

## Creating a Positive PLA Experience: A Step-by-Step Look at University PLA

Sara M. Leiste et Kathryn Jensen

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Résumé de l'article

A prior learning assessment (PLA) can be an intimidating process for adult learners. Capella University's PLA team has developed best practices, resources, and tools to foster a positive experience and to remove barriers in PLA and uses three criteria to determine how to best administer the assessment. First, a PLA must be motivating, as described by the ARCS model. Second, it must enable success. Finally, it must use available resources efficiently. The tools and resources developed according to these criteria fall into two categories: staff and online resources. PLA programs can use both to ensure that all departments provide consistent communication to learners about the PLA process, which will foster a positive experience. The PLA online lab houses centralized resources and offers one-on-one interaction with a facilitator to assist learners step-by-step in the development of their petitions. Each unit contains resources, examples, and optional assignments that help learners to develop specific aspects of the petition. By following the examples and recommendations, learners are able to submit polished petitions after they complete the units. The lab facilitator supports learners throughout the units by answering questions and providing recommendations. When learners submit their petitions, the facilitator reviews it entirely and provides feedback to strengthen the final submission that goes to a faculty reviewer. All of these individuals and tools work together to help create a positive experience for learners who submit a PLA petition. This article shares these resources with the goal of strengthening PLA as a field.

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## *Creating a Positive PLA Experience: A Step-by-Step Look at University PLA*

**Sara M. Leiste and Kathryn Jensen**  
Capella University, USA

### **Abstract**

A prior learning assessment (PLA) can be an intimidating process for adult learners. Capella University's PLA team has developed best practices, resources, and tools to foster a positive experience and remove barriers in PLA, and uses three criteria to determine how to best administer the assessment. First, a PLA must be motivating, as described by the ARCS model. Second, it must enable success. Finally, it must use available resources efficiently. The tools and resources developed according to these criteria fall into two categories, staff and online resources. PLA programs can use both to ensure that all departments provide consistent communication to learners about the PLA process, which will foster a positive experience. The PLA online lab houses centralized resources and offers one-on-one interaction with a facilitator to assist learners step-by-step in the development of their petitions. Each unit contains resources, examples, and optional assignments that help learners to develop specific aspects of the petition. By following the examples and recommendations, learners are able to submit polished petitions after they complete the units. The lab facilitator supports learners throughout the units by answering questions and providing recommendations. When learners submit their petitions, the facilitator reviews it entirely and provides feedback to strengthen the final submission that goes to a faculty reviewer for an official evaluation. All of these individuals and tools work together to help create a positive experience for learners who submit a PLA petition. This article shares these resources with the goal of strengthening PLA as a field.

**Keywords:** Prior learning assessment (PLA); student experience; barriers; positive experience; learner experience; facilitator; practitioner experience; practitioner learning; learning narrative; prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR); ARCS model; practitioner knowledge; Capella University; competency-based; Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL); The Standards for Assessing Learning

## **Creating a Positive PLA Experience**

Learners know that prior learning assessment (PLA) can help them meet their program requirements in less time and at a reduced cost, but they are uncertain about the PLA process and nervous about their petition being denied. This perception of PLA as a high-risk endeavor can prevent learners from pursuing PLA opportunities. Learners generally understand how to be successful in a classroom setting, but working through a PLA is a more challenging task. Learners are often able to describe their practitioner experience, but do not know how to write an academic description of their knowledge. To address this, the PLA team at Capella University has crafted a positive learner experience to assist learners through the PLA process. Critics might wonder why it is necessary to create a positive PLA experience. It is Capella University's PLA team's philosophy that by creating a positive PLA experience, both learners and the PLA program benefit, creating a win-win situation. There are three criteria which are used to evaluate the PLA process/experience: motivating learners, promoting success, and making efficient use of time and resources.

First, the PLA must motivate learners. By its very nature, a PLA requires self-reflection, in-depth writing, and a significant time investment, all of which can be challenging to learners, causing them to reconsider the decision to challenge a course. Capella's PLA team strives to make the process as motivating as possible, so that learners will persevere through the challenges. According to Keller's (2008) ARCS model, there are four aspects of motivation: attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. First, attention is related to curiosity and engagement in a task. Second, relevance is the perception that the task is applicable to one's goals. Because a PLA helps learners meet the goal of finishing a degree program faster at a reduced cost, the relevance of working through it is clear. Third, confidence is the belief that one will successfully complete the task. To improve confidence, the PLA team provides the necessary resources at appropriate times. Finally, satisfaction reflects positive feelings derived from an experience and an interest in continuing that experience. Satisfaction is influenced by the appropriateness of the amount of work as well as consistency between goals and required tasks. The remainder of this article will describe the efforts to address each aspect of motivation.

The second criterion is that the PLA experience must enable the learner to succeed. It is critical for the PLA program to anticipate common problems and provide useful resources at appropriate times. These resources clarify expectations, give positive examples to emulate, and provide flexible support. One important part of this is to encourage learners to be realistic about the PLA they attempt, to accurately assess their own competence as compared to the expectations of the faculty. The PLA team works hard to eliminate barriers to learner success. From the perspective of PLA practitioners, the overall goal is an accurate assessment of prior learning. If there are too many barriers in place, the PLA will instead become a test of the learner's ability to fill out paperwork, master bureaucratic hassles, and seek out hidden resources. Eliminating any barriers to accurate assessment ensures that learners can focus their energy on meaningful assessment activities rather than extraneous requirements.

