**Workforce 3One**

**Transcript of Webinar**

**Implementing Effective Acceleration Strategies Virtual Institute**

**Prior Learning Assessments: A critical strategy for adult learners**

**Monday, November 30, 2015**

*Transcript by*

*Noble Transcription Services*

*Murrieta, CA*

ERIC BELLINO: Thanks, everyone, and I'm going to turn it over to Samantha Brown.

SAMANTHA BROWN: Hi. I'm Samantha Brown. I work at the Department of Labor in the national office. This is the second of three webinars of the implementing effective acceleration strategies virtual institute. The topics of discussion during this virtual institute are in response to feedback from TAACCCT grantees on items that you want more information about. So we hope that you find today's webinar helpful. A lot of resources will be referenced today and are available on SkillsCommons at skillscommons.org.

I also wanted to mention that the deadline for submitting the proposal for a session at the TAACCCT convening in February of 2016 is December 4th. We have already gotten some great proposals and look forward to seeing even more.

Now, I would like to introduce our moderator for today's webinar, Rachel McDonnell, senior program manager at Jobs for the Future and our presenters, Sandy Goodman, director for career pathways at the National College Transition Network, Ellen Hewett, director at the National College Transition Network, Rilla Jones vice president of instruction at Northeast Mississippi Community College, and Louise Bradley, credit for prior learning coordinator at Southwest Wisconsin Technical College. So now, I will turn it over to Rachel.

RACHEL MCDONNELL: Thank you so much, Samantha. And I'd like to echo the welcome to everybody for joining today's event. I think, as you can tell, we've got a great group of presenters and Samantha introduced everybody.

But just to reiterate we've got Sandy and Ellen from the National College Transition Network, and also we've got two great college practitioners, Rilla Jones and Louise Bradley. So they all have a wealth of knowledge about prior learning assessment and will be great content experts and will guide you in some really rich discussions. And I know I look forward to hearing from their experiences as well.

Sorry. Do we want to go – I think this guy's slide skipped. So I'm not sure if we want to go back to it. OK. So I want to start by doing a quick overview of today's agenda. We're obviously right now in the welcome and introductions, and we'll be moving into a brief introduction to prior learning assessment before we get into our deep dive sessions.

We'll then be breaking up into our two groups, the 101 and the deep dive, and we'll come back together after about 50 to 60 minutes in those breakouts for a quick wrap-up. We'll talk about some of the takeaways and highlights of those two breakouts and talk a little bit more about where the field is heading in general. And then we'll end by sharing a few resources for your work.

I want to start off this section of the webinar by talking about the problem that we're trying to solve both today in this particular event and also throughout this series of events. And we know that it's increasingly important for colleges to ensure that students complete credentials and find success in the labor market.

And I think there's also a growing recognition among all of our colleges that for the non-traditional learners that we're serving, we allot more innovative and distinctive approaches in order to improve academic success. And so one of those strategies and the one we're going to focus on today is prior learning assessment, which we are finding for those non-traditional learners, is a really important innovative strategy and one worth including.

So prior learning assessments, just to make sure we're all on the same page here, is the process by which colleges can evaluate for academic credit the skills that students have learned outside of the classroom.

Prior learning assessment refers to this variety of approaches for evaluating college-level knowledge and skills that individuals may have learned. And these skills could have been learned in any number of a variety of settings, including military training and employer-provided training but also things like hobbies and civic activities and volunteer service.

The reason for this is that we know many students come to our colleges after having been in the workforce or the military for a number of years. So they come to us with competencies that they have learned on the job, and many of those are applicable to a college credential. So by recognizing this learning and providing the appropriate academic credit, we're able to then greatly accelerate the time that those students need to complete their post-secondary credential, and this allows them to finish their programs more quickly and also at a lower cost.

There's a lot of different methods for offering prior learning assessments, and Sandy Goodman will be talking about these in a lot more detail in the 101 session. So I don't want to go into a lot of detail on them, but some of the most common ones are standardized exams, so advanced placements, college-level examination programs, challenge exams, evaluation of non-collegiate instruction, and portfolio assessment. There's also a lot of nationally established standards that can help institutions assess whether a student's skills or competencies merit academic credit.

