Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in an Online Degree Program

by

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Abstract

Technological advances and changes to America's workforce have created a need for adult workers to upskill their abilities. Many of these adults address this need by pursuing a college degree. While adult learners tend to excel in their coursework their graduation rates lag behind those of traditional undergraduates. Credit for prior learning or prior learning assessment (PLA) has the potential to improve graduation rates and decrease time to degree for adult students. The current study examined the relationship of PLA with graduation rates for adult students in online degree programs of a large, private, for-profit institution. This study found a statistically significant relationship between graduation rates and the use of credit for prior learning (PLA). The study also revealed a significant relationship between degree completion and the type of PLA credit employed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The current path of the American job market is changing. It is estimated that by the year 2020 65% of jobs will require a college degree (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Adult students are returning to college to pursue the necessary credentials to attain these new jobs (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The path to a college degree is different for adult students than for traditional undergraduates. Adult students are typically employed part or fulltime and have adult responsibilities. These adult responsibilities limit access to traditional classes, student services, and money for college. Colleges have sought to adapt to adult learners by developing degree completion programs that employ various nontraditional delivery methods such as night classes, accelerated formats, and online classes. For adult students, every credit and every dollar count as the quest for an education and a better job tend to have specific goals related to time to completion, the total cost of the degree, and return on investment (Star-Glass, 2016).

The use of credit for prior learning can reduce the total number of credit hours required for a degree, therefore, reducing both the cost and time to completion (Olson & Klein-Collins, 2014). For these reasons it is imperative that colleges utilize prior learning assessment (PLA) options for college credit in adult degree programs as a way to attract, enroll and retain adult learners (Besendorfer, 2016). According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018). ACE documents and evaluates learning experiences to determine if it qualifies for college credit.

Adult learners prefer to determine what they will study and to incorporate real-world training and experiences into their programs of study (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015). Some adults struggle to engage in topics that they have already learned at work (Erisman & Steele, 2015) as well as those that might seem irrelevant to their professional direction. The use of credits from Prior Learning Assessment addresses both of these issues by allowing for reflection on previous learning activities and their relevance to the student's current path of study (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010).

This study sought to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree completion programs at a large, for-profit, online university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of full-time study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes American Council on Education transcripts, Council for Adult and Experiential Learning portfolios, credit for military training, challenge exams, and technical or professional certifications for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Overview of Prior Learning Assessment

According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (American Council on Education, 2018). Learning is documented and evaluated to determine if it qualifies for college credit.

Prior Learning Assessments are used to measure or validate learning in non-academic settings. Common examples of PLA are College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES), Advanced Placement, and portfolios. The most commonly used programs are CLEP testing and Advanced Placement (AP) exams for recent high school graduates. For adult learners the discussion focuses on the use of DANTES for military students and veterans, portfolio credits, and workforce training credits; workforce training is often absorbed into a university's portfolio program.

A report compiled by the American Council on Education explores the institutional policies, practices, and infrastructure related to Prior Learning Assessment at seven colleges and universities. The study reveals that colleges and universities with clearly written policies, effective methods of data collection, and the support of campus leaders benefited from increased student outreach and faculty support (Lakin, Nellum, Seymour, & Crandall, 2015).

Prior learning experiences are thought to impact learners affectively and behaviorally too. Adult learners participating in PLA programs cite improvement in social and personal development as they achieve life goals (Miguel, Ornelas, & Maroco, 2016). Rivera and Heinrich (2016) demonstrate the importance of co-curricular learning, especially the benefits of reflection on the experience as a teaching tool.

Research demonstrates that adult learners who participate in various PLA programs have higher rates of retention and graduation. Pearson (2000) states that students who complete the portfolio form of PLA persist toward graduation at higher levels than do students who are eligible and do not participate in the portfolio program.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning reported that adult students who receive some type of PLA credit have a graduation rate two and a half times greater than adult students who do not receive PLA credit.

A more recent study by Starr-Glass (2016) shows this trend to be consistent. Adults who participate in PLA programs have higher graduation rates than those who do not. This increase in graduation rates exposes an increase in retention rates and a decrease in non-graduate student loan debt (potentially defaults) which benefit the institution as well as the student.

One of the biggest challenges for colleges is assessing the creditworthiness of prior learning experiences. Prior Learning Assessments must take into account accreditation standards, appropriate demonstrations of mastery, and a level of rigor that is comparable to similar college coursework. The question of academic quality assurance is foundational to the study of PLA credit and its acceptance or rejection by many institutions. There is a need for consistency among colleges and universities—especially those within the same system of governance. Stenlund (2010) purports that this assessment must focus on the demonstrable aspects of learning rather than the experience in which the learning was obtained.

Some institutions still resist using PLA under the notion that it does not provide any new experience for learning (Stevens et al., 2010). This study of program alumni at the University Without Walls at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst reveals that the reflective nature of portfolio assessments, in this case, a written reflection, is not only educational but also transformational. Alumni stated a change in work, relationships, and other aspects of life tied to that reflective assignment.

Trowler (1996) seeks to establish an assessment approach that embraces both the credit exchange and the developmental (the British equivalent of a portfolio) model as opposite poles in a continuum. This holistic approach allows for both the measurement of skills and knowledge and for personal reflection and development.

Though there is no unified approach to using Prior Learning Assessments, some guidance offered by organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). These third-party organizations provide recommendations, training, and assessment services to member institutions.

The American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) provides validation of training and workforce education via a system of program assessment and the issuing of transcripts. Official documentation is provided for non-military corporate training completed through an ACE approved provider or course of study.

ACE also provides a database of approved workforce training courses in the ACE National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training (ACE, 2017). These courses can be cross-referenced with the ACE Credit College and University Network to determine which colleges accept specific types of PLA credit (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018).

Nationwide there are two hundred twelve institutions currently accepting the ACE Workforce/Corporate programs for credit. Two hundred fifty-one colleges utilize the ACE portfolio program for credit (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018). The majority of

the institutions on the list are public colleges but both private non-profit and for-profit colleges are represented.

CAEL provides structure to colleges on the development of portfolio programs and related portfolio classes. Institutional members have access to LearningCounts, an online portfolio assessment service. The PLA Accelerator program is designed to guide students through the process of applying for an evaluation of PLA opportunities. CAEL also assists institutions in preparing for accreditation review by providing a set of standards for PLA credit (CAEL, 2018).

Columbia Southern University

Columbia Southern University (CSU) is a private, for-profit university located in Orange Beach, Alabama. The university has been awarding credit for prior learning to adult students since its founding. All academic programs are offered fully online. The university is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission**.** CSU grants credit for ACE transcripts, DANTES, CLEP, institutional challenge exams, and specific technical and professional training articulations. Columbia Southern University recently joined the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and began using CAEL essays in Fall 2019 for undergraduate students. All students pursuing credit for prior learning are required to submit all documents for review at the time of enrollment. Students may earn up to 90 hours of credit via direct transfer, including ACE credits and challenge exams. Students may also receive up to 30 credits for approved experiential or equivalent learning programs, including CAEL portfolios, police officer training, and fire academy training. The PLA process is managed by the Office of the Registrar.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree completion programs at a large, for-profit, online university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of full-time study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes ACE transcripts, CAEL portfolios, credit for military training, challenge exams, and technical or professional certifications for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Statement of the Problem

While the number of adults enrolled in degree programs has increased in recent years, the graduation rate and degree attainment for adult students lags behind that of traditional students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Previous studies have focused on the use of Credit for Prior Learning in community colleges and adult degree completion programs, but little research has been accomplished in relation to adults in online degree programs.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between graduation rates and utilizing credit by Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) among adult students in online degree programs?

2. What is the relationship between the PLA method (direct transfer, testing, or portfolio) and graduation rates among adult students utilizing PLA credit in online degree programs?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1

Null Hypothesis:$H_0$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning did not graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Hypothesis:$H_1$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Question 2

Null Hypothesis: $H_0$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at the same rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Research Hypothesis: $H_1$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at a different rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Significance of the Study

The catalyst for this study was the need to help adult students attain a degree within a reasonable timeframe and lower educational costs. The current employment climate as well as new governmental programs related to both college completion and workforce training call for colleges and universities to revisit the idea of just what qualifies as learning. As institutions and employers discuss the issues of training and upskilling, as well as preparation for new kinds of jobs, there must be a new focus on

credit for prior learning. The use of PLA can make the degree more attractive and attainable for adults returning to school while valuing the need for relevant and applicable learning. It is imperative that colleges review PLA policies and outcomes to determine if it is helpful to students and cost-effective for the institution.

More studies are needed on PLA in online programs and at various types of institutions. This study sought to add to the body of knowledge regarding prior learning assessment and degree completion by examining outcomes for online adult students at a private, for-profit institution. The intended audience for this study was a group of university policymakers and adult educators seeking ways to increase adult degree attainment.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study was limited to online adult students in a bachelor's degree program at one for-profit university. The university is a large, for-profit institution located in the Southeast United States, therefore, the demographics of the sample may not be reflective of the total population of adult learners nationwide. The study was limited to students who enrolled in a bachelor's degree program from 2008-2012. It is possible that some enrolled students did not intend to complete the degree, but that data is not available. It was presumed that the data sets provided by the college were accurate and up to date. The study did not address outside factors that may have caused students to withdraw from the program prior to graduation.

Terms of the Study

Adult Learner: For the purposes of this study, an adult learner is defined as a student age 25 or older enrolled in a degree program.

Adult Degree Completion Program: An undergraduate program of study designed to meet the needs of working adult students. Programs are often acceleration, allow substantial transfer credits, and utilize credit for prior learning.

Challenge Exam or CLEP exam: An exam given to undergraduate students to demonstrate competence in a specified content area.

DANTES: Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support program provides challenge exams related to documented military training.

Direct Credit Recognition: Recognition of prior learning without the use of portfolios or exams. This type of recognition often involves a third-party certification or an institutional articulation agreement.

Graduation rate: “Graduation rate is the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within 150% of the published time for the program. For example, for a four-year degree program, entering students who complete within six years are counted as graduates” (FAFSA, 2018) .

Online Degree Program: Undergraduate college degree program offered fully online.

Portfolio Assessment: A PLA method that involves the student assessing and evaluating a learning experience on their own (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The process involves personal reflection, critical thinking, and application. Some institutions utilize a course for portfolio development while some contract with a third-party reviewer.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA): An evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (American Council on Education, 2018).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

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Adult College Students

The change in educational requirements for employment in the new workforce has led many adults to return to college for a degree. This change has created a new normal in regard to the demographics of the college classroom (Freed & Mollick, 2010). The new norm is moving toward non-traditional students, including both adult students and traditional-aged online learners. There is also a growing number of lower-income and minority adult students returning to college (Klein-Collins, 2011). These adult college students differ greatly from their more traditional peers in both their life situations and approaches to learning. As stated by Wlodkowski, (2008) "as adult educators, we have a moral and professional obligation to render postsecondary education accessible and successful for all adults" (p. 25). Higher education has increased their recruiting of adult students but can they meet their unique needs (Dagavarian, Walters, &

Walters, 2011)? In response, some colleges and universities have developed degree programs aimed specifically at adult learners.

In adult higher education it must be noted that learners may be distracted from their formal education by more immediate and higher-ranking needs such as family obligations, work schedule, financial strain or health issues (Mathew Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014c)—these factors may interrupt ongoing enrollment and even currently enrolled coursework. Adult programs must focus on the actual and felt needs of learners in order to become relevant and a higher priority. Many adult students have fulltime jobs and families and must attend college at night, on the weekends or online. These students are often too concerned about paying the bills or personal/family safety needs to see the benefits of education in meeting those needs as well as the lofty goal of academic fulfillment (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014a; Graduate! Network, 2019).

Wlodkowski (2008) considers responsibility to be the "cornerstone of adult motivation" (p. 96). Approached correctly, this feeling of responsibility can be the motivator for many adults to complete the credential that could lead to a better life (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015; Knowles, 1988).

A major issue facing adult education and higher education is the growing population of adult undergraduate students (Bergman & Olson, 2019). If the majority of college students are now adult learners (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), then have they become the new norm? What does this mean for education? Will there be a shift from traditional college teaching to an andragogical model? How will colleges adapt both their program offerings and teaching methodologies to meet this new demand?

Will institutions offer credit for workplace or lifelong learning in order to speed up the degree process?

Few institutions offer adult degree programs and many of those simply offer a traditional education model in a night school or online setting rather than a true adult program. An adult degree program is designed for working adults, typically over the age of 25, who have at least a semester of transfer credit from a previous college experience (Bergman, Rose, & Shuck, 2015). Research shows that adult learners are at a higher risk of not completing their degree programs (R Klein-Collins, 2010; Wlodkowski, 2008), therefore, colleges need the insights of adult educators to design programs to meet the needs (schedule, methodologies, outcomes, credit for prior learning, motivation) of adult learners if this trend continues (Mathew Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014b; Mathew Bergman et al., 2015). These insights will lead to the creation of new faculty and administrative jobs filled by adult education specialists trained to work with this population.

Adult Learning

A discussion of adaptations for adult higher education must start with an understanding of how and where adults learn. Adult education is a relatively new field of study. Its roots can be traced to the mid-twentieth century in the research of Lindeman, Knowles, and Houle (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult education can be described as multi-disciplinary, transdisciplinary, and interdisciplinary due to its interactions with other fields of study. It is unique in that it incorporates professionals and researchers from disciplines such as business, talent development, higher education, and the helping professions. Adult learning takes place

in a variety of settings from ESL classes at a library to professional development at a corporation to gardening classes at a community center to adult degree programs (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). This interdisciplinary approach lends itself to the study of credit for prior learning as an integration of various disciplines into a course of study.

Defining adult education has some challenges. The first challenge is defining an adult (Merriam, 2007). Age and criteria for adulthood vary greatly in different cultures (Wlodkowski, 2008) and can be based on social standing such as the difference between a 19-year-old with a job and a home versus a 19-year-old living in a college dorm. While the first student fits the age demographic of a traditional college student, the life situation and motivation may demand a non-traditional approach to a college education that employs a flexible schedule and a career-focused curriculum.

The second challenge is to determine what constitutes education—is it strictly formal classroom studies or is it broader than that? It seems that many American educators approach adulthood from a developmental or age-based perspective and the term education implies a more formalized or intentional approach to learning. In the case of adult degree programs, students are typically considered adults, for purposes of enrollment, when they reach the age of 23 to 25 (Ludden, 1996; Klein-Collins, 2010). This age-based categorization may become blurry when life situation is factored in and often does not apply to online programs. Many adult programs are considered degree completion programs and require previous college credit and work experience (Bergman, 2019).

Andragogy

Adult students approach a college education differently than traditional students because adults learn differently than children (Knowles, 1988; Tough & Knowles, 1985). Adult educators must understand how adults learn and design their courses accordingly. Andragogy is the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1988) as opposed to pedagogy which refers to teaching children. Malcolm Knowles is often referred to as the "Father of Andragogy"; his research into adult learning theory eventually led to the formal development of andragogy as a separate theory of education (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015). Knowles based his theory upon a set of assumptions related to adult learning motivation. This theory was not a methodology for how to teach adults but rather a set of principles that drive adults to learn that can be utilized in most learning environments.

Based on the key concept that adult learners are self-directed learners, Knowles developed six Core Adult Learning Principles.

1. The Learner's Need to Know
2. Self-Concept of the Learner
3. Prior Experience of the Learner
4. Readiness to Learn
5. Orientation to Learning
6. Motivation to Learn (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015).

While childhood education (pedagogy) is focused on completing the study of a subject within a set scope and sequence, andragogy is problem-focused in that adults are driven by a need or desire for knowledge or change (Knowles M. S., 1988). Adults

pursue learning for a specific reason or motivation (Houle, 1961; Wlodkowski, 2008). For adult college students this often means a desire for learning that applies to their career goals. While Lindeman (1926) states that adult education is more than just vocation, many adults do seek coursework that applies to their work directly or leads to a better employment situation rather than the general courses that many programs require. When adult learners find personal or professional relevance and application in their coursework they perform better and receive higher grades and are motivated to continue learning (Wlodkowski, 2008; Wlodkowski, Mauldin, & Gahn, 2001).

One limitation of pedagogy in adult education is that it treats adult students like children by controlling the process of education and by limiting learner independence (M. S. Knowles, 1988). This exercise of choice in self-directed learning takes many forms: choice of projects, choice of courses, and choice of learning methodologies (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015). Self-directed or self-motivated learning is the process of guiding students to control the selection of goals, outcomes, and learning activities in their educational experience (Wlodkowski, 2008; Yount, 1996).

The integrated concept of self-motivation is an important element in planning for independent studies and e-learning programs that remove the physical presence of an instructor. Lindeman (1926) states that the role of the adult educator is different from the traditional teacher in that he is "no longer the oracle who speaks from the platform of authority, but rather the guide, the pointer-out who also participates in learning" (p. 6).

Motivation to Learn

Why do adults enroll in learning programs and classes? The current labor market promotes the idea that adults return to school only to obtain the necessary credentials for

a better job but that does not present the whole story. In the 1950s, Cyrus Houle (1961) conducted research at the University of Chicago into the reasons that adults engage in continuing education. Building on Lindeman's (1926) theory that adult education is holistic and rooted in specific life situations, Houle's research identified three categories of adult learners based on motivation: Goal-Oriented, Activity-Oriented, and Learning-Oriented (Houle, 1961).

1. Goal-Oriented Learners. These learners engage in learning to accomplish a specific goal or meet a specific life/work need. Learning activities are typically sporadic arising only with need. Adults actively seeking a college degree or a professional certification for employment purposes would fit into this category.
2. Activity-Oriented Learners. These adults engage in learning for the social context or activity of learning. There is not always a specific goal or outcome in mind beyond the social interactions of the activity itself. Examples include community center programs, gardening classes, and travel clubs.
3. Learning Oriented Learners. These learners tend to learn for the sake of learning. There is often a consistent pursuit of learning via various methods, activities, classes, and reading (Houle, 1961). Adults in this category might pursue formal learning programs for the sake of learning more or for a sense of personal fulfillment.

Adult college students would likely be classified as Goal-Oriented Learners, but many continue their formal education simply out of a desire to continue learning

(Learning Oriented). Houle proposed a fundamental system of educational design for adult learners. The assumptions of Houle's design include contextual learning, human experience, education as a practical art, cooperative education and that education is a complex system made of various interacting events and elements (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015). Houle's model fits well within the current practice of adult degree completion and prior learning assessment programs.

Building on the work of Houle, Tough (1979) focused on self-initiated learning in adulthood, specifically learning projects. Tough presents the teacher as a helper who spends time with the learner and shows care, support, and friendship (Tough, 1979).