Finally, the PLA experience must be efficient, making good use of learners' time as well as staff time. This efficiency enables the PLA team to support many learners while maintaining the motivational and supportive aspects of the PLA. It is another reason for eliminating any barriers that prevent learners, staff, or reviewers from focusing on an accurate assessment of a learner's competence.

With the criteria of motivation, enabling success, and efficiency in mind, the authors present Capella University's approach to creating a positive experience throughout the PLA process. The tools and resources for creating a positive PLA experience fall into two categories, staff and online resources. After a literature review and brief introduction to Capella, the authors address the departments across the university that interact with learners and describe how the PLA team enables those departments to counsel them. Then they explore the online resources that allow PLA staff to efficiently support learners as they write their assessments. Capella's PLA team has found that learners benefit greatly from the combination of knowledgeable counselors, resources to guide them through the process, and feedback from reviewers.

## **Literature Review**

Conrad (2008) described the high-stakes nature of PLA, outlining how learners may use a PLA to gain significant rewards: the assessment allows them to move through their requirements faster by not having to complete certain courses. However, the written portion of the assessment is highly challenging for many learners. Michelson and Mandell (2004) provide several examples to illustrate how creating a PLA portfolio may be the most difficult challenge for the very students the PLA intends to serve. Creating a portfolio is time-intensive, and therefore learners who have multiple roles find it hard to give time to the sustained effort required to build the portfolio. Adults who have been out of school for some time may also have difficulty conforming to academic norms and writing standards.

Thus, while learners are motivated by the potential rewards of a PLA, they are also apprehensive about their abilities to successfully challenge a required course. For most learners, the PLA is challenging because of the requirement to express their learning in terms that correlate to the institution's courses or criteria. This process requires learners to break their knowledge down into constituent parts. In many instances, this is the first time learners are required to analyze their own learning and identify how they have acquired knowledge. This can be a very difficult process, as it requires the learner to identify common themes in work experience and the academic requirements of the courses he or she is challenging.

Even with a significant amount of support, learners experience major cognitive challenges when attempting to express their learning in terms that will be accepted by reviewers. On the one hand, there is a minority opinion that the responsibility of the institution should be to recognize learners' knowledge even if it is not in an academic framework (Michelson & Mandell, 2004; Starr-Glass 2002). On the other, the majority of researchers advocate for institutions to help learners understand how to present their knowledge in a format that is acceptable to the institution (Conrad, 2008; Brinke, Sluijsmans, & Jochems, 2009).

A PLA serves as a way of “honoring and building on mature learners’ past experiential learning” (Conrad, 2008, p. 140). The assessment is a mechanism through which learners ask institutions to value experiential learning, but it first requires learners to recognize and value their own learning. They have to “focus critically on how they have come to be where they are” (Conrad, 2008, p. 146). Through this process, they develop a more academically sound understanding of their own learning. Many learners are amazed by the extent of their learning. Miller and Morgaine (2009) point out that “Reflection can be an awakening for students and serves to distill the meaning from experiences” (p. 10). They state that the process of creating a portfolio for assessment can build learners’ identities as academics. This may be a particular benefit for learners in distance education who are often working adults who have been away from formal education settings for some time.

The PLA literature most often speaks about “facilitating” the PLA process rather than “teaching” learners how to work through a PLA. Arscott, Crowther, Young, and Ungarian (2007) highlight the importance of learners having access to facilitators throughout the PLA process. Some of the responsibilities of a facilitator include creating a shared discourse in which learners can reflect, developing a positive environment, and encouraging self-recognition in learners who lack self-confidence. When facilitators have subject matter expertise in addition to PLA expertise, they are able to help learners present their knowledge in ways that are recognized by other experts in the field.

## **Capella University**

Capella University is an online institution that serves more than 37,100 adult learners at the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral levels (Capella University, 2010b). It offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in 137 specialized areas of study, including business, information technology, psychology, public safety, public administration, nursing, and health administration (Capella University, 2010a). The degree programs focus on learning outcomes that are based on professional standards and employer recommendations. Capella University’s mission is as follows:

The mission of Capella University is to extend access to high quality bachelor’s, master’s, doctoral, and certificate programs for adults who seek to maximize their personal and professional potential. This mission is fulfilled through innovative programs that are responsive to the needs of adult learners and involve active, engaging, challenging, and relevant learning experiences offered in a variety of delivery modes. (Capella University, 2010c)

Capella’s mission statement echoes the focus of many institutions, providing access to a more diverse audience by offering innovative models of program delivery with more flexible learning opportunities. Capella’s educational philosophy parallels Keeling’s (2004) description of

transformative learning. Experiences that focus on helping learners understand major periods of transition and transformation in their thinking through openness, reflection, assessment, and celebration of accomplishments are integral parts of transformative learning (Keeling, 2004). A prior learning assessment serves as one of the delivery models to do just that.

