**Literary Review of PLAR at TRU**

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PLAR

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***“****Credit for learning, not experience.”*

*The Golden Rule of PLAR (CAPLA, 2023).*

**Abstract**

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been in existence since the days of Socrates and Aristotle, who “both endorsed the values of experience in learning”, although it did not become a formalized and accredited process through universities until the 1970’s (TRU-OL, 2023, *Course-Based,* p.5). With the increase in educational institutions and value given to degrees and certifications, PLAR continues to recognize the value of learning outside of academic institutions and trade schools. Originally used primarily to assess skills for an occupation, such as in the trades, in recent years PLAR has extended into academia; in 2005, PLAR became a government mandated program to be used within universities (TRU-OL, 2023, *Course-based*, p.5). That same year, Thompson Rivers University became Canada’s newest university and embraced PLAR’s new mandate to become among the “leading and most active PLAR programs in Canada” (TRU-OL, 2023, *Course-Based,* p.5).

This paper examines the purpose and benefits for participating in PLAR, as well as an overview of TRU’s PLAR program, current statistics, and findings from a 2018 research study done on TRU PLAR participant persistence. PLAR has great potential, but misinformation and lack of awareness has led to its underutilization. It is meant to summarize what is known about PLAR, the PLAR program pathways and processes at TRU, its limitations, and possibilities for future use and promotion.

**Introduction: What is PLAR?**

*“Intelligent individuals learn from everything and everyone; average people, from their experiences. The stupid already have all the answers.” Socrates. (Good Reads, 2023).*

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) defines PLAR as “the process that allows individuals to identify, document, have assessed, and gain recognition for their prior learning…the context of the learning is not key to the process as the focus is on learning” (2023). PLAR programs vary with each institution, and learning may be assessed through “challenge exams, demonstrations, structured interviews, simulations, and portfolios” (CAPLA, 2023). Typically, program participants are adult learners of diverse backgrounds who have chosen to participate in PLAR for “self-knowledge, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, for employment, licensure, career planning, or recruitment” (CAPLA, 2023).

There are three main reasons for participation and benefits that are unique to PLAR. The process alone of reflecting on life experiences and learnings allows participants to accurately assess their goals and skills, and plan for the future- they can set realistic career and educational goals that build on their strengths (CAPLA, 2023). PLAR programs provide objective assessment and validation of your experiences and learning, so participants can receive official credit for their accomplishments; this credit may be used for a degree or certification, gaining professional status or for career advancement (CAPLA, 2023). Pragmatic reasons for PLAR include saving money on tuition by letting students receive credit for what has been learned through life experience, rather than have them pay for and sit through more classes that reiterate what they already know (CAPLA, 2023). In comparison to the cost of and time spent in conventional courses, PLAR is a financially savvy and time efficient way to receive accreditation.

**Benefits of participating in PLAR for adult learners**

*“The educated differ from the uneducated as much as the living differ from the dead.” Aristotle. (Good Reads, 2023).*

PLAR’s main benefit is in validating participant’s life experiences and learning outside of formal educational settings (TRU-OL, 2023, Competency-based). The process of completing a PLAR portfolio can be a learning experience. A common misconception is that the experience alone is sufficient; to be awarded credits through PLAR, there must be evidence that learning has taken place, and that the level of understanding is at a university level.

Mature students are a growing demographic in universities as more adults are having career changes later in life, and jobs become increasingly unstable due to technology and globalization (among other things). Older students typically have had more ‘life lessons’, but also may have more responsibilities such as caring for children, ageing parents, having a full- time job, and paying for a mortgage. They could also be experiencing a life crisis, such as divorce or recently developed disability.

Research through the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning has found that PLAR is valuable for meeting the needs of adult learners (2022). Adult learners needs and desires gravitate towards programs that are affordable, relevant to their career development, accepting of diversity and promoting inclusion and academic empowerment (CAEL, 2022). The independent process of PLAR through correspondence makes it more accessible to those with disabilities or travel restrictions, and PLAR programs should have policies that “encourage equity, an inviting and accessible campus…(and) flexibility for adult learners with commitments” (CAEL, 2022). Institutions offering PLAR also show mature students that their life experiences and circumstances have value (CAEL, 2022).

Participating in the PLAR program allows them to have a more flexible schedule then what would be possible if they must attend classes in person. Although daunting, the process of completing a PLAR portfolio generally takes less time and can lead to more credits than a three-credit university course. For example, an investigation of the PLAR program at TRU found that a traditional course takes about 120 hours to complete, but a PLAR portfolio may take only 60-100 hours (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.13). Participants also usually receive more than three credits for a PLAR competency-based portfolio, that measures skill on multiple dimensions.