Tough's research has specific modern applications in the field of eLearning—both formal and informal approaches (Moore, 1986). Many online courses function like independent studies and rely on learner self-motivation. The teacher then takes on the role of encourager rather than instructor and often focuses more on providing feedback rather than giving information or instruction. This self-directed approach to learning is evident in the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) and organizations such as StraighterLine, Unbound, and Coursera (Coursera, 2020; Pearson, 2020; Sandeen, 2013; StraighterLine, 2020). These programs allow students to enroll and complete the course at their own pace and then apply for college credit at participating institutions.

Adults are driven to learn by an intrinsic desire to continuously improve themselves and their life—to find personal meaning and to give meaning to their life situations (Houle, 1961; Wlodkowski, 2008). Adult educators serve as motivators and encouragers of this natural desire whether its focus is on personal growth, accomplishment, or attaining better employment.

Formal/Nonformal/Informal Education

Where do adults learn? Adult education is not limited to formal coursework but takes place throughout all aspects of life (Knowles, 1973; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Michelson & Mandell, 2004). Learning is holistic and incorporates the various roles, situations, and experiences of life (Dewey, 1986; Lindeman, 1926). While formal learning is related to educational institutions and schools that offer degrees or certifications, non-formal learning is done at organizations that teach but are not considered schools (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). These learning activities may be organized but they do not lead to a specific credential. Examples of providers include churches, community organizations, libraries, and some professional training programs.

By contrast, informal learning is learning that is done during the day-to-day activities of life. Most informal learning is experiential in that it is learned in the process of participating in an activity or interacting with a person or group. These experiences are valuable to learning in that they often frame or inform adult learners as they participate in more organized learning (Dewey, 1986; Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015; Lindeman, 1926).

Role of Experience

A major component of adult learning is the role of the learner's prior experience in life, work, and learning environments (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015; Kolb, 1983; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). John Dewey (1986) addressed the priority of prior experience in adult learning. Dewey posited that in order for education to effect change in society and create meaning to the individual learner, it must give priority to the learner's experience (Dewey, 1986). It is this prior experience combined with the

learner's current situation that makes sense and gives application to learning. Evaluating adult learner experiences for academic credit allows students to connect past learning, including nonformal and informal, to the material being covered in the classroom thus creating a truly holistic and relevant approach to learning (B. Klein-Collins & Hain, 2009; Rebecca Klein-Collins et al., 2018; Michelson & Mandell, 2004).

David Kolb's Model of Experiential Education (1984) is considered to be foundational in the field of experiential education. The theory is rooted in the idea that students learn more through personal discovery and experience than traditional methods.

Kolb breaks the process of experiential learning down into four stages:

1. Concrete Experience—participating in the activity
2. Reflective Observation—thinking about, reviewing or analyzing one's performance in the activity, specifically personal success and failure; often includes seeking input from observers, teacher or other participants
3. Abstract Conceptualization—seeking to understand the experience, may utilize prior knowledge or theory to make connections
4. Active Experimentation—consideration of how this experience can be utilized in the future—within the learner's personal context (A. Y. Kolb & D. A. Kolb, 2017; D. A. Kolb, 1984).

Kolb's theory aligns well with the common methods of adult education. This approach allows learners to experience the material first-hand rather than simply reading about it or listening to the experiences of others. Potential uses include apprenticeships, projects (rather than papers), co-op programs, and career/technical educational settings.

Kolb (1984) stated that “as the population, in general, grows older and the frequency of adult career change continues to increase, the 'action' in higher education will be centered around adult learners who demand that the relevance and application of ideas be demonstrated and tested against their own accumulated experience and wisdom" (p. 6).

Workforce Learning

Workforce Development, or workforce learning, can be defined as the “wide range of education, training and professional development activities carried out in the workplace (Short & Harris, 2017). These programs seek to train or upskill employees for new roles, or to improve performance in the workplace.

> “Workforce development initiatives aim to deliver targeted education, training, and employment support services that allow people to improve their opportunities for employment. These initiatives assist governments, universities, and training institutions to understand and anticipate the changing demand for skills. Workforce learning programs build tools and systems that bring together job seekers and employers” (What is Workforce Development, 2017).

The rapid rate of technological advancement and cultural change has created a growing need for an educated workforce (Matt Bergman & Herd, 2017). More career paths now require a college degree than in the past (*A Skilled and Educated Workforce: 2015 Update*, 2015; Mathew Bergman et al., 2015). This is partially related to the need to work with technology and a renewed focus on STEM careers but there is also a new focus on soft skills in the workforce. Many adults in the workforce have neither the skills nor the credentials to get hired for these positions. The workforce development

side of adult education must answer the question of how to educate or "up-skill" the current adult workforce.

Some corporations such as McDonald's and Marriott sought to accomplish this by starting their own corporate universities to train employees according to the company's philosophy and to create pathways for promotion (Waks, 2004). Human resource professionals and corporate trainers must be able to create on-going professional development programs that allow workers to keep up with current trends as well as have opportunities for advancement. Because some organizations recognize digital badges and workforce certificates but many still look for the traditional college degree, it is important to leverage corporate training in such a way as to make advancement through degree attainment a reality and also map specific employment competencies learned in the classroom (Rebecca Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013).

These workplace learning programs could be designed in a way to qualify for academic credit by following PLA guidelines (Rebecca Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013). College credit could be routed through ACE Workforce programs or specific articulation agreements with a college or university. These programs could be regulated or accredited through various organizations to provide legitimacy for both employment and academic credit. In order to streamline this process, there is a need to create a system of universally recognized training credentials (Klein-Collins & Wertheim, 2013).

Adult degree programs can serve as the umbrellas under which universities and employers work together to create pathways for workforce training and educational attainment. Colleges and universities must work together with industry to prepare the current workforce for the jobs of the future. To do this, colleges must continue exploring

new methods for teaching, course delivery formats, and credit options that meet the needs of adult students (Mathew Bergman et al., 2014a). It is common to find workforce development tied to community and technical colleges. The Alabama Community College System recently launched a program to create stronger ties with new and existing industries (especially advanced manufacturing) in the state (A. Smith, 2017). This partnership is designed to keep educational institutions relevant in training students for jobs that actually exist. Partnering industries can communicate trends in training as well as expected hiring needs.

Online Learning

Though not always seen as specifically adult-oriented, much of online education is focused on adult learners as the majority of online students are working adults (Hobson & Puruhito, 2018; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Thirty-two percent of all undergraduate students were enrolled in some distance education course, while 13% were enrolled exclusively online (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). These adults choose to enroll in online programs that offer the greatest schedule flexibility as they seek to balance work, school, and family responsibilities. A report by Inside Higher Education revealed that adult learners tend to prefer degree programs where most or all of the instruction is offered fully online (Garrett, 2018). The report also revealed that students at online institutions are less likely to graduate within the typical eight-year period; this outcome may be more related to the situation of adult learners than the mode of education's effectiveness.

Effective online education will call for the integration of adult teaching methods if it is to be effective. There is also a need for technology training—both for professors and

adult students. Some institutions offer credit for prior learning via an online modality; these courses often involve producing a portfolio of past learning experiences such as those employed by CAEL's LearningCounts program (Klein-Collins & Hudson, 2017).

Prior Learning Assessments

History

The formal acceptance of PLA credit at universities started after WWI when soldiers returning from the war needed to quickly obtain a college education in order to enter the workforce (M. Lakin, Seymour, Nellum, & Crandall, 2015). Changes in America's industries and employment requirements, as well as societal expectations, led to an increase in post-secondary enrollment. Similarly, the growth of women and minorities entering the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s created another need for increased educational credentials for workers. In order to speed the process of degree attainment for these students, many institutions chose to embrace PLA as a viable academic option for adult learners (Travers, 2012). PLA credit sped up the time to degree attainment, decreased the cost of attendance, and connected the student's workplace and classroom learning. Given recent changes to America's workplace and economic stability, the need for affordable, flexible, and timely degree attainment continues to be an important issue (M. Lakin et al., 2015).

Purpose and Methods

According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines PLA as "the process by which an individual's learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit,

certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training" (Merrill, 2015, p. 470).

A wide variety of topics and activities fall under the heading of PLA including military training, workforce education, religious education, and community education. Some programs offer direct credit while others use a written portfolio or class structure (Merrill, 2015). Prior learning experiences should be documented and evaluated to determine if they qualify for college credit (Travers & Evans, 2011). Organizations like the American Council on Education and The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning are working to promote recognition, academic or otherwise, for adults who participate in formal workforce training. ACE provides transcript services to students that are recognized by several institutions while CAEL provides member institutions with access to a portfolio evaluation program.

Prior Learning Assessments are used to validate the creditworthiness of learning in non-academic settings. While there are a variety of PLA methods available (Harris & Wihak, 2018), common examples are CLEP, DANTES, AP, ACE transcripts, and portfolios. Many colleges use CLEP testing and Advanced Placement (AP) exams for recent high school graduates but need to make these more readily available for adult students (Hayward & Williams, 2015). For adult learners, the discussion focuses on the use of DANTES for military students and veterans, portfolio credits, and workforce training credits; workforce training is often absorbed into a college's portfolio program. Unfortunately, some institutions offer CLEP and AP programs but neglect PLA options that would focus specifically on adult learners.

Research demonstrates that PLA credits are typically organized into four categories: standardized challenge exams, institutional-specific evaluations, experiential/portfolio assessments, and externally evaluated programs (M. Lakin et al., 2015). Institutions vary in their acceptance and use of the four methods with standardized challenge exams being the most used type of PLA.

Standardized exams are challenge tests within a specific area of proficiency. Examples of these exams include the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standard Test (DSST), Advanced Placement (AP) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program.

Institutional-specific evaluations are challenge tests designed and managed by the institution. Faculty or other subject matter experts (SME) create and grade these exams.

Experiential/portfolio assessments are often the subject of scrutiny due to the often-non-academic nature of the learning experience. Students use written essays, portfolios, etc. to demonstrate college-level learning. Some institutions utilize programs such as CAEL's LearningCounts portfolio program to administer and evaluate portfolio assessments.

Externally evaluated programs are typically third-party providers that evaluate and validate learning activities then provide documentation to the university. Examples are the ACE College Credit Recommendation Service and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS). Students look up completed training programs in the registry and apply for credit with an ACE or NCCRS transcript that serves as validation.

Institutional and Assessment of PLA

One of the biggest challenges for colleges is assessing the creditworthiness of prior learning experiences. Institutions using Prior Learning Assessments must consider accreditation standards, appropriate demonstrations of mastery, and a level of rigor that is comparable to similar college coursework (Bodies, 2014). The question of academic quality assurance is foundational to the study of PLA credit and its acceptance or rejection by many institutions. There is a need for consistency among colleges and universities—especially those within the same system of governance. Stenlund (2010) purported that prior learning assessment must focus on the demonstrable aspects of learning rather than the experience in which the learning was obtained. This theoretical study sought to evaluate the quality of the PLA assessment procedures. The overarching question addressed in this article was whether informal learning is different from formal learning. This question of academic quality assurance is foundational to the study of PLA credit and its acceptance or rejection by many institutions. There is a need for consistency among colleges and universities—especially those within the same system of governance.

Some institutions still resist using PLA under the notion that it does not provide any new experience for learning (Stevens et al., 2010). This study of program alumni at the University Without Walls at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst reveals that the reflective nature of portfolio assessments, in this case, a written reflection, is not only educational but also transformational. Alumni stated a change in work, relationships, and other aspects of life tied to that reflective assignment.

Trowler (2006) sought to establish an assessment approach that embraces both the credit exchange and the developmental (the British equivalent of a portfolio) model as opposite poles in a continuum. This holistic approach allows for both the measurement of skills and knowledge and for personal reflection and development.

Though there is no unified approach to using Prior Learning Assessments, some guidance is offered by organizations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). These third-party organizations provide recommendations, training, and assessment services to member institutions.

The American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service (CREDIT) provides validation of training and workforce education via a system of program assessment and the issuing of transcripts. Official documentation is provided for non-military corporate training completed through an ACE approved provider or course of study.

ACE also provides a database of approved workforce training courses in the ACE National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training (The ACE National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training, 2019). These courses can be cross-referenced with the ACE Credit College and University Network to determine which colleges accept specific types of PLA credit (ACE CREDIT COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS, 2019).

Nationwide there are 212 institutions currently accepting the ACE Workforce/Corporate programs for credit (The ACE National Guide to College Credit for

Workforce Training, 2019). Most of the institutions on the list are public universities but both private non-profit and for-profit colleges are represented.

Measuring the effectiveness, benefits, and quality of credit for prior learning (PLA) is a concern for many academic administrators and faculty members as it differs from how college credit is traditionally earned (M. Lakin et al., 2015). A report compiled by the American Council on Education explores the institutional policies, practices, and infrastructure related to Prior Learning Assessment at seven diverse colleges, community colleges, and universities (M. B. Lakin, 2011). Researchers conducted 37 phone interviews with campus leaders at the seven participating institutions explored administrative policies, student support, and methods for faculty engagement in the PLA process. The study reveals that colleges and universities with clearly written policies, effective methods of data collection, and the support of campus leaders have benefited from increased student outreach and faculty support (M. B. Lakin, 2011).

CAEL provides structure to member colleges on the development of portfolio programs and related portfolio classes. CAEL's 10 Standards of Good Practice, first published in 1989 (Whitaker, 1989), are now in their third edition and give guidance regarding PLA credit and assessing adult learning (Younger & Marienau, 2017). The third edition includes steps and guidelines for implementing a PLA program and developing administrative policies.

CAEL's 10 Standards of Good Practice

1. Credit or competencies are awarded only for evidence of learning, not for experience or time spent.
2. Assessment is integral to learning because it leads to and enables future learning.

3. Assessment is based on criteria for outcomes that are clearly articulated and shared among constituencies.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels are made by appropriate subject matter and credentialing experts.
5. Assessment advances the broader purpose of equity and access for diverse individuals and groups.
6. Institutions proactively provide guidance and support for learners' full engagement in the assessment process.
7. Assessment policies and procedures are the result of inclusive deliberation and are shared with all constituencies.
8. Fees charged for assessment are based on the services performed in the process rather than the credit awarded.
9. All practitioners involved in the assessment process pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs are regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised to respond to institutional and learner needs (Younger & Marienau, 2017).

CAEL institutional members have access to LearningCounts, an online portfolio assessment service. The PLA Accelerator program is designed to guide students through the process of applying for and evaluation of PLA opportunities. CAEL also assists institutions in preparing for accreditation review by providing a set of standards for PLA credit (CAEL, 2018).

Walker (1995) sought to establish a correlation between PLA quality and membership in CAEL for SACS accredited institutions in Texas. Walker developed a

survey based on CAEL's 10 Standards for Quality Assurance in Assessing Learning for Credit (Whitaker, 1989). Walker's instrument was based on the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) 10 Standards of Good Practice (Whitaker, 1989). The instrument utilized a Likert-type scale to address each of the ten standards. These standards have been revised (Younger & Marienau, 2017) since their original publication but the survey is still relevant for evaluating PLA program quality. Potential limitations for this type of research include the assumption that the responder was a credible representative of the participating institution and the potential for bias in completing the survey.

Participating institutions showed a consistent concern for following administrative procedures regardless of CAEL membership. Walker (1995) found that CAEL member universities were more likely to observe the stated academic standards. The accountability fostered through membership in CAEL created adherence to accepted standards such as awarding credit only for demonstrated learning rather than simply experience. One area of concern was the lack of faculty and PLA reviewer training in both groups; "if prior learning assessment programs are to increase and become more widely accepted, it is imperative that the practitioners be well trained and have a thorough understanding of the process" (p. 89). CAEL now provides training and certification as a PLA reviewer.

Freed (Freed & Mollick, 2010) built upon Walker's (1995) foundation and sought to identify and profile the existing PLA processes associated with nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs. The study also identified whether quality standards were being met for each PLA process based upon the frequency of application of Whitaker's

10 Standards for Quality Assurance in Assessing Learning for Credit (Whitaker, 1989). This study was primarily descriptive in nature and utilized a within-stage mixed-model design. The research participants in this study responded to Walker's (1995) survey regarding the various methods of PLA utilized at their respective institutions of higher education and the quality of their PLA processes. Participant institutions were state-supported institutions of higher education in Texas offering nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs. The combined information obtained by this survey provided descriptions of the types of PLA processes that exist in those institutions offering nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs and to identify policy commonalities among the institutions. The data were analyzed to determine whether the PLA program quality existed based on CAEL's 10 standards for PLA credit (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006).

Student Outcomes

In 2009, then-President Barak Obama challenged higher education to increase degree attainment among Americans in order to maintain positive economic and employment growth. The goal of this challenge was to produce 8.2 million new graduates by 2025—to reach this goal many of those graduates must be working adults who are currently without a college credential. President Donald Trump built on this with a new focus on job-readiness and alternate credentials in order to link higher learning with employment outcomes. Organizations like the Lumina Foundation (Lumina Foundation, n.d.) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.) have become champions for educational access, equity, and attainment. Research (Bergman, 2019; Hayward & Williams, 2015; Pearson, 2000)

demonstrates that PLA is a valuable tool in assisting adult students in completing a college degree.

Institutions offering PLA credit must do so with the intent of improving student outcomes. Dagavarian, Walters, and Walters (2011) identified four recommended student outcomes of a PLA program.

1. To provide students with an opportunity to gain insight into how college works and how their past learning will assist them
2. To assist adult learners in setting educational goals
3. To promote self-discovery and a sense of self
4. To provide evidence of college-level learning.

Research (Bergman et al., 2014a; Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2011; Hayward & Williams, 2015; Pearson, 2000) demonstrates that adult learners who participate in various PLA programs have higher rates of retention and graduation. The outcomes of the research are of interest to this current project in that it sets a foundation for the benefits of PLA for the individual student (degree completion) and for the institution (mission fulfillment and increased rates of graduation and retention). These potential benefits must be identified for future research to have purpose, i.e. is there a need for institutions to offer PLA credit?

Graduation rate data is collected and reported by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). These rates are controlled by the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act (Pub. L. No. 101-542) and are calculated at 150% of the time to complete a specified program. Students pursuing a bachelor's degree are allowed six years to complete the program ("NCES Fast Facts," 2018). According to the NCES, 60

percent of students who began enrolling in a bachelor's degree program at a 4-year institution in fall 2011 completed that degree within the six-year timeframe (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The graduation rate for private for-profit institutions with open enrollment policies, such as the subject of the current study, from 2016 to 2017 was 48% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The accumulation of more credits in less time increases the likelihood of degree completion (Pearson, 2019).

Prior learning experiences are thought to impact learners affectively and behaviorally too. Recognition of prior work and learning appears to increase a sense of accomplishment and motivation toward goal completion in adult students. In a mixed-methods study in Portugal, students utilizing credit for prior learning in adult basic education programs cited improvement in social and personal development as they achieve life goals (Miguel et al., 2016). While this study did focus on adult secondary educational achievement, the fact remains that PLA credit lessened the time to complete the credential and allowed students to achieve their goal of better employment. Some participants stated that they felt more confident and socially valued simply by being better educated (Miguel et al., 2016). This personal dimension lends credence to the importance of valuing life experiences and service-learning in adult degree programs. Travers and Evans (2011) found that students participating in PLA programs demonstrated a higher level of "self-awareness and self-regulation; problem-solving, study, and reflection skills; use of tacit knowledge; and a better understanding of the role of faculty and mentors" (p. 45).