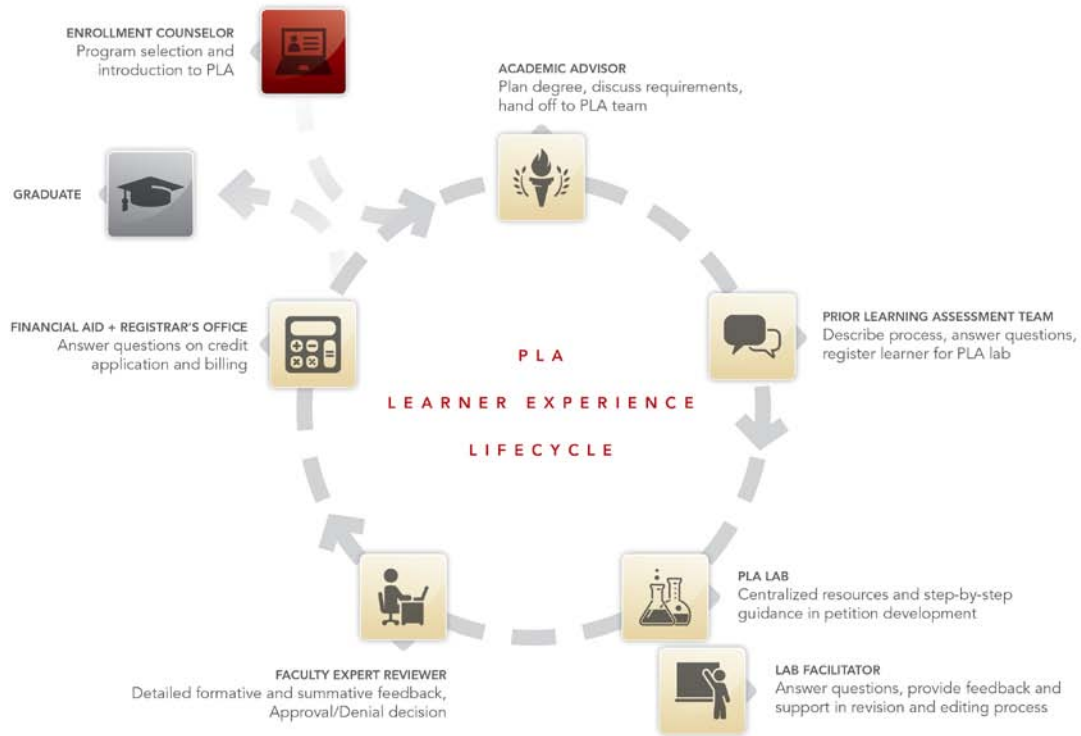
Until 2007, PLAs at Capella University were supported by staff members in individual academic departments. A centralized team was formed to improve efficiency and create additional resources for learners. The team has worked to determine best practices, develop helpful tools for PLA learners, improve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

Capella University is a competency-based institution. The competencies form the core of the curriculum, determine course content and activities, and assessments are designed to measure the attainment of these competencies. Morrissey et al. (2008) recommended that institutions develop learning outcomes for all course offerings to facilitate PLA. At Capella University, PLA uses the course competencies as the basis for the assessment of prior learning. In PLA, learners demonstrate that they have met the course competencies through a combination of written narrative and documentation. Learners receive the competencies in a template that outlines the type of narrative and documentation that will help demonstrate competence in a given area.

The PLA program at Capella University uses the standards for assessing learning created by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006) as the foundation of practices in every aspect of the PLA program. The standards provide several safeguards for learners and are an important basis for the PLA field. Building on the foundation provided by the standards, Capella has created a process and tools that enable learners to be more confident in PLA submissions.

## **Learners' PLA Experience**

At Capella University, people in many roles work with learners throughout their PLA experience. These roles include enrollment counselors (ECs), academic advisors (AAs), PLA staff, faculty reviewers, registrar's office staff, financial aid representatives, and so forth. Each of these individuals is involved in creating and fostering a positive experience in the PLA lifecycle. Figure 1 shows the various roles and the kinds of interactions those who fill them have with learners throughout the PLA lifecycle.



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*Figure 1.* PLA learner experience lifecycle.

Prospective learners have an increasing number of institutions to choose from when deciding which school to attend. In addition to program offerings, two main deciding factors are time to completion and total cost of the program. PLA offerings can help to reduce both. Therefore, the option to undertake a PLA may be a factor in the decision to attend a particular institution.

At Capella University, ECs have an in-depth conversation with prospective learners to discover the appropriate program for their needs. When prospective learners have the appropriate knowledge and experience, ECs will discuss PLA options. The EC is the first person to set expectations about timelines, to describe the PLA process, and to connect a learner with the PLA team. Setting the right expectations from the first point of contact is integral to fostering a positive experience in the PLA process. Therefore, the PLA team meets with ECs on a regular basis to provide ongoing training and to answer questions to ensure that learners are receiving consistent information.

