, the Task Force recommends that institutions develop policies and procedures that address the type of credit that can be earned, indicate how the evaluation will be carried out and by whom, and specify how this credit will be applied to a student’s academic program. The need for providing information that is easily accessible by students is also addressed. Additional guidelines related to credit by portfolio review include the recommendation that institutions offer a course or other form of instruction designed to teach a student how to prepare an effective portfolio.
Institutions supported the broad and general principles outlined in the report and concurred that PLA plays an important role to assess college level learning and award credit when students are able to demonstrate mastery of content. All institutions emphasized the role of governance at the institution level. Institutions often remarked that the report may be better used by an institution as a tool to facilitate development of PLA processes and practices, rather than to prescribe how an institution must design their PLA program.

“Guidelines and recommendations are appropriate to use at the institution level.”

“There is a need to “work closely with governance and individual departments and programs.”

“We at [institution] fully support the broad principles documented in the report: that we should transfer as much prior academic work as possible, that we shouldn't make students repeat courses when they have already mastered the content, and that we are making efforts to reduce time to degree and increase students' understanding of the requirements to complete their degrees. That said, the report is highly prescriptive and would be of more value to [institution] as an enabling document that recognized the important role of faculty in curricular decisions…

The recommendations of the report should favor institutional and faculty autonomy and honor the role of institutional academic governance bodies and program faculty for academic oversight in order to ‘best serve their unique student, academic and business needs’ (to borrow from the language of the report.)”

Two institutions articulated that they felt the guidelines did not comprehensively consider all formats of PLA that may apply to non-traditional adult learners and/or indicated concern that that the PLA needs of traditional students may have been excluded from PLA Task Force consideration.

“We recommend military veterans be included in these guidelines. It is our understanding military veterans can bring in courses directly (transfer credit) and through PLA with SMART transcripts, etc. It is noteworthy for this population to have recognition in this policy.”

“Some of the conclusions are confusing. The [UW System Credit for Prior Learning Program Review] audit collected information about specific a priori determined PLA methods. The audit report did not include information provided to the evaluators about the most common PLA methods at our university, despite the assertion that "the review focused on PLA formats utilized most commonly by returning adult learners". Would the task force members have drawn different conclusions if they had all the data that showed most common PLA methods?”

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1 The UW System Credit for Prior Learning Program Review was conducted by the UW System Office of Operations Review and Audit. The review was conducted at the recommendation of a cross-institution team known as the UW System Growth Agenda Advantage Wisconsin “Think Tank #2”, which focused on non-traditional students. The review focused on PLA formats thought to be most commonly utilized by non-traditional students, and thereby excluded a review of Advance Placement and International Baccalaureate formats of PLA.
The majority of institutions who provided comments emphasized, that while practices and policies relating to PLA must be developed at the institution level, coordinating practices in ways to facilitate transfer will be essential if we expect students to take advantage of PLA opportunities. For example,

“We found the Task Force’s Findings and Report document to be comprehensive, addressing many of the barriers that students and institutions face. It is our hope that in promoting PLA, Students will be confident that credit they earn is recognized throughout their academic career, no matter the UW institution they choose to attend.”

Institutions strongly indicated that more systemwide discussion and work is needed prior to the development of any coordinated systemwide policy. Comments linked to specific policy recommendations may be found in subsequent sections. General comments included.

“The general concept of implementing PLA as a critical strategy to increase the number of citizens who hold a college degree and as a strategy for non-traditional students that may reduce the amount of time to degree completion has merit. Creating policies and guidelines for implementation will take further discussion with the participation of all UW System institutions. We look forward to participating in this process to achieve this common goal.”

“There is general agreement at [institution] on the recommended academic principles and guidelines. A system-wide model should embrace common principles….Policy observations and commendations may be problematic and require further discussion and consultation.”

PLA Task Force Policy Observations and Recommendations

Current UW System Policy may impact prior learning assessment and the award of credit for prior learning in a number of ways, especially in terms of transfer and recognition of prior learning across UW System institutions. PLA Task Force policy observations and recommendations may be found on pages 13 through 15 of the PLA Task Force Report. The PLA Task Force examined UW System policies relevant to PLA, including those relating to transcription, transfer, and acceptance of standardized test scores. This section will summarize primary recommendations and respective UW institution comments.

Responding institutions articulated the importance to developing methods to facilitate transfer of PLA credit, including transcription. Comments regarding transcription and transfer indicate that the two issues are tightly coupled.

“Most importantly, we believe that any agreement that PLA course equivalencies will be accepted between campuses is needed at the Provost level, rather than between Registrars. Moreover, we understand the importance to students of accepting PLA credit across the UW System, while recognizing that the application of such credits to specific majors or degree programs would be the individual institution’s decision. We encourage each campus to support widespread faculty involvement when making these decisions.”
Institutional perceptions differed when considering how credit awarded for PLA should transfer, and thereby be transcripted. Some institutions’ comments support a perception that credit for prior learning should be recorded as an course equivalent. One institution indicated a long standing practice to accept credit for prior learning that was assessed and awarded at another UW institution, just as they would accept the assessment and award of classroom learning by that institution. Another institution presented a similar observation, as well as a concern, should credit awarded for prior learning assessed at their institution not be accepted at the receiving institution.

