



**Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board**

**PLAR Services Project**

**Saskatchewan Learning  
Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition  
Enhancement Funding Initiative**

**A Progress Report  
March 2002**

**PLAR**  
Prior Learning  
Assessment and  
Recognition



Saskatchewan  
Learning



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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

In the fall of 2000, the Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (PSEST) Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Enhancement Funding Initiative was launched to provide support for conducting PLAR pilot projects in post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan. The lessons learned and best practices from other provinces formed the basis for developing a *targeted* funding strategy to enhance institutional capacity to provide PLAR services to various learner groups. Pilot projects were approved based on the following key criteria:

- 1) demonstration of institutional readiness to “action” PLAR,
- 2) a project work plan or description
- 3) project outcomes enhanced long-term capacity building for PLAR in the institution/province.

It is important to note that the pilot project activities and objectives were designed to meet the specific needs of institutions and as a result, the pilots represent a diversity of PLAR applications with the common primary goal of building institutional capacity for PLAR. It was also envisioned that the pilot projects would provide the basis for the preparation of a Progress Report which identified the “best practices”, challenges/constraints and next steps to consider regarding the implementation of PLAR in post-secondary learning environments.

When PSEST allocated funding for the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative, an opportunity to partner with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project emerged. Since the PLAR Services Project (October 2000 – March 2002) aimed to build provincial long-term capacity for PLAR services, it

was agreed that a formalized link would be timely and beneficial for the advancement of PLAR in the post-secondary learning system. Subsequently, PSEST provided funding and preliminary coordination services, while the PLAR Services Project provided ongoing resource support to pilot Coordinators and led the preparation of the Progress Report and this Executive Summary.

This Executive Summary presents an overview of the eleven PLAR pilot projects undertaken in the Saskatchewan post-secondary learning system as well as a summary of the key comments made during the interviews conducted to develop the report. These comments offer insight to some of the main considerations while implementing PLAR.

## 1.2 Overview of the PLAR Pilot Projects

The eleven pilot initiatives summarized in this Executive Summary represent a spectrum of programs within post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan. The pilot projects are geared at building institutional capacity for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

- **Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research Inc., Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP)** undertook to strengthen the assessment component of the program and make it more student-centered. The pilot project entailed incorporating PLAR principles into the course outline, including the development of learning/teaching practice portfolios for pre-internship students in the third year of their education program.

- **Northlands College** in La Ronge undertook a pilot project to assess the applicability of PLAR processes for specific training underway in the context of northern Saskatchewan. This pilot project involved exploring options for work-based clerical training through identification of gaps in learning involving interviews, job profiling and TOWES (Test Of Workplace Essential Skills).
- **Regency College** embarked on a pilot to introduce PLAR processes and practices to the hospitality/tourism management program delivered at the college. The pilot aims to develop learning outcomes for three occupational areas related to Guest Services Agent.
- **The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, Department of Indian Social Work** undertook development of a PLAR assessment tool for a practicum course and a trial assessment of a learner portfolio. Activities included reviewing the SW448/58 Practicum II to see whether it could become PLAR-ready for social work students, and to provide professional development about PLAR for department members.
- **The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), Research, Planning and Development Department** carried out the development and implementation of an assessment tool to measure the need for PLAR and the degree of PLAR readiness in the SIIT Home Health Aide/Long Term Care Aide program. The pilot project team undertook interviews with former learners to see whether they could challenge the learning outcomes.
- **The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST)** undertook the development of an online PLAR Inventory Database of all PLAR-ready courses offered by SIAST programs. The database will include information on PLAR-ready status, the assessment fee and the methods available for challenging courses.
- **Southeast Regional College – Engaging the Labour Market** piloted a service at the local level to create awareness of PLAR and assist with portfolio development. Additional goals identified for continued development include developing occupational profiles, linking individuals with employment activities and incorporating portfolio development into college programming.
- **The University of Regina, Counselling Services**, focused on portfolio development activities for the pilot project. This included piloting services to inform students about learning and career portfolios, assisting students with portfolio development, revising the document “Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina,” producing the pilot handbook “Building Your Portfolio: A Step-By-Step Guide,” and supporting U of R services with development of appropriate services and resources.
- **The University of Regina, Faculty of Administration** aimed to develop a process for evaluating prior learning through learner portfolio assessment. Professional development and awareness-building activities were undertaken as part of the pilot project.
- The pilot project at the **University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture** aimed at using PLAR principles, processes and tools geared to the design of a self-assessment tool for essential employability skills. The team also undertook development of a template for an exit portfolio.
- **The University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing** set out to incorporate PLAR processes for the physical assessment course in the Post-Registration Program for nurses. The pilot project also included involvement in various

awareness-building and professional development opportunities.

### 1.3 Findings

By undertaking these pilot projects at various post-secondary institutions in the province, valuable learning has taken place. Insight is gained by participating in new initiatives, including greater awareness of potential challenges, as well as necessary resources, helpful strategies, and factors for success. The rich data that were obtained through the interviews will comprise a resource for post-secondary institutions, the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training, and other organizations.

The key lessons learned and best practices that were identified by pilot project Coordinators and their colleagues during the interviews include:

1. A concerted effort needs to be made to find time to devote to PLAR initiatives. This can be challenging, especially when staff and faculty encounter competing priorities and intense workloads. Two potential strategies to address limited time availability include access to support services and relief of workload for instructors and staff.
2. Time for learning needs to be built into the plan. Sufficient time needs to be allocated for PLAR initiative development teams, colleagues and other stakeholders to develop an understanding and familiarity with PLAR principles, processes and tools.
3. Access to information and training provides great benefit to development teams and their colleagues. Finding information or people with expertise in specific areas may be difficult, but invaluable in developing institutional capacity. A clearinghouse of resources and information was identified as a means to improve access to up-to-date information.
4. Adequate allocation of financial resources is also essential for the development of initiatives. For many institutions there are considerable demands on already limited resources; secure funding will greatly increase the sustainability of PLAR. Funding for research and development as well as implementation was identified as an integral component of a sustainable PLAR system.
5. Investing time and resources in up-front planning and preparation provide tremendous benefits. Careful planning can help ensure awareness-building, support and buy-in are integral components of the PLAR development process. Key stakeholder groups would need to be identified depending on the individual context. In post-secondary learning systems, several stakeholders should be consulted during the initial planning stages which includes: faculty members, staff, learners, the Registrar's office, and employers.
6. Early and ongoing communication with all potential stakeholders is essential for developing interest, understanding and support. Open communication will assist in building awareness that will hopefully minimize resistance. The implementing team should consult with the stakeholder groups on a regular basis, providing progress updates and requesting feedback.
7. External awareness-building is required in order to develop understanding of PLAR in the community and with employers. Building awareness is essential for increased knowledge of the potential for PLAR and to minimize misconceptions surrounding PLAR.
8. Resistance to change is often encountered when introducing new initiatives. Although resistance can create obstacles to overcome, it can also result in valuable discussions and explorations of multiple facets of PLAR. If people exploring PLAR are aware that there

may be reluctant, they can also develop proactive plans to avert major obstacles.

9. Flexibility – in mindset, scheduling, and approach – can be very beneficial when incorporating new concepts into programming. Progress can be enhanced when adjustments in accordance with increased understanding and with changing circumstances are allowed. The multiple assessment options available through PLAR also provide a means of increasing flexibility within the teaching/learning environment.
10. Champions and internal support are essential to spearhead new initiatives. Champions play critical roles as they maintain focus, create motivation, and bring the project to fruition. The champions participating in these pilots held various roles in their institutions, but through a shared vision and enthusiasm, they were able to carry the project forth. In addition, having support from respected and well-informed individuals can prove invaluable for new initiatives.

11. Industry and employer buy-in are critical for sustainability of the process. Education of employers can assist in enhancing the employers' ability to see the benefits and validity of the PLAR process for their employees and recruits.
12. Acknowledgement of staff and their accomplishments should not be forgotten. Recognition and appreciation should be shown for the work undertaken for developing and implementing new and innovative tasks; this is true especially when the new tasks are added to regular responsibilities.

## 2. Introduction

The intent of this report is to provide an overview of eleven projects underway at various post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan. The pilot projects are geared at building institutional capacity for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Saskatchewan. PLAR is “a systematic process that helps people think about, identify, organize and describe what they know and can do. The intent of PLAR is that it can lead to recognition of skills and knowledge, regardless of how they were acquired” (PLAR Services Project Advisor Orientation).

PLAR is surrounded by intrigue. Within the realm of the post-secondary learning system, conversations are being held on multiple levels exploring PLAR. Although some post-secondary institutions have been developing and implementing PLAR for several years or more, others have had little or no exposure to the concept, the process, or the tools. The pilot projects described in this report represent a broad spectrum of knowledge and awareness of PLAR. The pilot projects also provide a range of experiences in exploring PLAR and the potential applications and approaches.

This report presents some of the questions and issues that may be encountered during the process of developing and implementing PLAR processes. Insight to these questions and issues was obtained through interviews with pilot project Coordinators. While conducting the interviews for this report, various interviewees inquired, “this is supposed to be honest, right?” They were affirmed that their forthright input was invaluable as a means to expand opportunities for sharing opinions, experiences and insight. Interviewees were assured that all attempts would be made to present the information and feedback in a respectful and constructive manner in this Progress Report. The rich data that was obtained through the interviews will comprise a resource for

post-secondary institutions, the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (PSEST) and other organizations. Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training and the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) PLAR Services Project (hereafter referred to as PLAR Services Project) anticipate that information relevant to your level of interest or familiarity with PLAR will be available through the spectrum of experiences presented in this report.

### 2.1 Background

In the fall of 2000, the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative was launched to provide support for conducting PLAR pilot projects in post-secondary institutions in Saskatchewan. In the year 2000 budget, PSEST allocated \$30,000 for the development of PLAR pilot initiatives. An additional \$30,000 was allocated in the early phase of the next fiscal year. Five projects were funded from the first \$30,000 and six from the second disbursement of \$30,000. Each pilot project was allocated \$5,000; however technological requirements for the development of the online PLAR-ready course database resulted in this pilot receiving an additional \$5,000. The primary objective of the pilots was to develop institutional capacity for PLAR throughout the post-secondary learning system in Saskatchewan.

When PSEST allocated funding for the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative, an opportunity to partner with the PLAR Services Project emerged. Since the PLAR Services Project (October 2000 – March 2002) aimed to build provincial long-term capacity for PLAR services, it was agreed that a formalized link would be timely and beneficial for the advancement of PLAR in the post-secondary learning system. Subsequently, PSEST provided funding and preliminary coordination services, while the PLAR Services Project provided ongoing



resource support to pilot Coordinators and led the preparation of this Progress Report.

To initiate the process, the PSEST-PLAR Analyst (hereafter referred to as PLAR Analyst) began to identify and solicit targeted options for funding. She approached "PLAR champions" from various institutions that had understanding or experience with PLAR to assist in the identification of potential pilot projects. These initial contacts were asked whether they were aware of additional people who could become potential champions to lead PLAR pilot initiatives. It was thought that familiarity with PLAR gained through a program's initial experience with PLAR concepts made it likely that these programs could demonstrate readiness to proceed with the next phase of development. Indeed, several programs with previous involvement in the Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project (1998-99) were among the first to obtain funding from the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative. These programs included the University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture; the University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing; and the University of Regina, Faculty of Administration. The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) Department of Indian Social Work and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIASST) undertook the other two pilots.

In 1998 and 1999, PLAR pilots were conducted at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) and the University of Regina (U of R). These pilots were also funded by PSEST. The Vice-President Academic of the University of Saskatchewan "disbursed a sum of \$5,000 each to nine academic units to explore one or more aspects of PLAR" (Wong, 2000, p. 3). The Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project was spearheaded by Dr. Angie Wong of the University of Saskatchewan's Extension Division to investigate the feasibility of PLAR at the university level. In 1998, the first set of pilots included three programs at the U of S and two at the U of R. Four pilots were funded in 1999; three were from the U of S and one was from the U of R. In addition to undertaking the pilots, funding was also provided

for other activities. These activities included a website devoted to PLAR concepts and processes, and a provincial symposium on "Building Capacity for PLAR in Saskatchewan" (see References in Section 6 for website information). The initial work undertaken in these pilot initiatives has laid some groundwork for some of the pilot projects reflected in this report. Several of the pilot project Coordinators in this report refer to the previous PLAR pilots conducted in 1998 and 1999.

## 2.2 Rationale

The criteria for funding were developed based on the key lessons learned from previous initiatives and experiences from other provinces. These criteria included a demonstration of institutional readiness to "action" PLAR that included:

- learner demand for PLAR was evident and/or anticipated, and
- a champion (s) was (were) willing to lead the project.

Initially, the preference was that each pilot would need to have a learner involved for a project to receive funding. However, because the institutions presented different degrees of readiness, it became evident that each pilot would need to be unique. This resulted in the criteria becoming more flexible such that the assessment of a learner was no longer a definite requirement for selection. The pilots express their individuality, while maintaining some common threads. Some of the projects focused on internal awareness-building, while others identified material and tool development as a primary goal. Ultimately, the diversity of the eleven pilot projects, all contributed to the building of institutional capacity.