In their first quarter at Capella University, learners will meet with their AA to plan their degree program. AAs direct interested learners to the PLA Center from the university's Internet portal to learn more about the PLA process. Learners and AAs then discuss how a PLA will fulfill degree

requirements to ensure that learners plan their PLA for the right courses and in the best order. By providing consistent explanations of the PLA process and setting the right expectations, both ECs and AAs prepare learners to work with the PLA team to develop their assessments. Without guidance from these two individuals, learners may challenge a course that is not applicable to their degree requirements, or may wait until the last minute in their degree program to start the process, creating an unnecessarily rushed experience. In addition, enabling ECs and AAs to communicate proactively with learners about the PLA process helps to increase awareness among learners about PLA opportunities.

Because ECs and AAs play such important roles in counseling learners about the PLA process, the PLA staff has created resources to help them feel more comfortable speaking with learners about their options. Job aids describe the detailed steps of the PLA process, along with policies, fee structures, and credit application; contact information for the PLA team is also included. These aids can be used by counselors and advisors as quick visual references while talking with learners. When ECs and AAs need additional assistance, they refer learners to the PLA team for more information. In addition, the PLA team has created standardized email templates for the ECs, AAs, and PLA staff to use, encouraging consistent communication about the PLA process. ECs and AAs report that they feel more credible when speaking with learners about PLA options because of the resources and ongoing training they receive. The PLA staff has found that learners are more informed about PLAs and have more accurate expectations as a result, which helps to foster a positive PLA experience. In addition, by empowering ECs and AAs with these tools, PLA staff members are able to focus on the learners who need in-depth assistance, making the best use of their expertise in PLA.

The PLA team plays an important role in counseling learners through the PLA process. PLA staff members are available to work with learners via telephone, email, and the online PLA lab. Learners usually start working with the PLA team after meeting with an AA about their degree requirements to address questions or concerns and to understand the requirements of the PLA process. Sometimes, a learner has misconceptions about the process. In these instances, the PLA team coaches the learner to better understand both the requirements for PLA credit and his or her ability to meet those requirements. Although the PLA staff members are not subject matter experts in the various academic areas, they advise learners based on their experience with PLA. They use their own knowledge of PLA, combined with trends in feedback from faculty reviewers, to help learners avoid common pitfalls.

Learners come into the PLA process as highly skilled and knowledgeable practitioners in their fields, but often have less understanding of how to describe their knowledge in an academic framework (Conrad, 2008; Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The PLA team has developed tools in a centralized lab to help learners navigate the PLA process. While staff members are always available to work one-on-one with learners, most learners enroll in the PLA lab to develop their petitions. (A petition is the actual document a learner submits for PLA credit, referred to as a portfolio in some institutions.) The lab is a free, self-paced minicourse that guides learners step-by-step as they craft their petitions. One of the PLA staff members facilitates the lab to answer questions and provide feedback, as advocated by Arscott et al. (2007). The positive online



experience created by the availability of online resources and expert feedback has greatly reduced the anxiety of learners working through the petition process.

Before the lab was created, learners read about the petition process on a static Web page and completed petitions on their own, with little guidance. PLA staff members were inundated with the same, repetitive questions from learners struggling with the PLA process and were challenged to provide the kind of help that enables learners to feel confident in their submissions. Historically, many learners expressed interest in PLA but did not follow through to submit a petition. In response to this, staff used Keller's (2008) principles of motivation, especially confidence, to redesign the lab to provide centralized resources, reduce anxiety about the process, and alleviate the volume of repetitive questions. Having centralized resources and a structure for addressing questions has allowed a staff of three to simultaneously support hundreds of learners working on petitions. It has enabled the learners who need more assistance to get help, and those who can work independently to access resources as needed. Learners respond to the lab favorably and have reported that the resources are appropriate and timely for the development of their petitions.

## **The PLA Lab**

The lab was designed to function as a supportive and open environment to learn about the petition process. It was created with two perspectives in mind. From the perspective of content and flow, decisions were made about what learners need to know to petition, the steps they should take, and the resources they needed to have available at each step. The second perspective was the support provided during the lab. From this perspective, decisions included how to keep track of learners' progress without being intrusive, and how to provide individualized help when needed. The lab was designed to look and feel like a regular Capella University course, so that the learner does not have to struggle with learning a new courseroom platform when he or she should be learning the PLA process, thus improving the efficiency of the lab experience. This is in line with the second criterion for a positive PLA experience, breaking down unnecessary barriers to enable success.

The lab is divided into four separate units that correlate with different elements of the petition and supportive documentation. Each unit provides detailed explanations of the requirements coupled with resources and examples for the learners to utilize when developing each aspect of their petition. Optional assignments provide more in-depth guidance and targeted resources for each concept. The petition assessment templates are housed in the lab and are available for learners to review when they are deciding whether their knowledge and experience meet the requirements to be assessed.

## **Content of the Lab**

This section will briefly introduce the units in the lab before going into detail about how the individual resources foster a positive PLA experience. Like a course, the lab begins with a syllabus, followed by content units. Each unit provides guidance on specific aspects of a well-developed petition submission. Table 1 provides a summary of the unit contents.

