

Using Prior Learning Assessment in Adult Baccalaureate Degrees in Texas

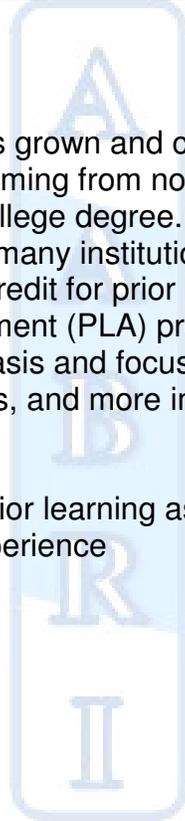
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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate enrollment has grown and changed drastically over the past two decades, with a significant portion coming from nontraditional students who have returned to campuses to pursue a college degree. To better meet the needs and demands of nontraditional students, many institutions have implemented programs that allow for the awarding of academic credit for prior learning. For those institutions involved in the prior learning assessment (PLA) process and interested in providing a quality program, an increased emphasis and focus should be on the importance of determining what a learning activity is, and more importantly, what constitutes college-level learning.

Keywords: nontraditional degrees, prior learning assessment, experiential learning, adult degree programs, credit for experience



INTRODUCTION

Student participation in higher education continues to grow rapidly. According to the American Council on Education (n.d.), "There are more than 16 million individuals seeking degrees in U.S. postsecondary institutions" (p. 7). In the state of Texas alone, participation rates are expected to reach over 1.17 million students in 2005 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2005b).

Nationwide, the undergraduate student population, which makes up a large portion of the enrollment figures, looks much different than it did a generation ago. Nationally, there are proportionately more adult nontraditional students on college campuses today than there were 30 years ago. Approximately 40% of students meet this definition (American Council on Education, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2000), based on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) characteristics for nontraditional students, it is estimated that 60% of students are nontraditional (p. 3).

Varied factors play a role in the increasing numbers of nontraditional students returning to college campuses to complete their baccalaureate degrees. One issue that appears to be paramount is the fact that the U. S. economy has changed drastically over the last 30 or more years. Historically, the United States was heavily dominated by the manufacturing industry; thus, a large majority of Americans were employed in the industrial/manufacturing sector (Decenzo & Robbins, 2002; Raschal, 1989). Since the early 1970s, modern movements have transpired which have caused the economy and work environment to be much more service and knowledge-based (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2004; Schermerhorn, 2005), and it is much more information driven (CAEL, 2000). Because of this, business and industry have begun to place more emphasis on the importance of prospective employees having college degrees in order to be considered for initial employment and for existing employees who wish to pursue growth opportunities. A college degree has become an essential credential in today's competitive marketplace (Noe et al., 2004).

Adult students have often had vast outside-the-college classroom experiences that could equate to college-level learning. Such experiences could be the result of continued employment, work and non-work-sponsored training, military experience, continuing education activities, and self-directed learning activities, among others. The ability and willingness of institutions of higher education to utilize prior learning assessment processes to evaluate, recognize, and award a students' credit for work, life, or prior learning experiences are important aspects for many nontraditional students. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is commonly defined as the evaluation of learning acquired outside the formal educational setting for college credit. For those institutions involved in this activity, the importance is placed on whether college-level learning has occurred as a result of the prior learning activities.

Urban Whitaker, an expert in the field of PLA, wrote *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures for Good Practice* (Whitaker, 1989). This publication identified 10 quality standards that dealt with academic assessment policies and administrative procedures for institutions involved in prior learning assessment activities. Whitaker divided the 10 standards for quality for PLA into 5 academic standards: (I) Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience; (II)

College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning; (III) Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application; (IV) The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts; (V) Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted. The other category has five standards that address administrative practices that ensure quality in granting credit for PLA: (VI) Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning; (VII) Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal should be fully disclosed and prominently available; (VIII) Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded; (IX) All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development; and (X) Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served in the state of the assessment art.

