

## Update on Activities of the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Council

Background: BOR Policy 301.19 was approved on September 17, 2015.

1. The Policy established a statewide PLA Council. Members for the PLA Council were nominated by campus chief academic officers and appointed by Commissioner Clay Christian. The Council consists of five faculty plus representatives from registration and records, academic advising, chief academic officers, financial aid, veteran's offices, TAACCCT grants, and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (see roster below).
2. The overarching focus of the Council is to aid in the implementation of the Board-approved PLA policy.
3. Council members were nominated by Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) in the Montana University System based on these criteria:
  - Willing to commit necessary and required time to thoroughly understand PLA and be able to regularly attend meetings.
  - Willing to communicate with various constituency groups and home campus colleagues.
  - Well-versed in the depth and breadth of knowledge of academic issues, processes, and constituencies.
  - Willing to face conflict and critics.

### Council Goals & Responsibilities:

- Work with campuses on implementation and efficacy of PLA Policy and Guidelines
- Stay current with NWCCU policies, services and procedures that may impact PLA
- Review, report and make recommendations to the Board of Regents, based on data from the institutional and state level to determine trends and student academic outcomes to include:
  - Number of students awarded PLA credits
  - Types of assessment methods
  - Associated costs to students
  - Analytics on subsequent student success

## Internal reporting

An early task of the PLA Council was to establish structures, roles, and communication protocols between the campuses and the Council. The Council made the following recommendations for the roles of the CAO and the PLA Liaison for each campus in the MUS.

- Chief Academic Officer: 1) Appoint the campus PLA Liaison and ensure ongoing communication; 2) Ensure PLA is policy is written, vetted on campus, and shared with OCHE; 3) Ensure participation in system implementation efforts; 4) Ensure faculty are engaged in giving input to the PLA Liaison.
- Campus PLA Liaison: 1) Coordinate with faculty, administrators, staff, CAO, OCHE and students; 2) Inform CAO or designee of PLA progress, issues, and announcements; 3) Communicate with and solicit input from faculty governance. Faculty senates may wish to appoint a member to communicate with Liaison; 4) Inform PLA Council on campus progress and implementation issues; 5) Advise internal and external campus effort on PLA promotion, and coordinate with community resources (e.g. Veteran's Centers, Job Service, etc.); 6) Establish, convene, and facilitate a short-term PLA workgroup to meet at least twice per year to seek stakeholder feedback to advise and support CAO on institutional policy, identify groups, issues, what works, how to leverage resources and recommend communications strategies for adult students to learn about PLA.

## PLA Council Activities

New member orientation (teleconference) January 28, 2016: Several of the members of the PLA Council were also members of the PLA Taskforce that drafted the MUS PLA Policy 301.19, but some of the members were new. Susan Jones and Stephen Lodmell led an orientation seminar via telephone and internet to introduce the various kinds of PLA and the broad goals of the PLA Policy to all members.

The PLA Council convened face-to-face meetings on February 4, March 10, May 5, and August 9, 2016. The purpose of these meetings was to establish PLA Council goals and priorities, to implement several small work groups according to the priority areas, and to discuss progress and results from each work group. At each meeting, participants who could not travel to the meeting were invited to participate via speaker phone.

After the first meeting, the Council solicited information and input from stakeholders around the system through the network of PLA Liaisons at each campus. PLA Liaisons hosted campus stakeholder surveys and follow-up meetings. Feedback from these local meetings was relayed

to the PLA Council, and this information was used to guide the PLA Council priorities for the first year of its existence.

### **PLA Council Priorities for Year 1**

In the first two meetings, with the help of input from PLA Liaisons and their colleagues from each campus, the Council discussed the current state of PLA in Montana, and deliberated on the areas in which the Council could aid efforts to increase the effective, best practices use of PLA in the MUS. Inasmuch as many forms of PLA have already been in use across the system, but often at a small scale and without coordination between units, the Council established a focused set of areas to work on in the first year.

A recurrent cautionary theme from the stakeholder meetings was the importance of careful advising when considering whether to apply for PLA credits, and how many to pursue. In particular, care must be taken to only transcript the credits that are applicable to the student's degree program so as not to jeopardize the student's financial aid award. This is especially important when evaluating prior learning and training of veterans and military personnel, who may be eligible for a large number of credits via ACE evaluation, but who may only benefit from a smaller number of the credits that are applicable to the student's degree program.

Another frequent request from the stakeholder groups was the need for initial and ongoing PLA training for involved faculty, advisors, admissions and registrar's office personnel, financial aid advisors, and for targeted groups of students. Annual refresher training for PLA Advisors was deemed very important.

After deliberation, the PLA Council determined the following are key areas of focus during this initial implementation stage:

- I. **Institutional Policies & Guides.** Per Policy 301.19, each campus in the MUS was directed to identify a PLA Liaison and to establish campus-specific PLA policies and guidelines that articulate nuances, processes, etc., that are tailored to each unit's needs. The PLA Council sent our requests via the Liaison network for each unit to provide PLA Policy or Guideline documents that meet the local needs of the institution.