Table 1

*Lab Outline*

Section of lab	Contents
Syllabus	General advice about petitioning PLA policy regarding credit application, limits, and assessment fees
Unit 1: Assess Your Qualifications for PLA	Reviewing petition requirements Prewriting: Exploring how knowledge and experience fits with the competencies of the courses
Unit 2: Supporting Evidence for Prior Learning	Résumé resources with link to career center Gathering supporting documentation Examples of recommended documentation Example reference letters
Unit 3: Writing Your Petition	How to address each competency Examples of appropriate writing style with link to writing center A summary of the common errors in petitions, written by a faculty reviewer Reminders about academic honesty
Unit 4: Submitting Your Petition	Reminders about editing, proofreading, and presentation Expected turnaround times on petition processing and faculty reviewer decisions

## **Syllabus**

The syllabus starts by providing general advice, similar to the coaching that the PLA team provides to learners. Including this advice in the lab ensures all learners have the opportunity to see important messages in a consistent and clear manner, reinforcing the expectations ECs and AAs have established. When learners do not follow the suggestions, an otherwise positive, self-actualizing experience can become a negative one.

The PLA team has found that the timing of petitions within a learner's program impacts all three of the criteria for a positive PLA experience: motivation, enabling success, and efficiency. Therefore, most of the advice in the syllabus centers on appropriate planning. It is suggested that learners petition early in their degree program for a number of reasons. First, by petitioning early, learners are able to better plan which courses they will take rather than petition. Early petitioning can also help in planning around prerequisites. If a learner's petition is denied, he or she will have

more time to consider the options. In addition, learners who petition early are likely to be more invested in completing their degrees because doing so allows them to essentially leap further ahead, creating a sense of investment and momentum. If a learner is planning to petition multiple courses, petitioning early allows him or her to utilize the feedback from one petition to strengthen future petitions. Having one petition approved will also reduce learners' anxiety about the viability of future approval, and will help them feel less rushed. This addresses the confidence aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008).

Other advice expressed in the syllabus focuses on creating a strong presentation. Learners should be aware that PLA is a serious assessment; approval is not guaranteed. Learners are often surprised at the amount and quality of writing expected of them in order to earn PLA credit. Writing is often a challenge for adult learners who are returning to the academic environment (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), and academic writing, specifically the description of knowledge, is difficult for many learners. The lab suggests utilizing feedback from the PLA facilitator, writing center resources, and insights from the lab discussions.

The syllabus also addresses PLA policy with regard to credit application, limits, and assessment fees. This information can be found in the university catalog, but it is important to highlight it in the syllabus so that learners are aware of their rights and the requirements they must meet. For instance, the policy states that a PLA assessment fee is charged for the assessment of their submissions whether a petition is approved or denied, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). If learners are unaware of this policy, they could assume that there is no financial risk involved, and become upset when a fee appears on their billing statements. When learners are unaware of the credit limits, they might petition courses that do not apply to their degree requirements. Because this information is highlighted, learners are able to avoid such pitfalls, which results in a better experience for them.

After reading the syllabus, learners can find the petition assessment forms for each individual course in the Petition Template section. In the forms, learners can see which competencies they will be assessed against. Learners can also see examples of petitions that faculty reviewers have recognized as being exceptional in quality. These model petitions help learners understand the appropriate writing style, documentation requirements, and the level of detail expected by faculty reviewers. The four units of the PLA lab (referenced in Table 1) help learners transform the blank assessment form into a fully developed petition.

## **Unit 1: Assess your qualifications for PLA.**

The first unit asks learners to make sure they understand the requirements of the courses they intend to petition. When considering which courses to petition, learners often focus exclusively on their work experience and certifications. The prewriting exercise in this unit helps learners brainstorm about other areas of their lives that have contributed to their learning, such as work experience, volunteer experience, training, certification, self-study, and so on. Conrad (2008) states that a PLA can be a reflective process that helps learners draw meaning from their learning histories. The prewriting exercise encourages such reflection and asks the learner to focus not

only on current learning and knowledge but also to uncover knowledge he or she attained at an earlier point in time. Some learners even decide to petition more courses as a result of identifying additional knowledge in this exercise. In the prewriting exercise, the learner lists his or her accomplishments and sources of knowledge. Having this list on paper can be one of the first times a learner identifies how much knowledge he or she really has. Miller and Morgaine (2009) mention that reflection can cause learners to be amazed at what they have accomplished. This can be a very fulfilling exercise for learners.

Unit 1 also introduces a hypothetical example that continues through the remaining units, where a hypothetical learner is petitioning for the course DRV1000 – Driving a Motor Vehicle. When staff developed this scenario, they chose a driving example because most adult learners can relate to driving knowledge. In this unit, the learner begins to think about her background related to DRV1000, and reviews the competencies to determine whether she is ready to petition the course. Through the prewriting exercise she identifies several aspects of her background related to driving that she will use in her petition.

The work learners complete in Unit 1 helps them build confidence in their ability to successfully petition courses, as prescribed by the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). The brainstorming list helps identify documentation for Unit 2 and forms an outline of knowledge to further develop in Unit 3, when the learners will write the actual petition content.