Whitaker's (1989) work and model are well respected and utilized by institutions of higher education involved in PLA activities. Over 10 years ago, a survey instrument was developed, validated, and utilized based on Whitaker's 10 standards to study the quality of PLA processes of a particular population. The survey instrument covered questions dealing with the types of credit awarded for prior learning, how the PLA information was documented, how college-level learning was determined, and other questions related to each of the standards. The outcome of the study provided rich information regarding the quality of PLA processes for the population being studied.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this study were to identify and profile the existing PLA processes associated with nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs in institutions of higher education in Texas and to identify whether quality standards are being met for each PLA process based upon the frequency of application of Urban Whitaker's (1989) 10 Standards for Quality Assurance in Assessing Learning for Credit.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were examined in order to carry out the purpose of the study:

1. What prior learning assessment (PLA) processes presently exist for the awarding of academic credit in those institutions of higher education in Texas offering nontraditional baccalaureate degrees?
2. What commonalities are present among the existing institutions in Texas offering PLA as a means of awarding academic credit?
3. Do the PLA processes utilized for the awarding of academic credit in the nontraditional baccalaureate degree-offering institutions in Texas provide quality according to established standards?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a within-stage mixed-model design. The instrument utilized in this study was designed based on the 10 Standards of Good Practice as outlined by Whitaker (1989). Participants responded to a mailed survey instrument that utilized closed- and open-ended questions designed to provide descriptive information regarding the methods of PLA utilized at each institution, as well as the quality of their PLA processes. The population consisted of those public institutions of higher education in Texas that offer the Texas Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code 30.9999.40 - Applied Arts and Sciences - baccalaureate degree. This particular CIP code has been defined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) as “the study of subject matter that enhances the general education and the professional competence, in an area such as education or management, of individuals with technical or vocational skills” (THECB, 2005c, p. 3).

Data were analyzed from the quantitative portion of the survey through use of descriptive statistics. The responses to the open-ended questions have been utilized to strengthen the data obtained from the quantitative portion of the study. Information obtained from this study was used to determine whether there is quality in the population’s programs based on identified standards and to make recommendations and suggestions for existing program and new programs in the future.

FINDINGS

Demographic information revealed that 24 years was the mean age of the prior learning assessment services, with one indicating an age of 0 years and two institutions showing an age of 31 years. With regards to whether prior learning assessment credit can be awarded solely through work experience, 59% of the respondents indicated a negative response, while 29% responded affirmatively, whereas 12% providing no response to the question. For those institutions that responded that credit was awarded solely through experience, the mean number of credit hours awarded through work experience was 14.4, with 6 credit hours being the least number of hours and 30 credit hours being the highest number reported.

Question 15 in the survey dealt with the total number of faculty members involved in the prior learning assessment process annually. Of the responses to this question, a total of 66 individuals were identified as being involved, with 3.9 being the mean. The data showed a low of 0 faculty members involved to a high of 10 faculty members taking part annually in the assessment process.

Research Question 1: What prior learning assessment (PLA) processes presently exist for the awarding of credit in those institutions of higher education in Texas offering nontraditional baccalaureate degree?

Survey questions 1 and 6 addressed this research question. The responses from survey question 1 are shown in Table 1. The predominant means utilized by the institutions was standardized exams with 88% of institutions responding either somewhat, usually, often, or always. The American Council on Education (ACE) recommendations on military education and training followed closely, with 82% of respondents. Interestingly, a resounding 71% of the respondents indicated a negative

response to the utilization of individualized prior learning assessment programs, such as portfolio-assisted, oral interviews, and competence demonstrations.

Table 1

Extent to Which Credit Is Awarded by Various Means

	Never		Somewhat		Usual		Often		Always	
	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%	n	%
Standard exams	2	11.8	5	29.4	3	17.6	2	11.8	5	29.4
Course challenge	10	58.8	4	23.5	1	5.9	1	5.9	1	5.9
ACE recommendations on military education	3	17.6	6	35.3	1	5.9	4	23.5	3	17.6
ACE/PONSI recommendations	7	41.2	6	35.3	1	5.9	1	5.9	2	11.8
Individualized PLA programs	12	70.6	2	11.8	-	-	1	5.9	2	11.8

Question 6 was concerned with the extent to which years of experience were utilized in the granting of credit. This question addressed Whitaker’s (1989) standard II, which indicates that college credit should be awarded only for college-level learning. Whitaker (1989) indicated that adherence to this standard is imperative and that two questions should be addressed prior to awarding credit: Is the subject matter appropriate for credit at the college level and Is the learner’s competence in the subject sufficient for college level credit? (p. 12). According to the results of this survey, only 6 out of 17 respondents (35%) awarded credit based on experience

Research Question 2: What commonalities are present among the existing institutions in Texas offering PLA as a means of awarding academic credit?