Similarly, Belzer (2007) theorized that adult learners are directly affected by their

prior educational experience, good or bad, in how they perceive new learning environments. The study suggests that adult students need to adapt to new environments and overcome past negative (as well as positive) school experiences to succeed. This could be particularly important in working with adult students with learning or mental disabilities as well as those from low support backgrounds (Belzer, 2004). The use of PLA for workforce training can also benefit students with learning differences by including hands-on learning versus traditional book study.

Rivera and Heinrich (Rivera & Heinrich, 2016) demonstrated the importance of co-curricular learning, especially the benefits of reflection on the experience as a teaching tool. In this study, the researchers sought to assess emotional and affective learning using reflection methods typically employed in Prior Learning Assessment. Participants utilized digital technology including video reflections, blogs, and images to demonstrate personal reflection and meaning related to outside of class learning activities including study abroad, community engagement, and service-learning (Rivera & Heinrich, 2016).

The research shows that the use of credit for prior learning has positive results on persistence and graduation rates for students in various settings. There is still a need for research regarding adult students in specific programs and settings including online programs.

PLA and Graduation

According to the Graduate! Network (Graduate! Network, 2018) there are over 36 million adults in the United States who attended college but did not complete a degree. A few studies directly addressed the issues of PLA and graduation rates, persistence, or degree attainment (Hayward & Williams, 2015; Klein-Collins, 2010; Klein-Collins et al.,

2018a; Pearson, 2000; Rust, & Ikard, 2016). These studies examined a variety of institutional types and student demographics that are useful for comparison. Given that adult students have lower graduation rates than traditional-aged college students, it is important to address solutions for the barriers to graduation, such as time to degree, work schedules, cost of attendance and cost of living during school (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014b; B. Smith, 2019; Wlodkowski, 2008).

College graduation rates are calculated on first-time, full-time undergraduate students who graduate from the institution at which they first started their education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). These rates allow for 150% of the expected time to completion, thus the graduation rate for a four-year degree would be calculated based on six years.

> "About 60 percent of students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2011 completed that degree at the same institution within 6 years; the 6-year graduation rate was higher for females than for males (63 vs. 57 percent)" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019, p. 13).

While these measurements are helpful, they focus primarily on more traditional students. These reports are useful but do not allow for the unique situations of adult learners who have often transferred schools or attend part-time.

In response, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) has recently begun to address the outcomes of nontraditional students. The following information sheds light on the current situation.

> "At private for-profit institutions, completion rates ranged from 13 percent for first-time, part-time students to 41 percent for non-first-time, full-time students.

> The percentage of students who remained enrolled at their initial institutions 8 years after entry was 2 percent or less. Transfer rates 8 years after entry at private for-profit 4-year institutions were higher among part-time students (20 percent for first-time students and 27 percent for non-first-time students) than among full-time students (6 percent for first-time students and 12 percent for non-first-time students)" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019, p. 13).

Pearson (2000) addressed the issue of persistence in adult college students indicating that adult students have a higher drop-out rate than traditional students while at the same time earning higher grades.

> "Despite the advantages of degree completion and the growth of programs intended to help adult students gain their degree, adult students find it difficult to persist to graduation. They face a series of barriers arising from: their situation at work and home, their level of confidence and goal commitment, their interaction with the college or university, and their level of academic preparation and (occasionally) capacity" (p. 4).

Pearson's study is considered foundational in PLA research. The study utilized Cross's (1981) three types of barriers to learning: dispositional, institutional, and situational. This typology (with the addition of academic performance) was used to organize the research on persistence factors in the literature review. Pearson identified factors within each element of this rubric as having an impact on persistence. Prior Learning Assessment is presented as one mode of intervention that can increase adult student persistence.

This quantitative study analyzed the association of the use of the PLA portfolio method with the persistence and completion rate of adult degree-seeking students who were studying part-time at Simpson College, a Midwestern liberal arts college. Pearson tested the variables of age, gender, high school performance, number of prior college credits, and Simpson grade point average.

The study found that the use of prior college credits was a key factor in adult student persistence and that PLA credit enhanced the persistence rates of adult students, particularly those with few prior academic credits. The study compared adult students who completed the PLA process to those who did not and considers various factors including age, gender, number of credits, and prior performance in high school. Pearson states that "students who complete the portfolio form of PLA persist at higher levels than do students who are eligible and do not complete the portfolio (p. 4)."

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (Klein-Collins, 2010) reported that adult students who receive some type of PLA credit have a graduation rate two and a half times greater than adult students who do not receive PLA credit. This 48-institution study reviewed the academic records and outcomes of 62,475 adult students and found that students utilizing PLA credit had better academic outcomes and graduation rates than their peers. The study tested for gender, age, academic ability, race, and type of institution. Students earning PLA credits had a 43% graduation rate as compared to 15% for students not earning PLA credits. Not only did the PLA students have a higher rate of graduation but they graduated in less time than students not utilizing PLA credits (Klein-Collins, 2010). These additional credits may serve as a motivator for some students by giving the feeling of a running start, displaying obvious progress, and providing a short-

game win. It is also notable that the PLA students in this study were also more likely (75%) than non-PLA students (44%) to have additional non-PLA transfer credits. Students with academic transfer credits were more likely to earn PLA credits (43%) than those without transfer credits (11%).

The use of PLA credit also benefits low-income and minority students (Klein-Collins, 2010; Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). Kuang and McKay (2015) found that the use of PLA credit benefits students from every racial group. Lower-income students benefit from paying less total tuition and accruing less educational debt. Title IV funding does not always benefit the working poor adult student therefore a shorter time to degree and less time taken off work for classes benefits the student's living condition during school.

Starr-Glass (2016) shows this trend to be consistent. Starr-Glass argues that PLA enhances the college experience by connecting the various forms of learning that adults compile. Adults who participate in PLA programs have higher graduation rates than those who do not, in part due to increased feelings of connection to the institution. The increase in graduation rates and decreased time-to-degree created an increase in retention rates and a decrease in non-graduate student loan debt (potentially defaults) which benefit the institution as well as the student (Star-Glass, 2016).

The Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center (McKay, Cohn, & Kuang, 2016) conducted a study of PLA and student outcomes in the Colorado Community College System (CCCS). The population included 299,377 students of all ages enrolled in a CCCS degree program between 2007 and 2010. The study revealed that PLA students did graduate at a higher rate (40%) than non-PLA students (13%). The

PLA students also had a decreased time to degree than non-PLA students regarding an associate's degree but no difference was found in regard to certificate programs. Of interest is that this study controlled for academic capability to determine if the increased graduation rate was more related to student motivation, preparation, or ability than actual PLA use. The researchers tested for academic goals, remedial coursework, and GPA; the study revealed that PLA student outcomes were stronger in each category. The study found that "PLA earners had higher graduation rates than their non-PLA-earning counterparts regardless of their overall academic aptitude" (p. iii). This study revealed "strong associations between PLA and graduation rates, persistence, and time to degree persist regardless of students' sociodemographic characteristics and life experiences" (p. 70).

Jackson (Jackson, 2016) compared persistence, completion, and time to degree outcomes for community college students utilizing PLA against those who did not. This one-institution study focused on first-time, full-time students of all ages enrolling in a degree program between 2011 and 2014. Jackson used a mixed-methods approach to obtain both quantitative data regarding outcomes and qualitative data regarding student experience. The study revealed that students completing PLA credit were more likely to complete their program of study and earn a credential than students without PLA credits. PLA students had a 29.53% completion rate compared to 10.6% for non-PLA students. The results were consistent when testing for race and gender. Students earning PLA credits were reported to have completed their degree programs in less time than their non-PLA counterparts.

Jackson also found that students earning PLA credits typically had higher GPAs but there was no significant impact on student persistence. Interviews conducted with 27 students revealed that the learning experiences that led to PLA credit were felt to have contributed to the participants' ability to "comprehend and successfully complete required courses" (p. 74).

Hayward and Williams (2015) compared PLA outcomes for students in four community colleges. This study was limited to adult community college students and measured progress toward an associate degree. The study revealed that the use of PLA credits did have a significant effect on graduation. Students earning PLA credits had a graduation rate of 28.4% while students not earning PLA credits had an 11.8% graduation rate. These findings were consistent across racial/ethnic groups.

The study also compared the graduation rates of PLA students by method (ACE, CLEP, Portfolio, and Combination). The researchers found that students earning CLEP credits had the highest graduation rate (52.3%) followed by students using a combination of PLA methods (29.9%), ACE credits (24%) and Portfolio credits (12.3%) (Hayward & Williams, 2015). These results imply that adult students utilizing CLEP credits have an advantage toward degree attainment over both non-PLA students and students using other forms of PLA credit. Hayward and Williams recommend making CLEP testing more available to adult learners and even offering exam preparation programs.

Rust and Ikard (2016) studied 2,491 adult learners at a large public university enrolled in an adult degree completion program. This degree program is offered in an evening format and includes an option for PLA credit via a portfolio development course. Supporting other research, participants in the study graduated at a rate higher than the

national average. In this study, there was not a significant difference in graduation rates for PLA and non-PLA students within the institution. The authors surmised that it might be related to the high level of student support offered to all students in the program, the number of part-time students, or because the study focused specifically on the portfolio method of PLA.

Klein-Collins and Hudson (2018) addressed the issue of PLA methods and student outcomes. Does the method of PLA credit impact graduation? This study included 26,122 students over the age of 25 at four participating institutions—three were private and one was a public university. Supporting their previous research, the authors found that students earning PLA credit continued to graduate at a higher rate than non-PLA students. The study revealed that students earning credit for any type of PLA had at 42% graduation rate compared to 26% for students not earning PLA credit. When methods of PLA were compared those earning credit via portfolio had the highest graduation rate (66%) followed by standardized tests, including CLEP, (56%), external-evaluated programs (42%), and other methods (22%). Students using a combination of methods had a 50% graduation rate. The difference in outcomes by PLA method may be explained by the way the portfolio method requires college-level thinking and often includes guidance by faculty members or a classroom setting. The researchers stated that "the findings could be explained by the theory that the level of a student's engagement with their past learning can create new forms of learning – and portfolio assessment and standardized exams are the two PLA methods that require students to do more of that kind of reflection on or re-engagement in their learning" (p. 12).

For-Profit Education

The demand for college credentials for working adults has led to the growth of many for-profit colleges and universities. These institutions are privately owned by either individuals or publicly traded entities (Pusser, 2015). For-profit institutions are often structured more like a corporation than a university, have a profit-earning focus, and provide career-focused programs for nontraditional learners (Tierney & Hentschke, 2007). For-profit or proprietary education in the United States began with training centers and then career and technical colleges (Fagan, 2019). In the 19070s, Walden University paved the way for modern online, degree-granting institutions (Deming, Goldin, & Katz, 2012). Much of the literature on for-profit education is negative and is written by those in nonprofit institutions who see this sector as both a rival for students and an affront to their philosophical perspective (Fagan, 2019). Many of these writings are op-ed pieces written for newspapers or websites, little peer-reviewed research on for-profits and their student outcomes is available.

For-profit institutions fill a gap in higher education by offering flexible degree programs to students who might otherwise not have access to a college education (Fagan, 2019). These colleges often attract students from underserved populations such as minorities, military students, and adult learners (Deming et al., 2012). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), over two-thirds of students enrolled at for-profit institutions attended college exclusively online.

While enrollment at for-profit institutions reached their peak in 2010 at 1.7 million students, the sector has felt new growth. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics shows that from 2000 to 2010, for-profit enrollment grew by 329

percent (from 403,000 to 1.7 million students). During this same period, public institution enrollment increased by 30 percent (from 10.5 million to 13.7 million students) and while private nonprofits increased enrollment by 20 percent (from 2.2 million to 2.7 million students) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). For-profit enrollment saw a 51 percent decline (from 1.7 million to 842,000) between 2010 and 2017.

Graduation rates at for-profit institutions tend to be lower than both public and private, nonprofits (McFarland et al., 2019). While this may be related to the life situation of adult learners, it may also be a reflection of the typically open enrollment policies at for-profits (Fagan, 2019). Many for-profit institutions offer open enrollment like community colleges thus enrolling students who may not be academically prepared for college.

Graduation rates at for-profit institutions tend to be lower than both public and private nonprofit institutions. According to the NCES, the combined 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor's degree at 4-year degree-granting institutions in fall 2011 overall was 60%. By 2017 60% of those students had completed a bachelor's degree at the same institution where they started in 2011. Comparatively, the graduation rate was 60% at public institutions, 66% at private nonprofit institutions, and 21% at private for-profit institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). It should be noted that this figure addresses completion at the same school that the student first enrolled in and does not account for part-time students who take longer to complete.

Selectivity appears to be a factor for graduation rates. The six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduate students at 4-year degree-granting institutions in 2011 varied according to the level of institutional selectivity in admissions. The most selective institutions (less than 25% acceptance rates) had graduation rates averaging 87% while the least selective institutions (open admissions) graduated only 31% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). In 2016-17, for-profit institutions awarded 6% of all bachelor's degrees in the United States (NCES, 2019).

A major concern regarding low graduation rates at for-profit institutions is the higher level of student loan debt and default rates for these students (Deming et al., 2012; Fagan, 2019). Students who do not complete their education must still pay off the high levels of loans but without the added benefit of a better job that a degree could have provided.

Tuition at for-profit institutions is typically higher than public institutions and often higher than private, nonprofit institutions. While the cost of attendance at these institutions varies, the average annual tuition and fees at for-profit institutions were positioned between public and private non-profit universities at $17,000. Students at for-profit institutions were more likely to use student loans to fund their education; these students borrowed an average of $10,000 more than their counterparts at private non-profit institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). This higher student debt level may lead to higher levels of student debt for both drop-outs and graduates (Deming et al., 2012; Fagan, 2019).

The higher tuition cost is often offset by the liberal application of PLA credits that many of these institutions offer adult learners. For-profit colleges and universities are

leaders in offering credit for workforce and military training. Many have partnered with industry to accept industry-specific training for credit or give credit for work experience in certain fields. This generous approach to PLA credit allows adult learners to leverage experience to speed up their time to degree and lessen the total cost of their education. For accredited institutions, the amount and type of PLA credit accepted must meet specific criteria.

Table 2.1

For-Profit Institution PLA and Graduation

Institution	Annual Cost	PLA Offerings	Graduation Rate
Capella University	$7,290	Yes	11%
Strayer University	$26,000	Yes	20%
University of Phoenix	$4,776	Yes	16%
Walden University	$21,276	Yes	21%

Columbia Southern University

Columbia Southern University was founded in 1993 by the late Dr. Robert Mayes, Sr. The university focused on providing educational opportunities for non-traditional students. The university remains privately-owned and for-profit in nature. It is a subsidiary of the Columbia Southern Education Group which also owns Waldorf University, a regionally accredited, faith-based institution with a traditional campus in Iowa.

The mission of CSU is to provide "diverse learning experiences and affordable, flexible distance education programs at the certificate, undergraduate and graduate levels

to a global student body, delivered by qualified, student-centered faculty committed to teaching and student learning. The university is dedicated to providing exceptional academic and student support services" (About Columbia Southern University, n.d.).

The original programs focused on environmental compliance, occupational safety, and training for local firefighters and police officers. Online programs were added in 1996 that included degrees in business, healthcare, and computer science. In 2003, CSU expanded to open hybrid campuses in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. All academic programs are now offered fully online. At the time of writing CSU's total student enrollment was just over 31,000 students (About Columbia Southern University, n.d.).

The university has been accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC) since 2001. DEAC is recognized by both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The university was approved to offer Title IV financial aid in 2008.

The university's academic programs are designed for adult learners but enroll learners of all ages. Many CSU students are current or former military or first responders. While historically most CSU students transferred from another institution there is a growing demographic of first-time full-time college students.

The university has been awarding credit for prior learning to adult students since 2002 when it received approval from the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) and Veterans Affairs. CSU was also selected to be among the first group of colleges and universities to be accepted into the Air Force Academic Institution Portal and into the U.S. Army's Centralized Tuition Assistance Management (CTAM)

program, GoArmyEd. The university recognizes ACE transcripts, DANTES, CLEP, institutional challenge exams, and specific technical and professional training articulations. Technical and training articulations, considered experiential learning, are reviewed internally by subject matter experts using rubrics and program comparisons.

PLA credit is awarded for verified work-based learning, military training, and continuing education credits. CSU does not provide credit for work experience. Students must demonstrate that prior learning is transferrable and equivalent to college-level learning. Guidelines for PLA credit is found in the Transfer Credit Policy and the current University Catalog.

Students may earn up to 90 hours of credit toward a bachelor's degree via direct transfer, including ACE Workforce ("The ACE National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training," 2019) and ACE Military ("Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services," 2019) transcript credits and challenge exams.

Undergraduate students may also receive up to 30 credits (25%) for approved experiential or equivalent learning programs, including CAEL portfolios, technical certifications, police officer training, and fire academy training. All experiential or equivalent learning credits must be reviewed by CSU's subject matter experts. Columbia Southern University recently joined the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and began using CAEL's LearningCounts portfolio evaluation program in Fall 2019. CSU was the first nationally accredited institution granted membership in CAEL. All CSU students pursuing credit for prior learning are required to submit all documents for review at the time of enrollment. The PLA review process is managed by the Office of the Registrar.

Summary

Chapter One presented the introduction to the study and its importance to adult education. Chapter Two addressed relevant literature from the existing body of research. The review of the literature included commercially available books, dissertations, and journal articles. Books and articles related to prior learning assessment (PLA) were often reports published by the American Council on Education (ACE) or the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

The current path of the American job market is changing. It is estimated that by the year 2020 65% of jobs will require a college degree (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Adult students are returning to college to pursue the necessary credentials to attain these new jobs (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The path to a college degree is different for adult students than for traditional undergraduates. Adult students are typically employed part or fulltime and have adult responsibilities. These adult responsibilities limit access to traditional classes, student services, and money for college. Colleges have sought to adapt to adult learners by developing degree completion programs that employ various nontraditional delivery methods such as night classes, accelerated formats, and online classes. For adult students, every credit and every dollar count as the quest for an education and a better job tend to have specific goals related to time to completion, the total cost of the degree, and return on investment (Star-Glass, 2016). The use of credit for prior learning can reduce the total number of credit hours required for a degree, therefore, reducing both the cost and time to completion (Olson & Klein-Collins, 2014). For these reasons it is imperative that colleges utilize prior learning assessment (PLA) options for college credit in adult degree programs as a way to attract, enroll and retain adult learners (Besendorfer, 2016). According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018). ACE documents and evaluates learning experiences to determine if it qualifies for college credit.

