

## 5. Earning Credentials Before College

Social movements, community struggles and neighborhood improvement efforts constantly surface people with the potential to become leaders, organizers and advocates as they learn from further experience and study. However, there seldom are systems for developing emerging leaders to take on greater responsibilities or to prepare for lifelong careers tackling vital issues and projects with increasing skill and sophistication. Only a fortunate few have an opportunity to work closely with and learn from skilled organizers and leaders who groom them for increasing responsibilities and even for family-supporting careers.

Can colleges help these emerging leaders increase their skills, knowledge and opportunities for growing responsibilities and authority earning family-supporting incomes? Obviously, the answer to this question depends on the academic program and priorities of a particular community college or university. They all have the great advantage of being able to provide credentials which can help open career and leadership opportunities for people, particularly for those who face discrimination or other obstacles. However, the challenge is to convince colleges to become serious about their civic obligation to help develop future generations of leaders and organizers of positive change, especially in communities of color and low-income and working-class neighborhoods.

The CLP Network's programs are aimed at rectifying this situation by creating new step-by-step educational pathways based on partnerships between community leaders and local community colleges and public universities and committed to this goal.

In addition to high school and early college programs in Community Change Studies, there are several other routes onto educational pathways preparing people for careers in community organizing, civic leadership and community-based research. These all relate to what prospective students may have already learned through experience.

Since people need to find ways to expedite their progress towards earning college Certificates or Degrees, CLP's strategy includes exploring several practical short-cuts.

## 1. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Providing College Credit for Learning Gained Through Experience:

Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, is a flexible way of earning college credits for college-level knowledge which students gain outside a traditional college classroom. PLA is accepted by hundreds of colleges throughout the US and around the world. It is based on the understanding that people can learn in many ways outside colleges as well as inside. They can learn from workshops, experience on the job, as leaders or volunteers, or through their life experience. PLA is based on the belief that all learning should be recognized and accredited, whether or not it occurred in an educational institution.

Many people have already learned enough to earn college credits through PLA. One Buffalo leader recently reported that he had earned 29 college credits for his life and work experience, making it relatively easy to complete a Degree.

Many community colleges are prepared to test students for their prior learning, while others have not yet developed that internal capacity. CLP is currently searching for a college partner to work with us nationally, enabling all our network's students to have access to PLA as an important shortcut to earning college credentials and entering a pathway toward college Certificates and Degrees.

This approach is particularly useful for community leaders and organizers, given what they may have learned about assessing community needs, issues and assets, team-building, campaign planning and strategizing, coalition-building and the like. They may earn college credit from what they have learned from –

- Their experience as an organizer or leader.
- Learning from other jobs as well as life experience.
- Learning from training, youth and leadership development programs.
- College courses they've already taken in the US or other countries.

PLA allows students to reduce the amount of time it takes to earn a college Certificate or Degree, and this shortcut reduces their tuition costs. Furthermore, studies show that students earning PLA credits actually have higher graduation rates than other students – their practical experience pays off in many ways.

*“There is a growing awareness that learning from experience, gained in a variety of work, politics and civil society contexts including, should be more substantially acknowledged and rewarded, especially in educational institutions.”*

— **Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, or CAEL**

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PLA does not refer to credit for the experience itself; rather, it is credit for the learning from that experience. If that learning is at a college level, it can be tested and given credit by a college through a PLA process. That process may involve documentation from training programs or past employers, tests and/or interviews, or preparation of essays or a portfolio demonstrating what a student has learned.

In short, PLA can be an important first step on a pathway to college credentials and a career. If students start with college credits already in hand, they can enroll in one or more courses which build on what they already know and continue on to earn a Certificate in Community Change Studies or a related field. That credential would be invaluable in itself, and also a big step toward moving farther along the educational pathway, learning more through additional courses and then earning Degrees at the Associate and/or Bachelors levels.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. Pre-Certifying Learning Through Training Programs:**

Unfortunately, there seldom are formal links between the many excellent training programs which organizing networks, community-based organizations and other nonprofits offer to young people and emerging leaders. While a PLA program may help someone demonstrate what he/she has learned from such programs, it

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<sup>11</sup> See paper by Laurien Alexander, Vice Chancellor, Antioch University, *Advancing College Education for Communities and Democracy* at [www.clpclp.org/publications](http://www.clpclp.org/publications)