KAPLAN UNIVERSITY

PROMISING AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO INCREASE POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS: PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Kaplan University (KU) began in 1937 as the American Institute of Commerce in Davenport, IA, and is now serving over 50,000 students nationwide as a regionally accredited institution recognized by The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. In addition to its online operations, KU operates 16 campuses and learning centers serving primarily non-traditional and adult learners who want postsecondary programs that enable them to "launch, enhance, or change careers in a diverse global society. The University is committed to general education, a student-centered service and support approach, and applied scholarship in a practical environment."[i]

Detailed Description of the Promising and Practical Strategy

Prior Learning Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) at KU is a comprehensive, technology-based retention initiative emphasizing the assessment of prior experiential learning of working adult students. Broadly, PLA covers not only experience-based learning from one's life and work, but also transfer credits earned elsewhere that adults wish to apply towards college degrees. The fundamental principle here is – "what you know is more important than where you learned it." Because older students have learning from life and work experiences that may be applied toward college credit, the process of PLA can be essential to their successful completion of a postsecondary degree by shortening their time to degree attainment. Thorough and efficient assessment of prior experiential learning is critical to serving, retaining, and graduating adult learners.[ii]

KU requires that students document their prior experiential learning via portfolios. KU student portfolios have five components: a course petition that matches students' prior learning to course outcomes in their degree plans; external documentation that verifies the knowledge, skill, and abilities acquired; an expanded resume that details competencies and the contexts in which they were acquired; an educational goal statement that helps evaluators understand students' past work and future plans; and a learning autobiography capturing self-reflection that converts experiences into practical knowledge and skills. KU's innovation in portfolio assessment is the creation of an online system that aids student portfolio development and manages the evaluation of all five components.

Per the Ten Standards for Assessing Learning developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)[iii], KU awards credit only for evidence of college-level learning, not mere experience.

College Completion Obstacle Addressed

Since less than one-third of today's college enrollments are full-time traditional-aged students in residential study, it is vital to promote retention strategies for working adult students who are attending college in record numbers to become the highly-educated workforce that supports our economy but are at high risk of attrition. For these nontraditional learners at KU, as elsewhere, college enrollment poses significant risks of lost time, money, and self-esteem. The federal definition of the at-risk student includes seven characteristics: delayed enrollment, absence of a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, financial independence, having dependents, single parent status, and concurrent full-time work. These characteristics perfectly describe the circumstances of most working adults over the age of 24 who attend college today.

Adult learners are drawn to career-focused institutions like KU. Across all U.S. higher education institutions, more than 60 percent of students have *one or fewer* at-risk indicators. At KU more than 75 percent of newly enrolled students during the 2003-2004 academic year had *more than three* at-risk indicators compared to only 30 percent of high-risk profiled students across all institutions. As will be shown below, these at-risk indicators impact graduation rates for nontraditional learners at KU and other institutions.

Theory of Action That Provides the Basis for the Strategy

A 2010 study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) – an international clearinghouse and sponsor of research on PLA – presented data on 62,000 students attending 48 institutions, which show that students with PLA credit exhibited greater persistence in college, higher graduation rates, and less time to earn their degrees, compared to adults without PLA credits. CAEL's graduation rate findings are especially compelling – more than half (56 percent) of PLA credit earners obtained a degree within seven years, compared to only 15 percent of non-PLA students.

Because PLA honors learning already acquired and puts adult students on a shorter path to degree completion, the University's goal has been simply to award credit where credit is due. Although no numeric goals or quotas exist for PLA or faculty credit production, the University promotes PLA because it honors learners, saving them time and money by avoiding courses having material that they have already mastered.

History of How the Strategy Was Developed

Portfolio-based PLA was pioneered in the 1970's by CAEL (cited above). At KU, prior to 2009, the University offered portfolio-based experiential learning assessment, which served few students because the program was delivered one-on-one, via a small advising corps. In 2008, the University committed to building a rigorous, online, scalable, portfolio-based program backed by thorough faculty involvement and professional assessor training.

In September 2008, the University piloted the portfolio program to its students and officially launched the program in July 2009. Undergraduate online students at KU who wish to submit a portfolio to earn experiential learning credit enroll in EL203 – Portfolio Development as an

elective. EL203 is a pass/fail online course through which students develop a portfolio documenting their prior experiential learning. EL203 faculty teach only portfolio development. Separately trained subject matter experts who are KU faculty and faculty from other institutions review the portfolios to determine whether or not the portfolio demonstrates that college-level learning has been acquired and ultimately whether KU should grant credit for this learning. Credit granted is not automatic, as 84 percent of all KU petitions are judged credit-worthy using the CAEL standard to recognize learning, not mere experience.

Because EL203 is elective credit that applies toward degree completion, and offers the convenience of online study so important to adult learners, the change in KU activity for the award of experiential learning credits since 2008 has been dramatic:

Table 1: Total PLA Credits Awarded By Calendar Year

| Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Credits	453	858	653	579	723	4,405	9,240	9,532

Note: Reflects PLA credits awarded through EL203 as well as through transfer credit and challenge exams.