Adult learners prefer to determine what they will study and to incorporate "real world training" and experiences into their programs of study (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015)(Knowles, M; Holton, E; Swansom, 2015). Some adults struggle to engage in topics that they have already learned at work (Erisman & Steele, 2015) as well as those that might seem irrelevant to their professional direction. The use of credits from Prior Learning Assessment addresses both of these issues by allowing for reflection on previous learning activities and their relevance to the student's current path of study (Stevens et al., 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree completion programs at a large, for-profit, online university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of full-time study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes ACE transcripts, CAEL portfolios, credit for military training, challenge exams, and technical or professional certifications for PLA credit in the undergraduate program. This study sought to investigate whether there is a significant difference in graduation rates of adult college students who utilize credit for prior learning versus those who do not. This quantitative project employed a non-experimental, ex-post-facto design (Mertler, 2019) to compare six-year graduation rates among students in an online adult degree completion program. The study also tested for additional factors such as student demographics and type of PLA credit used.

Statement of the Problem

While the number of adults enrolled in degree programs has increased in recent years, the graduation rate and degree attainment for adult students lags behind that of traditional students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Previous studies have focused on the use of Credit for Prior Learning in community colleges and adult degree completion programs, but little research has been accomplished in relation to adults in online degree programs.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between graduation rates and utilizing credit by Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) among adult students in online degree programs?
2. What is the relationship between the PLA method (direct transfer, testing, or portfolio) and graduation rates among adult students utilizing PLA credit in online degree programs?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1

Null Hypothesis:$H_0$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning did not graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Hypothesis:$H_1$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Question 2

Null Hypothesis: $H_0$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at the same rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Research Hypothesis: $H_1$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at a different rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Design

This quantitative study utilized a non-experimental, causal-comparative (ex-post facto) design (Cone, 2006) to compare graduation rates of adult online students who utilized PLA credit toward their degree to graduation rates of those adult students who did not utilize PLA for credit. The study is limited to those adult students previously enrolled in an online degree program at a large, private, for-profit university. The design is non-experimental in that no manipulation of the variables occurred (Mertler, 2019). Research seeking to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between variables often employ causal-comparative research methods (Glatthorn, 2005). Causal-comparative research allows the researcher to investigate events that have already occurred and draw conclusions from the data (Merriam, 2000). Limitations to causal-comparative research include the inability to control for confounding variables (Leedy, 2018), less control over the independent variable, and the inability to employ random sampling (Glatthorn, 2005). Potential confounding variables included the participant's use of student support services, level of previous college experience, and family/employer support while enrolled in the

program. Rust and Ikard (2016) found that external factors such as the availability and participation in student support programs may impact the results of such a study.

Variables

The first research question tested whether there is a statistically significant difference in the graduation rates between adult students who utilized PLA credits and those who did not. For this study, an adult learner who received college credit for any type of amount of prior learning was categorized as a PLA student. The independent variable for the first research question was PLA status (PLA or non-PLA). The dependent variable was the graduation rates of adult students (Table 3.1). Graduation or non-graduation was based on a six-year completion time and was measured by percentage.

The second question was designed to examine whether a statistically significant difference exists between adult PLA students by PLA method. The independent variables were the adult student PLA methods; students were categorized into three groups based on the PLA method employed (CLEP, ACE, or Experiential). The dependent variable was adult student graduation rates (Table 3.1). Graduation or non-graduation was based on a six-year completion time and was measured by percentage.

Table 3.1

Variable Table

Research Question	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Means of Analysis
One	PLA Status (PLA or non-PLA)	Graduation Rates	Chi-Square
Two	PLA Method (Experiential, CLEP, ACE/transfer)	Graduation Rates	Chi-Square

Population

The population of this study was all adults pursuing a bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University, an accredited online university. Participants for this study included adult students enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program. The institution is a large, private, for-profit university located in the Southeast United States. In addition to more common courses of study, Columbia Southern provides educational programs to first responders, active-duty military, and veterans, as such the demographics may not be comparative to adult learners at more traditional institutions. Total enrollment at the time of this study was just over 31,000. This study addressed data from student records for students enrolling in a bachelor's degree in academic years 2008-2012. A total of 28,803 students fit the parameters of the study with 18,274 students being classified as PLA users (Table 3.2). University staff gathered, processed, and de-identified the student data

prior to submission to the researcher. Due to the specific nature of the study, it was not possible to employ random sampling, therefore, the study employed nonprobability sampling techniques to select the participants (Mertler, 2019). It must be noted that nonprobability sampling does not allow for subjects to have an equal chance at being selected for the study (Mertler, 2019); however, this study did not allow for random assignment due to selection criteria. The review of student enrollment, PLA use, and degree completion data from previous semesters cannot be altered or regrouped, therefore purposive sampling was employed (Leedy, 2018). Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to set criteria for participants (Mertler, 2019), in this case, participants were selected based on enrollment in the adult degree completion program during the years employing PLA credit.

Table 3.2

Adult Learner PLA Use

			PLA Status		
			Non-PLA	PLA	Total
	No degree	N	5990	9330	15320
		% within PLA Status	57%	51%	
	Completed Degree	N	4518	8965	13483
		% within PLA Status	43%	49%	
Total		N	10508	18295	28803
		% within PLA Status	100%	100%	100%

There was some diversity among adult students in this study. Among the participants 67.3% identified as male while 32.6% identified as female; 0.1% did not

provide gender/sex information (Table 3.3). White students comprised the largest group at 56.1% of the population, African American 21.5%, Hispanic 6.3%, and Asian 2%.

Students identifying as Native American/Alaskan represented 0.9%, Pacific Islanders 0.1%, and unidentified students 12.8% (Table 3.4). While attempts were made to address demographic variables, those variables were limited by actual enrollment and graduation data as well as the voluntary nature of the information. Columbia Southern University is a recognized provider of education to the military and veterans; active duty military students represented 50.3% and 19.4% were veterans (Table 3.5).

Table 3.3

Adult Learner Gender

	Frequency	%	PLA Use
Male	19393	67.3	14483
Female	9377	32.6	3791
Unknown	33	0.1	
Total	28803	100.0	18274

Table 3.4

Adult Learner Race/Ethnicity

	Frequency	%
Asian	599	2.08
African American	6197	21.52
Hispanic	1831	6.36
Native American/Alaskan	270	0.94
Pacific Islander	32	0.11
White	16172	56.14
Unknown	3702	12.85
Total	28803	100

Table 3.5

Adult Learner Veteran Status

	Frequency	%
Active Military	14489	50.3
Veteran	5588	19.4
Non-Military/Veteran	8726	30.3
Total	28803	100.0

Data Sources

The researcher utilized a review of student enrollment and graduation records as the primary data source in this study. An analysis of de-identified student records regarding the use of PLA credit, graduation rates, and student demographics was

conducted. The college keeps records of PLA credit applications and approvals on file. These records were evaluated for the number of credits received, type of PLA credit employed, and degree completion.

Data for this study came from the records of adult students enrolled in an online degree program at the university. Student data was gathered by authorized staff members at the institution and all identifying information was removed before the data was shared with the researcher. Because the ex-post facto design studies data from the past (Mertler, 2019), it removes possible interaction between the researcher and study participants. To address content validity (Mertler, 2019), the method of data collection was replicated from prior studies that found it to be effective (Hayward & Williams, 2015; Rust et al., 2016). The data were originally collected and de-identified for non-research purposes by the university. Because the data was de-identified and owned by the institution, no participant permissions were required (Auburn University, 2018). Potential errors in the data include inaccurate demographic reporting and misclassification of PLA credits.

Instrumentation

The data gathered were categorical in nature; subjects were grouped according to the use of PLA for college credit. The categorical data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Cone, 2006). While non-parametric tests do not demonstrate distribution or probability, they are the most effective tests to use when the research design does not conform to standard parametric designs (Gravetter, 2018). These tests provided summary information including frequencies, means, percentages, and standard deviations. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to determine whether a relationship exists between two categorical variables (Gravetter, 2018), in this

case, the use of PLA credit and graduation rates among the subjects. The a priori alpha level for this test was set at 0.05. The independent variable was PLA use and the dependent variable was the six-year graduation rate. The independent variable had two levels: those that earned PLA credit and those who did not. Potential confounding or extraneous variables that could impact graduation focus on student history such as participation in student support programs, personality type, and family/employer support during enrollment; testing for these variables was outside the scope of this study. Graduation rates were calculated beginning with the student's first enrollment in an undergraduate program at Columbia Southern University; time spent at other academic institutions was not addressed. Data analysis was conducted using R statistical software version 3.6.

Summary

Chapter One presented the introduction to the study and its importance to adult education. Chapter Two presented a review of the related literature and scholarship related to the use of credit for prior learning and its influence on graduation rates and student outcomes. Chapter Three presented the research methods, the design of the study, information regarding the context, population and sample, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

This chapter re-addressed the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the related hypotheses. Attention was given to the overall research design, the population and sample, the instrumentation, the data collection process, and procedures for data analysis. The instrumentation and data collection process were pre-approved by the university's

Institutional Review Board (IRB). Copies of the researcher's and advisor's Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certificates were made available in the Appendix.

Chapter 4

Findings

The current path of the American job market is changing. It is estimated that by the year 2020, 65% of jobs will require a college degree (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Adult students are returning to college to pursue the necessary credentials to attain these new jobs (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The path to a college degree is different for adult students than for traditional undergraduates. Adult students are typically employed part or fulltime and have adult responsibilities. These adult responsibilities limit access to traditional classes, student services, and money for college. Colleges have sought to adapt to adult learners by developing degree completion programs that employ various nontraditional delivery methods such as night classes, accelerated formats, and online classes. For adult students, every credit and every dollar count as the quest for an education and a better job tend to have specific goals related to time to completion, the total cost of the degree, and return on investment (Star-Glass, 2016). The use of credit for prior learning can reduce the total number of credit hours required for a degree, therefore, reducing both the cost and time to completion (Olson & Klein-Collins, 2014). For these reasons it is imperative that colleges utilize prior learning assessment (PLA) options for college credit in adult degree programs as a way to attract, enroll and retain adult learners (Besendorfer, 2016). According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018). ACE documents and evaluates learning experiences to determine if it qualifies for college credit.

Adult learners prefer to determine what they will study and to incorporate real-world training and experiences into their programs of study (Knowles, Holton, & Swansom, 2015). Some adults struggle to engage in topics that they have already learned at work (Erisman & Steele, 2015) as well as those that might seem irrelevant to their professional direction. The use of credits from Prior Learning Assessment addresses both of these issues by allowing for reflection on previous learning activities and their relevance to the student's current path of study (Stevens et al., 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree completion programs at a large, for-profit, online university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of full-time study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes ACE transcripts, CAEL portfolios, credit for military training, challenge exams, and technical or professional certifications for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Statement of the Problem

While the number of adults enrolled in degree programs has increased in recent years, the graduation rate and degree attainment for adult students lags behind that of traditional students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Previous studies have focused on the use of Credit for Prior Learning in community colleges and adult

degree completion programs, but little research has been accomplished in relation to adults in online degree programs.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between graduation rates and utilizing credit by Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) among adult students in online degree programs?
2. What is the relationship between the PLA method (direct transfer, testing, or portfolio) and graduation rates among adult students utilizing PLA credit in online degree programs?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1

Null Hypothesis:$H_0$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning did not graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Hypothesis:$H_1$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Question 2

Null Hypothesis: $H_0$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at the same rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Research Hypothesis: $H_1$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at a different rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Chapter One presented the introduction to the study and its importance to adult education. Chapter Two presented a review of the related literature and scholarship related to the use of credit for prior learning and its influence on graduation rates and student outcomes. Chapter Three presented the research methods, the design of the study, information regarding the context, population and sample, and procedures for data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the results of the study. This quantitative project employed a non-experimental, ex-post-facto design (Mertler, 2019) to compare six-year graduation rates among students in an online adult degree completion program. The study also tested for additional factors such as student demographics and type of PLA credit used. Statistical analyses were developed using R statistical software Version 3.6.1.

Demographics

The population of this study was all adult students who enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program at the university from 2008-2012. Data were collected from the university's historical student records. Participants were adult students over the age of 24 enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program. All student records were de-identified to protect privacy during the study. During this time 28,803 students enrolled in the specified programs; of those enrolled, 18274 students utilized credit for prior learning. While attempts were made to address demographic variables, those variables were limited by actual enrollment and graduation data as well as the voluntary nature of the information.

Biological Sex

There was some diversity among the adult students in this study. Over two-thirds of the students identified as male (n = 19,393), one-third identified as female (n = 9,377) and less than 1% (n = 33) did not provide gender/sex information (Table 4.1). This distribution remained consistent in regard to PLA use with 79% of the PLA students identifying as male (n = 14,483) and 21% identifying as female (n = 3,791).

PLA 4.1

PLA Biological Sex

	Frequency	%	PLA Use
Male	19393	67.3	14483
Female	9377	32.6	3791
Unknown	33	0.1	
Total	28803	100.0	18274

Race/Ethnicity

White students comprised the largest group at just over one-half of the population (n = 16,712), followed respectively by African Americans (n = 6,197), Hispanics (n = 1831) , and Asians (n = 599). Students identifying as Native American/Alaskan and Pacific Islanders each accounted for less than 1% of the population. Students choosing not to self-identify comprised 12% (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

PLA Race/Ethnicity

	Frequency	%
Asian	599	2.08
African American	6197	21.52
Hispanic	1831	6.36
Native American/Alaskan	270	0.94
Pacific Islander	32	0.11
White	16172	56.14
Unidentified	3702	12.85
Total	28803	100

Veteran/Military Status

Columbia Southern University has historically served a large number of military and veteran students. Just over one-half of the students were active-duty military (n = 14,489) while about 20% (n = 5,588) held veteran status (Table 4.3). Students without military affiliation made up the remaining 30% (n = 8,726). Many CSU students bring PLA credit via ACE military transcripts or technical credits.

Table 4.3

PLA Veteran Status

	Frequency	%
Active Military	14489	50.3
Veteran	5588	19.4
Non-Military/Veteran	8726	30.3
Total	28803	100.0

Research Question One

The first research question sought to identify any difference in graduation rates between online adult learners who utilized credit by PLA and those who did not. The null hypothesis stated that there would be no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between adult students by PLA status (PLA or non-PLA).

Descriptive statistics showed that 63.5% (n = 18,295) of students in the population utilized some type of PLA credit. Students receiving PLA credit graduated at 49% (n = 8,965) with a 95% confidence level. Non-PLA students graduated at 43% (n = 4,518) with a 95% confidence level. Adult students earning PLA credit graduated at a 14 percentage point higher rate than those who did not (Table 4.4). A Pearson's Chi-squared test revealed a significant association between graduating and receiving PLA credit thus supported rejection of the null hypothesis, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 107.67$, $p < .001$. The Phi coefficient of .058 demonstrated a negligible effect size, therefore there is a weak relationship between PLA use and graduation with PLA students graduating at a higher rate. Since demographic reporting is optional at the institution, there was not enough information to form a conclusion on the role of biological sex or ethnicity.

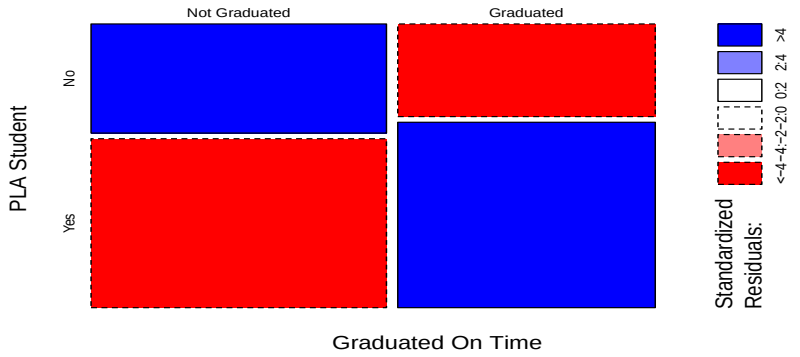
Table 4.4

PLA Use and Graduation

			PLA Status		
			Non-PLA	PLA	Total
	No degree	N	5990	9330	15320
		% within PLA Status	57%	51%	
	Completed Degree	N	4518	8965	13483
		% within PLA Status	43%	49%	
Total		N	10508	18295	28803
		% within PLA Status	100%	100%	100%

Figure 4.1

Association between Graduation Rate and PLA Status



Research Question Two

The second research question focused on identifying the difference in graduation rates of adult learners who utilized three PLA methods (ACE, CLEP, or Experiential Learning) in online degree programs. The null hypothesis stated that there would be no statistical difference in graduation rates between the three groups.

A nonparametric test of proportions was used to compare the graduation rates of students utilizing PLA credit by method (Table 4.5). Students utilizing CLEP

exams, the smallest group, had the highest graduation rate at 57% (n = 1,560). Learners with Experiential credit, the largest group, had a graduation rate of 53% (n = 5,178). Students earning ACE credits had a graduation rate of 46% (n = 4,374). The chi-squared test revealed a significant relationship between graduation and the type of PLA credit awarded, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 141.41$, $p < .00$, at a 95% confidence level (.064, .093) thus the researcher rejected the null hypothesis. The Cramer's V score of .078 indicated a weak relationship between PLA method and graduation with students using CLEP credit graduating at a slightly higher rate.