“Of most concern [to us] is that once a student has received course credit via PLA at one UW institution, [another institution] will not ask him/her to challenge the course again if they transfer within the UW System. We accept each other’s face to face courses in transfer according to a well-established process, and, likewise, course credits granted by one [institution] should be accepted by all of us.”

Another institution, in supporting the idea of transfer, emphasized the role and authority of the receiving institution to determine how that credit should apply toward the degree.

“We agree with this statement [Credit for prior learning granted by one UW System institution should be accepted and transferred by all UW System institutions] and recognize each institution’s determination of how the prior learning credit would apply to a specific major. We suggest that policy should emphasize the acceptance of PLA credit across institutions, minimally as credit contributing toward total graduation credits, regardless of major being sought by the student.

Some institution comments reflected less confidence in accepting credits awarded through assessment of prior learning by other UW institutions. In some cases, these comments suggested a need to differentiate between learning outcomes that reflect comprehensive mastery of specific course content and learning outcomes that reflect mastery of just some elements within a course.

“Recording credit awarded by PLA as a course equivalent may not be possible in all cases. PLA may not be inclusive or capture all elements of a course to suggest competency in the topic or area.”

In other cases, the comments suggested that institutions must be sure that course content and learning outcomes are equivalent prior to accepting transfer of a course toward a degree requirement, and that the transcript must be clear regarding the learning assessed and how it was assessed.

“Courses are not always of comparable content or credit at the different UW campuses. Giving CPL [credit for prior learning] for courses that meet specific degree or general education requirements for another campus than the one where the credits are granted may compound the transferability problem.”

“It will be necessary to have a mechanism whereby PLA credit is identified as such on transcripts in order for institutions to determine how the credit will apply to the major and/or degree.”

Another institution noted that transferability of PLA may be impeded given standards of some accrediting bodies.
“Some professional programs and their accrediting bodies may not accept CPL [credit for prior learning] credits toward the requirement for their majors and minors or toward student certification for work in the field.”

Some comments suggested that the assessment of learning conducted at one institution cannot always be deemed equivalent at another UW institution. Therefore, credit for prior learning granted by one UW System institution must be reassessed and accepted at the second institution, subject to their own institutional policies and practices and the degree requirements. One institution articulated the following concern,

“All courses and learning experiences within the System institutions are not created equal. The policy proposal that credit for prior learning granted by one UW System institution should be accepted and transferred by all UW System institutions does not take into consideration the variance in curricula, degree criteria and accreditation standards applied to a variety of professional programs. It will be necessary to establish a system for judicious review. For example, [our institution] has traditionally not accepted AP or IB or CLEP credit in the same way another UW System institution might, nor does [our institution] always accept language retroactive credits from another UW institution unless they were awarded using the same criteria we use.”

Another institution emphasized there longstanding policy to accept credit as documented by the original source of the credit, and that modifying current policy would be time consuming.

“A principle of awarding transfer credit (whether it be from courses taken at another college or PLA as defined above) is to rely on documentation from the original "source" of the credit: transcripts from the college at which the student took the course, AP score reports from College Board, and so on. A practice of accepting equivalency awarded by a third institution would be inconsistent with current standard practice. Requiring that credit evaluations depend on the sending institution (UW or not) or age of student (traditional or non-traditional age) would add huge complexity to the evaluation of prior work at time when we are attempting to streamline and automate processes and communicate clearly to students.

**Systemwide Acceptance of Standardized Tests**

Credit for prior learning based on student achievement on national standardized tests is awarded in several formats at UW System institutions. UW System Board of Regent Policy addresses the acceptance and award of credit for student achievement on some prior learning assessment programs, such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Project Lead the Way (PLTW). UW System policy does not address standardized prior learning exam formats such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DSST, and Excelsior.

Approximately, one-half of institutions responding indicated willingness to consider systemwide policy relating to acceptance of CLEP. One institution stated in their remarks,
“A systemwide policy guiding the award of credit for standardized national exams, especially CLEP, would eliminate the variation in accepted scores that are current practice and give the students clear expectations for credits awarded.”

Other institutional responses indicated concern regarding modifying long standing institutional policies regarding standardized exams. As one institution put it,

“CLEP exams have been around for a long time and departments have already made credit/course equivalency determinations when appropriate. The report seems to recommend over-riding those long standing faculty standards.”

Another institution perceived that for systemwide policy regarding standardized exams to be enacted,

“…all University of Wisconsin campuses will need to approve each of the national standardized tests considered for CPL [credit for prior learning].”