Another condition that became redefined was the completion date for the pilots. It was initially outlined that the pilots should be completed by 31 January 2002. Although January 31 remained a milestone for the projects, it evolved into a moment for reflection, rather than completion. For this

reason, interviews were conducted with the Coordinators of the PLAR pilot projects, at this point in the project. The intent of this report is to present, from the perspective of the Coordinators, the lessons learned and best practices.

This report will provide an overview of the eleven pilot projects undertaken in Saskatchewan. The process for data collection was as follows:

- An interview questionnaire was developed by the PLAR Services Project in December 2001. These questions were sent to the PLAR Analyst for review and comments. The questionnaire was edited.
- This draft version of the questionnaire was then sent to pilot project Coordinators for their review. Coordinators' feedback was requested; all feedback received was positive regarding the questions on the interview tool. The questionnaire (see Appendix I) was then finalized in early January 2002.
- Pilot project Coordinators were contacted in early January to schedule interview times and given the finalized questionnaire so they could prepare for the interview.
- Interviews (face to face) were held with each of the pilot project Coordinators, lasting approximately 1½ hours each. The interviews were held onsite at the participating institutions, to provide the interviewer with a flavor for the context of the pilot project as well as to facilitate the process for the Coordinators. In their setting, the Coordinators would have access to any materials they wished to refer to during the interview.
- Interview notes were then transcribed and sent to each of the project Coordinators for their records. The interview notes (transcriptions) serve as the framework from which the information for this report was drawn.
- The report was then drafted and individual sections were reviewed by interviewees to ensure accuracy. The report was then finalized.

The majority of information in this report is based on data collected in the interviews. Individual project descriptions are based on the information received in the interviews, together with information obtained from the pilot project work plans and other material provided by the Coordinators.

Whereas the information in the individual project descriptions relates to the respective pilot projects, the information presented in Section 3 (Lessons Learned and Best Practices), Section 4 (PLAR Services Project) and Section 5 (Summary and Recommendations) are general comments. The content of Sections 3, 4 and 5 is a compilation of the responses to the interview questions from the various projects. Some of the lessons learned and best practices mentioned are shared by all organizations, while others are specific to the experience within specific pilot projects. Therefore, it is important to understand the lessons learned (challenges, factors for success, strategies and resources) in relation to specific programs, as well as to institutional capacity building in general.

## 2.3 Overview of the PLAR Pilot Projects

The eleven pilot initiatives represent a spectrum of the various programs within post-secondary institutions in the province. In addition to the diversity of program areas involved in the pilot projects, there is also diversity in the goals, activities and deliverables of the projects. Differences among projects relates to the background and culture of the institutions, as well as the focus of the programs and their Coordinators. Contextual considerations are outlined in the detailed project descriptions presented in Section 2.

The foundation for the following sections of this report consists of data collected through interviews with the Coordinators of the pilot projects. Many Coordinators solicited input from the participants involved in different aspects of the PLAR

development and implementation process (e.g., faculty members, researchers, summer students, etc.) prior to the interview. The Coordinators presented these various experiences within their responses to the questions. In the case of the SIFC Department of Indian Social Work, however, all department members participated in interviews. This is indicative of the culture of the organization, as well as the numerous conversations the faculty were engaged in to explore their various perspectives on PLAR. The pilot project Coordinator invited the faculty who were directly involved in the pilot to be included in an initial interview, and requested that the interviewer also meet with additional faculty members. One faculty member was especially interested in including the multiple perspectives of the members of the department in the report, expressing the importance of this in reflecting the organizational culture.

The main objectives of the pilot projects as presented in the work plans are included below.

- **Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research Inc., Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP)** undertook to strengthen the assessment component of the program and make it more student-centered. The pilot project entailed incorporating PLAR principles into the course outline, including the development of learning/teaching practice portfolios for pre-internship students in the third year of their education program.
- **Northlands College** in La Ronge undertook a pilot project to assess the applicability of PLAR processes for specific training underway in the context of northern Saskatchewan. This pilot involved exploring options for work-based clerical training through identification of gaps in learning involving interviews, job profiling and TOWES (Test Of Workplace Essential Skills).
- **Regency College** embarked on a pilot to introduce PLAR processes and practices to the hospitality/tourism management program delivered at the college. The pilot aims to develop learning outcomes for three occupational areas related to Guest Services Agent.
- **The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), Department of Indian Social Work** undertook development of a PLAR assessment tool for the practicum course and a trial assessment of a learner portfolio. Activities included reviewing the SW448/58 Practicum II to see whether it could become PLAR-ready for social work students, and to provide professional development about PLAR for department members.
- **The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), Research, Planning and Development Department** carried out the development and implementation of an assessment tool to measure the need for PLAR and the degree of PLAR readiness in the SIIT Home Health Aide/Long Term Care Aide program. The pilot project team undertook interviews with former learners to see whether they could challenge the learning outcomes.
- **The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAT)** undertook the development of an online PLAR Inventory Database of all PLAR-ready courses offered by SIAT programs. The database will include information on PLAR-ready status, the assessment fee and the methods available for challenging the course.
- **Southeast Regional College, Engaging the Labour Market** piloted a service at the local level to create awareness of PLAR and assist with portfolio development. Additional goals identified for continued development include developing occupational profiles, linking individuals with employment activities and

incorporating portfolio development into college programming.

- **The University of Regina, Counselling Services**, focused on portfolio development activities for the pilot project. This included piloting services to inform students about learning and career portfolios, assisting students with portfolio development, revising the document "Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina," producing the pilot handbook "Building Your Portfolio: A Step-By-Step Guide," and supporting U of R services with development of appropriate services and resources.
- **The University of Regina, Faculty of Administration** aimed to develop a process for evaluating prior learning through learner portfolio assessment. Professional

development and awareness–building activities were undertaken as part of the pilot project.

- The pilot project at the **University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture** aimed at using PLAR principles, processes and tools geared to the design of a self-assessment tool for essential employability skills. The team also undertook development of a template for an exit portfolio.
- **The University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing** set out to incorporate PLAR processes for the physical assessment course in the Post-Registration Program for nurses. The pilot project also included involvement in various awareness-building and professional development opportunities.

### 3. PLAR Pilot Project Descriptions

This section will provide a more in-depth look at the various pilot projects undertaken with the funding support of the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative. For each project, the elements explored through the questionnaire will be elaborated in the individual sections. The information provided in each section consists of the following areas:

- Description
- Motivation
- Prior Experience with PLAR
- Accomplishments
- Defining Moment
- Awareness-Building: Internal and External
- Effects on Planning
- Next Steps

Whenever possible, the information presented in the project descriptions follows the order of the headings above. However, for ease of reading and stylistic considerations, some adjustments of the order were necessary.

#### 3.1 Gabriel Dumont Institute

The Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research Inc., through its affiliation with the Universities of Regina and Saskatchewan, offers a four year fully accredited Bachelor of Education program. Faculty members from the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program, SUNTEP (Regina), undertook to develop a PLAR pilot project for pre-internship students in the third year of their education program. The pilot project team identified possible ways for teacher education students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in a way that was understandable to students and not too overwhelming. "The idea is to identify goals and objectives of the class and suggest ways for students to demonstrate that they have satisfied the class goals and objectives" (pilot

project Coordinator). The pilot project entailed incorporating PLAR principles into the course outline, including the development of learning/teaching practice portfolios. These developmental portfolios will include artifacts (evidence of skills and knowledge) relating to professional skills and strategies of instruction, as experienced in school placements.

The intention when undertaking the pilot project was to assist students in becoming more involved in the assessment process and to develop ownership of their professional development. PLAR can assist in making the process clear and well-defined. When faculty first contemplated integrating PLAR into their program, they realized that one option for implementation was in the third year (pre-internship) of the program. To prepare for the internship the students are encouraged to practice their planning and teaching skills in practicum placements and carefully document their developing skills and knowledge. The development of a portfolio will assist in the preparation for Internship, by documenting their "learning experiences of the professional semesters, within the context of their own experience and expertise" (Educational Professional Studies 225 course description). The experience will assist students in preparing professional portfolios when applying for teaching positions upon graduation.

The faculty had a basic understanding of PLAR prior to involvement in the process, although the knowledge was felt to be at a superficial level. One of the goals of the project was to develop an awareness of how PLAR could be used in a post-secondary environment and to gain a deeper understanding of the uses, benefits and challenges of PLAR. In continuing conversations with the PLAR Analyst, applications were clarified,

and the pilot project team began to see a fit. Additional awareness was gained through involvement in the pilot project and attendance at professional development sessions.

The pilot has provided various benefits to the program. An initial development is the incorporation of the PLAR materials into the Professional Studies course outline and its subsequent presentation to students. The objectives of the program, which are defined by the SUNTEP program in consultation with the Faculty of Education, could not be changed. Nevertheless, the objectives were presented with descriptors that provide a clear idea of the criteria to be met. Students were then able to begin selecting artifacts (lesson plans, professional development plans, reflective journal entries, assessment instruments, student work, etc.) that best demonstrated knowledge and skills related to their teaching. In this way, the assessment has become more specific and student-centered. The descriptors will assist the learners and faculty in identifying evidence of the knowledge, skills and processes, attitudes and values necessary for excellence in teaching. The Coordinator has developed a document to assist students in understanding methods for describing and documenting learning. Students in the program have started the collection of evidence to document their learning. Through the process, students have gained more understanding and use of professional language needed to discuss their professional practice.

There have been two “defining moments” throughout this process – the first was as it became clear that PLAR was a possibility for a teacher education program; the second was through participation at the SLFDB “Workplace Training in Action” conference and the SLFDB PLAR mini-session in Saskatoon. The clarity resulted from discussions on the applications of PLAR within the program as well as the steps that could be taken to implement PLAR. It was beneficial to realize that “we could take a piece of the puzzle to

begin with. We did not need to take it all on, but we could take the assessment one step at a time and make it appropriate for the existing model in our program.” This initial understanding helped the Coordinator and faculty members see the possibility of application within the program.

The second stage in the awareness-building process for the faculty was attendance at the SLFDB PLAR mini-session focused on PLAR Applications for an Aboriginal Model of Holistic Learning. Diane Hill, of the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Ontario shared her expertise in the relationship between PLAR, portfolios and FNTI’s Human Services Program in a one day session. The Coordinator stated that this session “provided an expansion of how the process could be used in Aboriginal organizations, to recognize and validate the experiences of Aboriginal people and assist in goal setting at the start of a program. It was valuable to receive support for the idea that Aboriginal institutions have a role in supporting cultural strength and identity.”

In addition to the attendance at this session, the Coordinator has undertaken awareness-building activities, including research and attendance at workshops. The pilot Coordinator has obtained various reference materials, including a valuable portfolio resource from Ball State University. This material relates directly to PLAR/portfolios and teacher education. Aside from this material, faculty members have explored PLAR and portfolios individually. Faculty have discussed topics and shared information with one another whenever possible. The PLAR Analyst has also provided valuable information on the process and helped explain how the PLAR process could fit within the program. SUNTEP is a small organization and can respond rapidly to new ideas, share information more easily, and implement new ideas quickly.

In total, five faculty members have developed increased awareness of PLAR. At least 17 learners have been introduced to the concept and

principles of PLAR, although the title "PLAR" has not been used.

In the short-term, SUNTEP hopes to be able to integrate the use of the portfolio earlier in the teacher education program. In fact, the portfolio, developed around the goals of Year One classes, may be introduced to students as early as the first year and eventually continue through second year to pre-internship. In the long-term, funding may be requested to support implementing PLAR at an earlier stage of the program, perhaps prior to the beginning of classes. There is a need to explore the option of developing credit courses to assist students with personal and career planning. The courses could be directed at assisting students in making choices about their academic careers prior to entry into the program similar to the process in place at FNTI.

One of the key lessons learned is that it takes time to become familiar with the concept of PLAR and information resources are important. It is extremely beneficial to have people with a well-developed understanding of PLAR and of the specific context. SUNTEP identified Diane Hill as a good resource because she understands the challenges of working in a small organization within a large institution, as well as working within Aboriginal communities.

The Coordinator identified a sequence of next steps for the program. The first step consists of implementing the plans for the portfolio for use with students. The plan for proceeding is to provide materials to the students and faculty and request their feedback. Following this, the materials and the process will be reviewed and revised as necessary. The portfolios will be used as part of the final assessment for the pre-internship year and feedback will be requested again. Once this is completed, the faculty will begin working to introduce the concept to students earlier in the program. In the future, they have the vision of potentially using the portfolio as a means of goal setting early in the program. The

Coordinator is impressed with FNTI's "capacity to recognize life experience and support personal wellness at the institution in this process" and hopes that SUNTEP will be able to "work with students early in the process of teacher education to work on similar goals."

To accomplish this, SUNTEP will require resources and support. The vision identified by the teacher education program for PLAR reaches beyond the program, possibly into the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the community served by the Institute. This vision will require funding to be able to hire a full-time person to put the steps in place and access the resources required (such as Elders, counsellors, etc.). Time will be required for this process, but there is an excellent opportunity for the program due to the rich access to information and key community resources; including Elders. Furthermore, the SUNTEP program is well established, has a positive reputation and has an excellent hiring rate of graduates (over 95%).