Survey question 2 asked respondents to identify the area(s) in which credit is typically awarded for students requesting PLA consideration. This relates to Whitaker’s (1989) standard V, which indicates that credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted. Related to this standard, Whitaker discussed the fact that “college-credible experiential learning occurs in the major, in general education, and in electives” (p. 16). A large percentage of respondents indicated that credit is awarded either in a block of credit without specification of subject (76%) or in the general education area (71%), whereas slightly over one half of the respondents

indicated that credit is awarded in the electives area or in the major (59% and 53%, respectively). Only 41% of the respondents indicated that credit was awarded for learning equivalent to that taught in existing courses. It is interesting to note that of those respondents who indicated that block credit is awarded, over one third chose to always award credit in this manner and less than one quarter responded somewhat. Of those indicating that credit is awarded in the general education area, the figures were just opposite, with just over one third indicating a somewhat response and less than one quarter who indicated always.

Survey question 3 asked respondents to identify the assessment method or methods utilized to award credit. Approximately two thirds of the respondents indicated that standardized exams were the dominant method used. This corresponds with the findings in question 1 whereby standardized examinations were identified as the predominant means of awarding credit. Almost half of the respondents indicated that their institutions utilized a combination of procedures as in portfolio-assisted assessment (47%). This figure is in line with the data obtained in question 4 related to how assessment was administered. Forty-seven percent of the population responded that an individualized format was the method utilized most often to assess prior learning, which would include the use of a portfolio.

Research question 3: Do the PLA processes utilized for the awarding of academic credit in the nontraditional baccalaureate degree-offering institutions in Texas provide quality according to established standards?

To respond to this research question, a determination of what constituted an acceptable level of quality had to be identified. Walker (1995) defined the acceptable levels based on the descriptions and limitations assigned by Whitaker (1989) to the 10 academic and administrative standards.

Standard I indicates that credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience. Survey question 5 addressed this standard and asked respondents to identify the extent to which credit is awarded for prior experience as it is distinguished from the learning derived from it. According to Whitaker (1989), this is “the most important and most frequently violated quality assurance rule in the assessment field” (p. 10). Walker (1995) indicated that “the inverted nature of this questions means that those respondents replying ‘never’ were in adherence with the standard and all other responses indicated non-compliance” (p. 56). Approximately 60% of the respondents indicated that credit is never awarded based solely on experience. Fewer than 20% of the respondents indicated an always or often response.

Whitaker’s standard II deals with the extent to which credit is granted utilizing years of experience. This standard was discussed in Research Question 1. The data indicated that approximately 65% of respondents did not award credit based on years of experience. A large number of the respondents felt that the use of a portfolio was an important piece of the formal assessment process, whereas the comments concerning the awarding of credit for life experiences were almost evenly split.

The open-ended question designed to expand the discussion of Whitaker’s (1989) standards I and II asked respondents, “How important is the use of a portfolio assessment process in determining if a student should be awarded credit for learning based on experience? Should college credit ever be awarded for life experience?” A large number of the respondents felt that the use of a portfolio was an important piece

of the formal assessment process, whereas the comments concerning the awarding of credit for life experiences were almost evenly split. Formal portfolio assessment was said to be “absolutely critical. It is the learning process that validates the credit that students receive” by one respondent. Another comment paralleled that statement by indicating that the “portfolio process is a key process that requires extensive documentation and reflection on the part of the adult learner” and that the credit awarded should be based on competencies, not the duration of the work. One institution observed that the use of a portfolio “should be very important in awarding credit for learning based on experience,” but also indicated that the formality of the process was immaterial when evaluating the learning based on experience.

The question of whether credit should be awarded for life experiences provided a variety of respondent comments, both for and against the practice. One respondent made the astute comment that “whether or not life experience should be used to award college credit is an interesting philosophical question,” which is embedded with much truth. Proponents of awarding credit for experience justified the practice by indicating that the awarding of such credit should follow “guidelines established by the university,” or require some type of written and/or performance testing. One institution had a strong opinion regarding the need to award credit based on experience: “1. It seems right for us to reward students for life experience; 2. It is a recruiting tool.” The comments made by those institutions against the practice of awarding credit for experience ranged from relatively sedate to very passionate about the subject. Several institutions simply indicated that no credit was given or that they do not believe in awarding credit for life experience. One institution indicated that “credit should NEVER be awarded for life experience,” while another discussed the fact that “college credit should not be awarded just for life experience. It is hard enough to defend experiential learning without “giving it away” simply for life experience.” The qualitative discussion supported the quantitative data obtained from survey questions 5 and 6, thus showing compliance with Whitaker’s (1989) standards I and II.