## **Unit 2: Supporting evidence for prior learning.**

Most learners want to start the petition by documenting their experience because they find it easier to gather documentation than to describe their knowledge and how they have attained it. Unit 2 helps learners identify which types of documentation are appropriate and relevant. There are two common mistakes learners make regarding documentation. The first is to include little or no documentation. Learners who fail to provide adequate documentation have not thought creatively about what they can include, or do not realize it is necessary. The opposite problem is including too much documentation, overwhelming the reviewer with unnecessary or unneeded documents. Learners who do this tend to dislike the limits on petition size (5 MB, including all attachments), but their petitions usually benefit from the requirement to include fewer, more relevant documents. This unit also describes how to tie the relevant documentation to the course competencies in support of the learning narrative (developed in unit 3). Additional resources provided include information about the career center for résumé help and suggestions for acquiring effective letters of reference.

In this unit, the hypothetical learner petitioning DRV1000 gathers many pieces of documentation and carefully considers the relevance of each piece. After consideration, she chooses the most relevant, including her driver's license, training records, and awards for safe driving from her job. One function of the example is to demonstrate the thinking process for learners. In the example, the learner goes through the process of taking her initial list and identifying the most relevant pieces of documentation. While the model petitions only show the end result, this exercise helps learners see and follow the decision-making process.

### **Unit 3: Writing your petition.**

This unit focuses on the narrative portions of the petition. This is the most intensive and important section of the lab, and conveys the importance of the narrative in describing learning. Many learners want to eliminate or ignore the writing aspect, allowing their résumés and work products to stand on their own. They state their job title, assuming it will explain the knowledge they possess to the reviewer—but this approach is too simplistic and assumes the reviewer can infer what learning has occurred based on industry-specific titles. PLA facilitators and the resources in the lab help learners describe their knowledge within an academic framework. According to Conrad (2008) and Brinke et al. (2009), it is the responsibility of the PLA facilitators to help learners understand how to present their knowledge in an acceptable academic context.

Unit 3 includes links to relevant departments within the university, such as the writing center and academic honesty resources. Learners are encouraged to utilize the writing center for feedback, just as they would for their course assignments. This unit also includes the most popular element in the lab, a summary of the common errors in petitions. This resource was written by a faculty reviewer to clarify the reasoning reviewers employ and their approach to petitions. Everything in the summary is included elsewhere in the lab, but in this unit learners pay more attention to the voice of an actual faculty reviewer and have found this resource very insightful and helpful for writing the learning narrative.

The hypothetical learner in the DRV1000 example finds unit three to be challenging but also satisfying, because she begins to see an overall pattern of her development as a driver. She discusses how she initially learned to drive, as well as the efforts she has made to improve her knowledge and skills. She also explains how she has used this learning in her professional and personal life. The DRV1000 example builds on the model petitions and the summary of common errors to demonstrate acceptable writing styles, format, and presentation. By having access to these examples, learners can develop a more polished presentation of their learning and feel more assured that their petition submission is strong, addressing the confidence aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). Before these resources were available, learners had few references when developing their learning statements. These resources set a consistent standard for learners to meet and provide a benchmark for success. Learners can compare their drafts to the model petitions and the DRV1000 example to ensure that they are on the right track.

### **Unit 4: Submitting your petition.**

This unit helps learners develop the strongest presentation possible with simple, yet critical reminders. At this point, learners are either really excited about submitting their petition, or they are tired of working on it. In both instances, they often dismiss the importance of editing and proofreading in developing a strong petition. A petition with numerous spelling and grammatical errors or a weak structure can be denied or returned, creating a poor experience for the learner. Unlike a course, which includes multiple assignments and drafts for major papers, a petition is a

one-time presentation of prior learning. Therefore, the importance of editing and proofreading is heightened. Unit 4 strongly encourages learners to take a step back and review their petitions as if they were the reviewer to uncover areas that need improvement. The goal is to put them in a more critical frame of mind when editing and proofreading. Confusing wording, grammar and spelling errors, or missing attachments can result in a petition being denied. Learners have to appeal denials, which adds time and stress to the petition process.

In this unit, the hypothetical learner in DRV1000 demonstrates attention to detail and provides a careful presentation of her petition, which reinforces these suggestions for learners. The unit reduces anxiety by setting expectations for the decision process, credit application (upon approval), and billing of the assessment fee. By this point, learners have already put a great deal of work into their petitions. Now they have the opportunity to make that work shine, or last-minute rushing can cause them to miss the mark. The key reminders make learners more likely to catch problems before the official evaluation.

Once learners have edited and proofread their petitions, they submit their petitions in the assignment drop box. The lab facilitator reviews the submissions. If a petition needs further development, the facilitator provides detailed feedback and asks the learner to resubmit. Once the learner and facilitator are comfortable with the submission, the facilitator sends it to the reviewer for an official evaluation. There may be many feedback cycles between the facilitator and learner at this stage, as the facilitator continues to work with the learner until both are satisfied with the petition before sending it on for an official evaluation.