### **3.2 Northlands College**

The pilot project at Northlands College is aimed at exploring the applicability of PLAR processes for specific training underway in the context of northern Saskatchewan. The pilot project identified two specific objectives. The first consists of reviewing and customizing the clerical job profile for use in this context. The second objective is to develop awareness and capacity for PLAR within the college and participating employers. The job profile will be developed based on Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) Essential Skills, following which the pilot project Coordinator will conduct job profiling in local settings. The findings will provide the necessary competencies/learning outcomes for workplace clerical training programs. The Project will review the job profile and identify preliminary training needs by matching the job profile with existing courses and priorities for training will be defined. Following this, options for delivery of training will be explored, to identify appropriate modes of

delivery based on logistical requirements and resource availability. The long-term goal of Northlands College is to be able to develop a PLAR tool, such as Portfolios, which will then be used to identify the skills and knowledge acquired by clerical workers in the field. Another tool that may be used is TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills). Then, the knowledge the clerical workers have will be compared with the competencies and essential skills as defined in the job profile. The project will then undertake to identify any gaps in learning and then explore options for filling the gaps.

The project at Northlands was, like other pilot projects, motivated by a combination of factors, including need, timing and support. For years the college has offered clerical training in response to community need. For the current academic year, however, there was no apparent demand and the course was not offered; staff and instructors wondered what factors contributed to this situation. The faculty and staff began to wonder whether the training could or should be offered in a new way. As the college began to explore the various options, PSEST approached the college with the financial support for undertaking a PLAR pilot project. Because it fit with the work they were already initiating, it appeared to be an excellent opportunity.

Further to the internal consultation at the college, employers were also approached to assess the need for training for clerical workers. The employers said there was a need for training, but expressed a desire for the training to be delivered in a new way. They found that it would be preferable to train people on-the-job rather than sending them out for eight months of training. The companies felt that during the eight months they were at a disadvantage. Moreover, when clerical workers returned from training, they were often recruited by another organization or company.

Prior to undertaking the pilot project, the Coordinator had not heard of PLAR. After some

awareness-building, she realized that it had great potential and asked herself "why haven't we been doing this before?" The Coordinator then attended some professional development sessions, coordinated by the PLAR Services Project. Susan Simosko, a PLAR expert from British Columbia, delivered advisor and assessor orientations. Following the orientation sessions, the Coordinator explored how to use PLAR in her program and also became involved in the sub-committee developing the provincial PLAR policy framework recommendations for submission to the government.

As the Coordinator became more familiar with PLAR, she realized that there were additional options for implementation. At first, the plan only consisted of profiling to identify training needs. Then after the orientation sessions, it became apparent that other options also existed. The Coordinator realized that PLAR could also be used to identify essential skills.

By the end of January 2002, four job profiles had been developed. The Coordinator compiled the information for developing the profiles by conducting interviews with staff of various organizations. An extensive amount of time was required to set up and then conduct the interviews, and then to enter the data into a database. The data organization system was also developed as part of the project. Following initial entry of the data, the information gained from the four interviews was then compiled into one profile that would represent the central elements. The next step was to analyze the data and identify the complexity of each task.

Being involved in the process provided the Coordinator with information that could contribute to improving training programs. She gained insight from the process that would improve training such as observing that clerical staff in remote locations have numerous duties in addition to those on existing HRDC profiles. For example, clerical staff are not only required to enter information or edit



documents; they also need to create documents. This skill would not have been included in the profile if the local interviews had not been conducted.

During the development and implementation of the pilot project, various awareness-building activities were undertaken by the Coordinator and the college. For example, everyone in Student Services plans to attend PLAR orientations and as many staff as possible will be encouraged to attend, whether they will be PLAR advisors or not. The college is also involved in developing a PLAR policy, although they are waiting for the provincial framework to be completed.

In addition, activities were also undertaken to provide external partners with awareness of PLAR, including an Advisor Orientation delivered in January 2002 to employers in the La Ronge area. The orientation session was held to provide employers from a variety of organizations, including government, First Nations, and private employers with an introduction to PLAR. The objective of the orientation was for employers to get to know one another and to become familiar with PLAR concepts, processes and tools. The meeting was a starting point, setting the foundation upon which further work could be developed.

There is a lot of knowledge within the Northlands College office regarding PLAR, including Student Services, some of the faculty and half of the staff. The Coordinator presented information on PLAR to the college after the spring PLAR orientation, which has helped develop a greater level of awareness. There are also at least seven employers who have increased their awareness of PLAR.

A significant event took place during a meeting with various stakeholders in the project. The stakeholders met to explore what each other had to offer to the project, such as capability and flexibility. It was valuable to brainstorm and share ideas with other people, but the definition that resulted from the conversation was beneficial as

well. When the multiple ideas were presented, and the ideas were pulled together into one thread, "it was possible to see how everything fit in the big picture." This event "brought the pilot into focus."

The college has not envisioned any change for their planning in the short or long-term. Any change in planning will be dependent on the outcomes of the project and whether the project identifies PLAR as workable. Nevertheless, the college has demonstrated commitment to PLAR, and the CEO is committed to it

The next steps for the project are to finalize the job profile. This will involve contacting employers and having them provide feedback for the profile. Following that there will be the need to test it through Bow Valley College. Some employers may go the route of Bow Valley Testing, but it is costly. There is also a plan to provide portfolio development sessions for the staff and instructors of the college.

### 3.3 Regency College

Regency College in Saskatoon delivers training for employment in the hospitality/tourism sector. Within the hospitality and tourism industries there are many employees who have extensive on-the-job training, but do not have formal education or certification. The pilot project undertaken at Regency College proposes to develop learning outcomes for three occupational areas being taught at the college for Front Office: customer service, reservation/registration, and night audit. The college would then introduce the PLAR processes and practices to hotel management, to assist the industry in recognizing the potential contribution for job placement and promotion.

The main goal of the project is to determine whether people who have no formal training, but who desire certification, can get recognition for their prior learning. The Coordinator stressed that the trend is becoming one that "without the certification there is no internal movement in the

industry; there is no promotion.” The first step in the project is to develop an occupational profile based on learning outcomes that reflect the national standards as well as the college curriculum. Once the outcomes are defined, flexible assessment tools will need to be developed. Following the development of the means of assessment, three people will be assessed.

Two key factors motivated the Coordinator to take on the pilot project. First, there is a nation-wide initiative to integrate PLAR in hospitality. Second, the presentation to Regency College was very convincing. When the idea of undertaking a PLAR pilot was introduced by the PLAR Analyst, it was felt that it would fit well within the context of the hospitality industry.

Taking on the pilot project implied a substantial learning curve for the Coordinator and faculty members. Prior to undertaking the pilot project, the Coordinator and faculty were unfamiliar with PLAR. During the development of this pilot, the Coordinator has undertaken basic awareness-building activities. Information has been provided to hotels regarding PLAR and the potential benefits. In addition, the Coordinator has developed increased understanding of PLAR, as has the instructor who is developing the learning outcomes. The instructor of the college courses on Front Office is involved in the development of the learning outcomes. She has familiarized herself with learning outcomes and with PLAR. The college also conducted information sessions with the PLAR Services Project to assist in developing awareness.

In terms of accomplishments, the Coordinator stated that “just getting the hotels to agree to this is a great accomplishment. They are very busy.”

At this stage in the pilot project, the Coordinator has not yet perceived any effects on planning for the college. There are still some challenges that need to be addressed. For example, the biggest

challenge with PLAR is to develop an adequate assessment tool. The college instructors need to figure out ways to assess ‘soft skills’ adequately, and in a way that will be valid for meeting industry standards. Indeed, the pilot project Coordinator emphasized that undertaking this type of project in addition to regular workloads presents challenges. There is a substantial amount of time and effort that needs to be devoted to awareness-building, developing learning outcomes, and assessment tool development. This all needs to be accomplished prior to undertaking assessment.

The three candidates to pilot the assessment process have been identified. They have no formal training, but have experience working in the hospitality industry, at various hotels. They learned on-the-job, but are interested in participating in the assessment, because the assessment will provide them with an idea of where they stand in relation to the standards. Assessment will help identify whether they meet the criteria or not. If they are at the required level, they will be able to take the certification exam; if they are not at the required level, they can enter the program to obtain “top-up” training. However, even if PLAR was an option, some learners may still prefer to enter the program. For example, there is a person working with seven years of experience in an established hotel. Since he is not able to progress in the industry without certification, he has decided to enter the program.

The next steps involve completing the pilot project within the time frame allocated. The first step is to complete the development of learning outcomes. It is taking longer than anticipated to develop the learning outcomes because the college staff are reviewing the outcomes to ensure that they are consistent with the national standards. Once the learning outcomes are complete the pilot project will work with the Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council to investigate whether some of their “line individuals” could enter the process. Options will need to be explored. Additional time and support will be required for developing the

assessment tool and to prepare for the assessment of the candidates.

### 3.4 Saskatchewan Indian Federated College

Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC) embarked on a PLAR pilot project to determine whether PLAR is a useful process for the Department of Indian Social Work. If it is determined that PLAR is beneficial, it will then be necessary to strive to obtain buy-in and support. Two main objectives were identified for the project in the work plan. The first objective consisted of revising the SW448/58 Practicum II to see if it can be PLAR-ready for social work students who will enroll in the course. The second objective was to provide professional development sessions for faculty in PLAR advising and assessing processes. The pilot project was comprised of four key phases. The first phase was planning and preparation, the second was an initial pilot of the process and procedures, the third phase was identified as conducting additional assessments as part of the pilot, and then a review of the pilot will be the final phase.

Considerable human resources were invested in undertaking the pilot project. Four faculty members were involved in developing the learning outcomes for the pilot project. To conduct the pilot project, there was a need for "cooperation and integration of resources of the Department of Social Work and PLAR Services Project" (Draft Work Plan, Pilot Project: Services and Resources for the PLAR Revision of Social Work 448/58 Practicum II). The pilot project team developed the assessment tool and then piloted the tool with an actual learner. The learner was assessed through a portfolio-assisted interview.

The introduction of PLAR to the Department of Indian Social Work was due in large part to the presentations delivered by the PLAR Analyst. The Dean at SIFC (Northern Campus) attended the presentation on PLAR and informed the Department of Indian Social Work about the

potential for a pilot project. The concept of PLAR was deemed worthy of further exploration for various reasons. In part, the Coordinator was interested because of specific work already underway within the Department. Prior to this initial contact regarding the PLAR pilot projects, the Faculty was already conducting professional development to build awareness of the Task Bank and DACUM (Developing a Curriculum). Furthermore, many students in the program enter as mature students with extensive experience in the field. PLAR was seen as a possible means to assess this experience and identify whether students could qualify for advanced standing. It was also felt that PLAR offered a potential means for addressing the needs of these students and respecting their culture and background.

In addition, "it was felt that PLAR was fitting for the cultural context, as cultural skills as well as academic skills could be explored" (Advisor/Assessor). The faculty member who initially advised the candidate who underwent the PLAR assessment emphasized the liberation education aspect of PLAR and in particular how it is a powerful tool for addressing the issues of de-colonization. PLAR assists students in learning how to respond to questions; it takes the student through a process of responding to a committee and reflecting on his/her learning. The flexibility of PLAR enables it to address a myriad of issues, "including cultural issues, self-esteem, confidence, demystification of big words. It is a process of educating, telling people what the process demands" (Initial advisor). In defining the options of PLAR for de-colonization, it was also important to ensure that PLAR was not a means for imposing elements of the colonial paradigm on the students.

Several faculty members identified elements of PLAR that made it worth exploring. For example, the focus of PLAR is "on the positive, looking with a strengths perspective. Students are not to feel bad about weaknesses, but to see them as gaps in knowledge" (Initial advisor). Another observation was that PLAR fits with Aboriginal culture at

another level. Elders are selected based on their potential as role models, including the character and experience they possess. This concept coincides with the concept of PLAR, which should facilitate the process of making PLAR culturally relevant, if it can be tailored to make it “our own.”

Within the pilot project team and the Department of Indian Social Work, there was a range of previous knowledge and experience with PLAR. Most of the pilot team were unfamiliar with PLAR and gained an understanding through involvement in the pilot development. One member of the pilot project team was familiar with competency-based education through previous work experience, but not with the PLAR process and tools. Other members of the faculty, outside of the project team had experience with a predecessor to PLAR, credit for competency. Some of the challenges experienced with the credit for competency process impacted the receptiveness of some faculty members to this pilot project. One faculty member had substantial familiarity with PLAR, and had personally experienced a prior learning assessment process to develop her doctoral program of study.

In spite of the varied level of knowledge at the onset of the pilot, the Department of Indian Social Work team was able to develop a PLAR assessment tool for the Practicum II course, and to undertake the assessment of a candidate. Two members of the pilot project team undertook the development of the assessment tool, which involved a translation of the criteria for field evaluation into clarifying statements and/or guiding questions. These two pilot team members “took the evaluation guide and operationalized it for the student.” During the compilation of the clarifying statements and guiding questions, it became apparent that some of the evaluation criteria were unclear. As a result of undertaking this process, the Department has identified some areas for clarification in the field evaluation form, to help ensure that the desired outcomes and performance indicators are clearly articulated. “In

terms of benefits to the program, there is affirmation and questions. Some requirements are more clear now” (Practicum II Professor). In addition, a new requirement for the practicum experience is for the students to write a paper in which they articulate the learning in the practicum. This is a valuable addition to the program.