Standard III suggests that credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance between theory and practical application. Over 70% of respondents indicated that they never identify a balance between theory and practice when determining college-level learning, and 52.9% do not utilize criteria established by faculty in relevant areas. Based on the criteria established by Whitaker, these responses indicated an overall lack of compliance with this standard. On a positive note, over one third of respondents indicated that course descriptions were utilized as a means of determining credit.

Standard IV states that appropriate subject matter and academic experts must be involved when attempting to determine the competency levels and credit awards when utilizing prior learning assessment. Based on the responses to survey question 7, which addressed the extent to which outside experts, in-house subject experts, and trained faculty in prior learning were used, there was a lack of compliance with Whitaker’s (1989) established standard among the identified population. Subject matter experts and trained faculty were utilized less than one third and one quarter of the time, respectively. Approximately 90% of the respondents indicated a never or somewhat response to the use of outside experts when determining the competency levels and credit awards. Whitaker indicated that a shared decision of outside content experts for

the levels of learning and internal academic experts to determine the amount of credit awarded is the ideal scenario when attempting to preserve quality.

Standard V, which indicates that credit should be appropriate to the context in which it is accepted, was discussed in Research Question 2. Based on the criteria identified for compliance to quality for this standard, the issuance of block credit was the only area that ranked higher than 50%. Thus, there appeared to be a lack of adherence to quality for this standard.

Survey question 13 was designed to identify whether administrative procedures were in place to monitor the awarding of academic credit to ensure that duplication does not occur. This corresponds to Whitaker's (1989) standard VI, which indicates that "credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning" (p. 16). Data showed that 76.5% indicated that safeguards were in place to detect duplication of credit, thus indicating adherence to this standard. Those respondents who indicated that monitoring did occur were asked to identify when the procedures were evaluated. Responses ranged from over one third indicating that evaluation occurred each semester to approximately one fourth of respondents indicating either annually or that no review was completed.

Whitaker's (1989) standard VII indicates that "policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available" (p. 17). Survey questions 10 and 14 were designed to address this standard. Question 10 encouraged respondents to identify all individuals and/or groups involved in the development of written policy and procedures as related to the use of prior learning assessment. Administrators and faculty members were well represented at over 50% each, with committee reviews represented at over 35%. Question 14 asked whether a written appeal policy existed. Data showed that only approximately 40% of respondents indicated that a written policy was in place to handle appeals, with 30% indicating that policy reviews were periodically completed. According to Whitaker's criteria for quality, this standard lacked compliance.

How the fee structure for prior learning assessment is arranged in institutions of higher education is the subject of standard VIII. The data obtained from survey question 9 indicated that well over three quarters of respondents indicated that they never base fees or tuition decisions on credits attempted, fees for administrative services, or a flat fee structure, which does not correlate with the basis of this standard. On a positive note, close to 90% of the respondents did adhere to the quality standard of not charging fees based on number of credits awarded, a criterion that Whitaker indicated as being extremely important.

Standard IX, as identified by Whitaker (1989), indicates that "all personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provisions for their continued professional development" (p. 17). To be in compliance with this standard, it was assumed that training should have occurred more than one time. Responses from survey question 16 indicated that approximately 45% of the faculty involved in the assessment of prior learning had received prior training (with the percentage being based on the responses from survey question 15, addressed earlier in this chapter). Data obtained from survey question 17 indicated that 41% of faculties received training continuously, annually, or

biannually. Therefore, based on the identified criteria for quality, the majority of the respondents did not adhere to this standard, based on the quantitative data provided.

To seek elaboration on standard IX, the second open-ended question in the study encouraged respondents to identify the amount of emphasis their respective organizations placed on the training of new faculty or assessors involved in prior learning assessment activities and the importance of the continual updating of knowledge and skills in this area. The responses were surprising in that very few indicated that there was a major emphasis on training in either area. Many stated that either there was no emphasis, very little, or not much emphasis placed on the training of new faculty or other assessors. One respondent indicated that their institution “relies on OJT for training the process or PLA” while another commented that their “departments have the responsibility to train new faculty initially.” Another comment indicated that the selection process of evaluators for portfolio assessment was completed very carefully at their institution and that one-on-one training occurred in conjunction with a full-time professor in the program. Staff development activities were also undertaken in an attempt to acquaint new faculty members with the process of prior learning assessment and to provide an understanding and obtain buy-in of their experiential learning activities.