## **Individualized Support**

The goal of enabling success, one of the criteria for creating a positive PLA experience, must often be balanced with efficiency in providing individualized support. The opportunity to ask questions, exchange ideas with peers, and receive feedback from the PLA facilitator reduces learners' anxiety in the petition process and improves confidence and satisfaction according to the ARCS model (Keller, 2008). To enable success, it is crucial for the facilitator to meet the learners where they are, and help them develop the ability to navigate the PLA process (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). Arscott et al. (2007) argue that it is important for learners to have access to facilitators knowledgeable about PLA requirements to guide them through the process. As a result of feedback from the lab facilitator, there are higher participation rates, fewer denials, and more satisfying experiences for learners. Feedback from the facilitator prevents poorly developed petitions from moving forward, reducing unnecessary appeal cycles, which meets the criterion of efficient use of time and resources.

The term "lab facilitator" was chosen carefully. As stated in the Learner Experience section of this article, the resources in the lab allow the facilitator to focus on assisting those in need, rather than teaching all of the learners each step of the process. Arscott et al. (2007) highlight the importance of facilitating rather than teaching in a laboratory format to encourage the learner to self-reflect instead of relying on the instructor to develop his or her learning statements. The design of the lab, including the facilitator role, allows for a self-paced environment so that

learners can use the lab for the particular information and resources they need, when they need them. Since the facilitators do not have teaching responsibilities, they can devote time to individual learners who need more assistance. Those learners who are more independent have the freedom to develop their petitions at their own pace.

Each facilitator is an expert in PLA and holds a Certificate of Mastery in Prior Learning Assessment through CAEL. Even though the facilitators are not subject matter experts in all petitionable areas, they understand the petition process and the resources available at Capella University. The facilitators use the trends they see in reviewer feedback to coach learners and promote best practices, translating academic expectations so learners can relate to them (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). PLA facilitators advocate for learners as well as for the academic rigor of the process.

While the lab provides resources and support to large groups of learners, it also allows the facilitator to provide individualized feedback and assistance when it is needed. At any point in the lab, a learner can contact the facilitator. For general questions, there is an open discussion board, allowing other learners to benefit from the facilitator's response. Sometimes these postings generate discussions about the best approach for a particular situation. For personal or sensitive questions, the courseroom offers an email function, so that the learner and facilitator can communicate privately.

Each unit has a discussion activity that is recommended, but not required. Learners who are nervous about asking a direct question to the facilitator will sometimes post concerns or challenges in the discussions. The facilitator can respond and provide suggestions or resources, while also encouraging the learners to follow up if more guidance is needed. The discussion questions have become a forum for peer-to-peer support, encouragement, and recognition. The discussions are important in helping many learners manage or address anxiety and they make the experience of petitioning less lonely, because learners are going through the processes with peers who might have the same questions and concerns. Learners can feel better about their situation because they know someone else is going through the same challenges. This addresses the satisfaction aspect of the ARCS model (Keller, 2008).

The final element of individualized support is the review and feedback provided for each petition. Each petition is reviewed by a faculty reviewer with expertise in the area being evaluated, who scores the learning demonstrated and writes detailed, personalized feedback. The feedback is intended not only to explain the scores but also to help the learners develop in their fields, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). The PLA team has crafted standards and examples for faculty reviewers, so they understand the type of feedback learners and the PLA team are expecting from them.

All faculty reviewers are also teaching faculty, so they are skilled at giving feedback within the courseroom. The PLA team has discovered that setting expectations for the faculty reviewers and giving examples of best practices has improved the quality and quantity of feedback that learners receive. The team was initially concerned about the quality of feedback on low-scoring petitions,

as it is important for learners to understand why their scores were low. However, learners who do well on petitions often want to submit additional petitions. They also need constructive feedback to understand why they were successful, to help them decide if they are ready to petition additional courses.

The individualized support and feedback received from peers, the lab facilitator, and faculty reviewers helps learners to better understand what knowledge and learning they have accomplished. This can be self-actualizing for them (Michelson & Mandell, 2004), and the feedback can validate their accomplishments to build self-confidence for future petitions, coursework, and development in their fields, in accordance with the CAEL standards (Fiddler et al., 2006). Learners often express gratitude for the resources and personalized interactions throughout the PLA process. Conrad (2008) states that even though learners are challenged by the PLA process, “their reactions reflect both satisfaction with and wonder at the nature and extent of the learning that they realize has occurred” (Conrad, 2008, p. 145).

## **Discussion**

Distance education is not just a traditional university without the campus. It requires a different approach to all facets of education (Conrad, 2008). Similarly, a PLA is not just a traditional test. It requires the institution as a whole to orient its approach to learning and assessment in a way that welcomes knowledge gained through multiple means. PLA as a field has a strong philosophical and theoretical standing, but seems to be still in the process of developing best practices for implementation and administration. To that end, this article has described the various tools the PLA team at Capella University has developed to create a positive PLA experience and to address the perceived barriers to PLA. This section will review the three criteria described in the introduction, that PLA be motivating, enable success, and be organized in an efficient manner.

### **PLA: A Motivating Process**

It is important for PLA practitioners to break down the perceived barriers that prevent qualified learners from pursuing PLA programs. Preparing a petition for assessment can be a very abstract process. Typically, learners who pursue PLA are better at applying their knowledge practically than they are at describing it academically. Learners can be apprehensive and anxious because of this. The resources discussed in this article empower learners to succeed in the PLA process, which reduces anxiety and enables learners to have a better experience.