To undertake the assessment, it was also necessary to work with the learner and prepare her for the assessment. The initial advisor worked with the candidate as a guide, helping the learner clarify, be concise and complete. “I was able to guide her through the process from story-telling to identifying goals and objectives. Many First Nations focus on story-telling. So through this process a person can learn to move from cultural story-telling to providing specific examples of goals, objectives, activities and results.” The advisor also ensured that tangible evidence was there to support learning.

The third main element of the process was the assessment itself. The candidate prepared a 23-page narrative to accompany an extensive portfolio. This process was intense, as the process from beginning to end consisted of only several weeks due to the learner’s pre-scheduled travel plans. The process culminated in an interview with the candidate, where the narrative and the portfolio were examined. As a result of the interview and portfolio-assisted assessment, the student was deemed to have successfully fulfilled the requirements of the Practicum II and received credit towards her degree.

Throughout the process of undertaking the pilot, discussions were held in Department meetings. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity for undertaking the assessment was such that the majority of the development and implementation of the pilot project occurred in the summer months when many faculty members were away on holiday. Nevertheless, open debate was encouraged around the pilot project and potential future developments. In addition, the PLAR Services

Project delivered PLAR information sessions to the pilot project team to build capacity and knowledge of PLAR processes, advising and assessment. An observation made by several faculty members interviewed was that additional up-front discussion would have been beneficial. A tight timeline accelerated the development and implementation, but it was felt that with hindsight that additional time should have been spent in building awareness and ensuring there was support early on.

The pilot project team and other faculty members have also presented at various conference sessions and attended educational sessions as well. Three members of the pilot project team presented at the "Recognizing Learning" conference in Halifax in October 2001. The Coordinator also presented at the SLFDB "Workplace Training in Action" conference on 15 November 2001 and a team member presented at the SLFDB PLAR mini-sessions on 16 November 2001. Great interest has been stirred by the information presented in these sessions. In addition, various faculty members participated in the PLAR Applications for an Aboriginal Model of Holistic Learning delivered by Diane Hill at the SLFDB PLAR mini-sessions. This session had a significant impact on the faculty members who were able to attend.

Indeed, for some faculty members, the participation at the PLAR Applications for an Aboriginal Model of Holistic Learning session was a defining moment. The session had an impact on the staff in that it provided them with a more profound understanding of how the concept of PLAR and the processes and tools can benefit the learners. A faculty member who had been quite resistant to PLAR stated that "Diane Hill made it clear for me. I am less resistant than in the past, but there are just some courses where PLAR should not be done." Subsequent to the attendance at this session, it was felt that the potential benefit to staff and students necessitated organizing Diane Hill's return to Saskatchewan,

where additional information could be gained and more people could attend.

For other members of faculty, the assessment interview with the PLAR candidate was a significant moment in the process. "Listening to the candidate present her prior learning; it was impressive," said one team member. During the interview the value of the advising process became clear, as well as the value of writing a narrative. "Going through the process helped her to be able to define her skills and knowledge, etc." Seeing the value of the process, and the potential for liberation education was confirmed. For the Coordinator, "the candidate's ability to articulate the learning of colonial effects on the social context" was particularly interesting.

In regard to planning in the program, it has not been impacted. The practicum unit is undertaking some revisions of the handbook/booklet for the practicum, although it is not certain at this time if PLAR for credit of the Practicum II course will be repeated. Further exploration is required and a three-day professional development session to be led by Diane Hill in March of 2002 may help provide some definition. Nevertheless, there remains a desire to explore the possibilities of PLAR. Dialogue is still required to decide how and when to use PLAR. A screening mechanism and protocols will need to be developed, to ensure fairness as well as effective use of resources. Another option for the program is to explore the use of PLAR as a formative assessment tool for students as they progress through their degree.

The next steps for the pilot project are to continue to explore the possibility for PLAR in the program. There needs to be discussion and a decision made regarding whether PLAR is appropriate for the program and its students. If it is to be integrated into the program, then there will need to be clear parameters explored and defined regarding the use of PLAR, including resource allocation, selection or screening process, scheduling, and criteria (a rubric). An additional consideration was

identified by a faculty member who stated that it may be pertinent to explore the various models of PLAR that exist, but then create something from within.

### **3.5 Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies**

The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) offers a wide range of education and training programs to First Nations adults. SIIT is an educational institution of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. The institution offers “vocational and technical employment programming as well as educational services for continued career growth. [...] Programs and curriculum are designed and developed to meet the needs of First Nations communities” (Pilot Project Proposal). The pilot project work plan states that the project consists of the development and implementation of an assessment tool to measure PLAR need and readiness in the SIIT Home Health Aide/Long Term Care Aide (HHA/LTCA) Program. The HHA/LTCA program prepares students to work as care-giving members of the health care team in co-operation with community leadership and Elders.

The project was designed to undergo three distinct phases, including consultation, development and implementation. Initial work was undertaken to develop the awareness and knowledge of the team members. Required background information was obtained, including information on PLAR advising and assessing, and a list of assessment participants. For the development of the project, the learning outcomes from the 20 courses in the program were transferred to a checklist format. The checklist formed the basis for the assessment tool. The project team tested and finalized the assessment tool for use with actual candidates. An information and consent letter was developed, an interviewer script was prepared and contacts were made with former learners to participate in the interviews. An assessment schedule was established, candidates completed the

assessment interview and results were tabulated. The pilot project Coordinator emphasized that this tool is specific to the program under consideration and should not be confused with a template. She emphasized that the project team did not intend to develop a template, but rather a tool specific to HHA/LCTA.

SIIT decided to undertake the pilot project because many candidates came to the HHA/LCTA program with extensive previous work experience. There is little information available on Aboriginal learners being interested in PLAR, so a component of the pilot motivation was to determine whether there was a need for PLAR processes in the HHA/LTCA program.

An instructor was contracted to conduct the assessment interviews. As an instructor of the program, she was well qualified to assess the candidates' knowledge and skills. The interview pool consisted of 54 former learners. The instructor attempted to contact all former learners. Of the 54 former learners, 20 former learners were interviewed to see whether they could challenge the learning outcomes and document their learning.

The pilot project Coordinator had previous experience with PLAR prior to initiating this pilot project. The pilot project Coordinator began researching prior learning assessment and portfolios in the early 1990's. SIIT was contracted to develop a training program for Aboriginal employment developers in 1998. PLA options were designed for a significant portion of the program. SIIT obtained the assistance of Roberta Burke to frame pieces of the assessment tool, to train assessors and to assist with some early assessments. The findings from this earlier project provided some insight as to the potential impacts on the current PLAR pilot initiative. One of the findings was the low interest in PLAR assessment and the low completion of PLA assessment activities. The low interest and low completion rates possibly related to the work required to

compile the necessary evidence, the learner desire to work in groups to facilitate networking, and the need for field work to complete requirements for each course. Learners who had formal academic experience found it easier to pursue and to complete PLA assessments than those who had primarily workplace experience.

The earlier pilot also provided some insight as to the challenges that may be encountered in PLAR assessment processes. In addition, it identified a need to define whether need is perceived or actual. Although there were some clusters of courses that people challenged, not all courses were challenged. This previous experience provided a basis for appreciation of the multiple factors that could impact a pilot project. It was deemed necessary to examine if there were any patterns in the selection of HHA/LTCA courses to challenge, and to see whether any HHA/LTCA courses were PLAR-ready.

A significant unintended accomplishment of the pilot project is that the instructor and the Program Coordinator felt comfortable endorsing PLAR. For example, the Program Coordinator requested information on PLAR for courses that a potential learner completed at another educational institution. The Program Coordinator and the pilot project Coordinator discussed various ways that PLAR could be relevant in this situation and the various flexible assessment options available to the learner. Assessment of on-the-job skill demonstration and top-up learning were discussed as viable options in this situation. The concept of top-up training was new to the Program Coordinator; she intends to explore the concept further.

Through analysis of the interview data, the instructor and the pilot project Coordinator gained insight to challenges as well as benefits of PLAR. Examination of the data collected from the interviews revealed that although many of the candidates came to the program with experience, they did not feel that they could challenge as many

courses as they initially thought they could. As well, some felt they could challenge some portions of courses, but not entire courses. Those who felt they could challenge entire courses were more likely to have completed similar courses at other educational institutions. The emphasis on the content of the courses and the subsequent display of learning outcomes could account for the lack of perceived ability to challenge even the courses that included more skill demonstrations. The pilot project Coordinator pondered the possibility of couching the tool in a different framework, with tighter outcomes that the learners could more easily identify and feel more able to challenge.

The involvement in the pilot project provided the instructor and the Program Coordinator with an increased understanding of PLAR. The instructor learned a great deal about PLAR, the PLAR process and flexible assessment tools. The instructor and the pilot project Coordinator attended sessions delivered by the PLAR Services Project on PLAR assessment and assessment tools. The Program Coordinator also attended a PLAR advisor session facilitated by the PLAR Services Project at the Canada-Saskatchewan Career and Employment Services Centre in Saskatoon. Another awareness-building activity was the participation of the pilot project Coordinator at the SLFDB PLAR mini-session in November 2001 on PLAR Applications for an Aboriginal Model of Holistic Learning. Posters were distributed throughout SIIT and presentation information was distributed electronically, which may have brought PLAR to the attention of people formerly unaware of PLAR activities. Nevertheless, additional public awareness is required, especially targeting instructors. In total, approximately 11 faculty members and staff, 20 learners and 10 others have increased awareness of PLAR as a result of the pilot project.

The pilot project Coordinator's defining moment occurred in December 2001 when the results began to come in and the results were not as successful as expected. The experience in the

previous program (low numbers) caused the Coordinator to ponder about the potential reasons for the low results. Rather than taking the results to reflect a definite lack of need, the Coordinator asked what could have been done to improve the numbers. The question was asked whether the low numbers were due to lack of need or other factors. One possible factor could be the design of the assessment tool rather than the lack of need. Further exploration of the various parameters of the study need to be conducted, with additional research on determining PLAR need in Aboriginal training and learning programs conducted by the institution.

The pilot project has not impacted planning directly, but there is a recommendation to review the course learning outcomes. The pilot project Coordinator stated that prior to this pilot project, plans existed to review and revise learning outcomes, because some learning outcomes were difficult to measure and some could not be adequately demonstrated. Results from the pilot project corroborate with and confirm these plans. In the long-term, however, the pilot project Coordinator proposed it may be valuable to clearly define the different domains of learning within the training program; Aboriginal learning environments; and, identify flexible ways to assess prior learning, as well as classroom learning. The goal would be to take learning styles, learning environments and flexible assessments into consideration when enhancing current programs and developing future programs. Refining learning outcomes so that they are more conducive to PLAR increases assessment options available to instructors and students.

The pilot project Coordinator envisions continuing to build on this pilot by exploring other project options and expanding the repertoire of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) tools, including flexible assessment tools, within SIIT. For the pilot project, the next steps will be to review curriculum and design learning outcomes so that there are various avenues to demonstrate learning. For example, in the HHA/LTCA program, demonstrations play a

significant role and are well developed, but are not recognized in the learning outcomes.

### **3.6 Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology**

The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIASST) has undertaken the development of an online database of all PLAR-ready courses offered in the various programs at its four campuses in Saskatchewan. The information presented on the database includes an inventory of PLAR-ready courses, the methods available to the candidate for challenging courses and the assessment fee. To date over 500 distinct courses have been challenged through prior learning assessment with the PLAR candidate receiving credit for the course. Each year more programs and courses are putting PLAR challenge processes in place (SIASST Interim Report, February 2002). The database will allow access to current information on the availability and use of PLAR across SIASST programs. To date, the database structures have been created and initial data has been entered for testing. The database is linked to the 'Banner System' (student and records management system), which is critical to provide integrated, current and distributed information.

The PLAR Coordinator at SIASST (also the pilot project Coordinator) entertained the possibility of the pilot project as a result of an existing need, timing and the availability of support funding. It is significant that with the increasing provision of PLAR, there was an existing need to inventory the course information on PLAR. Accessible information on PLAR is important, in part because "SIASST has multiple campuses which are located province-wide" (interview with Coordinator). Furthermore, there was a need for consistent information to be available to counselors, programs and learners. Timing was another motivating factor, because when SIASST initially decided to undertake the pilot project, a student in the Computer Technology Systems program was



available to undertake the project as a summer student. Combining this activity with the Saskatchewan Centennial Summer Student Program was an added benefit. An additional motivating factor was the availability of support funding. Although SIAST has funding devoted to PLAR, additional monies were not readily available to develop an electronic data inventory. A centrally located inventory file with printed reports was planned for development. The funding offered by PSEST was sufficient to create a database, which SIAST is committed to maintain.

The pilot project Coordinator and SIAST have extensive experience with PLAR. SIAST introduced a PLA policy in 1996, and a new PLAR policy in 2000; the procedures continue to evolve and expand. Understanding from the first few years provided input to the ongoing improvement of the practices. The SIAST policy and guidelines have undergone revisions to enhance the implementation of PLAR.