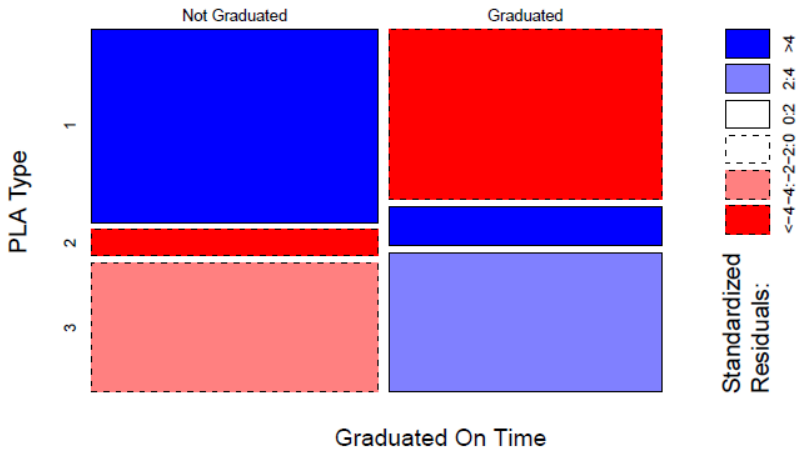
Table 4.5

Adult Degree Attainment by PLA Method

		ACE	CLEP	Experiential	Total
No degree	N	5188	1157	4659	11004
	% within PLA Method	54%	43%	47%	
Completed Degree	N	4374	1560	5178	11112
	% within PLA Status	46%	57%	53%	
Total	N	9562	2717	9837	22116
	% within PLA Status	100%	100%	100%	100%

Figure 4.2

Association Between Graduation Rate and PLA Method



Summary

This quantitative study revealed that students who obtain credit for prior learning at Columbia Southern University did graduate at a higher rate than their non-PLA peers. While PLA did have an effect on graduation, the effect is minimal. A comparison of graduation outcomes by PLA method revealed that students who earned CLEP, or similar challenge exam, credit graduated at a higher rate than those earning ACE or experiential credits though, again, the effect of the method on graduation is small. However small the effect may be, it must be acknowledged that earning PLA credit did increase the graduation rates for adult learners at the institution. In an era where the need for a degree is increasing, any additional motivator or aid to degree completion should be seen as a worthwhile endeavor both for student success and institutional reporting.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

The current path of the American job market is changing. It is estimated that by the year 2020, 65% of jobs will require a college degree (Richards & Terkanian, 2013). Adult students are returning to college to pursue the necessary credentials to attain these new jobs (Michelson & Mandell, 2004). The path to a college degree is different for adult students than for traditional undergraduates. Adult students are typically employed part or fulltime and have adult responsibilities. These adult responsibilities limit access to traditional classes, student services, and money for college. Colleges have sought to adapt to adult learners by developing degree completion programs that employ various nontraditional delivery methods such as night classes, accelerated formats, and online classes. For adult students, every credit and every dollar count as the quest for an education and a better job tend to have specific goals related to time to completion, the total cost of the degree, and return on investment (Star-Glass, 2016). The use of credit for prior learning can reduce the total number of credit hours required for a degree, therefore, reducing both the cost and time to completion (Olson & Klein-Collins, 2014). For these reasons it is imperative that colleges utilize prior learning assessment (PLA) options for college credit in adult degree programs as a way to attract, enroll and retain adult learners (Besendorfer, 2016). According to the American Council on Education (ACE), a prior learning assessment is an evaluation of college-level skills and knowledge that a student has gained outside of the classroom (Adult Learners Guide to PLA, 2018).

ACE documents and evaluates learning experiences to determine if it qualifies for college credit.

Adult learners prefer to determine what they will study and to incorporate real-world training and experiences into their programs of study (Knowles, et al., 2015). Some adults struggle to take courses in topics that they have already learned at work (Erisman & Steele, 2015) as well as those that might seem irrelevant to their professional direction. The use of credits from Prior Learning Assessment addresses both of these issues by allowing for reflection on previous learning activities and their relevance to the student's current path of study (Stevens et al., 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree completion programs at a large, for-profit, online university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of full-time study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes ACE transcripts, CAEL portfolios, credit for military training, challenge exams, and technical or professional certifications for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Statement of the Problem

While the number of adults enrolled in degree programs has increased in recent years, the graduation rate and degree attainment for adult students lags behind that of traditional students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Previous studies

have focused on the use of Credit for Prior Learning in community colleges and adult degree completion programs, but little research has been accomplished in relation to adults in online degree programs.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between graduation rates and utilizing credit by Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) among adult students in online degree programs?
2. What is the relationship between the PLA method (direct transfer, testing, or portfolio) and graduation rates among adult students utilizing PLA credit in online degree programs?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1

Null Hypothesis:$H_0$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning did not graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Hypothesis:$H_1$1: Adult students utilizing credit for prior learning graduate at a higher rate than students who did not utilize PLA credit.

Research Question 2

Null Hypothesis: $H_0$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at the same rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Research Hypothesis: $H_1$2: Adult students utilizing PLA credit through a direct transfer of credit method graduate at a different rate as those utilizing the portfolio Credit method.

Methods

This quantitative study utilized a non-experimental, causal-comparative (ex-post facto) design (Cone, 2006) to compare graduation rates of adult online students who utilized PLA credit toward their degree to graduation rates of those adult students who did not utilize PLA for credit. The study is limited to those adult students previously enrolled in an online degree program at a large, private, for-profit university.

The population of this study was all adults pursuing a bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University, an accredited online university. Participants for this study included adult students enrolled in an online bachelor's degree program. The institution is a large, private, for-profit university located in the Southeast United States.

This study addressed data from student records for students enrolling in a bachelor's degree in academic years 2008-2012. A total of 28,803 students fit the parameters of the study with 18,274 students being classified as PLA users. University staff gathered, processed, and de-identified the student data prior to submission to the researcher. Due to the specific nature of the study, it was not possible to employ random sampling therefore the study employed nonprobability sampling techniques to select the participants (Mertler, 2019).

The data gathered was categorical in nature; subjects were grouped according to the use of PLA for college credit. The categorical data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Cone, 2006). Non-parametric tests provided summary information. The Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to determine whether a relationship exists between the use of PLA credit and graduation rates among the subjects. The a priori alpha level for this test was set at 0.05. The independent variable

was PLA use and the dependent variable was the six-year graduation rate. The independent variable had two levels: those that earned PLA credit and those who did not.

Summary of Findings

Research Question One

The first research question sought to identify any difference in graduation rates between online adult learners who utilized credit by PLA and those who did not. The null hypothesis stated that there would be no statistically significant difference in graduation rates between adult students by PLA status (PLA or non-PLA).

Descriptive statistics showed that 63.5% of students in the population utilized some type of PLA credit. Students receiving PLA credit graduated at 49% with a 95% confidence level. Non-PLA students graduated at 43% with a 95% confidence level. Adult students earning PLA credit graduated at a 14 percentage points higher rate than those who did not

A Pearson's Chi-squared test revealed a significant association between graduating and receiving PLA credit thus supported rejection of the null hypothesis, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 107.67$, $p < .001$. The Phi coefficient of .058 demonstrated a negligible effect size. The analysis confirmed that PLA students did graduate at a higher rate than non-PLA students but the effect of PLA was minimal.

A 2010 study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) surveyed 48 colleges and universities revealed that students using PLA credits graduated at a higher rate than their non-PLA peers (Klein-Collins, 2010). The effect of PLA credit on graduation rates at Columbia Southern University were lower than those in the CAEL (2011) study. Table 5.1 compares CSU to the CAEL study and specific institutional

categories within the CAEL study. Notably, non-PLA students at CSU graduate at a much higher rate than the category means.

Table 5.1

CAEL Graduation Rate Comparison

	CSU	CAEL	For-profit	Large Institution
PLA	49%	58%	74%	44%
Non-PLA	42.5%	27%	23%	18%

Hayward and Williams (2015) conducted a similar study comparing graduation rates at four community colleges. Hayward found that students who earned PLA credit graduated at 2.4 times the rate of non-PLA students. Pearson (2000) reported similar findings in a single institution study of adult learners in a traditional campus setting. A study by the Rutgers Education and Employment Research Center found that community colleges students earning PLA credits not only graduated at a higher rate than non-PLA earners but also significantly reduced their time to degree completion (McKay et al., 2016; Jackson, 2016) found similar results. Rust and Ikard (2016) found conflicting results in a single institution adult degree completion program; while students in that study had higher graduation rates than the national norms, the graduation rates for PLA and non-PLA students within the program were similar--PLA had no significant effect. The effect of PLA on graduation appears to vary (Table 5.2). The reasons for this variance are beyond the scope of this study but is a topic that needs further investigation if college leaders are to make informed decisions regarding PLA credit options and institutional investment.

Table 5.2

Research Question One Comparison

	CSU	CAEL	Pearson	Rutgers	Hayward	Jackson
PLA	49%	58%	58%	40%	28.4%	29.53%
Non-PLA	42.5%	27%	27%	13%	11.8%	10.6%

Research Question Two

The second research question focused on identifying the difference in graduation rates of adult learners who utilized three PLA methods (ACE, CLEP, or Experiential Learning) in online degree programs. The null hypothesis stated that there would be no statistical difference in graduation rates between the three groups.

A nonparametric test of proportions was used to compare the graduation rates of students utilizing PLA credit by method (Table 5.3). Students utilizing CLEP exams had the highest graduation rate. The chi-squared test revealed a significant relationship between graduation and the type of PLA credit awarded, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 141.41$, $p < .001$, at a 95% confidence level (.064, .093). The Cramer's V score of .078 indicated a weak relationship between PLA method and graduation with students using CLEP credit graduating at a slightly higher rate.

Table 5.3

CSU Degree Attainment by PLA Method

		ACE	CLEP	Experiential	Total
No degree	N	5188	1157	4659	11004
	% within PLA Method	54%	43%	47%	
Completed Degree	N	4374	1560	5178	11112
	% within PLA Status	46%	57%	53%	
Total	N	9562	2717	9837	22116
	% within PLA Status	100%	100%	100%	100%

While Research Question One revealed that PLA students graduate at a higher rate, Research Question Two demonstrated that the use of credit by examination had the greatest effect on graduation. Hayward (2012) found similar results with CLEP students graduating at more than twice the rate of students using ACE or experiential credits. The results of this study are in contrast to a 2018 CAEL study (Rebecca Klein-Collins et al., 2018) in which students earning portfolio/experiential learning outperformed students using all other PLA methods (Table 5.4). There is limited research addressing the effectiveness of each type of PLA or the method that presents the most benefit to students.

Table 5.4

Research Question Two Comparison

	CSU	CAEL	Hayward
CLEP	57%	56%	52.3%
Portfolio/Experiential	53%	66%	23%
ACE	46%	42%	24%

Conclusions

The current study revealed a statistically significant difference in the graduation rates of online adult undergraduates who utilized PLA credits and those who did not. While PLA cannot be proven to have a positive effect on adult student graduation, it is apparent PLA is helpful for many students. In the current changing economic and job market, adult workers must have or obtain the college level credentials that many employers seek, for many adults, this means returning to college. To best support adult learners, colleges and universities must take every opportunity to shorten the path to a degree as well as create programs that allow for prior learning and experience credit.

The effectiveness of the different methods of PLA credit varies by institution. This variance could be related to differing institutional policies, support services, or ease of access. Regardless of the reason, for PLA credit to be fully utilized by adult learners and have the greatest impact, institutions of higher learning should create pathways for all possible methods of credit. This openness and availability will likely attract adult

learners from a variety of backgrounds and increase the institution's influence within the community and workplace.

Recommendations

Certifications and technical credits. Some institutions offer programs and credits which are considered professional, trade-related, or not intended for academic credit or transfer. These credits pose a unique problem for the institution to which a student seeks to transfer. A timely study would address this distinct type of course and its application to academic degrees. Research should address how to incorporate these credits into existing or new PLA credit models.

PLA Methods. There continues to be a gap in the research regarding the comparative benefits of the various methods of PLA credit. While research exists promoting specific methods, more research is needed into which method benefits adult students the most. There is also a need to create comparison studies in similar environments such as adult learners, online learners, and adult students in traditional university settings.

Total number of transfer or PLA credits. While PLA credit had a significant impact on graduation rates in this study, it could be part of a larger conversation. Was it the PLA credit specifically or the total number of credits that led to increased graduation rates? During this study, data revealed that students with a similar amount of academic transfer credit graduated at a slightly higher rate than PLA students. This analysis was outside of the scope of this study but needs to be investigated. A study exploring the differences in PLA credits versus transfer credits would add to the knowledge base and help institutions determine the effectiveness of multiple approaches.

Learner profile. In the current study, many of the participants held some type of military affiliation and all were online students. Other studies focused on students at traditional institutions, degree completion programs, and community colleges—all with different results. A study addressing learner profiles could help shed light on these differences as well as the different outcomes associated with various types of PLA credit. Issues related to financial aid, job status/history age and major could also add to the relevant literature.

Military Affiliation. In the current study, a large percentage of the the participants were affiliated in some way with the military. A study addressing the use of PLA for military training could further add to the research on how PLA usage and learner profiles affect degree completion.

Meta-analysis. Many of the prior studies reviewed used different statistical tests. This lack of a unified approach made it difficult to make accurate comparisons of the results. At the time of writing, CAEL is producing a new multi-institution study that will provide updated information on PLA use and student outcomes. While additional independent research is still needed, researchers need to adopt a unified approach to produce usable comparisons.

Concluding Remarks

As American colleges and universities adapt to the growth of adult student enrollment, it is important to consider how adults learn and what motivates them to return to school. For adult students to succeed, institutions must lay aside bias toward traditional programming and embrace these new opportunities. The new traditional student has come of age and higher education must follow suit.

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Appendix:

IRB approval

Barnett Exempt Protocol #19-352 EX 1909, "Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in Online Degree Programs"

IRB Administration <irbadmin@auburn.edu>
Wed 9/4/2019 9:50 AM
To: Lee Barnett <wlb0016@tigermail.auburn.edu>
Cc: James Witte <witteje@auburn.edu>

2 attachments (3 MB)
Investigators Responsibilities rev 1-2011.docx; Barnett 19-352 EX1909 revisions 1.pdf;

Use IRBsubmit@auburn.edu for protocol-related submissions and IRBadmin@auburn.edu for questions and information.
The IRB only accepts forms posted at https://cws.auburn.edu/vpr/compliance/humansubjects/2Forms and submitted electronically.

Dear William,

Your protocol entitled "Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in Online Degree Programs" as "Exempt" under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4). Attached is a scan of your approved protocol.

Please note this application describes secondary research, consent not required, with data collected from another primary activity and is retrospective secondary use of the data. THE STUDY QUALIFIES FOR CATEGORY 4 104(d)(2) EXEMPT RESEARCH.

Official notice:
This e-mail serves as official notice that your protocol has been approved. A formal approval letter will not be sent unless you notify us that you need one. By accepting this approval, you also accept your responsibilities associated with this approval. Details of your responsibilities are attached.

Consent documents:
Since you do not have to wait to for the return of any consent documents, please conduct your study at your convenience.

When you have completed all research activities, have no plans to collect additional data and have destroyed all identifiable information as approved by the IRB, please notify this office via e-mail. A final report is no longer required for Exempt protocols.

If you have any questions, please let us know.

Best wishes for success with your research!

AUBURN
RESEARCH

William Lee Barnett
Wlb0016@auburn.edu
August 29, 2019

IRB Committee
Auburn University

Response to the IRB Committee's comments on my IRB application.

1. Item 2 has been updated to reflect the use of only archival data. This was a clerical error.
2. Item 4
    a. I have added further details of the study to the application. CSU feels that the Research Agreement and CSU IRB approval cover the question of how data will be used. The PI is the Dean and Assistant Provost for Student Affairs at CSU but does not have access to the data directly. In order to maintain privacy, de-identified data will be pulled and processed by appropriate staff members that do not report to the PI. The study will cover students who enrolled from 2008-2012. The total enrollment for that time period is estimated at 44,000 students.
    b. I updated the application to include a definition of PLA—Prior Learning Assessment. PLA credit is academic credit given for non-academic learning such as CLEP exams, ACE and military training.
    c. The institution has been identified in the IRB application as Columbia Southern University.
3. Item 5 has been updated to include a request for Waiver of Consent.
4. The term "privatized" has been replaced with "de-identified" to conform to research standards.
5. No data collection form will be used.

Please let me know if you have further questions.

Respectfully,

William Lee Barnett

Auburn University Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPTION REVIEW APPLICATION

For information or help completing this form, contact: **THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE,**
Location: 115 Ramsay Hall **Phone:** 334-844-5966 **Email:** IRBAdmin@auburn.edu

Submit completed application and supporting material as one attachment to IRBsubmit@auburn.edu.

1. PROJECT IDENTIFICATION **Date**_____

a. Project Title Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in Online Degree Programs

b. Principal Investigator William Lee Barnett Degree(s) BA, MA, MRE, EdS, DMin
Rank/Title PhD Candidate Department/School Adult Education
Phone Number 256.679.1231 AU Email wlb0016@auburn.edu

Faculty Principal Investigator (required if PI isa student) Dr. James Witte
Title Department Chair and Professor Department/School Adult Education
Phone Number 3348443054 AU Email witteje@auburn.edu

Dept Head Sheri Downer Department/School Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology
Phone Number 334.844.3060 AU Email downesh@auburn.edu

c. Project Personnel (other PI) – Identify all individuals who will be involved with the conduct of the research and include their role on the project. Role may include design, recruitment, consent process, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Attach a table if needed for additional personnel.

Personnel Name_____ Degree (s) _____ Rank/Title_____
Department/School_____
Role_____
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution _____
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? _____

Personnel Name_____ Degree (s) _____ Rank/Title_____
Department/School_____
Role_____
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution _____
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? _____

Personnel Name_____ Degree (s) _____ Rank/Title_____
Department/School_____
Role_____
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution _____
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? _____

d. Training – Have all Key Personnel completed CITI human subjects training (including elective modules related to this research) within the last 3 years? YES☒ NO ☐

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this Document for use from 09/04/2019 to ----------
Protocol # 19-352 EX 1909

e. Funding source – Is this project funded by the investigator(s)? [X] YES [ ] NO
Is this project funded by AU? [ ] YES [X] NO If YES, identify source _____
Is this project funded by an external sponsor? [ ] YES [X] No If YES, provide the name of the sponsor, type of sponsor (governmental, non-profit, corporate, other), and an identification number for the award.
Name_____Type_____Grant # _____

f. List other IRBs associated with this research and submit a copy of their approval and/or protocol.

Columbia Southern University IRB (attached)

2. Mark the category or categories below that describe the proposed research:

[ ] 1.

[ ] 2. Research only includes interactions involving educational tests, surveys, interviews, public observation if at least ONE of the following criteria. (The research includes data collection only; may include visual or auditory recording; may NOT include intervention and only includes interactions). **Mark the applicable sub-category below (©, ii, or iii).** 104(d)(2)

(i) Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/linked); **OR**
- surveys and interviews: no children;
- educational tests or observation of public behavior: can only include children when investigators do not participate in activities being observed.

[ ] (ii) Any disclosures of responses outside would not reasonably place participant at risk; **OR**

[ ] (iii) Information is recorded with identifiers or code linked to identifiers and IRB conducts limited review; no children. **Requires limited review by the IRB.***

[ ] 3. Research involving Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)** through verbal, written responses (including data entry or audiovisual recording) from adult subjects who prospectively agree and ONE of the following criteria is met. (This research does not include children and does not include medical interventions. Research cannot have deception unless the participant prospectively agrees that they will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature and purpose of the research)
Mark the applicable sub-category below (A, B, or C). 104(d)(3)(i)

(A) Recorded information cannot readily identify the subject (directly or indirectly/linked); **OR**

[ ] **(B)** Any disclosure of responses outside of the research would not reasonably place subject at risk; **OR**

(C) Information is recorded with identifiers and cannot have deception unless participant prospectively agrees. **Requires limited review by the IRB.***

[X] 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: use of identifiable information or identifiable bio-specimen that have been or will be collected for some other 'primary' or 'initial' activity, if one of the following criteria is met. Allows retrospective and prospective secondary use. **Mark the applicable sub-category below (I, ii, iii, or iv).** 104(d)(4)

[ ] (i) Biospecimens or information are publically available;

[X] (ii) Information recorded so subject cannot readily be identified, directly or indirectly/linked; investigator does not contact subjects and will not re-identify the subjects; OR

☐(iii) Collection and analysis involving investigators use of identifiable health information when use is regulated by HIPAA "health care operations" or "research or "public health activities and purposes" (does not include biospecimens (only PHI and requires federal guidance on how to apply); OR

☐(iv) Research information collected by or on behalf of federal government usinggovernment generated or collected information obtained for non-researchactivities.

