

Thirty Plus Years

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

(PLA)

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A Brief History of PLA...

Colleges & universities started receiving requests to assess the learning adult students had achieved outside of an academic setting

Cooperative
Assessment of
Experiential
Learning



**Convergence of 4
Events in the 1970's**

American Council on
Education (ACE)
began assessing
military training for
academic credit

Growing
perceptions ,
based on
demographic
shifts, that adult
learners would be
the 'new' clientele
of post-secondary
education

A Brief History of PLA...

- 1974: 3 year collaboration among –
 - Educational Testing Service (ETS) and a group of about 10 colleges
 - Entitled the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (C A E L)
 - To examine if there were best practices emerging (or that could be articulated) re valid and reliable assessment of prior learning

Still a Brief History of PLA...

○ **Outcomes of the C A E L project:**

- **An initial set of principles** to guide best practices... since revised twice
- **C A E L became...**
CAEL – Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
- **4 Strategies for measuring learning from experience emerged:**
 - Standardized exams (e.g., DANTES, CLEP)
 - Challenge exams (locally developed, usually)
 - Guidelines for Assessment (ACE PONSI)
 - Individualized assessment
 - Portfolios, focused evidence(s), recognition of certificates of achievement

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- ⦿ **def:** the assessment of learning attained through experiences irrespective of the time and place in which they occurred
- ⦿ **In the context of higher education...**

PLA is the process of determining if learning outside of an institute of higher education is equivalent to learning within the institution for the intent of granting college credit

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2006: CAEL Survey, 272 Institutions

- 3rd study in ~16 years → trends
- Sample closely represented universe of postsecondary institutions in the U.S.
- Summary.....

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- $\geq 90\%$ of colleges & universities offer some form of PLA
- Public institutions seem to be more open to accepting PLA than private institutions
- Mid-sized institutions (enrollment 1,000-5,000) more likely to create PLA credit than smaller institutions
- Fewer institutions in New England and Far West accept PLA compared to other regions
- **And... PLA is underutilized by students**

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Methods of Assessing Prior Learning:

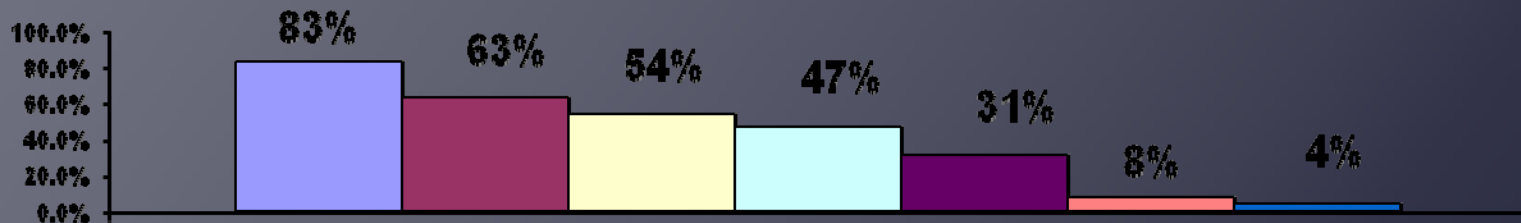
- Individualized portfolios or interviews – experiential learning
 - ACE Guides – published credit recommendations for non-collegiate instructional programs
- Challenge exams – locally developed
 - CLEP (College Level Exam Program)
- DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST)
 - Excelsior College Exams
- Validation of Local Training Programs

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- PLA credit is generally granted 2x as often to lower level than upper level credit... though there is a trend to the latter in response to what students are presenting with
- Max # credits → ave = ~30 from experiential learning; 42 from ACE Guidelines
- PLA at the graduate level → by <5% of institutions but growing interest in both education and business programs