The awareness of PLAR at SIAST has been building over the years, and it would be difficult to separate the spectrum of awareness-building activities from this pilot project. However, the staff from the Information Resources (IR) department increased their knowledge of PLAR through their involvement in the project. There are some individuals who may have become aware of PLAR from attending the SIAST presentations at the SLFDB "Workplace Training in Action" Conference as well as at a SLFDB PLAR mini-session in November 2001. Although only counselors will have access to the database, they will now have access to a wider range of information for learners who may not have previously pursued information on PLAR.

The development of the database and the protocols has been a great accomplishment. Unanticipated outcomes also resulted, including the ability for the PLAR Coordinator to access "real time" statistics on PLAR activity within SIAST. The ability to extract course ready statistics from the database through the use of queries provides great

benefit for the pilot project Coordinator. Future reporting and planning will be greatly facilitated through this application of the database, which was not originally anticipated. The benefit of linking a database with the system-wide records management also presented challenges with technology, remote access, and ultimately time. A lot has been learned regarding future projects of this nature.

A key moment in the SIAST project occurred when the PLAR Coordinator first saw the database on the computer screen. The usefulness and ease of the tool became evident, as the user moved between screens. It was a visual experience that had great impact. Her response at the time was: "Great. All I have to do is press a button and voila!" From that point the project accelerated. It became evident that small on-screen details could be revised to better define the user's experience.

In the short-term, the pilot project will improve client consultation. There will need to be some consultation and orientation with faculty members, counselors and the Registrar's office regarding the operation of the database. This inventory will help overcome administrative challenges of gathering data through segregated reporting mechanisms. Moreover, the database will provide ongoing information regarding the availability of PLAR within programs at any point in time. This information will assist with implementation work in promoting PLAR and promoting systems to develop PLAR tools. Comments from potential SIAST database users who tested the system include the following:

- *"It was easy... I would use this site to find out if the program I was interested in accessing offered PLAR."* – Counseling
- *"[...] the information presented is very clear."* – Extension Services
- *"The structure is good{...}"* - Registration

In the long-term, the database will assist with planning on an ongoing basis rather than waiting

for the annual report. Currently there is a lag time to receive the statistics on PLAR activities; data are provided in the year-end report, which is released a few months after year-end. With the information that can be gleaned from the database, the SIAST PLAR Office can develop targeted activities for the upcoming academic year in a more timely manner.

Two critical elements arose through the reflection on the project. First, the project would not have been possible without the support of the Information Resources (IR) Department. The IR department made a tremendous contribution to the project by coaching the contracted person on the programming language needed to develop the database. Also, with the ongoing consultation between the database developer and the pilot project Coordinator, the need to work as a team, was essential for the most effective design and structure of the database.

The next steps within the SIAST pilot project are to test the system with an actual candidate wishing to undertake a PLAR course challenge, to integrate the database with the Banner System, and to develop protocols. In addition, ongoing maintenance will be conducted through the IR department.

### **3.7 Southeast Regional College-Engaging the Labour Market**

The Southeast Regional College project "Engaging the Labour Market" works with job-ready people to find employment. The project is a partner with the Whitewood Canada-Saskatchewan Career and Employment Services Centre. The pilot project undertaken by the Southeast Regional College initially identified four main goals for the project. The Coordinator stated that these initial goals were quite broad and although they may fit into a long-term vision for the program, they were too sweeping to be accomplished in this pilot. Initial steps were taken to embark on the journey necessary to meet these broader goals. One of the areas focused on in the project is that the

Coordinator worked to provide services at the local level to create awareness on PLAR and portfolios. The Coordinator worked to develop strategic partnerships between clients, employers and educational institutions. Portfolio development has been incorporated into adult education programs and portfolio development workshops have been delivered to rural residents.

The key factors that spurred the Coordinator to take on the pilot project included the need to reach farmers and First Nations people regarding the various employment opportunities that exist. The current method of job development was not working. The concept of PLAR and portfolios seemed to fit nicely into the existing Engaging the Labour Market mandate. This pilot project would offer a different way of looking at people's skills and abilities and promoting them.

Prior to initiating the pilot project, the Coordinator had limited knowledge of PLAR. However, the Coordinator had heard reference to PLAR while attending a conference in Quebec. When the Coordinator mentioned her work, the conference attendee stated that she sounded like a candidate for PLAR. The Southeast Regional College has a PLAR policy, but there is little public knowledge about it. Initially the Coordinator was not aware that the public was essentially unacquainted with PLAR. Through the work in the pilot project, the Coordinator came to realize the general lack of awareness of portfolio development and PLAR in the wider community. As the pilot project progressed, the service issue became quite important. The focus then shifted from one of working within the college walls, to moving out to the street and talking to the people. It became a goal of the Coordinator to promote PLAR and portfolio development.

The main accomplishment of the project was the direct contact with people and the Service Centre approach. "In fact," said the Coordinator, "when people in southeast Saskatchewan think about portfolio development, they seem to turn to

Engaging the Labour Market.” Additional accomplishments have included material development, presentations, and service delivery. A presentation was delivered on portfolio development, titled “Know Your Worth.”

The Coordinator expressed a personal sense of accomplishment “from seeing people get it or not get it. Either way, it is a valuable experience.” The Coordinator explained that when people understood the concept of PLAR and felt the positive outcomes from portfolio development, they looked at people and ideas differently. They could see the multiple sides of an issue and it demonstrated that regardless of the formal experience of the participants, each of their portfolios told a story. The participants gained an “acceptance within themselves and of each other, of their lives; they did not have that before the session” stated the Coordinator. As a result, participants had increased self-awareness and self-confidence. The impact has stretched into other areas of their lives and the people around them.

The pilot project has undertaken various presentations, including at the SLFDB “Workplace Training in Action” conference in November. Additional activities have included the “Know Your Worth” portfolio seminar (December 2001), as mentioned above, and a presentation at a Cornerstone Regional Economic Development Authority (REDA) Board Meeting (September 2001). A set of presentations were also delivered to the Records Technician Course at the college (November 2001 and January 2002). These presentations promoted the importance of building a portfolio during practicum.

Through the various activities of the pilot project, a number of people have increased their awareness of PLAR and portfolios. These people include four faculty members, five college staff, four employers, approximately 24 learners and 75 clients. There are likely additional people who have become

aware of PLAR indirectly, as a result of promotional material and ongoing activities.

To increase her own awareness and capacity in PLAR, the Coordinator attended various sessions delivered by the PLAR Services Project. The Coordinator attended the Advisor Orientation Session as well as the Personal Portfolio Development for Advisors. These helped the Coordinator build awareness of the process of PLAR in general as well as develop her personal portfolio. In fact, the Coordinator stated that having access to the portfolio development training earlier in the project would have been extremely beneficial. The personal experience and resulting deeper understanding of the concept and process would have greatly facilitated the promotion and delivery of portfolio development.

Attendance at the Advisor Orientation Session at the inception of the project provided the Coordinator with a clear vision of how the pilot project could proceed. The Coordinator realized at that point that if people could recognize themselves for all they can offer, “doors of opportunity would begin to open.” This was reinforced following delivery of the portfolio development session, when a client composed a success story. The client wrote:

*“The creation of my portfolio has helped me realize my abilities and potential. I have a multitude of skills that I never even considered skills.”* She concluded her narrative by stating: *“It is unfair to ourselves to think we are unskilled or that we lack ability. [...] I may not be able to do EVERY thing, but I can do MANY things, and those things that I can do, I do well.”*

Over the next year, the project Coordinator anticipates ongoing support for portfolio development, using a Service Centre approach. She states that the objective will continue to be “partnering with the Southeast Regional College and local groups to spread the word of the

importance of recognizing self first." In the long-term, the goal would be to have post-secondary institutions recognize "that people are individuals and design credit around skills that are acquired. This would give people the power to design life experience education, rather than just focus on textbook education."

Within the development and delivery of this project, it has become apparent that an important learning is to take the pilot project out of the boardroom. There is a need to meet people on the street and help them become aware of the opportunity that exists in PLAR. If colleges build capacity for PLAR, no one will benefit until people know about it.

Additional presentations have been scheduled for early 2002. There will be a four-part series, once again titled "Know Your Worth" that will be co-facilitated with Whitewood Action for Families. A portfolio development session will be held for farmers in February 2002. The pilot project Coordinator will also deliver a short presentation to the Rural Women's Conference at Montmartre in mid-February 2002. Another portfolio development workshop has been scheduled for the Adult Education class at Southeast Regional College to discuss the use of portfolios during work experience (February 2002). Activities will continue to be added to the list, and it is anticipated that portfolio development will also be offered to First Nations people, in addition to farmers.

### **3.8 University of Regina, Counselling Services**

Counselling Services at the University of Regina (U of R) provides a range of services to university students, including educational, career and life planning. The pilot project work plan identified four main goals:

- a) Inform university students of the value of maintaining learning and career portfolios

- b) Provide assistance to students who want to develop a portfolio
- c) Revise the booklet "Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina," which describes potential knowledge, skills and opportunities for each area of study
- d) Support appropriate U of R services with integrating portfolio development into programming and resource development.

The most important part of the pilot involved developing and promoting the portfolio to students, and supporting them in recognizing and valuing their learning - past, present and future - and, thus, in realizing their potential. This has included piloting services and resources for portfolio development, and revising as required.

Counselling Services was motivated to embark on the pilot project by the potential benefit for students, faculty and staff of the U of R. The portfolio can benefit students by helping them recognize that valuable learning occurs every semester, and from a broadened perspective, is also developed outside of a post-secondary institution.

Two practical considerations enabled the development of this pilot project. First, the availability of funding was necessary. The budget at Counselling Services is limited, so financial support was needed to produce portfolio resources such as bookmarks, posters, the "Exploring Your Options" booklet and pilot handbook "Building Your Portfolio." The second factor was the availability of support services offered to project Coordinators, which included consultation with specialists from the PLAR Services Project, access to the resource library, and opportunity to attend information sessions. According to the Coordinator, "without the support of PLAR Services, we may not have taken on this type of project."

In general, staff at Student Affairs did not know what PLAR was prior to undertaking the pilot project, so there was a steep learning curve. In

spite of limited knowledge upon inception of the project, Counselling Services at the U of R proceeded and, subsequently, developed a range of materials and conducted several presentations to increase awareness of PLAR. The following activities and resources served to increase awareness PLAR and the value of the portfolio:

- Introductory sessions on the portfolio were conducted for students, staff, and faculty.
- Portfolio information was presented in interview workshops conducted by U of R Co-operative Education and Student Employment Services.
- Portfolio information was presented to first-year students at Orientation Sessions.
- A general poster on portfolio development was produced.
- A bookmark on portfolio development and services was developed and distributed.
- A student version of "Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina" was produced.
- A draft handbook on "Building Your Portfolio: A Step-By-Step Guide" was produced.

In addition, staff engaged in professional development by working with consultants at the PLAR Services Project, reviewing PLAR resources, attending PLAR Orientation Sessions and attending conferences. The Coordinator also attended and participated in the following:

- PLAR Services Project Advisor Orientation
- Portfolio Development Sessions: Part A and B
- SLFDB "Workplace Training in Action" conference (November 2001), where she presented at a session on "Recognizing Prior Learning," and attended portfolio sessions by Alan Cuvelier and Diane Hill
- Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers (CACEE) Canada West Regional Conference (February 2002), where she and Managers of U of R Co-operative Education and Student Employment Services presented at a session on "Portfolio Pizzazz-Practical Applications for Educators & Educators"

The pilot project resulted in increased awareness of portfolio development and applications among various groups, including approximately 50 faculty and staff, 276 university students, 55 high school students and 50 conference attendees. Ongoing pilot project activities will continue to build awareness. For example, portfolio information will be more readily available when the proposed portfolio guide for post-secondary students and website are complete.

A defining moment for the Coordinator occurred when students and staff expressed strong interest in portfolio development. Positive feedback affirmed the importance of the portfolio as a resource and created momentum for continuing the development of portfolio services and resources. Through participation in this pilot project, the Coordinator recognized potential benefits of introducing portfolio development, as appropriate, to students who seek educational and career counselling. For example, counsellors may inform students about opportunities for applying the portfolio now or in the future to request assessment and recognition of prior learning for educational or employment purposes.

As a result of this pilot, portfolio resources and services are now an integral part of programming at Counselling Services. Portfolio resources and services are a new development in programming and are becoming a mainstay.

Proposed programming developments include offering the portfolio handbook online and expanding it to be provincial in scope. This revision would provide added value not only for students from the U of R, but for all learners in Saskatchewan, and especially for those applying for academic credit based on prior learning.

Proposed revisions also include making the document more "user-friendly," by including working guides with a selection of "real-life" samples for each section of the portfolio. To increase awareness of the recognition and

application of the portfolio for different purposes, quotations from a diversity of students, employers and educators from around the province may be included. A feedback page may also be included so that reader comments on the portfolio and its applications can be collected continuously. Similar to the portfolio, the handbook, thus, could develop as a "living" document that continues to evolve over time.

In the short-term, Counselling Services intends to offer more intensive portfolio workshops, in addition to information sessions. In the long-term, the Coordinator states that they plan to offer portfolio services and resources as "a regular component" of Counselling Services.

The "Exploring Your Options" booklet was recently presented at the Dean's Council for review. This review will serve to clarify learning outcomes and potential career opportunities for each program of study. The Coordinator regards this resource as informative and valuable for helping students to "conceptualize and articulate their learning."