Regarding continuing education activities related to assessors and the prior learning assessment process, again many respondents indicated that little to no importance was placed on these activities within their organizations. One respondent indicated that the “individual assessor is responsible for the updating of their knowledge” as it relates to PLA, while another institution identified that procedural changes to the process were addressed in staff meetings. One comment indicated that “there is a great emphasis placed on faculty development in assessment, but not a specific focus on PLA.” As was found in the quantitative data analysis related to this standard, the narrative responses did not support an adherence to quality.

Whitaker’s (1989) standard X discusses the importance of assessment programs being monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised on an as-needed basis to reflect both changes in the needs being served and the state of the assessment art. Whitaker indicated that “local review and evaluation can take various forms, including academic and outside advisory panels” (p. 18). Survey questions 11, 12, and 14 address the issues identified in this standard. Question 11 asked respondents to indicate how often written policy and procedures are reviewed. A large percentage of respondents (41.2%) indicated that a review occurred annually, with the remaining 35.3 percent of the respondents that adhere to this standard indicating that a review is completed biannually, each semester, or on an as-needed basis.

Question 12 asked respondents to identify how often students are involved in determining the value of the assessment process. Just over half of the respondents indicated that students were monitored periodically, with more than one third identifying that that process occurred annually. Question 14, which was discussed in standard VII, revealed that close to 60% of respondents have no policies for written appeal in place. Of the remaining forty percent, 11.8% provide no review of their existing policies. Two of the three questions indicate compliance with this standard; therefore, it was determined that quality existed.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be made based on the outcomes of the research questions from this study. The overwhelming majority of colleges and universities in this study indicated that they preferred to utilize traditional methods of prior learning assessment, such as standardized examinations and credit awarded through the American Council on Education recommendations on military education and training (ACE/Military) when awarding credit. As discussed by Michelson and Mandell (2004), these methods of prior learning assessment are not new and have deep roots in the American university system. The likelihood of an institution's being viewed negatively or scrutinized for utilizing this means of awarding nontraditional credit is relatively insignificant. Based on the findings of this study and the history of this widely accepted practice, it can be concluded that institutions would utilize this method and embrace this as an acceptable approach to PLA.

An additional conclusion that can be made from this study is that the awarding of academic credit based on years of experience is not a common practice among the respondents offering nontraditional degree programs. Question 6 showed that approximately two thirds of the participants never award credit utilizing years of experience, while responses to a similar question in the demographics section indicated that fewer than one third of respondents award credit solely by work experience. These responses coincide with Whitaker's (1989) standard II, thus substantiating this conclusion.

Based on the overall outcome of the data analysis for research question 3, which dealt specifically with the processes utilized for the awarding of PLA credit, the conclusion can be made that the majority of the respondents lack concern with the quality of their existing prior learning assessment processes as compared to a recognized standard, such as Whitaker's (1989) 10 Standards for Assessing Learning utilized in this study. Less than 25% of the population surveyed was found to be in overall compliance with Whitaker's standards. Of the 10 quality standards identified, the population was found to be in compliance in only 4 standards: the extent to which credit is awarded only for learning and not experience; that credit should be awarded for college-level learning only; that credit awards should be monitored to avoid duplication; and that assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised. Of the remaining 6 standards in which the respondents lacked adherence, 3 warrant additional discussion in justification of this conclusion. Standards III and IV, which deal with credit being awarded only for learning that has a balance between theory and practice and the need for subject matter and academic experts to evaluate competency levels, are identified by Whitaker (1989) as dependent on each other. Responses to these standards in this study showed that approximately 75% failed to identify a balance between theory and practice, over 50% failed to utilize faculty criteria when determining credit awards, and almost 90% indicated that they rarely used outside experts when determining competency levels; this represents a significant concern when the focus is on quality. The findings of standard IX, dealing with the need for the adequate training of personnel involved in the assessment of learning, also provides justification for this conclusion. The quantitative data indicated that well over 50% of faculties had not received initial training and had not been involved in continuing

education activities. The responses to the open-ended question supported these findings. According to Whitaker, professional development activities related to this area are essential, even for those individuals well versed in the content area.



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