Progress and results: To date, the PLA Council received copies of eight sets of unit-specific PLA policies or guidelines. Some of these documents are still being vetted by stakeholders at the individual units, and some are combined policies and guidelines for associated units, e.g., UM-Missoula and Missoula College.

- II. **Tracking, Transfer, and Transcription.** For effective use of PLA credits, there is a compelling need to be able to transfer PLA credits between units of the MUS, to be able to compositely track the progress and success rates of students who use PLA, and to establish an MUS-wide system of transcription that is coherent and uniform. The PLA Council established a Tracking, Transfer and Transcription work group, which worked closely with Montana Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (MACRAO) to establish recommendations to accommodate these goals.

Progress and Results: The Tracking, Transfer, and Transcription work group, together with MACRAO, established codes for use in Banner at each institution that enables tracking of each kind of PLA credit. The credits are entered on the student's transcript in the Transfer section, which does not count toward the student's current credit load to avoid interference with financial aid calculations. Upon recommendation by the PLA Council, Deputy Commissioner Tyler Trevor sent out a request to all registrars in the MUS to enter these codes for use in Banner beginning in Fall semester 2016.

- III. **PLA Fees.** A tenet of judicious use of PLA is that fees for assessment should reflect the costs incurred during assessment, and should not be based on a 'fee per credit' model. The PLA Council established a work group to study the current fee structure for different types of PLA around the MUS and around the country to try to establish baseline fees that could be recommended for use at MUS campuses, allowing for local circumstances that may require a different fee structure.

Progress and Results: The PLA Fees work group did an extensive survey of fees for PLA credits within and outside the MUS. The work group made recommendations for appropriate fee levels for different types of PLA to the PLA Council. The Council discussed the fee recommendations and approved a recommended schedule of fees that will be sent to the CAOs of each unit for comment and feedback.

- IV. **Veterans Outreach and Promoting PLA on and off Campuses.** Enhancing visibility of PLA is an important objective in order to aid students who have prior college-level learning that they could potentially apply toward a college degree. Efforts to improve PLA visibility will be beneficial to students, and will help to engage more, often non-traditional, students in higher education in the MUS. Veterans constitute a large group of potential students who often have extensive military training that can be translated into course credits toward a degree via PLA. The Council established a Veterans outreach and PLA work group to enhance visibility and to study the ways that the MUS can communicate with veterans.

Progress and Results: The Veterans Outreach and PLA work group member Daryl Lee made an extensive fact-finding and outreach mission across the state of Montana to

collect perspectives on how to raise awareness of PLA opportunities to veterans with military training. The work group recommends sustained cooperation and communication between units of the MUS and local military bases and veterans organizations to maximize use of PLA for recruitment of veterans into higher education, to make steadfast efforts to minimize indiscriminate transcription of PLA credits that do not count toward the student's intended degree program, and to maximize the effectiveness of using prior military training toward the degree. The work group is studying the degrees that are most commonly chosen by veterans to develop a template for translating ACE-recommended credits from military training toward the most commonly sought after degree types.

- V. Apprenticeships and Credit for Internships.** The PLA Council established a work group to study how learning and training acquired through apprenticeships in the trades could lead to the allocation of PLA credits, and to study the parallel role of internships as partnerships between higher education and the workforce.

Progress and Results: The PLA Council established a work group whose membership includes faculty with direct experience with internships and apprenticeships. This work group is currently studying models to enhance higher-education/workforce collaborations that are mutually beneficial.

### **In Conclusion**

The PLA Council's activities in its inaugural year have focused on gathering information from campuses within the MUS to enhance effectiveness of PLA, improving visibility of PLA both on campus and in the greater community, and enabling tracking of PLA to ensure student success. The Council has identified priorities areas within these thematic areas, and the results are beginning to be apparent. Future effective use and expansion of PLA as a tool to aid in recruitment and degree completion will require sustained efforts by the MUS as well as individual units, especially in the areas of outreach, visibility, and for training of advisors, faculty, and admissions office and registrar office personnel.

## Council Members

1. Stephen Lodmell (Chair) – University of Montana, Missoula
2. Joel Sims – Great Falls College MSU
3. Bill Ryan – Highlands College of Montana Tech
4. Michael Schulz – UM Western
5. Katherine Williams – MSU Northern
6. Ann Ellsworth – MSU Bozeman
7. Garth Sleight, Miles Community College
8. Dena Wagner-Fossen, Great Falls College MSU
9. Ron Larsen, MSU Bozeman
10. Clifford Coppersmith, City College of MSU Billings
11. Ricki Jones, UM Western (vacant as of July, 2016)
12. Elizabeth Toenyes Engebretson, Student Representative

### Ex-Officio

Shawn Grove, VETS Office, UM Missoula

Lexy Fisher, TAACCCT Grants (vacant as of September, 2016)

Susan Jones, OCHE

John E. Cech, OCHE