### **3.9 University of Regina, Faculty of Administration**

The pilot project at the U of R aimed to develop a process for evaluating prior learning through learner portfolio assessment. This would be undertaken to explore the possibility of using PLAR principles for entry or substitution for the courses instructed by the pilot project Coordinator. The tasks within the project would involve developing clear learning outcomes for the classes taught by the Coordinator. Learners would then develop portfolios, which would be compared against the learning outcomes to identify learning gaps. The Coordinator also explained that the development of a protocol for portfolio assessment was a component of the pilot. This pilot project is the second pilot that the Faculty of Administration has undertaken; the first was undertaken with guidance from Dr. Angie Wong of the University of Saskatchewan.

The Faculty is motivated principally in that it is a professional school where previous work and life experience of the learner is valued. In addition, the Coordinator has personal factors influencing her interest in the project; she has had an unorthodox career path. Formal education institutions did not recognize her prior learning, which has resulted in developing her interest in advancing the possibility for others. The Coordinator stated that she does not believe "that because I suffered that everyone should have to suffer. I would like to see things fixed."

Although the Faculty had been previously involved with a PLAR pilot project, the degree of familiarity with PLAR was basic. The Coordinator was introduced to the previous pilot project by the Assistant Dean and became minimally involved. She attended the symposium "Building Capacity for PLAR in Saskatchewan." The pilot Coordinator also participated in a workshop led by Dr. Khalideen at the U of R (one of the participants in the original pilot projects) on PLAR. She also attended the PLAR Services Project workshop led by Susan Simosko on PLAR advising and assessment. The Coordinator also wished to learn more about the practical applications of PLAR as well as the implications of recognition of prior learning on student performance. The Coordinator gained some insight at Royal Roads University, as she instructed there in 2001. According to the Coordinator, many of the students at Royal Roads University undergo a PLAR assessment for entrance into the program, and the students who successfully completed this process did well in the program. "Some of the background was missing initially, but in fact the best student in the program was a PLAR."

The project is progressing at a measured pace. According to the pilot Coordinator, the discussions around PLAR required time to take root. Time was required to talk about issues and to start moving through the faculty and the institution. Any change needs to be introduced gently, with patience.

Regarding change, the Coordinator said, “You create change by talking at the right time and being patient. If you talk too much, people get bored and stop listening; they don’t want to hear about it.” A good part of the project has been involved in raising awareness in the Faculty on PLAR. The main accomplishment in the pilot project to date has been a PLAR presentation made by the Dean of the Faculty of Administration to the university’s senior administration. As a result of activities undertaken, the Coordinator feels that approximately 25 faculty, including senior administration, have increased and continue to build their awareness of PLAR.

The conversations, both informal and formal, among faculty members have been the main form of awareness-building within the Faculty. Work has focused on introducing the idea and it remains at a preliminary stage. A potential learner had been identified and the concept of PLAR has been presented to the learner; however the process has not been taken any further. Initial interest in PLAR was indicated, but changes in staff of the PLAR Services project and changes in the work environment of the learner have delayed the implementation of the portfolio assessment. Developing learning outcomes and conducting portfolio assessment remains a possibility, but it will most likely progress slowly due to existing constraints.

To date the pilot project Coordinator has not felt that there has been a defining moment. She felt that it was still too early in the process to feel that there had been a moment of clarity.

Similarly, there is no direct effect on planning anticipated from the development of the pilot project to date. There may be some indirect effects, such as the current discussions on the distance northern program that may result from the pilot. However, if the distance northern program were to go ahead, that would be an indirect result, but it remains very unpredictable at this time.

The next steps for the project include continuing to develop learning outcomes followed by an assessment of a specific learner’s experience (prior learning) through portfolios for academic credit in the program. This will require enhanced understanding of the PLAR implementation process. It will also be necessary to define what kind of experience relates to the learning outcomes and to determine how prior learning can be demonstrated.

### **3.10 University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture**

The College of Agriculture at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) has had a PLAR initiative underway for several years, prior to undertaking this pilot project. The Manager of Experiential Education, College of Agriculture has been involved with the development of PLAR at the U of S in general, as well as within the College of Agriculture. The project is an innovative implementation of PLAR and undertakes the design of a skills inventory for students. The end product of the process is a learning portfolio, wherein the students will produce tangible evidence of learning outcomes of a university education. The inventory is an integral part of the portfolio development process since it provides guidance on how to write their portfolios.

In addition to a table of contents of expectations, elements of the portfolio will include information on how to: conduct a personal inventory (for example, Myers-Briggs), complete an inventory of skills, and write reflective statements. The materials for the inventory are based on materials previously developed by the University of Guelph and Dalhousie University.

Motivation for becoming involved in the PLAR pilot projects includes the opportunity to build on the achievements of the PLAR initiative already underway in the College of Agriculture. The Coordinator stated that this pilot project fits well into the initiative underway and provides an

additional means for students to develop the ability to articulate their learning.

The Coordinator of the pilot project had substantial experience with PLAR prior to undertaking this pilot project. In addition, the Coordinator is one of the champions of PLAR at the U of S, working in conjunction with Dr. Angie Wong and other colleagues to recommend policy to the University. It has been slow and challenging, but nevertheless, a rewarding process. Besides professional development activities that she sought out individually, the Coordinator also attended the orientation session led by Susan Simosko (coordinated by the PLAR Services Project). The value of this session was that it provided a new perspective on the information related to PLAR.

Indeed the Coordinator identified one of the key accomplishments of being involved in the process was enhancing her ability to articulate elements/concepts of PLAR. Following the development and implementation of this pilot project, the Coordinator is better able to articulate learning (knowledge and skills) and to reconceptualize PLAR processes and tools (develop the matrix of PLAR). Another accomplishment identified by the Coordinator is the increased confidence and skills to undertake PLAR. This provides a model for students to emulate. Faculty members pass on the skills through modeling the behaviour of skills identification. To date, approximately three-quarters of the skills inventory is complete.

As a result of involvement in this project, there is much more awareness of learning outcomes as a tool. Learning outcomes can be a basis for undertaking PLAR. In the process, students identify the learning outcomes they hope to achieve in their work term. Upon completion of the work term, students can compare what they have done with the learning outcomes they identified. Students have always stated the objectives of their work terms, but now the learning outcomes include aptitudes as well as tasks. For example, students

identify aptitudes they hope to develop, such as self-management. The Coordinator's work with the Dean has been instrumental in having learning outcomes incorporated into the curriculum.

To develop awareness within the College, the Coordinator has been involved in various activities including advising the Dean and communicating with Department Heads. The person contracted to develop the skills inventory was not familiar with PLAR initially, but through involvement in the pilot she has increased her knowledge and understanding of PLAR. The Coordinator also delivered a presentation on the pilot project at the SLFDB "Workplace Training in Action" Conference in November 2001. In total, approximately 50% to 60% of the faculty members are familiar with PLAR to various degrees (there are a total of 60-70 faculty members). Within the Dean's office, five or six people are now familiar with PLAR. Employers and learners (about 25) are aware of the elements and principles of PLAR, but the actual term "PLAR" has not been used.

In relation to identifying a defining moment for the project, the Coordinator initially felt that there had not been such a moment. However, upon further consideration, she pondered whether PLAR has provided her with an understanding that each task has a number of skills attached.

The program would consider undertaking another pilot similar to this one, however, it would require more support (financial) than this one. To entertain the idea, it would require at least 50% support from outside sources. Significant human and financial resources, as well as time, are required to develop and implement PLAR processes, and in the current project a major in-kind contribution was made by the institution, adding significant work to the Coordinator's current duties.

In the long-term, the program may explore the idea of eventually introducing PLAR into a diploma program. This would need to be explored in



consultation with faculty in order to ensure that concerns and questions can be addressed. On a global level, the goal is to build a matrix that could represent the scope of learning.

The identification of delivery systems to fill learning gaps is an area of interest for the Coordinator. She identified possible next steps to include researching ways to deliver information to address gaps that could be conducted on an individual and group basis.

### **3.11 University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing**

The pilot project at the U of S College of Nursing consists of two key areas. The first is the development of a PLAR process for the physical assessment course. The second focus of the pilot project initiative is to offer professional development opportunities for faculty members to increase their knowledge and ability with PLAR. These two elements are connected, due to the importance of ensuring academic standards and credentials of the program while developing the PLAR process. A solid understanding of PLAR and the potential applications will help ensure the credibility of the program remains although the processes for assessment may change. The pilot project Coordinator aims to have the process PLAR-ready for the fall of 2002.

This pilot project is not the first that the College of Nursing has undertaken. There had been a previous PLAR initiative involving the lead investigator of the Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project, the former Dean of Nursing, Assistant Dean of Nursing, and a faculty member. When the PLAR analyst presented the idea of undertaking a pilot project, the Coordinator said it was “not a stretch because the University has been assessing for transfer credit for a long time. Nurses want to get credit for their work experience, especially now that with a degree they are more likely to be able to advance in the workplace.” The college decided to work on the physical assessment course because

it lends itself more easily to PLAR. In addition, the post-registration curriculum is being revised, so it appeared to be an opportune time to explore the integration of alternative delivery and assessment process.

The College of Nursing has undertaken transfer credit for courses from other universities or colleges. In addition, within the nursing profession, assessment plays a central role. For this reason, nursing is perhaps more accepting of PLAR than other fields. Assessing previous experience and prior learning is not a new concept for the College, and therefore nursing has a strong background for incorporating PLAR.

Two key accomplishments have been achieved, with the first being PLAR process and tools development. The learning outcomes are being developed and the manual for the physical assessment course is being revised. The information in the manual is being revised to outline the expectations for the course and the challenge exams. This is intended to assist the learner in understanding the expectations of the course and challenge exams prior to undergoing assessment. The challenge will likely include a theory challenge and a practical challenge. As part of the course development process, a literature review was conducted to ensure that the most current theory is being included in the course. As well, the faculty member responsible for revising the course has developed a network and consulted with nursing faculty in other universities involved in PLAR.

The second accomplishment was the participation of two faculty members in a PLA assessment with the Primary Health Care Nurse Practitioner Program in Ontario. The Coordinator of the Post-Registration Baccalaureate Program and the faculty member who teaches the physical assessment course participated fully in the assessment process and they developed a deeper understanding and awareness of PLAR. Having the opportunity to witness an actual assessment was a

valuable exercise and provided a level of awareness that is difficult to achieve without the practical experience.

Several activities were undertaken by the Coordinator and various faculty members to increase their awareness of PLAR. These include:

- The pilot project Coordinator attended the Recognizing Learning Conference in Halifax.
- The pilot project Coordinator and a faculty member attended PLAR Advisor orientations with the PLAR Services Project which provided a good overview.
- Some faculty attended U of S sessions led by Dr. Angie Wong. The presentations provided information on portfolios and "Strategies on Flexible Assessment of Learning".
- The Gwenna Moss Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of Saskatchewan offers professional development opportunities as above or similar topics on a regular basis.
- The pilot project Coordinator also presented at the SLFDB PLAR mini-session in November.

In addition to the formal activities undertaken by faculty members, the Coordinator also forwards

information about PLAR opportunities to specific faculty members.

The Coordinator of this project is also involved in a committee for the PLAR challenge for credit process at the University of Saskatchewan. The process has been presented to the first level of university administration, the Academic Programs Committee. Faculty members throughout the university are involved in this committee, including Dr. Angie Wong; the Associate Dean Undergraduate Affairs, Arts and Science; the Registrar's office; and other University faculty including the Post-Registration Baccalaureate Program Coordinator, College of Nursing. Another pilot project Coordinator, in the College of Agriculture, is also involved in the committee.

With regard to planning for the future, the College of Nursing will keep PLAR in mind when revising courses. The College is currently thinking about which courses may be "PLARable" (such as management) and when courses are revised, they will keep PLAR in mind. However, with the latest theories and content, courses may become less appropriately "PLARable," but this has yet to be determined. The College of Nursing intends to continue exploring PLAR possibilities.

## 4. Lessons Learned and Best Practices

This section presents summaries of the information gathered in the interviews conducted with the pilot project Coordinators, colleagues and the PLAR Analyst. Comments from the interviewees at various institutions are combined in this section.

### 4.1 Factors for Success, Challenges, Resources and Strategies

This section outlines the challenges encountered, as well as identifying some of the considerations that may help facilitate the process.

#### 4.1.1 Demands on Time

Having adequate time was mentioned by the Coordinators and their colleagues as critical for exploring and implementing PLAR processes. It was not only the time necessary to undertake the activities, but also time for learning about PLAR, time for planning, and time for communicating and building relationships. Faculty members, instructors and staff need to have time relief so that they can undertake these additional tasks, because they are already “spread very thin.” Although there are individuals who are interested and capable of undertaking PLAR initiatives, relief of teaching duties and workload will provide people with the time required to successfully implement PLAR.