☐5. Research and demonstration projects which are supported by a federal agency/department AND designed to study and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs;(iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. (must be posted on a federal web site). 104(d)(5) (must be posted on a federal web site)

☐6. Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The research does not involve prisoners as participants. 104(d)(6)

New exemption categories 7 and 8: Both categories 7 and 8 require Broad Consent. (Broad consent is a new type of informed consent provided under the Revised Common Rule pertaining to storage, maintenance, and secondary research with identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens. Secondary research refers to research use of materials that are collected for either research studies distinct from the current secondary research proposal, or for materials that are collected for non-research purposes, such as materials that are left over from routine clinical diagnosis or treatments. Broad consent does not apply to research that collects information or biospecimens from individuals through direct interaction or intervention specifically for the purpose of the research.) **The Auburn University IRB has determined that as currently interpreted, Broad Consent is not feasible at Auburn and these 2 categories WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED at this time.**

***Limited IRB review* – the IRB Chairs or designated IRB reviewer reviews the protocol to ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect privacy and confidentiality.**

****Category 3 – Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)* must be brief in duration, painless/harmless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on participants, and it is unlikely participants will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.**

3. PROJECT SUMMARY

a. Does the study target any special populations? (Mark applicable)

Minors (under 19)	☐ YES ☒ NO
Pregnant women, fetuses, or any products of conception	☐ YES ☒ NO
Prisoners or wards (unless incidental, not allowed for Exempt research)	☐ YES ☒ NO
Temporarily or permanently impaired	☐ YES ☒ NO

b. Doe s the research pose more than minimal risk to participants? ☐ YES ☒ NO

Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or test. 42 CFR 46.102(i)

c. Does the study involve any of the following?

Procedures subject to FDA regulations (drugs, devices, etc.)	☐ YES ☒ NO
Use of school records of identifiable students or information from instructors about specific students.	☐ YES ☒ NO
Protected health or medical information when there is a direct or Indirect link which could identify the participant.	☐ YES ☒ NO

Collection of sensitive aspects of the participant's own behavior, such as illegal conduct, drug use, sexual behavior or alcohol use.	☐ YES ☒ NO
Deception of participants	☐ YES ☒ NO

4. Briefly describe the proposed research, including purpose, participant population, recruitment process, consent process, research procedures and methodology.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine if Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree programs at Columbia Southern University, a mid-sized, privately owned, for-profit university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of fulltime study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes CAEL portfolios, military training, challenge exams, in-house evaluations, and ACE transcripts for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Population: The population of this study will be all adults pursuing a bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University. The sample will include students enrolling from 2008-2012. There are approximately 44,000 students in the sample. While the demographics of the population vary dramatically, it is hoped that this sample will address a relevant subset of the population. Participants for this study will include adult students enrolled in an online degree program.

Consent: Consent is granted by the university to review privatized student outcome data. See attached Research Agreement and related IRB from Columbia Southern University

Procedures and Methods: Data will be gathered from student records for academic years 2008-2018. Student data will be gathered and processed by university staff and will be de-identified prior to submission to the Primary Investigator. Due to the specific nature of the study will not be possible to employ random sampling therefore the study will employ non-probability sampling techniques to select the participants. SPSS will be utilized for the statistical analysis.

Role of the Principle Investigator: The Principle Investigator is both a Ph.D. Candidate at Auburn University and the Dean and Assistant Provost for Student Affairs at Columbia Southern University. As such, care will be taken to ensure that data collected are not provided to the PI until CSU staff have de-identified it. This historical data is not directly available to the PI as a part of employment responsibilities.

5. Waivers

Check any waivers that apply and describe how the project meets the criteria for the waiver. Provide the rationale for the waiver request.

☒ **Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)**

☐ **Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter) Waiver**

☐ **of Parental Permission (for college students)**

All retrospective information will be de-identified.

A Waiver of Consent is requested since all data are historical and will be de-identified.

6. Describe how participants/data/specimens will be selected. If applicable, include gender, race, and ethnicity of the participant population.

The population of this study will be all adults pursuing a bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University. While the demographics of the population vary dramatically, it is hoped that this sample will address a relevant subset of the population. Participants for this study will include adult students enrolled in an online degree program. The institution is a mid-sized, private, for-profit university located in the Southeast United States, as such the demographics may not be reflective of the total population of online adult learners. De-identified demographic information will be gathered and compared.

Data will be gathered from student records for academic years 2008-2018. University staff will gather and de-identify student data prior to submission to the Primary Investigator. Due to the specific nature of the study will not be possible to employ random sampling therefore the study will employ non-probability sampling techniques to select the participants.

7. Does the research involve deception? ☐ YES ☒ NO If YES, please provide the rationale for deception and describe the debriefing process.

8. **Describe why none of the research procedures would cause a participant either physical or psychological discomfort or be perceived as discomfort above and beyond what the person would experience in daily life.**

The researcher will not have contact with the participants in the study. The study will review de-identified student data collected by the institution.

9. **Describe the provisions to maintain confidentiality of data, including collection, transmission, and storage.**

No identifying information will be available to the Principle Investigator. University staff will de-identify all student data prior to submission to the researcher.

10. **Describe the provisions included in the research to project the privacy interests of participants (e.g., others willnot overhear conversations with potential participants, individuals will not be publicly identified or embarrassed).**

No individual identifiers will be included in the study. Data will be de-identified by university staff prior to submission to the Principle Investigator.

11. **Will the research involve interacting (communication or direct involvement) with participants?**
☐ **YES** ☒ **NO If YES, describe the consent process and information to be presented tosubjects. This includes identifying that the activities involve research; that participation is voluntary; describing the procedures to be performed; and the PI name and contact information.**

12. **Additional Information and/or attachments.**

In the space below, provide any additional information you believe may help the IRB review of the proposed research. If attachments are included, list the attachments below. Attachments may include recruitment materials, consent documents, site permissions, IRB approvals from other institutions, etc.

Attachments
1. CITI certificates
2. CSU Research Agreement
3. CSU IRB approval
4. Research Proposal

Principal Investigator's Signature_____ **Date** 08/26/2019

If PI is a student,
Faculty Principal Investigator's Signature_____ **Date** _____

Department Head's Signature_____ **Date** _____

Auburn University Human Research Protection Program

EXEMPTION REVIEW APPLICATION

For information or help completing this form, contact: **THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE,**
Location: 115 Ramsay Hall **Phone:** 334-844-5966 **Email:** IRBAdmin@auburn.edu

Submit completed application and supporting material as one attachment to IRBsubmit@auburn.edu.

1. PROJECT IDENTIFICATION **Date** 8/26/2019

a. Project Title Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in Online Degree Programs

b. Principal Investigator William Lee Barnett Degree(s) BA, MA, MRE, EdS, DMin
Rank/Title PhD Candidate Department/School Adult Education
Phone Number 256.679.1231 AU Email wlb0016@auburn.edu

Faculty Principal Investigator (required if PI isa student) Dr. James Witte
Title Department Chair and Professor Department/School Adult Education
Phone Number 3348443054 AU Email witteje@auburn.edu

Dept Head Sheri Downer Department/School Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology
Phone Number 334.844.3060 AU Email downesh@auburn.edu

c. Project Personnel (other PI) – Identify all individuals who will be involved with the conduct of the research and include their role on the project. Role may include design, recruitment, consent process, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Attach a table if needed for additional personnel.

Personnel Name Degree (s) Rank/Title
Department/School
Role
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel?

Personnel Name Degree (s) Rank/Title
Department/School
Role
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel?

Personnel Name Degree (s) Rank/Title
Department/School
Role
AU affiliated? ☐ YES ☐ NO If no, name of home institution
Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel?

d. Training – Have all Key Personnel completed CITI human subjects training (including elective modules related to this research) within the last 3 years? YES ☐ NO ☐

Allow Space for the AU IRB Stamp

e. Funding source – Is this project funded bythe investigator(s)? ☐ YES ☐ NO
Is this project funded by AU? ☐ YES ☐ NO If YES, identify source _____
Is this project funded by an external sponsor? ☐ YES ☐ No If YES, provide the name of the sponsor, type of sponsor (governmental, non-profit, corporate, other), and an identification number for theaward.
Name_____Type_____Grant # _____

f. List other IRBs associated with this research and submit a copy of their approval and/or protocol.

---

2. Mark the category or categories below that describe the proposed research:

☐ 1. ~~Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices. The research is not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn or assessment of educators providing instruction. 104(d)(1)~~

☐ 2. Research only includes interactions involving educational tests, surveys, interviews, public observation if at least ONE of the following criteria. (The research includes data collection only; may include visual or auditory recording; may NOT include intervention and only includes interactions). **Mark the applicable sub-category below (i, ii, or iii).** 104(d)(2)

☐ (i) Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly orindirectly/linked); **OR**
- surveys and interviews: no children;
- educational tests or observation of public behavior: can only include children when investigators do not participate in activities being observed.

☐ (ii) Any disclosures of responses outside would not reasonably place participant at risk; **OR**

☐ (iii) Information is recorded with identifiers or code linked to identifiers and IRB conducts limited review; no children. **Requires limited review by the IRB.***

☐ 3. Research involving Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)** through verbal, written responses (including data entry or audiovisual recording) from adult subjects who prospectively agree and ONE of the following criteria is met. (This research does not include children and does not include medical interventions. Research cannot have deception unless the participant prospectively agrees that they will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature and purpose of the research)
Mark the applicable sub-category below (A, B, or C). 104(d)(3)(i)

☐ **(A)** Recorded information cannot readily identify the subject (directly or indirectly/linked); **OR**

☐ **(B)** Any disclosure of responses outside of the research would not reasonably placesubject at risk; **OR**

☐ **(C)** Information is recorded with identifiers and cannot have deception unless participant prospectively agrees. **Requires limited review by the IRB.***

☐ 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: use of identifiable information or identifiable bio-specimen that have been or will be collected for some other 'primary' or 'initial' activity, if one of the following criteria is met. Allows retrospective and prospective secondary use. **Mark the applicable sub-category below (I, ii, iii, or iv).** 104(d)(4)

☐ (i) Biospecimens or information are publically available;

☐ (ii) Information recorded so subject cannot readily be identified, directly or indirectly/linked; investigator does not contact subjects and will not re-identify the subjects;OR

☐ (iii) Collection and analysis involving investigators use of identifiable health information when use is regulated by HIPAA "health care operations" or "research or "public health activities and purposes" (does not include biospecimens (only PHI and requires federal guidance on how to apply); OR

☐ (iv) Research information collected by or on behalf of federal government usinggovernment generated or collected information obtained for non-researchactivities.

☐ 5. Research and demonstration projects which are supported by a federal agency/department AND designed to study and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs;(iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. (must be posted on a federal web site). 104(d)(5) (must be posted on a federal web site)

☐ 6. Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The research does not involve prisoners as participants. 104(d)(6)

New exemption categories 7 and 8: Both categories 7 and 8 require Broad Consent. (Broad consent is a new type of informed consent provided under the Revised Common Rule pertaining to storage, maintenance, and secondary research with identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens. Secondary research refers to research use of materials that are collected for either research studies distinct from the current secondary research proposal, or for materials that are collected for non-research purposes, such as materials that are left over from routine clinical diagnosis or treatments. Broad consent does not apply to research that collects information or biospecimens from individuals through direct interaction or intervention specifically for the purpose of the research.) **The Auburn University IRB has determined that as currently interpreted, Broad Consent is not feasible at Auburn and these 2 categories WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED at this time.**

***Limited IRB review* – the IRB Chairs or designated IRB reviewer reviews the protocol to ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect privacy and confidentiality.**

****Category 3 – Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)* must be brief in duration, painless/harmless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on participants, and it is unlikely participants will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.**

3. PROJECT SUMMARY

a. Does the study target any special populations? (Mark applicable)

Minors (under 19)	☐ YES ☐ NO
Pregnant women, fetuses, or any products of conception	☐ YES ☐ NO
Prisoners or wards (unless incidental, not allowed for Exempt research)	☐ YES ☐ NO
Temporarily or permanently impaired	☐ YES ☐ NO

b. Does the research pose more than minimal risk to participants? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or test. 42 CFR 46.102(i)

c. Does the study involve any of the following?

Procedures subject to FDA regulations (drugs, devices, etc.)	☐ YES ☐ NO
Use of school records of identifiable students or information from instructors about specific students.	☐ YES ☐ NO
Protected health or medical information when there is a direct or Indirect link which could identify the participant.	☐ YES ☐ NO
Collection of sensitive aspects of the participant's own behavior, such as illegal conduct, drug use, sexual behavior or alcohol use.	☐ YES ☐ NO
Deception of participants	☐ YES ☐ NO

4. Briefly describe the proposed research, including purpose, participant population, recruitment process, consent process, research procedures and methodology.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine if ~~PLA~~ Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree programs at Columbia Southern University,~~at~~ a mid-sized, privately owned, for-profit university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of fulltime study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes CAEL portfolios, military training, challenge exams, in-house evaluations, and ACE transcripts for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Population: The population of this study will be all adults pursuing a bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University. The sample will include students enrolling from 2008-2012. There are approximately 44,000 students in the sample. While the demographics of the population vary dramatically, it is hoped that this sample will address a relevant subset of the population. Participants for this study will include adult students enrolled in an online degree program.

Consent: Consent is granted by the university to review privatized student outcome data. See attached Research Agreement and related IRB from Columbia Southern University

Procedures and Methods: Data will be gathered from student records for academic years 2008-2018. Student data will be gathered and processed by university staff and will be ~~privatized~~ de-identified prior to submission to the ~~researcher~~Primary Investigator. Due to the specific nature of the study will not be possible to employ random sampling therefore the study will employ non-probability sampling techniques to select the participants. SPSS will be utilized for the statistical analysis.

Role of the Principle Investigator: The Principle Investigator is both a Ph.D. Candidate at Auburn University and the Dean and Assistant Provost for Student Affairs at Columbia Southern University. As such, care will be taken to ensure that data collected are not provided to the PI until CSU staff have de-identified it. This historical data is not directly available to the PI as a part of employment responsibilities.

5. Waivers

Check any waivers that apply and describe how the project meets the criteria for the waiver. Provide the rationale for the waiver request.

- ☐ **Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)**
- ☐ **Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter)**
- ☐ **Waiver of Parental Permission (for college students)**

Procedures subject to FDA regulations (drugs, devices, etc.) YES NO

All retrospective information will be de-identified.

A Waiver of Consent is requested since all data are historical and will be de-identified.

6. Describe how participants/data/specimens will be selected. If applicable, include gender, race, and ethnicity of the participant population.

The population of this study ~~is~~ will be all adults pursuing a ~~college~~ bachelor's degree online at Columbia Southern University. While the demographics of the population vary dramatically, it is hoped that this sample will address a relevant subset of the population. Participants for this study will include adult students enrolled in an online degree program. The institution is a mid-sized, private, for-profit university located in the Southeast United States, as such the demographics may not be reflective of the total population of online adult learners. De-identified ~~Demographic~~ demographic information will be gathered and compared.

Data will be gathered from student records for academic years 2008-2018. University staff will gather and ~~privatize~~ de-identify student data prior to submission to the ~~researcher~~Primary Investigator. Due to the specific nature of the study will not be possible to employ random sampling therefore the study will employ non-probability sampling techniques to select the participants.

7. Does the research involve deception? ☐ YES ☐ NO If YES, please provide the rationale for deception and describe the debriefing process.

8. **Describe why none of the research procedures would cause a participant either physical or psychological discomfort or be perceived as discomfort above and beyond what the person would experience in daily life.**

The researcher will not have contact with the participants in the study. The study ~~reviews privatized~~will review de-identified student data collected by the institution.

9. **Describe the provisions to maintain confidentiality of data, including collection, transmission, and storage.**

No identifying information will be available to the Principle Investigator. University staff will ~~privatize~~ de-identify all student data prior to submission to the researcher.

10. Describe the provisions included in the research to project the privacy interests of participants (e.g., others will not overhear conversations with potential participants, individuals will not be publicly identified or embarrassed).

No individual identifiers will be included in the study. Data will be ~~privatized~~de-identified by university staff prior to submission to the Principle Investigator.

11. Will the research involve interacting (communication or direct involvement) with participants?
☐ **YES** ☐ **NO If YES, describe the consent process and information to be presented to subjects. This includes identifying that the activities involve research; that participation is voluntary; describing the procedures to be performed; and the PI name and contact information.**

12. Additional Information and/or attachments.

In the space below, provide any additional information you believe may help the IRB review of the proposed research. If attachments are included, list the attachments below. Attachments may include recruitment materials, consent documents, site permissions, IRB approvals from other institutions, etc.

Attachments

1. CITI certificates
2. CSU Research Agreement
3. CSU IRB approval
4. Research Proposal
5. ~~2.~~

Principal Investigator's Signature_____**Date** _____

If PI is a student,
Faculty PrincipalInvestigator's Signature_____**Date** _____

Department Head's Signature_____**Date** _____

RESEARCH AGREEMENT
BETWEEN
COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND LEE BARNETT

This Research Agreement is made by and between Columbia Southern University and William Lee Barnett, D.Min. a graduate researcher at Auburn University and an employee of Columbia Southern University.

Recitals

WHEREAS, the Parties desire that Dr. Barnett perform research related to CSU polices and data that is of mutual interest and benefit to both Dr. Barnett and the University, in that the research may result in inventions, improvements, and/or discoveries and will further the University's instructional and research objectives in a manner consistent with its status accredited educational institution.

NOW, THEREFORE, in consideration of the premises and mutual covenants herein contained, the Parties agree as follows:

Research Agreement

Article 1 - Definitions

As used herein, the following terms will mean:

1.1 "Contract Year" means July 15, 2019 through July 15, 2020.

1.2 "Confidential Information" means any confidential or proprietary information of a Party related solely to the Project, including any information related to any compound, research project, work in process, future development, scientific, engineering, manufacturing, marketing, business plan, financial or personnel matter relating to such Party, its present or future research, products, services, sales, suppliers, customers, employees, investors, or business, whether in oral, written, graphic or electronic form. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Confidential Information does not include any information that the receiving Party can prove by competent written evidence: (a) is now, or hereafter becomes generally known or available through no unlawful act or failure to act on the part of the receiving Party; (b) is known by the receiving Party at the time of receiving such information as evidenced by the receiving Party's records; (c) is hereafter furnished to the receiving Party by a third party as a matter of right and without restriction on disclosure; (d) is independently developed by the receiving Party as evidenced by the receiving Party's records, without knowledge, aid, application or use of the Confidential Information of the disclosing Party; (e) is the subject of a written permission to disclose provided by the disclosing Party; or (f) does not employ or involve technology described in the Project.