How Outcomes are Measured and Any Evaluations of the Strategy

The impact of PLA has been significant in terms of retaining students because PLA saves time and money, often cited by students as reasons to drop out. KU data for calendar year 2011 show that 391 EL203 course completers cumulatively received 8,306 experiential learning credits, an average of 21 quarter credits per student, which resulted in average tuition savings of $7,541 per student. EL203 also impacts program completion, as explained below.

To view in context the graduation outcomes for students completing EL203, look first at KU's performance in graduating students having the at-risk characteristics cited earlier. Figure 1 below charts the graduation rates of undergraduate degree students (associate's and bachelor's

Figure 1: Risk-adjusted General Graduation Rates Kaplan University vs. All Institutions
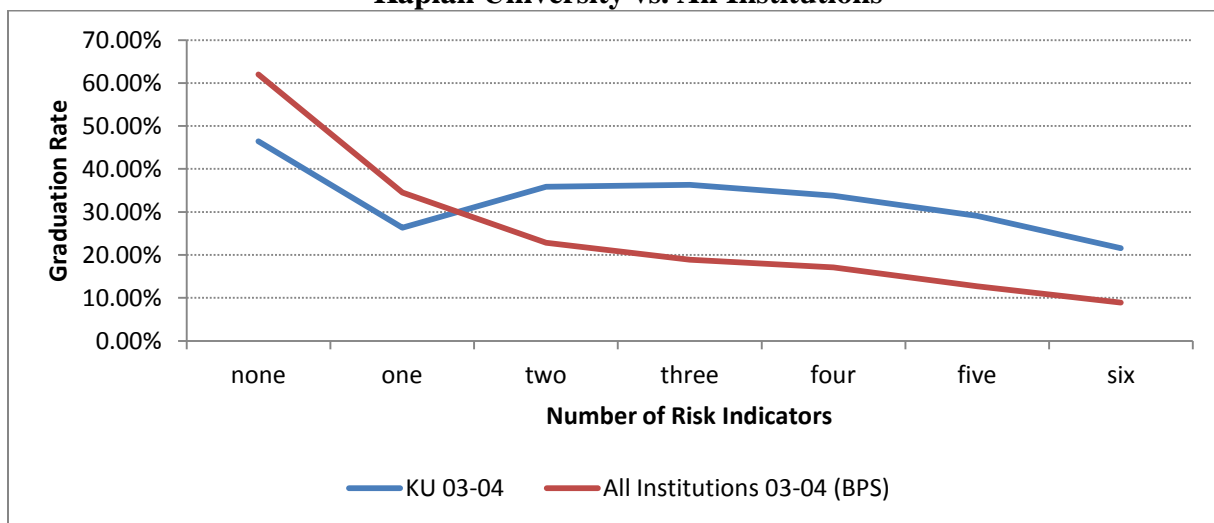
degrees) at Kaplan with the national average of all colleges and universities (public, non-profit, and for-profit).[iv] Among undergraduate students with two or more risk factors – the kind of student that Kaplan University enrolls – KU students generally graduate at an overall rate that is almost two times the national average (*32 percent versus a national average of 17 percent*).

Although KU's general graduation rate for at-risk students compares favorably to other institutions, the University obviously wants to see a much higher percentage of its students complete their degrees. Since KU developed its PLA program, students awarded credit via portfolios developed in EL203 have outperformed those not awarded such credit. Over the lifetime of the EL203 course offering, a total of 800 students (154 associate's and 646 bachelor's degree-seeking) have earned credit through the course. Institutional research office studies show that KU students who, at any point during their KU enrollment, completed the EL203 course through October 2011 have graduated at high rates, with *more than half graduating within the expected timeframe for their degree and more than 80 percent graduating within 150 percent of their expected timeframe* (See Table 2, below).

In addition, students completing the portfolio process show higher levels of academic performance: students awarded credit through the portfolio process had average GPAs of 3.57 compared to 2.43 for KU students without credits earned via portfolios from the process. These results typify the findings in the 2010 CAEL study of 62,000 students at 48 institutions that demonstrate PLA completers are more likely to persist to graduation with higher GPAs than those without PLA credits.[v]

Table 2: Graduation Rates at 100% and 150% of Expected Time Frame
For Students Completing EL203 at Kaplan University

	Graduation Rate Within X% of Expected Time	
Degree Level	*X* = **100% (n=285)**	*X* = **150% (n=195)**
Associate's	55%	91%
Bachelor's	53%	83%

Implementation Challenges

All faculty who serve as portfolio evaluators must be specifically trained in prior learning assessment and how to assess experiential learning portfolios using standardized evaluation criteria. At KU, the evaluator training course teaches faculty how to review student portfolios and how to make a decision as to whether credit for college-level learning should be recommended and ultimately awarded by the institution. The training is a self-paced, online course that potential evaluators complete in approximately 25 hours over a two-week period. All faculty must successfully complete the training in order to review portfolios for college credit. Portfolio evaluators are not compensated for training, but they do earn a flat-rate fee as compensation for each course petition evaluated. Two to three experts evaluate each portfolio and provide a credit recommendation to the institution. The University's Registrar office reviews the recommendations for actual posting of credit to students' degree plans.