*“Finding the time to do all this is a challenge. I have one person who could commit her time to this project, but we don’t have the time or resources to divert.”*

*“Workload is another challenge. People are busy and do not have time to add on additional work.”*

*“We need time to devote; we need to assign assessment duties to specific faculty members who are familiar with the content as well as the PLAR process. And, there is little time to devote to undertaking assessment duties. It is labour intensive to get the learning outcomes developed and to assess prior learning. Faculty and students need to undergo the process, but it takes time.”*

*“One thing is that you need to have the time to be committed. Also, it will take longer than anticipated, so be prepared. It is not an easy trek to develop PLAR. We think developing learning outcomes will be easy, but it is not as easy as it sounds to articulate it onto paper.”*

*“Another concern that I have is time. When the word gets out that PLAR is available how much resources can we devote to this. The front end of the process needs to be well defined, there needs to be a screening process. The front end needs to be fair, for faculty (resources) and for the student (process).”*

#### 4.1.2 Time for Learning

Many Coordinators referred to the importance of allowing the pilot project team sufficient time to develop an understanding of PLAR. The learning curve for some people can be quite steep and it is important to support them through this experience. The learning experience will vary for each individual or group, so patience is necessary to allow the learning process to take its course.

*“It is important to recognize that there is a certain amount of time required to absorb the concept of PLAR, as well as the processes and tools. One can not rush the process; it takes time. Therefore even if support is offered, time is still necessary for the staff involved to develop an understanding of their own.”*

*“Learning about the portfolio and its applications was a huge learning curve. We needed to become informed and then we needed to integrate the information and then generate possibilities for application. Having a supportive work environment that allows flexibility is essential.”*

The value of allowing this time is a worthwhile investment, as one Coordinator stated that *“if staff are encouraged to develop portfolios and are recognized for the skills they have acquired, they may be more likely to consider the possibility of evaluating skills and knowledge through portfolio assessment. When faculty can see that their portfolios have value, they may be more accepting of the value of others’ portfolios.”*

*“What is required is basically a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered approach to education. Our teacher-centered approach has relied on and created a construct that learning takes place and is in the hands of authority. There is a concept that learning happens external to you, rather than being integral to the power of the individual. We are talking about a shift from that to understand that learning takes place in many ways. It democratizes the learning environment and is no longer elitist. Getting away from the elitist process is a movement from learning happens to me, to learning happens within me. Once the paradigm shift happens, they click on and whoosh! Then the question becomes how can I allow this person to show what they have learned.”*

*“There is a need to understand what you do currently. Then there is a movement from knowing the content of what we teach to begin to articulate deeper understanding. To develop the ability to articulate the steps to accomplish the learning leaves the responsibility to the learner. We do not necessarily provide the up-front preparation to be successful. For example, the current approach is to tell students to problem solve or to work in teams. However, we don’t provide them with the means to reflect on the process that you go through to solve problems or to work in teams.*

*Although the process will be different for each individual, you can cover the basics.”*

### **4.1.3 Access to Information and Training**

Access to necessary information resources and training opportunities was another key learning that arose from the process. The time limitations that faculty, instructors, and staff experience makes access to relevant and timely information and training is critical. Coordinators and colleagues stressed the importance of having access to experts who are able to respond to inquiries in a timely fashion and provide the necessary support.

*“Access to ongoing training and organizations is critical. Expertise in a specific training area is extremely beneficial. Having someone who cares about the same issues. For example, Diane Hill understands the issues for Aboriginal organizations in large institutions. She knows about identifying student learning and how to foster healthy learning. However, there are not many people with that expertise.”*

*“Being able to gain insight from experts in related areas who have gone ahead in your field, even if it is only one step ahead. This then becomes an anchor from which they can reach further. The coordinators and champions can then rise up from the weight of the pilot and feel empowered to feel that there are others in their field exploring this too. The Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology for example, is very dedicated to this area and is a huge resource.”*

*“Providing information sessions and development opportunities to allow people to develop expertise to fulfill their function. This will be essential if PLAR is to become part of the everyday world.”*

*“Access to resources is critical. This includes websites, reports, case studies, examples and tools. It is even more beneficial when these are in related fields.”*

#### 4.1.4 Financial Resources

Allocating adequate financial support is a critical element when developing any initiative, especially when aiming for sustainability. For some institutions the increased demand on already limited resources (due to considerable in-kind contributions) put a strain on programs and departments. Without committed, stable funding for PLAR, sustainability will remain elusive.

*"Five thousand dollars does not cover much, so a large in-kind contribution was made by the institution. There need to be long-term, secure research and development funds available to develop policies, protocols for programs. In addition, it would be good to have funds for professional development."*

*"Dollars or financial support are required to allow for release time of faculty to explore and pilot these ideas."*

*"There is a lack of resources on every level, but mainly human resources. [...] The shortage of faculty together with increased demand has had a huge impact on faculty ability to take on more tasks."*

*"You need funding to develop. If you can build PLAR into programs during the development stage, great. Otherwise you need to do the work after the fact. This can be a substantial extra cost."*

#### 4.1.5 Planning and Preparation

Investing in the initial planning and preparation steps can provide great returns. Many Coordinators recognized the importance of up-front planning and ensuring that awareness, support and buy-in are created in conjunction with project development. Communication and consultation were identified by many interviewees as critical elements for reducing delays, suspicion, and resistance. Initial planning helps ensure that policies and protocols are in place and that relevant stakeholders, including the Registrar's office, are involved from the onset. Stakeholder

participation in the planning stages increases the feeling of ownership of the process, and can minimize the feeling that an initiative is being imposed. Expediting the process does not always provide gains in the long-term.

*"You have to get buy-in and support. You need to work up-front to get support for a project. Sometimes that means dollars."*

*"Enthusiasm carried it forth, and maybe it could have used more initial orientation. People were interested, but there was some reticence. Maybe we should have spent more time orienting people to the process and idea."*

*"A difficulty was in the way it was introduced. It was felt that it was agreed upon before it was decided. Some resistance may have resulted from the lack of consultation. The way the course was selected was also a possible reason. Maybe if another course had been selected, there would be less resistance. My advice would be to go to faculty first. Then look at suggestions of different courses. Faculty can vote on courses to be considered for the project. Then it could go much smoother. This could have been a time factor though."*

*"You need to start at the same time educating the faculty and working on a "real case". It is an iterative process, it goes back and forth. You need to get the resources in place and do a practical example. If people have time to think about PLAR, they may be less suspicious."*

*"Good and ongoing communication with support teams and administration is essential. Great advantage was gained by going to administration and other stakeholders prior to initiating the project. This enabled the project Coordinator to scope out possibilities and develop awareness. Then, if something occurs down the road there are fewer surprises."*

*“Start work at the program development stage to write the outcomes in language that the learner can understand but also meets industry requirements. Up-front planning on learning outcomes and PLA tools is a factor for success. It is critical to have instructional design blueprints to be conducive with learning outcomes frameworks. This must take place at the program development stage. It is a challenge if a program is not designed for PLAR.”*

*“Introduce PLAR to courses gradually, doing the easy to PLAR courses first. Workshops and information sessions for faculty need to be held at strategic times. Once tasks are complete, then we would highlight our successes and promote these successes.”*

#### **4.1.6 Communication**

The importance of effective communication and presentation of information on PLAR is critical for developing interest and understanding. In addition to the time that is required to communicate and the importance of including communication as a component of your planning, there is also a need to ensure effective and ongoing communication. Through the process of continued communication, we can ensure a common understanding of language (words and their meaning).

*“The parties need to proceed slowly and communicate often and build trust.”*

*“You need to present information in a way to pique someone’s interest enough to become informed. When people are busy, and their workloads are high, there are many competing priorities. To take on something new that requires a lot of work may not be immediately perceived as attractive. People are busy keeping their head above water. You need to be able to present the information in a way that entices them to explore further.”*

*“I would like to suggest that in developing procedures or administrative tools consult, consult, consult. In addition, consult with representatives*

*of as many potential stakeholder groups as possible. This includes: potential users, people who will maintain procedures or the tool, people who have content and technical expertise, people who will be required to make reports, and etc.”*

*“There needs to be a communication strategy, which includes a website, newsletter, practitioner network, library, clearinghouse, etc.”*

*“The messengers need to be consummate communicators. You need to identify the spokespeople within the sectors to design the pitch for their group. These people can navigate through the path. It is crucial to have people on side who know their people, and you need to have them on your side.”*

*“Language and terminology can also be a challenge. For example, assessment and evaluation conjure up images to people. It conjures a power structure and people react to that power structure, where they feel judged. Another challenge with language is that misunderstandings can occur based on how language is used within various contexts. The way we communicate this concept could be clearly understood or misunderstood.”*

*“It is important to be strategic and get the message to the people who can move and shake in their sector. It is not a big fishnet, but rather an effort to cultivate the motivators. There is, in this way, a lot of payback for the time spent.”*

#### **4.1.7 Building Awareness**

External awareness-building activities can produce the required understanding of PLAR, which will result in increased support of the process. When people become aware of PLAR, market demand can be created.

*“External agencies and groups need to be brought into the awareness-building process to partner with. In this way there is true dissemination of information on portfolio development.”*

*"If the average person is aware of the process of recognizing learning, the pressure would be on institutions to design a system to recognize the skills that people value in themselves. If more people demand that their portfolios are assessed, systems will have to be developed."*

*"Conferences would be very helpful. However, I don't mean conferences where PLAR is the main topic, because these tend to be for people who already have an affinity for PLAR. Rather, go to the sector where PLAR becomes one topic among many."*

*"It is also important to raise public awareness of the fact that because you can do something does not mean that you know everything about it. We need to avoid building false expectations of what PLAR is."*

*"Talking to people on the street, I realize that they have no clue of what portfolios, self-assessment, or recognition means and how it can work for them. If one person in an organization has had a defining moment of clarity and can see the benefits of PLAR, they need to take it to the people in the community around them and assess what ordinary people think of portfolios. We need to take it out of the boardroom."*

#### **4.1.8 Resistance to Change**

Resistance to change is another challenge that is encountered when implementing PLAR. A positive result of resistance can be the sharpened philosophies that can result from dialogue between individuals with varied perspectives on new initiatives. Valuable exploration of the underlying principles and philosophies of education can result. Resistance may be a natural reaction to implementing new initiatives; however, taking appropriate steps (such as communication, up-front planning, and awareness-building) can help minimize strong resistance. Understanding the underlying factors for reluctance is important for helping assuage misgivings.

*"It is important to recognize that there is a reason for resistance. Right now I am involved in trying to recruit more faculty (by building awareness). In the long run, recruiting faculty will be more important than "PLARing" one individual."*

*"There is sometimes institutional resistance to change. We do many things based on tradition."*

*"Assumptions and myths are another challenge to overcome. People are afraid or feel threatened by something new. This challenges people and a very natural response is to resist. They see PLAR as a give-away or say it will not work. They question what may happen to the whole education system. People bring to the system their own perceptions and this could obstruct their hearing the whole story. People may be inclined to make a decision based on incomplete information."*

#### **4.1.9 Flexibility**

There needs to be the flexibility within an organization to explore new options. There also needs to be scheduling flexibility, so that as new information is obtained the activities can be adjusted. We often look for definitive answers, we want to see things to be certain. However, PLAR resides in an area where we must be comfortable with ambiguity. The variety of modes of instruction and assessment inherent within PLAR can leave individuals feeling uncertain.

*"It has taken more time than expected, especially now that the portfolio guide is expanding in scope and there are more resources to develop. You need flexibility with time."*

*"In our society we tend to look at things as black or white. We live in a black and white world, and yet PLAR is in the grey. We need to be comfortable in the grey."*

#### 4.1.10 Champions and Internal Support

The importance of having someone to carry forth the initiative and champion the process was identified as an essential element in the pilot project development and implementation. In addition, internal support was also beneficial for the development and implementation of the pilot projects.

*"People really need to believe in portfolio development to implement the whole process. You need one person who really wants it to fly, they need to really believe in it. An individual who strongly believes that the outcomes of portfolio development will be positive."*

*"Faculty and staff are confident and have very strong opinions; the champions must have strong convictions and be able to stand up against opposition."*

*"Get persons involved who are supportive of PLAR and respected by other Faculty. Constantly keep PLAR on the agenda. It can be low-key, but having it on the agenda is important."*

*"You need to understand the administrative process and have key people who need to be involved. Key decision-makers need to be involved early on."*

*"Obtaining buy-in at various levels is required to move it forward. There are different levels of readiness between the key players in an institution. But you need buy-in at various levels. You need a champion to spearhead initiatives."*

*"You need to get support from the faculty and program people. They do the assessments and they are the content people. You also need to find out if the industry supports it. You also need support from management."*

#### 4.1.11 Industry and Employer Buy-in

Coordinators from several of the pilot projects identified the importance of external support from employers. If the industry did not recognize the results of PLAR as valid, it would greatly reduce the possibility of a sustainable system.

*"Employers need to know PLAR and understand it. We need their buy-in for this to go anywhere. Employers are not familiar with the idea yet. They need information. We need to get on the phone to market and promote PLAR."*

*"Cooperation of industry is a factor for success. Gaining this is no problem if they don't have to invest money or time. And, maybe once this phase is done they will perceive greater benefit and be willing to invest something."*

*"Industry needs to buy into it. Right now there is nothing for them to follow on. Once we have proven success, then we can build from that. They need something tangible to see and understand PLAR. No one can understand it in a brief period of time."*

#### 4.1.12 Acknowledgement of Staff

A Coordinator stated that staff who have undertaken the initiatives need to be recognized for their efforts. "Not only are faculty and staff undertaking work beyond their normal work requirements, they could easily sabotage the initiative." For these reasons, stated the Coordinator, it is important to express your appreciation for their work. In addition, the participants in the initiatives undertook the pilots on top of their regular duties, and did not receive financial or other remuneration, so recognition is important.