I want to turn to this question of why we should do prior learning, and, as I said, we know that it's helpful for those students who are coming to our colleges with a wealth of experience obtained outside of the classroom. But we also know that there is just a huge demand for this nationally.

We have 87 percent of Americans saying that they believe that prior learning assessment makes sense, and 75 percent think it would make them more likely to enroll in postsecondary education. So given that we are all pushing for greater postsecondary attainment in this country, it makes sense to think about prior learning assessment as a way to attract a lot of new students into higher education and better serve the ones that are already in our colleges.

The other piece that's important to know is that 62 percent of adults who return to school chose their school based on the options for credit for prior learning. So we know that students are paying attention to this, and they are looking at what colleges offer when making decisions about where to go back to school.

The other important factor is that prior learning assessment is an effective strategy. CAEL has done a lot of great research on this topic, and they have found overall that students who earn credit for prior learning are more likely to complete a degree, and they're going to do so in less time overall. So it's clearly an important strategy for acceleration.

Along those lines, we're also seeing that students who earn credit for prior learning are two and a half times more likely to complete their degree. And when we started looking at that by smaller subgroups, for example, by student for students of color, that number increases to eight times. So it's a hugely important strategy, especially when trying to get some disadvantaged populations into and through postsecondary.

Another piece that CAEL found through their research is that community colleges are actually pretty familiar with prior learning assessments, and most do offer it primarily through CLEP and AP exams and challenge exams and military transcript review.

The challenges we're finding is that even when it's offered, students don't necessarily take advantage of the opportunity, and this is what Ellen and her co-presenters are going to really dig into in their breakout session is how do you expand the use of PLA at colleges so that more students are able to take advantage of this great resource.

And with that, I am going to turn it over to Ellen Hewett, the National College Transition Network, and she is going to share a great video with us.

ELLEN HEWETT: Thanks a lot, Rachel, and hello, everyone. The video you're about to see is two and a half minutes long, 2 minutes and 27 seconds, to be exact, and it was produced by the NCTN for the retraining the Gulf Coast Workforce Consortium. And so we'll talk a bit more about that later but I just wanted to let you know that and that it is available on SkillsCommons.

The video was produced to help to raise students' awareness about the potential of prior learning assessment and introduce students to the PLA processes. And we co-developed it with members of the GCIT Consortium to make sure that we can both make it specific enough to be useful for students and also generic enough so that it would be useful to other colleges and not just any specific college. And I think we've done that.

There's also a companion guide, and the companion guide shows different scenarios about how do you maybe – ideas about using the video as a student recruitment activity, program orientation, or in a one-on-one advising setting. So now, I think Eric is going to be able to start the video. OK. Thanks, Eric.

(video plays)

MS. MCDONNELL: Thank you, Ellen, for sharing such a great video with all of us. It really – learned a lot from it.

MS. HEWETT: You're welcome.

MS. MCDONNELL: Now, let's go ahead and prepare for the breakout session, and to do that I want to just chair two questions for you to be thinking about as you go into your breakout session. Both breakouts are going to touch on these two questions.

So first, I want you to think about what are the most promising PLA approaches, and I also want you to be thinking a little bit about how campuses can deepen implementation of PLA and impact and expand those strategies so that they can impact even more students. Then we'll come back to these at the very end of the webinar too when we ask our presenters to share some of their key highlights.

All right. So I'm going to turn it back to Eric, and you'll get us into our breakouts.

(breakout)

MR. BELLINO: OK. Thanks, everyone, for joining the breakout sessions. We are just going to do a little rundown of what happened in each breakout room. So, Rachel, do you want to take care of breakout room one, and then, Ellen or Louise, you guys can take care of two after we're finished?

MS. MCDONNELL: Sure. That sounds great. So, Sandy, I did take a few different notes during the presentation. So I can read those, or if you want to share your highlights, that's OK too.

SANDY GOODMAN: Why don't you go ahead? I saw your notes coming up. That was helpful.