For mature students with greater financial obligations, the savings possible through PLAR could come as a relief as it could save them several hundred to several thousands of dollars in tuition for their program. There are also lower opportunity costs; they can work on their portfolio as it is convenient for them, so do not have to miss work hours.

**PLAR program at Thompson Rivers University**

TRU’s PLAR program has evolved since the university’s inception and continues to change to better meet student needs.

Students can apply for PLAR after enrolment in a TRU Online Learning program and must complete a PLAR Readiness Questionnaire and autobiographical resume for consideration and approval to begin PLAR (TRU-OL, 2023, Competency-based, p.8). This part of the process is free; no payment is necessary unless the student decides to proceed to create a portfolio.

PLAR credits can be received after completion of a course-based or competency-based portfolio, or challenge exam, although completion of the process alone does not guarantee credits. Those choosing to create a portfolio have 24 weeks, although extensions are possible if there is valid reason (TRU-OL, 2023, p.6). Participants are then given another two weeks after portfolio submission for revisions based on feedback and must meet with PLAR team members for a ‘Discussion of Learning’ (TRU-OL, 2023, p.10). PLAR assessors then determine the amount of credits that should be received, send their recommendations to PLAR’s director, who will email the final decision and credits awarded to the participant. The number of credits given is nonnegotiable. As the credits given are for university level courses, the portfolio must show this level of learning, skills, and knowledge; if the student wishes to receive upper rather than lower level credits, a higher standard must be reached (TRU-OL, 2023, p.8).

It is important for students to consult with a program planner as well as the PLAR team, so they understand how PLAR pertains to their educational goals. PLAR credits are not recognized across institutions; the student should consider this when planning their career path and degree completion (TRU-OL, 2023, Competency-based, p.8). Their needs and abilities dictate the pathway taken. Competency-based portfolios cost a flat rate of $750, and course-based portfolios cost $520, plus an additional $36 per credit awarded. As a competency-based portfolio can result in up to 12 credits, it is significantly cheaper than the approximately $3520 that would be paid for open learning students acquiring the same amount of credits through courses (TRU-OL, 2023).

There has been confusion about the credits received through PLAR and how they are applied toward a degree or certification. Possible credits fall under two categories: academic and applied studies credits (TRU-OL, 2023). Applied credits used to be the most commonly awarded, for “learning that has been acquired through training or on-the-job work that is technical, vocational, or studio-orientated, and that involves hands-on experience in the subject area (TRU-OL, 2023, p.13). Academic credits are more recent and focus on “discipline-specific knowledge that is usually theoretical, scholarly, and/or research oriented and includes the preparation of academic papers or other written projects” and are awarded through course-based portfolios or challenge exams (TRU-OL, 2023, p.13).

Credits are only given for “uncredited informal learning” and non-formal learning (TRU-OL, 2023, p.14). Informal learning may include independent self-study, reflection, coaching, or mentoring; non-formal learning includes learning acquired through training courses, workshops, seminars, conferences, and continuing studies courses that have not received academic credit (TRU-OL, 2023).

Creating a PLAR portfolio has intimidated some potential participants who may have thought it was complicated and ‘a lot of work’, but it can be tackled sequentially as separate segments. PLAR advisors are available for support, review, and feedback; it is recommended that participants send in early drafts and their first two competencies to advisors for suggestions for revisions, so they have a clear understanding of what the program expectations are and how to present their learning, so they are awarded credits (TRU-OL, 2023, p.14-15).

When participants begin to write their autobiographical resume, they should also begin to accumulate evidence to support their learning (TRU-OL, 2023, p.16). The autobiographical resume should include formal and informal education, employment (with a list of the responsibilities and skills used for each job), personal interests and related learning, and volunteer work (TRU-OL, 2023, p.23). All applicants will also need to write a cover letter for their portfolio, sharing about themselves, an overview of the learning they want credit for, what they hope to get from PLAR, and what their career goals are after PLAR (TRU-OL, 2023, p.16).

Credits after PLAR completion are not guaranteed, and advisors cannot give you their predictions, only help you maximize the likelihood of receiving credits (TRU-OL, 2023, p.8). Their feedback should be used to strengthen the portfolio for the assessor’s review, which is why it is highly recommended participant’s consult with advisors before their final submission. Students are likely to be excellent candidates for receiving PLAR credits- for the course-portfolio- if they have multiple years of work or volunteer experience related to the course and have advanced and grown in their role and show continual learning (TRU-OL, 2023, p.9). The competency-based portfolio is judged by the participant’s demonstration of their abilities in the eight competencies: communication, teamwork, and leadership. Information gathering and organization, problem solving and decision-making, numeracy, critical and creative thinking, independent learning, and intellectual maturity, applied knowledge and skills (TRU-OL, 2023, p.24).