1.3 "Effective Date" means the later date upon which an authorized representative executes this Research Agreement on behalf of a Party.

1.4 "Joint Intellectual Property" means individually and collectively, all inventions, improvements and/or discoveries whether or not patentable or copyrightable, that were

conceived and/or made by the Parties jointly and as a sole and direct result of performing the Project, whether or not utilized or otherwise incorporated into the Project.

1.5 "Researcher" means the researcher conducting the study.

1.6 "Researcher Intellectual Property" means, individually and collectively, all researcher inventions, improvements and/or discoveries whether or not patentable or copyrightable, that were conceived and/or made by Researcher before commencement of the Project or conceived and/or made by Researcher while the Project was pending but independent of the Project, whether or not utilized or otherwise incorporated into the Project.

1.7 "Party" or "Parties" means the researcher and the University individually and collectively, and their respective Principal Investigators, trustees, directors, officers, members, employees, faculty, researchers, fellows, graduate assistants, postdoctoral associates, agents, volunteers, subcontractors, representatives, designees, successors and assigns.

1.8 "Principal Investigator" means **Researcher** and/or his/her successors.

1.9 "Project" means each and every element of the research and work performed in the University's efforts to achieve the objectives identified in Exhibit A, which is incorporated herein by this reference.

1.10 "Research Agreement" means this Research Agreement for the Project.

1.11 "University" means Columbia Southern University and its Principal Investigator(s), trustees, officers, employees, faculty, researchers, fellows, graduate assistants, postdoctoral associates, agents, volunteers, subcontractors, representatives, designees, successors and assigns.

1.12 "University Equipment" means all materials, supplies and/or equipment reasonably required by the University to perform the Project.

1.13 "University Intellectual Property" means, individually and collectively, all University inventions, improvements and/or discoveries whether or not patentable or copyrightable, that are conceived and/or made by the University as a direct result of performing the Project, whether or not utilized or otherwise incorporated into the Project.

Article 2 - Research

2.1 The researcher will commence performance of the Project promptly after the full execution of this Research Agreement, and will use reasonable efforts to perform the Project substantially in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Research Agreement. Notwithstanding anything contained herein to the contrary, the Parties may at any time amend the scope of the Project by mutual written agreement.

2.2 In the event the Principal Investigator becomes unable or unwilling to continue the Project, and a mutually acceptable substitute is not available, either Party may terminate this Research Agreement upon written notice to the other Party.

2.3 During the performance of the Project, Researcher may have the opportunity to utilize University Equipment. All such use of University Equipment must be under the guidance and supervision of the University or its designee. Any damage to University Equipment caused directly or indirectly by Researcher, whether or not supervised by the university

designee, will be repaired or replaced by Researcher at its sole cost and expense, in a timely manner and to the satisfaction of the University.

Article 3 - Reports and Conferences

3.1 The Researcher will provide the University with Project status reports on dates and times to be mutually agreed upon by the Parties. The Researcher will provide the University a final Project report within thirty (30) calendar days after the earlier of the: (a) completion of the Project; (b) conclusion of the Contract Year; or (c) termination of this Research Agreement pursuant to Article 9.

3.2 During the Contract Year, the Principal Investigator will meet with University designee at times and places to be mutually agreed upon to discuss the progress, ongoing plans, changes to, and results of, the Project.

Article 4 – Payments and Support

4.1 No payments will change hands as a result or part of this research study. The purpose of this study is purely academic to meet program requirements for the Researcher at Auburn University.

4.2 All related program Materials for review will be purchased, loaned, donated or otherwise provided by the University at no cost or expense to the Researcher. The University will retain title to all University Materials that are attached to and therefore become aspects of the research project.

4.3 No promise of future employment or contracts are included or assumed in this agreement.

Article 5 - Publicity

5.1 Neither Party will use the name of the other Party in any publicity, advertising, news release or other media without the other Party's prior written approval.

Article 6 - Confidentiality

6.1 Authorized Disclosure. Each party will have the right to disclose the results of the study to the extent such disclosure is reasonably necessary to protect intellectual property, prosecuting or defending litigation, or complying with applicable laws, statutes, rules, governmental orders and regulations; provided however, that if such Party is required to make any such disclosure of Confidential Information, such party will to the extent practicable give reasonable advance written notice to the other Party and, except to the extent inappropriate in the case of protecting intellectual property, will use such Party's best efforts to secure confidential treatment of such information required to be disclosed.

Article 7 - Publications

7.1 Both Parties engage only in research that is compatible and beneficial to, and consistent with, their respective academic roles and missions. Therefore, results of research activities must be reasonably available for publication. The University agrees that the Researcher may publish the methods and results of the Project in journals, theses or dissertations, and present at symposia, national or regional professional meetings, or otherwise, at its discretion; provided however, that the Researcher will furnish the

University with copies of all proposed publications and presentations at least thirty (30) calendar days before submission of such proposed publications and presentations.

Article 8 - Intellectual Property

8.1 All rights, title and interests to Researcher Intellectual Property belong to Researcher, and Researcher is free to file or continue copyright application(s) with the United States at the Researcher's sole cost and expense.

8.2 All rights, title and interests to University Intellectual Property belong to the University, and the University is free to file or continue copyright application(s) with the United States at the University's sole cost and expense.

8.3 The Parties will promptly notify each other in writing of the conception or making of any Joint Intellectual Property. In the event any Joint Intellectual Property is conceived or made, then each Party may use the Joint Intellectual Property for their own purposes, including without limitation publications pursuant to Article 7 of this Research Agreement, but may not sublicense the Joint Intellectual Property. The Parties agree to discuss mutually acceptable terms and conditions upon which Joint Intellectual Property may be sublicensed, and will reduce any such mutually acceptable terms and conditions to a written agreement; provided however, that nothing contained herein requires either Party to enter into or execute any further contract relating to sublicensing Joint Intellectual Property.

Article 9 – Representations, Warranties and Covenants

9.1 Corporate Power. Each Party represents and warrants to the other Party that it is duly organized, validly existing and in good standing under the laws of the State of Alabama and has full corporate or other power and authority to enter into this Research Agreement and to carry out the provisions hereof.

9.2 Due Authorizations. Each Party represents and warrants to the other Party that such Party is duly authorized to execute and deliver this Research Agreement and to perform such Party's obligations hereunder.

9.3 Binding Agreement. Each Party represents and warrants to the other Party that this Research Agreement is a legal and valid obligation binding upon such Party and is enforceable in accordance with its terms. The execution, delivery and performance of this Research Agreement by such Party does not conflict with any agreement, instrument or understanding, oral or written, to which such Party is a party or by which such Party may be bound, nor violate any law or regulation of any court, governmental body or administrative or other agency having authority over such Party.

9.5 **DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTIES. THE UNIVERSITY MAKES NO REPRESENTATION OR WARRANTIES TO RESEARCHER OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING, WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTY OF TITLE, OR MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. UNIVERSITY MAKES NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES TO RESEARCHER THAT ANY PRODUCT OR SERVICES MADE, USED, SOLD OR OTHERWISE DISPOSED OF RESULTING FROM THE PROJECT IS OR WILL BE FREE FROM INFRINGEMENT OF PATENTS, COPYRIGHTS, TRADEMARKS, OR OTHER PROPRIETARY RIGHTS OF THIRD PARTIES.**

9.6.1 Indemnification.

(a) Researcher Indemnification of the University. Researcher, at Researcher's sole cost and expense, will defend, indemnify, and hold the University in both official and personal capacities ("University Indemnified") harmless from and against any and all claims, demands, suits, damages, judgments, liabilities, losses and expenses, including without limitation, personal or bodily injury to or death of any person, defamation, infringement of copyright, trademark, patent or other intellectual property, and attorneys' fees and expenses of litigation, to which the University Indemnified may become subject actually or allegedly arising out of or relating to: (a) any failure of Researcher to observe or perform any of the covenants, conditions, agreements or obligations on Researcher's part to be observed or performed pursuant to this Research Agreement; or, (b) any other action or omission of Researcher. This indemnification will survive termination of this Research Agreement.

(b) University Indemnification of Researcher. The University, at the University's sole cost and expense, will defend, indemnify, and hold Researcher in both official and personal capacities ("Researcher Indemnified") harmless from and against any and all claims, demands, suits, damages, judgments, liabilities, losses and expenses, including without limitation, personal or bodily injury to or death of any person, defamation, infringement of copyright, trademark, patent or other intellectual property, and attorneys' fees and expenses of litigation, to which the Researcher Indemnified may become subject arising out of or relating to the willful misconduct and/or gross negligence of the University. This indemnification will survive expiration or termination of this Research Agreement.

10.7 Assignment. Except as expressly provided hereunder, neither this Research Agreement nor any rights or obligations hereunder may be assigned or otherwise transferred by Researcher without the prior written consent of the University; provided however, that Researcher will have the right to assign this Research Agreement and its rights and obligations hereunder without the University's consent in connection with the transfer or sale of all or substantially all of the business of Researcher to which this Research Agreement relates to a third party, whether by merger, sale of stock, sale of assets or otherwise. Notwithstanding the foregoing, any such assignment will not relieve Researcher of Researcher's responsibilities for performance of Researcher's obligations under this Research Agreement. The rights and obligations of the Parties under this research Agreement are binding upon and inure to the benefit of the successors and permitted assigns of the Parties. Any assignment not in accordance with this Research Agreement will be null and void ab initio.

10.8 Beneficiaries. This Research Agreement is for the sole and exclusive benefit of the Parties and neither Party intends to create a benefit in favor of any third party.

10.9 Non-Reliance. Researcher acknowledges that the University has not made any representations, warranties, assurances or guarantees, of any kind, nature or description, express or implied, that this Research Agreement or the Project will succeed or provide a particular result, produce any specific data, product or other result, or result in or cause Researcher or Researcher's business enterprise(s) to succeed or achieve any specific objectives. Researcher is capable of assuming, and does assume all risks related to this Research Agreement and the Project of every kind, nature and description.

10.10 Nonliability. Notwithstanding anything expressed or implied herein to the contrary, the University is not liable for money damages or otherwise to Researcher for any loss or damage of any kind, nature, or description and whether founded in tort, contract or otherwise, including without limitation costs, expenses, losses and damages that result from or arise out of sickness, bodily injury or death of any person, or damage to or loss or destruction of any tangible or intangible personal property, lost revenues or lost profits, any special, punitive, incidental or consequential damages that accrue to Researcher or Researcher 's business enterprise even if the University had knowledge of the possibility of such potential loss or damage, and whether caused by causes beyond the University's reasonable control, by reason of the University's actions in connection with, relating to, arising out of, and in fulfilling the University's obligations under this Research Agreement, or from any other cause whatsoever ("Monetary Damages"). Researcher releases the University from any and all Monetary Damages that result from this Research Agreement. Researcher's sole remedies for any material breach of this Research Agreement by the University are injunctive relief and specific performance of this Research Agreement.

10.11 Force Majeure. Neither Party will be liable or responsible to the other Party nor be deemed to have materially breached this Research Agreement for failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of this Research Agreement when such failure or delay is caused by or results from causes beyond the reasonable control of the affected Party, including, without limitation, fire, floods, earthquakes, natural disasters, embargoes, war, acts of war (whether war be declared or not), acts of terrorism, insurrections, riots, civil commotions, strikes, lockouts or other labor disturbances, other acts of God or acts, omissions or delays in acting by any governmental authority or the other Party.

10.12 Governing Law. This Research Agreement will be governed by, and construed and enforced in accordance with, the laws of the State of Alabama, which will also be the venue for any litigation arising out of or relating to this Research Agreement.

10.13 Waiver. The waiver from time to time by either Party of any right or failure to exercise any remedy will not operate or be construed as a continuing waiver of the same right or remedy or of any other of such Party's rights or remedies provided under this Research Agreement.

10.14 Severability. In case any provision of this Research Agreement is determined by a court of competent jurisdiction to be invalid, illegal or unenforceable, the validity, legality and enforceability of the remaining provisions will not in any way be affected or impaired thereby.

10.15 Compliance with Law. Each Party will be separately responsible for compliance with all federal, state, local and/or municipal ordinances, regulations and laws, including nondiscrimination laws.

10.17 Notices. All notices and other communications provided for hereunder must be in writing and must be mailed by first-class, registered or certified mail, postage paid, or delivered personally, by overnight delivery service, by facsimile, or by electronic transmission with confirmation of receipt, addressed as follows:

If to the Researcher: Dr. William Lee Barnett
8023 Lauderdale Rd
Huntsville, AL 35802

If to the University: Provost or his/her designee

Either Party may, by like notice, specify or change an address to which notices and communications must thereafter be sent.

10.19 Entire Agreement; Amendment. This Research Agreement including the Recitals and exhibits attached hereto sets forth all of the agreements and understandings between the Parties with respect to the Project, and supersedes and terminates all contemporaneous and prior agreements and understandings between the Parties with respect to the Project. There are no agreements or understandings with respect to the Project, either oral or written, between the Parties other than as set forth herein. Except as expressly set forth in this Research Agreement, no subsequent amendment, modification or addition to this Research Agreement will be binding upon the Parties unless reduced to writing and signed by the respective authorized officers of each Party.

10.20 Headings. The captions contained in this Research Agreement are not a part of this Research Agreement, but are merely guides or labels to assist in locating and reading the several Articles hereof.

10.21 Counterparts. This Research Agreement may be executed in two or more counterparts, each of which will be deemed an original, but all of which together will constitute one and the same instrument.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the Parties have executed this Research Agreement as of the dates set forth below.

DR. LEE BARNETT

Lee Barnett

Date: 8/5/19

COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Barry D Kalbfleisch

Provost

Date: 8/5/2019

_____, Professor

Date: _____

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)

COMPLETION REPORT - PART 1 OF 2
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS*

* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- Name: Lee Barnett (ID: 7099368)
- Institution Affiliation: Auburn University (ID: 964)
- Institution Email: wlb0016@auburn.edu
- Institution Unit: Adult Education
- Phone: 2566791231

- Curriculum Group: Responsible Conduct of Research for Social and Behavioral
- Course Learner Group: Social, Behavioral and Education Sciences RCR
- Stage: Stage 1 - RCR
- Description: This course is for investigators, staff and students with an interest or focus in Social and Behavioral research. This course contains text, embedded case studies AND quizzes.

- Record ID: 26717855
- Completion Date: 07-Apr-2018
- Expiration Date: 06-Apr-2023
- Minimum Passing: 80
- Reported Score*: 96

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
Authorship (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16597)	07-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Collaborative Research (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16598)	07-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Conflicts of Interest (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16599)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Data Management (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16600)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Mentoring (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16602)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Peer Review (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16603)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Research Misconduct (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16604)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Plagiarism (RCR-Basic) (ID: 15156)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Research Involving Human Subjects (RCR-Basic) (ID: 13566)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?ka9492b86-77cf-4724-92b8-9cc28fede731-26717855

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)
Email: support@citiprogram.org
Phone: 888-529-5929
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org

COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)

COMPLETION REPORT - PART 2 OF 2
COURSEWORK TRANSCRIPT**

** NOTE: Scores on this Transcript Report reflect the most current quiz completions, including quizzes on optional (supplemental) elements of the course. See list below for details. See separate Requirements Report for the reported scores at the time all requirements for the course were met.

- Name: Lee Barnett (ID: 7099368)
- Institution Affiliation: Auburn University (ID: 964)
- Institution Email: wlb0016@auburn.edu
- Institution Unit: Adult Education
- Phone: 2566791231

- Curriculum Group: Responsible Conduct of Research for Social and Behavioral
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- Stage: Stage 1 - RCR
- Description: This course is for investigators, staff and students with an interest or focus in Social and Behavioral research. This course contains text, embedded case studies AND quizzes.

- Record ID: 26717855
- Report Date: 07-Apr-2018
- Current Score**: 96

REQUIRED, ELECTIVE, AND SUPPLEMENTAL MODULES	MOST RECENT	SCORE
Research Involving Human Subjects (RCR-Basic) (ID: 13566)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Plagiarism (RCR-Basic) (ID: 15156)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Authorship (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16597)	07-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Collaborative Research (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16598)	07-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Conflicts of Interest (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16599)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Data Management (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16600)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Mentoring (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16602)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Peer Review (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16603)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Research Misconduct (RCR-Basic) (ID: 16604)	07-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?ka9492b86-77cf-4724-92b8-9cc28fde731-26717855

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COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)

COMPLETION REPORT - PART 1 OF 2
COURSEWORK REQUIREMENTS*

* NOTE: Scores on this Requirements Report reflect quiz completions at the time all requirements for the course were met. See list below for details. See separate Transcript Report for more recent quiz scores, including those on optional (supplemental) course elements.

- Name: Lee Barnett (ID: 7099368)
- Institution Affiliation: Auburn University (ID: 964)
- Institution Email: wlb0016@auburn.edu
- Institution Unit: Adult Education
- Phone: 2566791231

- Curriculum Group: IRB #2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel - Basic/Refresher
- Course Learner Group: IRB #2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course
- Description: Choose this group to satisfy CITI training requirements for Key Personnel (including AU Faculty, Staff and Students) and Faculty Advisors involved primarily in Social/Behavioral Research with human subjects.

- Record ID: 25717856
- Completion Date: 05-Apr-2018
- Expiration Date: 05-Apr-2021
- Minimum Passing: 80
- Reported Score*: 90

REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE MODULES ONLY	DATE COMPLETED	SCORE
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	05-Apr-2018	3/5 (60%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	05-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Students in Research (ID: 1321)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Unanticipated Problems and Reporting Requirements in Social and Behavioral Research (ID: 14928)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid Independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?kd0ed9709-4e15-4f0b-8b4b-e40a2adb8f48-25717856

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)
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COLLABORATIVE INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING INITIATIVE (CITI PROGRAM)

COMPLETION REPORT - PART 2 OF 2
COURSEWORK TRANSCRIPT**

** NOTE: Scores on this Transcript Report reflect the most current quiz completions, including quizzes on optional (supplemental) elements of the course. See list below for details. See separate Requirements Report for the reported scores at the time all requirements for the course were met.

- Name: Lee Barnett (ID: 7099368)
- Institution Affiliation: Auburn University (ID: 964)
- Institution Email: wlb0016@auburn.edu
- Institution Unit: Adult Education
- Phone: 2566791231

- Curriculum Group: IRB #2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel - Basic/Refresher
- Course Learner Group: IRB #2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel
- Stage: Stage 1 - Basic Course
- Description: Choose this group to satisfy CITI training requirements for Key Personnel (including AU Faculty, Staff and Students) and Faculty Advisors involved primarily in Social/Behavioral Research with human subjects.