MS. MCDONNELL: Yeah. There was a lot of great content really digging into how to get a challenge exam put in place, but some of the high-level takeaways that I jotted down, one was this idea that the credit is for the knowledge and skills and not the experience itself and needing to be clear with students about that distinction.

One thing we heard loud and clear was that faculty inputted critical for any method of prior learning assessments, and we heard about ways challenge exams, how important it was for those faculty to feel really comfortable with the exams and be clear that they were – that students were actually demonstrating the skills and knowledge that students were – that the faculty were expecting.

Another big theme was just that processes need to be clear and transparent for students. So that includes all the methods that they can use and the timeframes and who they need to talk to. And at the same time, everybody really needs to be aware of PLA. We heard about navigators and advisors, registrars, faculty so that students are getting the message from multiple places that this exists and it is an option for them.

In terms of the challenge exams themselves, we have heard that it can be a mix of both a written test or a skills tech op, depending on what type of class you're looking at. So – (inaudible) – there were some things that you couldn't really cover in a written exam but you could do sort of a skills test.

And then one other piece that I thought was great was that industry partners – bringing them in once ACM has been developed to validate those challenge exams and make sure they also believe that the assessment is really covering everything that they would expect from someone graduating from that class.

And then we also heard that, in terms of the fee for doing the assessment, which the college was able to get a really low fee, which is great for students, but then also in some cases even industry partners might be willing to cover the transcripting fee, if they're seeing the value of it for both their employees and also people who might be coming to them after they're done with their program.

So those are just a few of my highlights, and, Sandy or Rilla, you may have some others as well that you'd like to share with us.

MS. GOODMAN: I think you get full credit. Good job. I don't have anything else to add at the moment.

MS. MCDONNELL: Thank you. And then I guess, Ellen, do you want to take room two, or do you have someone else that you'd like to talk about the takeaways from room two?

MS. HEWETT: Yeah. And also I'd like Louise to join me because we really did this together, and I'm sure that she has some things to amplify. So just giving you a heads up, Louise.

So some of the same kind of themes that are up there kind of I think we resonate with. I think one of the – two things that we kind of really unearthed is just similar to all of our experiences was the importance of certainly having effective policy but one that – one know – that it's known. It's promoted within the institution, across the institution.

And also making sure the faculty is getting engaged earlier in the process of developing the procedures and the challenge exams and other kinds of assessment processes earlier on. We often get caught up in terms of needing to get things started, as we all did, and then trying to bring faculty on board and if we could find ways of doing it sooner, that would be better for them to be full partners.

And the thinking about one of the things that I was aware of as we were talking today, I really appreciate the conversation from the participants – it was really helpful to me – is that the importance of also making sure that there's data collect – that there's a process of collecting data.

With the Meridian case, the register really made sure that when they did new procedures within the past three years, that they allow for there to be a way to be able to pull out the data in terms of prior learning credit with students without alerting anyone on the outwardly, publicly that it was – that their credits were earned through prior learning.

 And if we really want to kind of build a case to go beyond – once we begin to get the momentum going, get over the promotion hump many of us are contending with, we need to be able to collect the data and analyze it to make – to further make the case.

Louise, you have anything to add?

LOUISE BRADLEY: Yes. Thank you.

MS. HEWETT: You're welcome.

MS. BRADLEY: For us or in the conversation we were having around having the clear policies and procedures and as stated in – from the group one, making it very transparent so that everybody's aware of it. And for me it was getting the faculty buy-in that was a big key for us. And we had some great discussions around how to do that, whether it was – for us it was getting them involved in the process planning early as well as identifying competency levels for the different tests and so forth. So that was a big part of what we did and talked about.

I think a lot of emphasis around promotion, and that's where I find myself at for our – in our particular section or college. That's where I find myself at now is getting to a point where it can be promoted to all the different people and making it available outside of our college. Right now, it's just internal, and we really need to expand that to be external as well so people know that we do it.

MS. : And when you mean external, do you mean with your industry partners and –

MS. BRADLEY: Industry partner, employers, as well as to the general public.