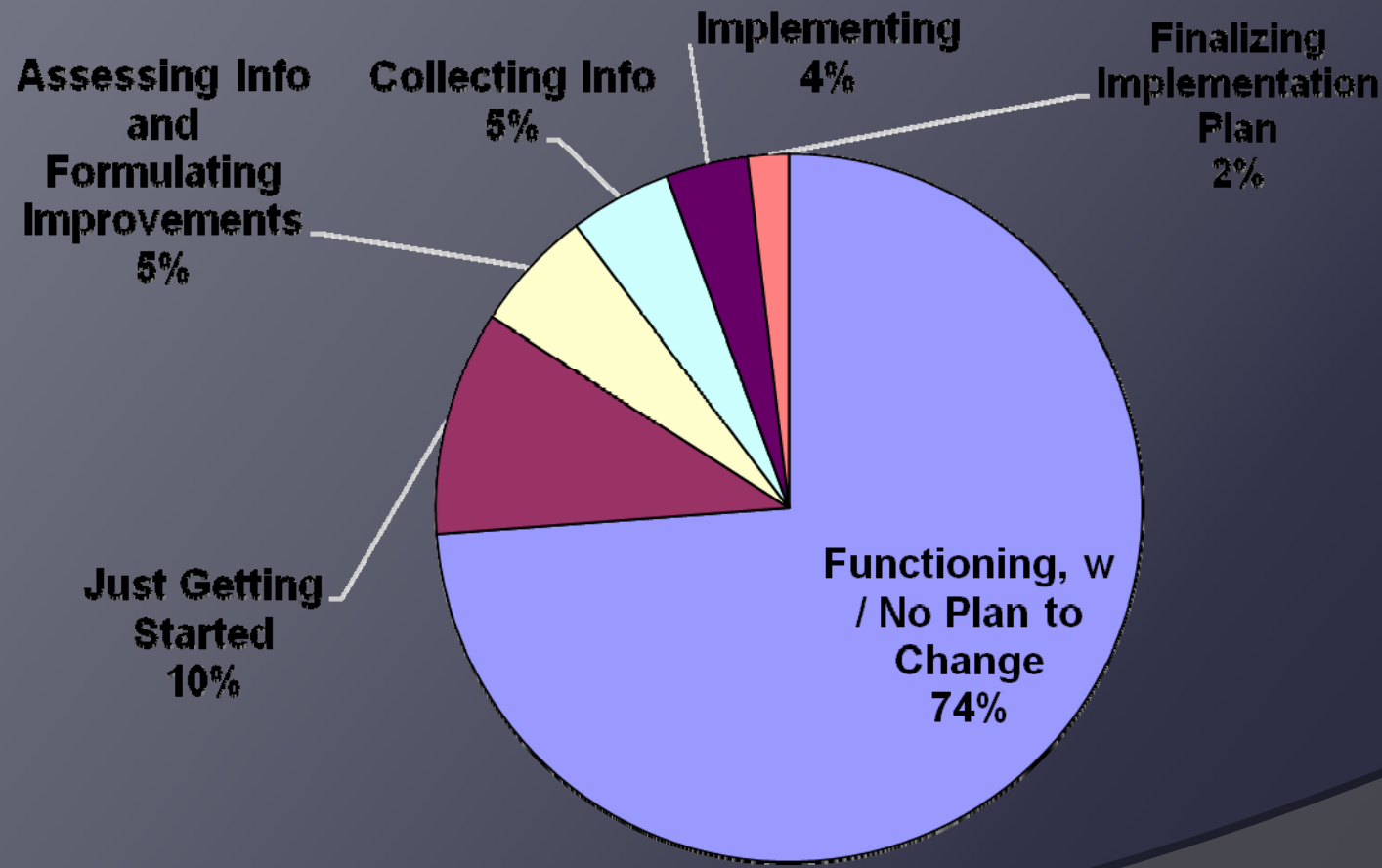
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Orienting and Supporting Students



- Individualized advising
- Student handbook or guidebook
- Pre-screening qualification prior to actual preparation
- Credit-based course that includes portfolio development
- Seminars, or workshops
- Other