It is critical that participants prove that learning occurred- the experience alone is insufficient. Bloom’s Taxonomy, “a classification system used to define and distinguish between different levels of thinking, learning, and understanding… (sees levels of understanding) along a continuum from basic to complex and concrete to abstract” (TRU-OL, 2023, p.37). For course-based portfolios, the applicant must show that the learning outcomes for the course have been reached, and their level of understanding. For the competency-based, it is judged through the Identification of Learning (IOL) and Demonstration of Learning (DOL) sections of their application and needs to be organized categorically with a clear description within each category of where and how the learning occurred, approximate hours spent learning, and supporting evidence (TRU-OL, 2023, p.27). The average applicant will have 3-8 categories (TRU-Ol, 2023, p.28). DOL entails connecting your learning to the eight competencies; each competency’s write up should be 3-4 pages double spaced with an evidence list (TRU-OL, 2023, p.33).

Although there are differences in content and focus, the portfolios follow the same process for evaluation whether they are for competency or course-based knowledge. After the final copy is submitted, the participant has an additional two weeks to edit after it is reviewed, and more feedback is given. They are also required to participate in an in-person interview. PLAR assessors make their recommendations for credits to be awarded, which are considered by the PLAR director, approved (or disproved), and then the final decision is emailed to the participant.

**TRU PLAR 2018 Study**

A 2018 PLAR experience survey conducted by Forseille of Thompson Rivers University examined factors affecting persistence with and completion of the PLAR program. It also collected data on the demographics of PLAR participants and their incentives for beginning the program (Richard, T., 2021, p.2). The purpose of the study was to enhance awareness of the needs of PLAR participants- typically “nontraditional, adult students” and develop specific strategies to “promote persistence” (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.2). They identified factors affecting persistence and completion that were both inside and outside the university’s locus of control (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.2). The study was created in response to the high dropout rate of PLAR participants- 77% of applicants never finished their portfolio and left before paying fees (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p. 9, 11). The university hopes to create a more inclusive and accessible program so more students can succeed (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.9).

Forseille’s study of TRU students was also compared to a similar study at Champlain College and found both provided satisfactory support and services to participants, but “the greatest challenges to persistence were personal situations, work commitments, and home life” (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.5). The study at Champlain College corroborated Forseille’s findings that finances played an enormous role in PLAR completion, and interferences with PLAR that were specific to mature students included finances, schedule conflicts between work and childcare, and life crises such as disability or divorce (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.7-8).

176 individuals were surveyed at TRU. The majority were mature students between 26-46 years of age; over half were 41 or older (Richard, T., 2021, p.5). Most reported as female (47%) although 26% did not share their gender; 98% were Canadian citizens and 13% were indigenous students (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.11). The competency-based route was the most popular and selected by 61% of respondents; the course-based suited 28%, and only 5% challenged exams (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.11).

Investigating the reason for interest in the PLAR program caused a reconsideration of how PLAR is marketed- originally, program developers believed that career advancement was the primary motivator, but the survey findings challenged this assumption (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.11). Most students said they chose PLAR because it was a cost-effective way to acquire credits (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.11). The second most common reason was to “reflect on self-learning, self-validation, and self-development (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.11).

Although the dropout rate is high early on, after paying PLAR fees students have a high completion rate of 82% (although only 23% of applicants paid their fees) (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.12). Feedback from students indicated that they would like more guidance early on in understanding the process and expectations, so a PLAR handbook has been created to provide students with a resource they can access 24/7, plus PLAR advisors do more frequent check-ins with students and are more available for communication (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.12).

Misconceptions deterred many interested students from proceeding with PLAR. They were often intimidated by the amount of work and time required to create a portfolio. A 3 credit course through the university takes approximately 80-120 hours; 3 credits through the PLAR course-portfolio only requires 25-40 hours (TRU-OL, 2023, p.9). Students are also discouraged because credits are not guaranteed. However, the success rate for those who complete PLAR is very high, with 99% receiving credits for the work they have done (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.12-13). Between the 368 PLAR students between 2021 and 2022, 14,446 credits were awarded (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.9). Many felt that their experiences or skills would not qualify, but PLAR evaluates a range of prior learning from on-the-job training, life experiences, volunteer work, continuing studies, industry training, and private study and skill development (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.9).

Finances are a focus for PLAR students, whether in choosing to participate or being able to finish the program. A common complaint is that the cost is too high, especially with no guarantee of credits. When compared to earning the equivalent amount of credits through university courses, the savings can be huge: for $750, students through PLAR could receive as much as 75 credits “whereas a three-credit course averages $500” (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.13).