Students frequently submit portfolios containing multiple course petitions. In addition to the tuition for EL203, students also pay a course fee of $1,500 which then covers the cost of any

post-EL203 support as well as all costs of the faculty time to assess their work (regardless of numbers of courses petitioned).

Since the KU program is online and has grown to scale serving thousands of students, the program clearly requires dedicated administrative and technical staff to ensure responsiveness, consistency, and quality. At small institutions, reaching "critical mass" to offer such a program can be challenging, whereas in institutions with large numbers of adult students the challenge may be to invest in online technology support and to involve sufficient numbers of faculty as portfolio evaluators.

Factors Important to the Success of the Strategy

Investments in technology and people were essential to the success of this retention initiative. An investment of approximately $1.2 million was needed to build the scalable, online system supporting the development and assessment of student portfolios. However, the critical resource needed for success in this kind of program is the commitment and training of university faculty who serve as evaluators needed to perform the reviews of student portfolios. At KU, close to 300 faculty from a variety of disciplines have been trained to evaluate experiential learning portfolios.

How Other Institutions Might Best Replicate the Strategy

Over the past 40 years, hundreds of higher education institutions have implemented effective PLA programs without the high costs of software for online delivery as incurred by KU.[vi] While portfolio-based PLA is found at many postsecondary institutions, KU's innovation is having built a scalable, online portfolio system to help students systematically assess creditable learning experiences as well as assemble and deliver their individualized electronic experiential portfolios to faculty for evaluation. KU welcomes inquiries by other institutions wishing to learn more about its PLA system described above.[vii]

Federal Regulatory or Statutory Requirements That Made Successful Implementation Easier or More Difficult

KU has been able to implement and expand PLA effectively within existing Higher Education Act statutory and regulatory frameworks because of its strong commitment to adult learners. Nonetheless, PLA is still found at the margin within the higher education sector, in part, because the government has not promoted it as an effective practice. The hidden message is that these practices are not valued, and because they are not valued, they are viewed as lacking the legitimacy to which, in fact, research shows they are entitled.

In order to put more nontraditional students on a path toward degree completion, the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA) concluded in a 2012 study that the federal government "might assist institutions with prior learning assessment (PLA) by making clear that all costs associated with assessing students' "college level" knowledge, skills, and abilities will be covered through Title IV, including faculty time."[viii]

The ACSFA also recommended that the federal government "should design policies that emphasize that what one knows is more important than where or how one learned it. Creating regulations that focus on credit hours as a benchmark for student achievement rather than evaluating students on learning outcomes through practices such as PLA conflicts with that view."[ix]

[i] KU Mission Statement, 2012-13 Kaplan University Catalog. The catalog can be downloaded from http://online.kaplanuniversity.edu/pages/Student_Consumer_Information.aspx. See also http://www.higherlearningcommission.org/component/com_directory/Action,ShowBasic/Itemid,/instid,1586/.

[ii] See these CAEL books: Thomas A. Flint and Associates, *Best Practices in Adult Learning: A CAEL/APQC Benchmarking Study* (New York: Forbes Custom Publishing, 1999) and Thomas Flint, Paul Zakos, and Ruth Frey, *Best Practices in Adult Learning: A Self-Evaluation Workbook for Colleges and Universities* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2002).

[iii] Information on CAEL's quality assurance standards for PLA is found at http://cael.org/Whom-We-Serve/Colleges-and-Universities/Prior-Learning-Assessment-Services.

[iv] The Kaplan Inc. analysis in Figure 1 is based on a 2003 student cohort assessed at years one, three and six after college entry. Data was drawn from the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System center (http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx). See National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2009; Graduation Rates, 2003 and 2006 Cohorts; and Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2009*, Table 10 (Washington, DC: NCES, 2011). Data derives from the NCES Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study 2003-2004.

[v] See the CAEL study: "Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes" (Washington, DC: CAEL, 2010). The KU findings parallel the CAEL findings both on the matter of graduation rates and GPAs; see pages 36-37 in the CAEL study. The study was supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education; the full report can be downloaded at http://cael.org/pdfs/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.

[vi] See the CAEL publication: Brian Z. Zucker, Chantell C. Johnson, & Thomas A. Flint, *Prior Learning Assessment: A Guide to American Institutional Practice* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1999).

[vii] Inquiries may be directed to tflint@kaplan.edu.

[viii] U. S. Department of Education, Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), *Pathways to Success: Integrating Learning with Life and Work to Increase National College Completion, (Washington, DC: ACSFA, 2012)*.

[ix] Ibid.

Appendix A: Standard Keywords and Tags

Adult Education
Competency-Based Learning
Degree Attainment
Non-Traditional Age Students
Prior Learning Assessment
Retention
Skill Assessments
Time to Degree