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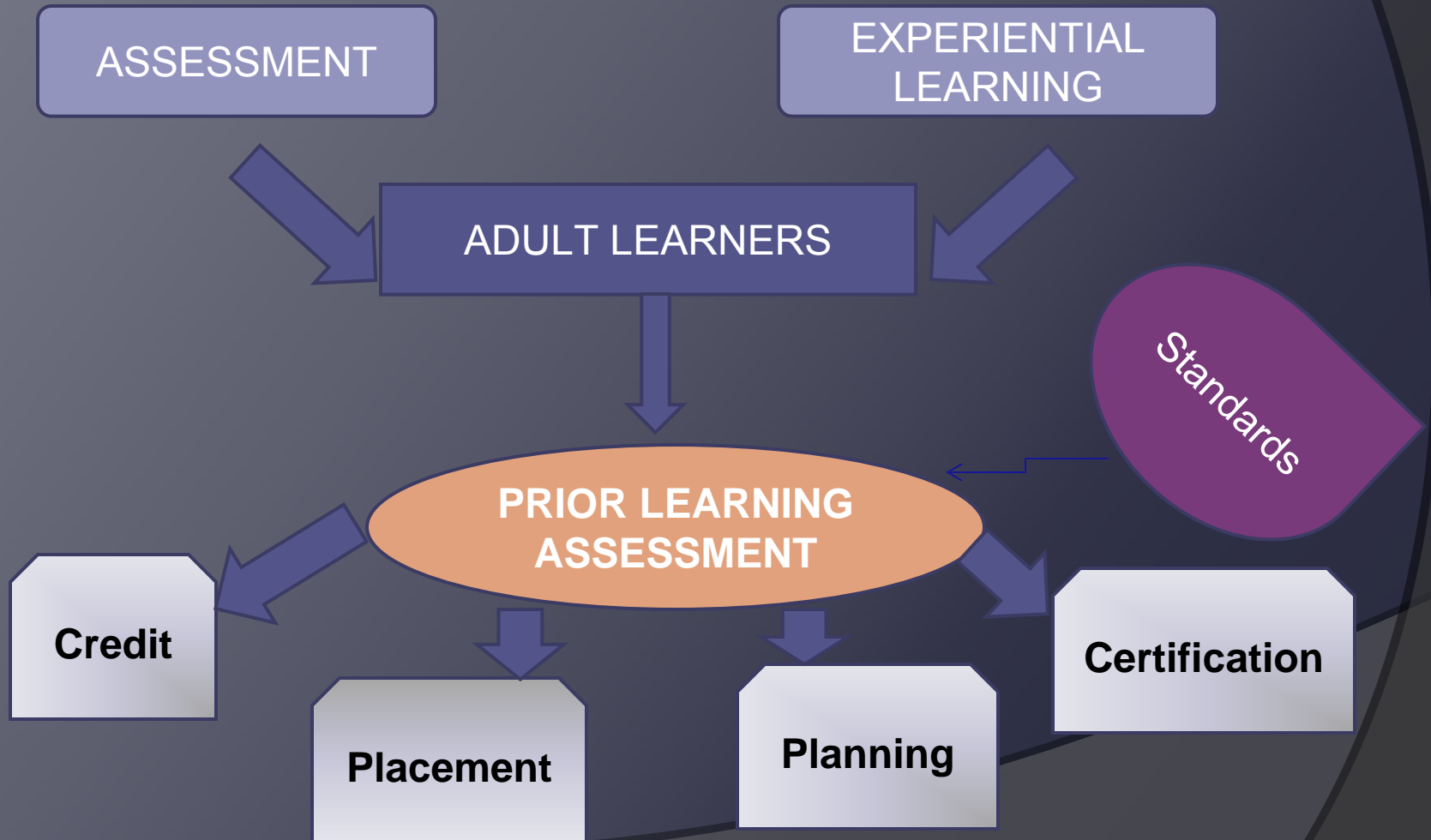
WORLDWIDE...

...legislated by national governments in Canada, Australia, and South Africa

...practiced in UK, Ireland, Estonia, France, Trinidad/Tobago, Bermuda



EVOLUTION OF PLA



TEN STANDARDS for ASSESSING LEARNING

○ Academic

- **STANDARD I: Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience**
- **STANDARD II: Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public**
- **STANDARD III: Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not apart from it, and be based on an understanding of learning processes**
- **STANDARD IV: The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts**
- **STANDARD V: Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted**

Fiddler, Marienau, Whitaker
2006 [Assessing Learning](#)

TEN STANDARDS for ASSESSING LEARNING

Administrative:

STANDARD VI: If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.

STANDARD VII: Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available for all parties involved in the assessment process

STANDARD VIII: Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded

STANDARD IX: All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and professional development for the functions they perform.

STANDARD X: Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and in the state of the assessment arts

Joining the move to establishing PLA...

- ◎ Is a series of decisions...
 - * to adopt the standards?
 - * to revisit our relationships with students, particularly adult learners?
 - * to build on the practices and lessons learned from our colleagues across higher education?



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