The three primary personal factors affecting PLAR completion are “availability of personal time, adequate writing skills to articulate their prior learning, and sufficient evidence to support their prior learning claims” (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.14). Students do not necessarily have to provide additional evidence for every competency- their write up can also count as evidence. PLAR is open to many forms of evidence, such as reference letters, performance reviews, workshop and course descriptions (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.14). Unfortunately, personal factors, namely life circumstances, “home life, and work commitments” have the largest influence on PLAR persistence and are difficult or impossible for the university to control (Forseille & Brown, 2023, p.15).

**Current challenges for TRU PLAR program**

Between reviewing research and conversations with other students at Thompson Rivers University, it seems the university faces challenges in increasing PLAR completion and participation is raising awareness and combatting misconceptions. When the author of this report mentioned PLAR to any of her acquaintances on campus, many of which are mature students who may benefit from PLAR, they said they ‘had never heard of it’. Given that TRU has one of the more active PLAR programs of Canadian universities (TRU-OL, 2023), this is surprising, and it should be advertised as an option for potential students. As mature students are a growing demographic on university campuses, this could encourage many of them to attempt a portfolio, as it would reduce two common limiting factors- cost and time.

49% of applicants abandoned the PLAR process before paying fees; the top three reasons cited for this were 1) uncertain of benefits (33%), 2) doubtful their experience would be credited (35%), and 3) did not think they could provide sufficient evident (29%) (Forseille, 2019). Students also felt lost within the process, with 31% of respondents requesting more personalized support (Forseille, 2019).

Another challenge for TRU is that despite any changes they make to the PLAR program, there is little they can do to for participant’s life circumstances. Between family, work (29% indicated having full time jobs [Richard, 2021, p.10]), and other responsibilities, students may feel intimidated by the time required to compile a portfolio, or simply not have it. 15% of respondents said that PLAR’s time commitment was their largest deciding factor to discontinue (Richard, 2021, p.15). Only 14% of PLAR participants completed a portfolio for final evaluation (Richard, 2021, p.7) indicating that there needs to be a change to the PLAR program in order to increase student success and accommodate students responsibilities outside of school.

**Suggestions for future research and changes to PLAR program**

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) investigated the needs of adult learners for success with post-secondary participation (2022). They found that adults were most concerned with the affordability of programs, relevance to their future career, “academic empowerment”, and inclusiveness (CAEL, 2022). Generally, adults are focused on advancing in their careers rather than ‘finding themselves’, so the program needs to be directly applicable to these goals. Forseille’s 2018 research study found 83% of respondents wanted to use PLAR to finish a degree (Richard, 2021, p.12); in marketing PLAR, TRU needs to highlight its ability to do this.

When choosing a school, adults prefer institutions with policies that encourage equity, have an accessible campus and flexible learning schedule to be able to balance school and other commitments (CAEL, 2022). They also look for schools that consider the specific needs of adult learners, “value and consider their experiences, circumstances, and offer support for adult students” (CAEL, 2022). CAEL stressed the need to repair “the gap between principles and practice” and do more to meet adult learners where they “are at” and support them (CAEL, 2022).

This confirms Forseille’s findings that many participants requested more in-person help (Richard, 2021, p.13). Providing greater support could occur in several different forms and consider issues beyond the PLAR program itself. As life circumstances can severely inhibit the ability of students to complete their portfolio, PLAR advisors could also connect students to relevant supports on campus or within the community, such as subsidized childcare, food bank services, and social services. As success in PLAR also depends on the ability to convey learning through the written word, students should be introduced to the TRU Writing Center, a helpful and free on-campus resource that could help them. More frequent check-ins on students by advisors, or a greater availability of PLAR advisors and their approachability could help students feel more supported, especially in beginning their PLAR portfolio.

As almost half of students dropped out before paying PLAR fees, this speaks to the need for program affordability. PLAR is very cost effective, but this needs to be conveyed in its marketing so potential students understand this. Another thought is to delay the deadline for PLAR fee payment, pushing it back later in the process after students have had time to find evidence and submit the first section of their portfolio for review. Feedback from advisors could reassure them of their likelihood to be successful in the program and let them feel comfortable enough to commit. Partial payments throughout the process could also be considered to make the initial fee less intimidating.

Spare time is beginning to feel like a luxury in the 21st century. In both CAEL’s and Forseille’s research, students indicated having nonnegotiable time commitments and needing programs that allow for this. Perhaps extending the deadline to submit a portfolio would increase students confidence in being able to collect evidence and submit their final copy before the deadline.

Misperceptions of the time and cost of PLAR could be alleviated if there was more clarity in comparing and contrasting PLAR to traditional university courses. Being transparent about these differences could also make the university program seem more trustworthy – the university receives less money per credit from students using PLAR, so it demonstrates that TRU is considering the students’ needs and acting in their best interest.

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