**PLA Task Force Additional Recommendations**

The UW System Prior Learning Assessment Task Force considered eight additional factors that may significantly impact the operation of a PLA program. Issues identified related to academic planning; institutional assessment; test and portfolio banks; student and institutional records; fees policies; academic advising; marketing; and financial aid planning. A full discussion of the issues may be found in pages 16 through 19 of the PLA Task Force report. Institutional comments consistently addressed four of the eight factors identified by the task force.

**Student and Institutional Records**

The PLA Task Force recommended establishing coordinated methods to identify credit earned through PLA within student and/or institution records. Such methods may facilitate evaluation of PLA and the extent to which PLA may play to increase completion or reduce time to degree.

“Data should allow us to follow PLA awardees through graduation, degree completion, GPA, and time to degree; tie data collection about PLA awardees to existing university data collection such as retention, job placement, participation in High Impact Practices, number of credits they bring in, student academic issues, etc.”

The majority of institutions reflected interest and a need to identify ways to most efficiently collect comparable data across institutions.

**Fees**

The PLA Task Force report stated UW System institutions should be provided autonomy to establish PLA fee structures so as to improve an institution’s ability to control sustainability of the program. The Task Force noted; however, the development of systemwide fee guidelines may support consistent and equitable fee policy across institutions. In general, institutions supported the PLA Task Force findings.
“We would recommend development of various models for fee policies and structures developed for consideration. We would also encourage UW System to identify a support person to assist each UW institution with developing a fee structure.”

**Advising and Student Support Services**

The PLA Task Force recommended that advising regarding the process and award of PLA should be as transparent and comprehensive as possible and ensure equity of access to PLA opportunities. As illustrated in previous remarks, institutions recognized the need to collect and analyze data to best understand how prior learning assessment opportunities and award will impact completion of the degree. Such data may be utilized to inform advising practices.

Institutions articulated the need to include PLA advising within standard advising practices. Several institutions indicated that they intend to include information regarding PLA opportunities, in all formats, into their discussion with students and applicants. Comments emphasized a need to provide consistent regarding PLA, while recognizing that PLA is used differently across degree programs.

“There is a need to provide consistent messaging about PLA.”

“We encourage the development of comprehensive training models that acknowledge the variation among different advising models found on each campus.”

One institution suggested a need to be sure that PLA moves students, more efficiently toward degree, rather than simply providing more credits to students. That institution wondered,

“Will students get fixated on getting PLA credits rather than making progress to degree? Students seem to have lots of credits at graduation – on average many more than they need to graduate at most UW institutions. The challenge seems to be putting the curriculum together to fulfill a set of requirements for college-level learning and degree progression.”

**Marketing and Market Demand**

The PLA Task Force recommended that, when developing a PLA program or processes, UW System institutions and/or academic departments should collect and assess market data to estimate both need for new PLA opportunities, gauge business and public awareness, and identify institution/business partnerships.

Institutions presently engaged in PLA program expansion initiatives indicate the are focusing strategies within academic program areas where they believe there is greatest interest and potential for PLA growth. In some cases PLA expansion strategies are oriented toward specific majors or academic programs. In other cases, strategies are focused within a college at the institution. Some institutions would like additional data and analyses to better understand why their adult student populations may or may not pursue PLA opportunities if offered to them. These institutions indicated a desire to evaluate both market demand and non-traditional adult student perceptions and awareness of PLA as part of the Lumina Foundation PLA initiative. One institution cautioned the building of system of PLA if the demand for PLA is not clearly understood.
“It seems appropriate to avoid "overbuilding" a complicated, cumbersome, and expensive system. Recommendations and next steps should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and should support institutional differences, including mission distinctiveness and student and regional differences in demand for PLA.”

The majority of responding institutions concluded that institutions who expand PLA opportunities for students should do so in ways that meet market and business demands within their local context and within the parameters of their institution’s mission.

Next Steps

Comments provided by institutions will be provided to the UW System Office of Academic Affairs, as well as to the UW System PLA Advisory and Implementation Committee. The work of this committee will advise how, in practice, the recommendations of the PLA Task Force should be implemented. The group will consider impact and implications of the Task Force findings on UW System institutions and students. The committee will recommend establishment of specific systemwide policies or processes to coordinate PLA practices that are best implemented collaborative.

The charge of the committee is to:

- Conduct an in-depth examination of the academic and non-academic issues identified by the PLA Academic Planning and Policy Task Force, with a particular focus on:
  - the application of these findings;
  - recommendations that have system-wide policy implications or shared system-wide priorities that are best implemented collaboratively.
- Consider input provided by institutions in their responses to the PLA Task Force findings.
- Engage expertise from applicable functional units at the institutions.
- Incorporate learning and findings of the PLA Institutional Pilot Program.
- Recommend specific practices, or policies for the transcription and transfer of credit for prior learning.