More research is needed in the area of motivation and PLA. Which specific aspects of PLA are motivating and discouraging for learners? How can PLA programs enhance the motivating aspects and mitigate the discouraging aspects? Which aspects of PLA are motivating for different groups of learners? These questions are particularly important if PLA is to be offered on a larger scale to reach a wider base of learners. Currently, PLA attracts a relatively small group of learners who are willing and able to deal with the challenges in the PLA process. If PLA grows, learners who are not as comfortable with the process will want to attempt petitions and they will need



more support. For them, motivation will be a bigger issue. It is therefore necessary to break down the perceived barriers while adhering to the tenets of Keller's (2008) ARCS model to generate high levels of motivation.

Another aspect of PLA and motivation is the impact PLA has on motivating learners in the rest of their academic work (Brinke et al., 2009). PLA practitioners have anecdotal evidence that learners are motivated to enter (or reenter) degree programs because of PLA opportunities. Certainly, learners who have earned credit through PLA have higher graduation rates and complete more courses than learners who do not pursue PLA (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). This part of the PLA story is not always shared or understood by those outside of PLA, who believe that PLA keeps learners from taking courses and paying tuition. PLA as a field needs to tell this story better, to focus on PLA's value in recruitment and retention. While national studies are helpful, the most convincing research may be on the level of a single institution or program. Faculty and administrators will be more convinced of the value of PLA if they see the impact on their learner population.

## **PLA: A Process that Enables Success**

In PLA, there are two ways of looking at success. One is that learners are successful in their pursuit of credit. The other is that the assessment process accurately measures learners' competence with regard to the course requirements. There is tension between these goals. Having learners work through a PLA only to be denied is not desirable, yet maintaining the integrity of the assessment is crucial. Capella University has addressed this tension by working to give learners the tools and information to judge their own competence. Unfortunately, learners sometimes overestimate their competence and put a lot of work into petitions that are ultimately not successful. At the same time, other learners underestimate their chances of success and choose not to do PLA when they could have been successful. More resources for learners and staff are needed to help learners be realistic about their chances of success.

In discussing success within PLA, it is natural to focus on learners and forget about the staff and faculty reviewers who are part of the process. The CAEL standards require training as well as professional development for PLA personnel (Fiddler et al., 2006), but it is not clear what this training or professional development should include. Brinke et al. (2009) argue for more training, specifically in the areas of giving feedback, supporting portfolio creation, and understanding PLA. There are training sessions and conferences available for PLA staff, but one of the gaps in the field is the lack of training available for faculty reviewers. Currently, each institution must create its own training courses. Capella University has found that having standard training available to all faculty reviewers has helped maintain the quality of the review process, and has increased both the quality and quantity of feedback that reviewers provide.

As described in this article, learners get information about PLA from many different departments. By empowering these departments with resources and information, Capella University's PLA team is able to set consistent expectations and provide helpful guidance. Working with other departments is a continuing process, and has become a major effort for the PLA staff. The various

departments often hire new staff members, or reorganize, necessitating training for them “from scratch” on PLA. In addition, the PLA team tries to stay in touch with all AAs, ECs, and other relevant individuals to ensure ongoing communication and consistent messaging. Although it is time-consuming, there has been a significant payoff for the time invested. AAs in particular are more willing to ask questions and collaborate with the PLA team when they feel supported. This translates to increased support and better communication to learners.

## **PLA: Fostering Efficiency**

Focusing on efficiency in addition to the other two criteria helps to ensure that PLA can benefit a larger population of learners. PLA programs, like higher education in general, need to serve an increasing number of learners without additional resources. In addition, the concept of PLA is to improve the efficiency of certain learners’ degree programs, allowing them to earn credit for courses where they have already mastered the content, thereby focusing their energy on new material. Like many decisions about the structure of Capella University’s PLA program, there are trade-offs in efficiency. Intensive help for a few learners requires resources that might have been used to reach additional learners. There are no easy answers for efficiency, and it is not often addressed in the literature, yet it is part of every decision within PLA administration. This is an area where more discussion and research is needed.

## **Conclusion**

Morrissey et al. (2008) encouraged PLA practitioners to improve the capacity and impact of PLA by identifying common concerns and best practices, as well as exchanging knowledge. Toward those ends, and in particular to increase the level of knowledge-sharing across institutions, this article has presented some of Capella University’s best practices. CAEL has provided foundational standards upon which many institutions have built PLA programs. Now is the time to build on these standards and create best practices for fostering positive PLA experiences. As a field, PLA should continue efforts in this direction. In particular, it would be beneficial to see more discussion about and development of several aspects of PLA. First, there are many opportunities to further develop best practices in PLA, from practices related to the assessment process itself, to the methods for advising and guiding learners through the process. In addition, there are opportunities to communicate the successes of PLA to wider academic audiences. By sharing knowledge about the field and implementing best practices, the field of PLA can continue to improve the assessment experience for all learners and expand accessibility.

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