MS. : I agree.

MS. BRADLEY: I think one of the things – when you watch TV at night, you see about five or six different colleges telling everybody, oh, we take your transfer credits. Well, so does everybody else. So making it available known that Globe University takes credits as well as Southwest Tech. So just getting that word out to the public.

MS. : I agree.

MS. MCDONNELL: Thank you so much, Ellen, and thank you, Louise, as well. So at this point we have a few more minutes left, and I'd love to ask the group – and I'd like to thank everybody for participating in today's event. If either you have any final takeaways, something – any aha moments that you had throughout – during your breakouts or any further questions that you're wondering about, we've got the report out chat open. So if there's either an aha or a question that you'd like to ask, we do have a few more minutes left, and I'd love to invite you to do so.

I do see one person is typing. So I'll see what comes up. And in the meantime, I'll just thank our – all of our presenters again. The – unfortunately, only able to be in one breakout room at a time, but the one I was in was fantastic. Yeah. We have a lot of really great information, just a ton of depth about the whole process of developing a challenge exam and getting buy-in, and it was great to hear that.

Let's see. OK. So we have another question, and I am – Sandy, I'm going to put you on the spot for this because I feel like this question is good for you. It's, "Elaborate on the navigator role and who this person is and what the process might be for when a student would see this person." I know, Sandy, I'm going to ask you to talk about this because I know you know a lot about navigators in general but also, Rilla and Louise, if you have any – (inaudible) – examples from your institutions, that would be helpful too.

MS. GOODMAN: Sure. Just briefly, many colleges have hired a college and career navigator, and when – at what point in the process a student sees that person really varies. But I think across all of the examples, certainly at the front end, either that navigator is – in Massachusetts in round one the instance was the navigator was actually collocated at a One-Stop career center to help people make their way to the college. So as it sounds, it's a navigator to help particularly non-traditional students really make their way through the kind of foreign terrain of college.

I – just because we don't have much time, I want to also encourage you again to use the SkillsCommon because I know the work that we did with the GCIT colleges, which is a toolkit and a student support services plan, are up on SkillsCommons or should be there soon. And I bet if you typed in navigator into the search, you'd find a lot of tools and resources from other consortia and their navigator work specifically.

And so yeah. Rilla or Louise, if you want to talk about instances on your colleges, that would be great.

MS. BRADLEY: We don't really – this is Louise. We don't really have a navigator. We have advisors that talk to students, and that's one thing I found that I thought our advisors were – had all the knowledge they needed and then found out that they really didn't or hadn't been – they hadn't been really – they hadn't taken on ownership of that role around credit for prior learning is basically what it came down to. So that was an area that we found that we really needed to emphasize is getting our advisors on board.

MS. MCDONNELL: Thanks, everyone.

RILLA JONES: We have the same thing. The navigators, once they get the – through the system a couple times, they are such a great resource. And they end up being commendation navigator, recruiter, advisor. They just do everything, and students will return over and over to them because they always have the answers. So giving them the background knowledge for these exams and helping them see the program as a whole but also help the students through every semester is very helpful.

MS. HEWETT: This is Ellen. I really agree with you, Rilla. I think that's really important.

MS. MCDONNELL: Thanks, everybody. And thank you, Christian, for adding the link to skillscommons.org and it looks like that will be a great resource for those of you thinking about how to tie in the role of the navigator into this larger question about how to expand the use of PLA on your campuses.

So we only have a couple minutes left, and so just before we go I do want to again thank you all for participating. And up on the screen you'll see that there's more resources for TAACCCT colleges at the website posted on your screen, and then of course we can see the SkillsCommons link in your – in the report out chat. Those are both really helpful places that you can find a lot of great information on PLA but also on acceleration and other topics that may be relevant to your TAACCCT grant.

And I think before we go my last role is to turn it back over to Eric Bellino from Maher & Maher who's going to do the final bit of wrap up. So thanks, everybody, and thanks again to all of our presenters.

MS. HEWETT: Thank you, Rachel.

(END)