- Record ID: 26717856
- Report Date: 05-Apr-2018
- Current Score**: 90

REQUIRED, ELECTIVE, AND SUPPLEMENTAL MODULES	MOST RECENT	SCORE
Students in Research (ID: 1321)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
The Federal Regulations - SBE (ID: 502)	05-Apr-2018	3/5 (60%)
Assessing Risk - SBE (ID: 503)	05-Apr-2018	4/5 (80%)
Informed Consent - SBE (ID: 504)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBE (ID: 505)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)
Unanticipated Problems and Reporting Requirements in Social and Behavioral Research (ID: 14928)	05-Apr-2018	5/5 (100%)

For this Report to be valid, the learner identified above must have had a valid affiliation with the CITI Program subscribing institution identified above or have been a paid independent Learner.

Verify at: www.citiprogram.org/verify/?kd0ed9709-4e15-4f3b-8b4b-e40e2adb8f48-26717856

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program)
Email: support@citiprogram.org
Phone: 888-529-5929
Web: https://www.citiprogram.org

CITI PROGRAM
Completion Date 07-Apr-2018
Expiration Date 06-Apr-2023
Record ID 26717855
This is to certify that:
Lee Barnett
Has completed the following CITI Program course:
Responsible Conduct of Research for Social and Behavioral (Curriculum Group)
Social, Behavioral and Education Sciences RCR (Course Learner Group)
1 - RCR (Stage)
Under requirements set by:
Auburn University
CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w9205ea8c-1e47-409b-80bc-cc6a3f7b4c5d-26717855

CITI PROGRAM
Completion Date 06-Apr-2018
Expiration Date 05-Apr-2021
Record ID 26717856
This is to certify that:
Lee Barnett
Has completed the following CITI Program course:
IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel - Basic/Refresher (Curriculum Group)
IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel (Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course (Stage)
Under requirements set by:
Auburn University
CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w5ced43b0-7393-4382-b6ca-fd0b2166fbbe-26717856

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) exists to ensure university compliance with federal regulations regarding research involving human subjects. Members of the academic community use this application to facilitate and document this compliance review. The Columbia Southern University IRB must approve research projects which meet the federal definition for research and the federal definition of human subjects before any data collection begins. If the IRB approves an application and later the nature of the research design, requirements, or site locations change, the applicant must submit a revised application for reconsideration describing these changes. This application is intended as a stand alone document, so reference to other documents or appendices of dissertation proposals or other research studies does not substitute for direct provision of that information as part of this application, either as a response within a section or as an addendum. This application pertains to both pilot studies and full studies. Please note the researcher has responsibility to give complete and accurate information about the nature of the proposed study, particularly in terms of the effects on, and expectations for, subject participants. Please note an applicant must document his or her currency in CITI certification as part of this application.

NAME OF RESEARCHER(S)	CITY, STATE, AND COUNTRY / SCHOOL OR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY	AFFILIATION (STUDENT, FACULTY, OR STAFF AND ID)	TYPE OF RESEARCH (RESEARCH STUDY, *FUNDED RESEARCH, OR OTHER)
LEE BARNETT	COLUMBIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY, ORANGE BEACH, AL	STAFF	RESEARCH STUDY

* If research is funded, please complete the following agency information. Otherwise, leave blank.

AGENCY SUBMITTED TO	SUBMISSION DATE	LOCATION OF PROJECT
	/ /	

1. **Title of the Research Study/Dissertation: Effects of Prior Learning Assessment on Graduation Rates of Adult Students in Online Degree Programs**

2. **Classification of the Study:**

Will you do primary data collection from human subjects in this study?

(☐) Yes, I will only collect original data from human subjects and no archival data will be used.
(☐) Yes, I will collect and use both original data from human subjects and archival data.
(X) No, I will only use archival data.

3. Purpose and Anticipated Study Goal(s) and Benefits: Briefly describe the following:

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to determine if PLA credit and PLA method affect the six-year graduation rates of adult learners in online degree programs a mid-sized, privately owned, for-profit university. Colleges and universities measure graduation rates on a six-year scale; a traditional undergraduate degree is thought to take four years of fulltime study; the rate is calculated to allow for 150% of that time to complete the degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) thus allowing for stop gaps in enrollment and part-time students. The university utilizes CAEL portfolios, military training, challenge exams, in-house evaluations, and ACE transcripts for PLA credit in the undergraduate program.

Significance of the Study: The catalyst for this study is the need to help adult students attain a degree within a reasonable timeframe and lower educational costs. The current employment climate as well as new governmental programs related to both college completion and workforce training call for colleges and universities to revisit the idea of just what qualifies as learning. As institutions and employers discuss the issues of training and upskilling, as well as preparation for new kinds of jobs, there must be a new focus on credit for prior learning. Use of PLA can make the degree more attractive and attainable for adults returning to school while valuing the need for relevant and applicable learning. It is essential that colleges review PLA policies and outcomes to determine if it is helpful to students and cost effective for the institution.
More studies are needed on PLA in online programs and at various types of institutions in order to provide a clearer picture of adult college students and degree attainment. This study seeks to add to the body of knowledge regarding prior learning assessment and degree completion by examining outcomes for online adult students at a private, for-profit institution. The intended audience for this study is a group of university policy makers and adult educators seeking ways to increase adult degree attainment.

3.1 Data Usage and Ownership: If your research involves access to, and/or use of, a pre-existing private or restricted database (one that is not open access/publically available), please briefly describe the type of data in the database, the organization or individual owner or controller of the data, how you will access the data, and how you will ensure data confidentiality. Please note that permission to access and use private, archival data for this study must be documented as an addendum to this application.

a) *Does this research study involve access to, or use of public, open access databases or datasets, resources, recruitment lists, contact information for potential subjects or any other pre-existing public data? (Note that "open access" means free and available to the general public without restriction or prior permission needed.)*
(X) No (☐) Yes (Please describe here)

b) *Does this research study involve access to, or use of private databases or datasets, private resources or recruitment lists, contact information for potential subjects or any other pre-existing private data?*
(☐) No (X) Yes (Please describe here and document permission granted for access and use)

c) *During data collection or subject recruitment, will the researcher need access to any health information created, received or archived by health care providers, clearinghouses, or health care plans that pertains to the past, present or future health conditions or provision of health care to an individual living or deceased?*
(☐) Yes (X) No

(☐) HIPAA compliance (if health records are used, please discuss here and address HIPAA compliance)

d) *Will school or student related data be collected in this study?*
( ) Yes, individual student data (X) Yes, aggregate student data (☐) No
I will ask respondents to disclose their educational level and if they ever dropped out

(X) FERPA compliance (if student data is used, please explain here and address FERPA compliance)

4. Project Description: Briefly explain and address the following questions as indicated:

a) Who are the subjects of this study and where are they located? (for example, lawyers in private practice in the State of Ohio)
. Adult college students currently or previously enrolled in a degree program at CSU. Students reside globally; records are housed in Orange Beach, AL.

b) What are the subjects expected to do as participants in this study and what is the time commitment involved? Please explain. If you use class time please describe the activities planned for non-participants. No active participation is required of participants.

c) Will you conduct a pilot study before the primary data collection occurs? (X) No (☐) Yes

d) How will you collect data? Check any that apply:
(☐) email survey (☐) face to face interview (☐) focus group (☐) mail survey (☐) online survey
(☐) onsite survey (☐) social media (☐) telephone survey
(X) other (specify) __Review of privatized student records pulled by CSU staff._____ _____

e) Where will data collection occur? Check any that apply and specify the location(s) below.
(X) organizational site (☐)online (☐) private premises (☐) public facility () open access site
(☐) other (☐) not applicable

Location _Columbia Southern University, Orange Beach, AL____ _____

Attach as an addendum any letter granting permission to collect data at a specific location.

f) What is the degree or magnitude of risk/stress (physical, psychological, emotional, legal, financial) to the human subjects because of their participation in this study?
(X) minimal risk/stress, not greater than encountered in ordinary daily life/activities or routine tests.
(☐) greater than minimal risk/stress with potential for direct benefit to the individual subjects
(☐) greater than minimal risk/stress with little/no potential direct benefit to individual subjects

g) If greater than minimal risk/stress to the human subject is possible, please explain how the risk/stress will be mitigated or lessened.

h) Are any third parties assisting with this study who will have access to the data?
(X) No (☐) Yes (specify) _____

5. Subject Groups: Will the subjects recruited to participate in this study include any in the protected groups identified below as specified within the federal human subject guidelines? (The guidelines are defined at www.citiprogram.org)

If any category from this list is checked "yes", please explain in the "Comments" area below how the subjects will be protected from harm, risk, or stress as a study participant and how stress/risk will be mitigated or lessened.

a. Children/minors under age 18?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
b. Prisoners?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
c. Pregnant women?	Yes (X)	No (☐)

d. Cognitively impaired or mentally disabled?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
e. Educationally or economically disadvantaged?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will the subjects be traumatized, comatose, or terminally ill patients?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will the subjects be elderly or aged persons?	Yes (X)	No ( )
Will the subjects be minorities (including women)?	Yes (X)	No (☐)
Will information be withheld from subjects prior to, or during, participation?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will the subjects be college students?	Yes (X)	No (☐)
Will the subjects be deceived, misled, or coerced in any way?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will/might the subjects be students of the Columbia Southern University?	Yes (X)	No (☐)
Will/might the subjects be faculty or staff of the Columbia Southern University?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will information be requested that is, or may be, personal or sensitive?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
If the subjects are active duty military, will their supervisors have influence on their participation in this research or will participation be affected at all by the reporting relationship(s)?	Yes (☐)	No (X)
Will any aspect of this study involve subjects from countries outside of the U.S.? If yes, please specify in the comments section below.	Yes (X)	No (☐)

Comments: This study will focus on privatized student data. The study will address ethnicity, gender, age, enrollment status, GPA, retention and graduation data.

Student demographics will vary and may include minorities, women, aged students and potentially disabled students. Disability data will not be included in the study. Female students will be included but pregnancy will not be addressed or disclosed. Data on educational or economic status will not be collected. Some students may reside outside of the United States but that information will not be collected.

6. Subject Recruitment and Selection: Briefly explain and address the following:

a) Which of the following will you use to find and recruit subjects? (check all that apply and include copies with this application) Please note that permission to recruit subjects from organizations must be documented by completion of a form, and inclusion of it as an addendum to this application.

(☐) Area Canvassing
(☐) Bulletin Board Post
(☐) CSU Social Media
(☐) Direct Mail
(☐) Email Announcement
(☐) Events, Meetings, Conferences
(☐) Face-to-Face Interaction
(☐) Flyers
(☐) Institutional "gatekeepers"
(☐) Internet/Websites
(☐) Newspaper/Radio/Television
(☐) Phone Solicitation
(☐) Poster
(☐) Referrals from Others
(☐) Registry
(☐) Social Media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, etc.) (please specify below; documented use permission is required)

*(X) Other (please specify)_The study will only examine privatized student data gathered related to the use or non-use of credit for prior learning.*_____

EXPLAIN AND DESCRIBE HERE IF YOU WILL USE SOCIAL MEDIA _____

b) Will any external parties (such as editors, translators, interpreters, statisticians, etc.) provide assistance for recruitment purposes?

(X) *No* (☐) *Yes (please identify and explain how they will assist)* _____
If yes here, a completed Non-Disclosure Agreement should be appended to the application.

c) Are any of the research subjects students or employees of the researcher?
(X) Yes (☐) No

d) If any potential subjects under the age of 18 years are not selected to participate in this study, what activities will they perform during the time the subjects participate in the study so they do not feel excluded or left out?

(x) Not applicable (☐)_____

e) Will any offer or provide any compensation or remuneration to subjects for their participation in this study?
(X) No (☐) Yes (please identify amount and type, and the plan for dissemination.)

7. Informed Consent: Briefly explain and address the following questions. In addition, please include (as an addendum to this application) a proposed Informed Consent form which includes information applicable to this study in a format which aligns with the approved CSU template. Please ensure that the reading level of the Informed Consent language is at the 7th to 8th grade level.

a) How will you inform subjects of the study's purpose, procedures, intent, duration of the study and any potential risks or discomforts to them? Check all that apply:
(☐) Informed Consent form (☐) Email (☐) Letter (☐) Meeting (☐) Phone Call (X) Other _This study will review archival data so no participant consent is required. A letter of consent from CSU will be obtained before data is explored._____

b) How will you inform subjects of withdrawal procedures? Check all that apply:
(☐) Informed Consent form (☐) Email (☐) Letter (☐) Meeting (☐) Phone Call (X) Other _NA_____

c) How will you provide the researcher contact information to the subjects? Check all that apply:
( ) Informed Consent form (☐) Email (☐) Letter (☐) Meeting (☐) Phone Call (X) Other __NA_____

d) How will subjects withdraw from the study as participants after data collection?
(☐) Phone call to researcher (☐) Submit withdrawal form
(X) Other (please specify) __NA_____

e) Please explain what subjects must do to withdraw from the study after researcher collects data and how you will subject data retrieve and handle data to ensure security and confidentiality. NA

f) If any subjects are under the age of 18 years, parental consent is required. What provision will you make to answer any questions the parents have about this study or to address any individual concerns? (For example, will you have an informational meeting with the parents, etc.?) If this scenario does not apply to this study, please indicate "Not applicable" here. NA

PLEASE READ AND CONFIRM THROUGH CHECK MARKING THE BOXES BELOW:

X I attest no primary data collection from human subjects will occur without a prior signed Informed Consent form completed for each subject and that I will retain Informed Consent documentation separately from study data.

☐ I attest I will implement a process for subject withdrawal whereby subjects may withdraw without penalty before, during, and after the researcher has completed and submitted the data collected and the information they provided will be identified, secured, withdrawn, and kept confidential.

8. Confidentiality and Privacy: Briefly explain and address how the identity and privacy of the individual subjects will be protected. Check any of the following that apply:

a) How will subject identity and data be protected?
(X) Subject names will not be used or identified
( ) Pseudonyms or numbers will be used instead of subject names
(☐) Data will be coded alphanumerically
(☐) Other (please specify) _____

b) Will any audio and/or video tape or other recording of data be done in this study? If yes, this must be explicitly stated on the Informed Consent form.
(☐) Yes (X) No

c) How long will the study data be kept after study completion?
(X) Three years (please note this is the minimum required retention time)
(☐) More than three years

d) Where will the data be stored:
(☐) In an office or other location at the researcher's residence
(X) At an office at the researcher's place of employment
(☐) At a third party facility (please specify) _____
(☐) Other (please specify) _____

e) How will data be destroyed at the appropriate time?
(☐) Shredding (☐) Burning or incineration (☐) Smashing (X) File Deletion
(☐) Other (please specify) _____

f) How will the results of this study be disseminated?
(X) Publication (X) Presentation (☐) Other _____

PLEASE PROVIDE HERE (OR AS AN ADDENDUM TO THIS APPLICATION) ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION OR EXPLANATION CONCERNING THE ABOVE THAT YOU THINK MAY BE HELPFUL TO THE IRB REGARDING CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR RESEARCH STUDY.

PLEASE READ AND CONFIRM THROUGH CHECK MARKING THE BOX BELOW:
X I attest that the data from this research will be kept in a secured location for at least three years following study completion, and then will be permanently destroyed.

9. Research Study Time Line:

Projected Start Date:August 1, 2019
Projected Completion Date: December 1, 2019

Please note that the IRB approval is applicable for one year from the final Board approval date. Research extending beyond one year requires resubmission and approval of an updated IRB request.

10. Addendum to Support the IRB Application: *Please check all that apply and include as an addendum to this application.*

CITI Certification REQUIRED	(X)	Confidentiality Agreement REQUIRED	(☒)
Informed Consent form REQUIRED	(☐)	Certificate of Originality REQUIRED	(☒)
Data Collection Tool(s)/Survey REQUIRED	(X)	Assent form (as child subject will view it, if applicable to study)	(☐)
Introductory Letters or Other Communications	(☐)	Letter of Collaboration	(☐)
Non-Disclosure Agreement	(☐)	Recruitment Materials	(☐)
Survey Permission form	(☐)	Other Documentation	(☐)
Data Access and Use Permission form	(☐)	Premises, Recruitment, and Name (PRN) Permission form	(☐)
IRB Approval from other Institution	(☐)		

In making this application, I certify I have read and understand the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 690), and I will comply with the University policies governing the same. I agree I am responsible for the protection of human subjects about their rights and welfare and for the ethical conduct of this study. I have completed the CITI training and have submitted documentation of my completed certification and training in the protection of human subjects and that this certification reflects currency for at least one year from the date of this application. CITI training is found at www.citiprogram.org

I also agree to submit a progress report as requested.

NAME:	SIGNATURE:	DATE:
W. LEE BARNETT	**/s/ Lee Barnett**	
E-MAIL ADDRESS:	**TELEPHONE #:**	
LEE.BARNETT@COLUMBIASOUTHERN.EDU	**256.679.1231**	
MAILING ADDRESS:		

FOR COMPLETION BY THE DISSERTATION CHAIR OR PROJECT SUPERVISOR

TO THE DISSERTATION CHAIR/PROJECT SUPERVISOR: *Complete this section if the researcher is your student or is conducting research you are supervising. Please note that your name and signature must match. Please use the following date format: xx/xx/xxxx*

FOR RESUBMISSIONS: Please note that you are asked to review the IRB application to ensure all reviewer feedback is satisfactorily addressed by the student before the application is resubmitted.

I agree to provide the proper oversight of this project to ensure the ethical conduct of this study and that the rights and welfare of all human subjects involved are properly protected.

NAME:	SIGNATURE:	DATE:	E-MAIL ADDRESS:
	/s/		

LOCATION:	DEPARTMENT:	TELEPHONE #:
City, State, Zip	[College]	

Please give your recommendation as to whether this research study is Exempt or Non-Exempt and provide your rationale here:	Exempt ☐ Non-Exempt ☐	Is Archival Data Used ? Yes ☐ No ☐

FOR COMPLETION BY Columbia Southern University IRB

This application has been reviewed by the Columbia Southern University IRB with the following decision:

Full Board Review (☐) **Exempt** (☒) (☐) **Non-Exempt**

Initial Approval (☐)

Deferred (☐)

Not Approved (☐)

Expedited (☐)

Initial Approval with Conditions. See required changes below* (☐)

Please note that the indicated changes, when fully satisfied, must be submitted to the IRB for their confirmation along with the "Removal of IRB Decision Conditions" form.

***Changes or modifications/conditions for initial approval, or reasons for non-approval:**

NOTE: This application is effective for one year from the start of the study to be determined upon finalized IRB approval.

REVIEWER'S NAME:	REVIEWER'S SIGNATURE:	DATE:
Dr. Phil Harris	/s/	8/6/2019
IRB # 20190801	/s/	/ /