## 5. Comments on Support

This section presents a summary of the information pilot project Coordinators shared regarding the support received from the PLAR Services Project, PLAR Analyst and other resources for the development and implementation of their pilot.

To adequately reflect the principles of PLAR and adult education in the development and implementation of the interview questionnaire, involvement of the pilot project Coordinators and the PLAR Analyst was invited. The draft interview questionnaire was presented to the various parties for their input. In this manner, PLAR Services Project staff hoped to encourage a sense of being a participant in the process, rather than having the process imposed upon them.

Regarding the process of soliciting feedback, Tornow, London and CLL Associates (1998) state that:

Giving and receiving feedback seem to be commodities hard to come by, both from the individual and the organizational perspective. And judging by the reactions of those who give and receive it, dealing with feedback constructively is not necessarily a talent we're born with. Rather, we must learn and practice it." (p. 6)

For this reason, it was important to develop and implement a process where all of the stakeholders were not afraid to give, receive or use candid feedback. This report aims to respect the value of the feedback provided, in whichever form it takes.

### 5.1 Level and Type of Support

Support, resources and information was offered to the various pilot projects from several sources. The PLAR Analyst spearheaded the initiative and introduced the opportunity to undertake a pilot project to the Coordinators. Another source of support was the PLAR Services Project Facilitator. One Facilitator was involved in the initial stages of the pilot projects, and a staff change in the PLAR Services Project resulted in a second Facilitator undertaking the writing of this report.

The amount of support provided by the PLAR Services Project to the pilot projects ranged considerably. The PLAR Analyst observed that the level and type of support *"varied from project to project, ranging from minimal to significant support. The support provided to the Coordinators included work planning, access to resource materials, delivery of professional development workshops, and solicitation of ideas. The initial Facilitator was instrumental in initiating the involvement of the U of R Counselling Services, the Southeast Regional College and the Gabriel Dumont Institute-SUNTEP pilot projects."*

Some pilot projects proceeded independently, with limited involvement in the development or implementation of the project. This was often due to the background of the pilot project Coordinators in PLAR. Several of the Coordinators felt confident in proceeding on their own, and did not require additional input from the PLAR Services Project staff. The SIIT pilot Coordinator stated that she *"never felt left out in the dark, but I did not call up to receive assistance. I felt confident that we were proceeding well on our own."* Varying levels of support also related to expectations. As one Coordinator stated, *"As an organization, SUNTEP is quite independent. We had support when we*

*needed it from [the PLAR Analyst].” Another Coordinator commented that she had received more support than was required, or perhaps even desired.*

The PLAR Services Project Facilitator provided considerable information, resources and support to several of the pilot projects. In these instances, the additional support was beneficial because the pilot project staff had limited to moderate previous experience working with PLAR. Some of the pilot Coordinators expressed a reticence in taking on a project unless external support was available. Work overload issues were often identified as challenges that institutions face in undertaking innovative projects; having access to the support from the PLAR Services Project staff and of the PLAR Analyst could address, at least in part, workload issues. In the case of the U of R Counselling Services pilot project, *“PLAR Services staff have assisted with the review of the documents, made suggestions and provided resources for the development of portfolios. They were also involved in project consultation. [...] The staff participated in the pilot workshop for students and staff.”*

Some of the support offered to the pilot projects has been ongoing, while the support has been intermittent for other projects. Several pilot project Coordinators who did not require much support mentioned the value of the intermittent “check-ins” to keep them on task. *“Without these kind of intermittent interjections of information, it is likely that I would have dropped it. You never have enough time, especially if something is not critical”* stated a Coordinator.

Many of the pilot project Coordinators attended information sessions delivered by the PLAR Services Project. Some attended the initial orientations on PLAR advising and assessment delivered by Susan Simosko, which the Coordinators felt were extremely beneficial. A Coordinator stated that the involvement in these educational activities was very important because

*“I could not have asked questions in the beginning. I needed more knowledge to be able to ask questions.”* Others attended the subsequent PLAR Advisor Orientation Sessions and Personal Portfolio Development Sessions delivered by the PLAR Services Project. These sessions were based on the material introduced in the initial Susan Simosko workshops.

Additional professional development opportunities were made available in November of 2001 during the SLFDB’s annual conference: “Workplace Training in Action”. Pilot project Coordinators and colleagues were invited to participate in sessions at the SLFDB Conference (November 15<sup>th</sup>) and subsequent SLFDB PLAR mini-sessions (November 16<sup>th</sup>). Project Coordinators attended sessions led by presenters with substantial PLAR experience, including Alan Cuvelier, (Manager of Assessment Services and Staff Development, Employment Support Services, Nova Scotia Department of Community Services), Dr. Doug Myers (Executive Director, The PLA Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia) and Diane Hill (Aboriginal Educational Programs Consultant, First Nations Technical Institute, Ontario). The feedback from participants attending these sessions was very positive.

Participation at the SLFDB “Workforce Training in Action” Conference also offered the opportunity for PLAR pilot project Coordinators to participate in panel presentations showcasing their pilot projects. For many Coordinators, it was the first opportunity to share with one another the activities and accomplishments of their pilot projects. Coordinators of the PLAR pilot projects as well as those involved with PLAR initiatives outside of these eleven pilot projects presented at one of the SLFDB PLAR mini-sessions together with Dr. Doug Myers of the PLA Centre in Nova Scotia. Having the opportunity to hear one another’s experience was very beneficial to Coordinators.

The PLAR Analyst identified that a key learning was the importance of recognizing the individuality of each project and that “one size does not fit all.”

This perspective was reflected often throughout discussions with faculty and staff involved in the implementation of PLAR.

## 5.2 Effect of Support

It is important to recognize that although people may acknowledge the value of honest and open feedback for continuous improvement, it is not always sought after. We often look at criticism with dread. Human nature often leads us to attempt to avoid contemplating any negative feedback, because this could be equated with weakness or failure. In some instances, although there may be an abundance of positive feedback, any negative feedback overshadows all positive feedback. Within PLAR itself, because of its strengths-based ideology, much of the focus is on the areas of strength. Negative experiences or pitfalls are identified as learning opportunities. Adult education recognizes the value of both negative and positive experiences for learning. It is with this understanding that the following responses from interviewees are presented.

The following section presents the range of responses on the effect of the support on the pilot projects. The points below comprise a summary of the perspectives shared by Coordinators and other interviewees regarding the impact (positive or negative) of the level or type of support on their pilot project. The comments from the interviews are presented under thematic headings.

### 5.2.1 Supportive

The importance of feeling supported in the process was recognized by most of the respondents. For many of the Coordinators it was important to know that there is a place to go for information.

*“Overall the support has been excellent, as consultants have been available and enjoyable to work with. It has been a positive experience.”*

*“The PLAR Services Project was super supportive, and without their assistance and backing this project would not have been out in rural*

*Saskatchewan touching the people at the grassroots level. [...] The project made everything easier. I did not have to design everything from scratch. It allowed me to complete my first goal. For the future it may be good to have support in how to design and develop occupational profiles.”*

*“The training received from Susan Simosko was incredible. It was excellent and really useful.”*

*“There has been a lot of support from [the PLAR Analyst]. The initial facilitator provided some support, such as resources and information. She was a good resource person and the email contact was good.”*

*“If there was anything that would have made the process go easier, it would have been that I did not have time to finish my own portfolio beforehand. The portfolio development session came too late in the process. I was lucky because the information was sent to me, which allowed me to sell the idea. It is easy to promote something, but when you have not already experienced the process, it makes it tougher.”*

*“The way the projects progressed, it fostered a notion that these projects are independent, private projects. To improve this it would have been nice to have a sharing session for Coordinators/staff. In this way we could learn from one another. The SLFDB “Workplace Training in Action” conference session on PLAR was a good start. Even a joint session, casual or less formal would have helped. Then we could have learned from other people’s experiences rather than one person having to know everything.”*

### 5.2.2 Motivating

If the level and type of support suited the organizational culture or the personality of the Coordinator, it was felt that it could provide motivation for the project. Support provided in a manner that does not fit the organizational or individual culture was seen to have a neutral effect.

*"The initial support gave me the idea for the project. Without this real support, I would not have proceeded. The energy and enthusiasm of [the Project Manger, PLAR Facilitator and PLAR Analyst] made me want to do something."*

*"The support made the project progress faster. It is good to have someone keep you on top of it. It is good to have someone ask you how it is going and to encourage you to stay on schedule."*

*"The support has enhanced and helped the project to progress and to expand and become more innovative."*

### **5.2.3 Responsive**

The responsive nature of the support was a critical element in many of the pilot projects. When Coordinators felt that their needs were being adequately and appropriately responded to, that had a positive impact. However, if the support was felt to be too eager or disjointed from expectations this could result in challenges. Some Coordinators enjoyed a greater degree of involvement of outside support, while others felt that they would look outside for support when required, but work independently at other times. With guidance, most individuals and organizations can identify their own requirements; responsive support will offer what is needed.

*"A lot of work needs to be done internally, and someone outside can't help with that. Nevertheless, PLAR Services Project could help by providing more information on how PLAR fits into an academic institution (for example, how it applies, the rationale behind it, etc)."*

*"It is important to recognize that there is a certain amount of time required to absorb the concept of PLAR, as well as the processes and tools. One can not rush the process; it takes time. Therefore, even if support is offered, time is still necessary for the staff involved to develop an understanding of their own."*

*"It would be great if the PLAR Services Project could provide knowledge and expertise. Having sensitivity to the needs of project staff and organizations is appreciated. The support could have been improved if it had been more responsive. For example, if an organization identifies information needed, the PLAR project could have researched and provided it."*

*"It is also important to recognize that while I think that I may have something good, I need to watch how I offer it. The offer of help could be perceived as an imposition or a directive, or it could be welcomed. It depends on the delivery as well as the recipient. It is important to be receptive and wait for an actual expression of desire for assistance, rather than to assume and just do something."*

*"When outside support is offered, the 'outside' party needs to respect the individuality of people and of organizations/institutions."*

### **5.2.4 Ongoing**

Various respondents emphasized the importance of continuous access to support. The trust and understanding required for cooperation needs time to develop. Continuity of resource availability has a positive effect on project development, whereas lapses in availability can disrupt the progression of projects. In some instances, involvement of more pilot project team members in professional development activities would have helped develop ongoing internal support systems.

*"The delay in changing staff was negative. It was a gap that affected the projects psychologically. It shook things up a little and the anchor was gone. The pilot Coordinators built a relationship with the Initial PLAR Services Project facilitator, and then needed to reestablish a relationship with someone new."*

*"If everyone involved could have been at the initial meeting. I was the only one involved at the initial*

*meeting. It would have been helpful to have other people at the initial meeting so that we could support one another."*

### **5.2.5 Understanding**

Understanding of the context for pilot projects was identified as a critical element of the support. When Coordinators felt that they were understood, it had a positive effect on the interaction between the Coordinator and support services. The perceived quality of the support was affected in part if the Coordinators felt that understanding, for whatever reason, had not yet been achieved. Indeed, one respondent stated that "A lot of time needed to be spent on building understanding and a common lexicon due to the different perspectives of the various parties." Understanding of the specific conditions within which the pilot projects were operating was highly valued, such as the opportunity for specific and relevant professional development opportunities.

*"Access to ongoing training and organization; expertise; specific training area (someone who cares about the same issues). For example, Diane Hill understands the issues for Aboriginal organizations situated in large institutions, knows about identifying student learning and how to foster healthy learning."*

*"Understanding of the difference between institutions and their mandates is also important."*

*"The understanding of the university environment is very important. It appears that now there is a better understanding of the university culture and procedures."*

### **5.2.6 Clarity and Communication**

Because of the involvement of various parties in the execution of the pilot projects, it was very important to have effective communication. Tornow, London and CLL Associates state that "individuals are connected in that they derive meaning with and through other people about what

is expected of them and how well they are doing" (p.4). People have different degrees of comfort with uncertainty, but it is normally advantageous to ensure clarity whenever possible. Clarity of roles and responsibilities is an important consideration when undertaking a project, especially when multiple parties are involved. These pilot projects were funded by PSEST and the support was provided intermittently from the PLAR Analyst, as well as the PLAR Services Project facilitator. The resulting challenges in communication were perhaps a result of the staffing changes and the serendipitous nature by which the partnership between the two parties emerged.

*"Communicate, communicate, communicate."*

*"Printed information is not readily accessible (some are very difficult to understand). It is important to talk with someone who can respond to questions and give examples."*

*"Explanations need to be clear and relate to the understanding of the context."*

*"When being asked for more information, there needed to be a clarification of roles and responsibilities."*

## **5.3 Suggestions for Improvement**

Although people are normally able to identify areas that they would like to improve upon, it is sometimes challenging to develop constructive strategies. Pilot project Coordinators provided valuable input regarding the areas in which support and resources could be enhanced. One area of unanimous agreement was on the need for more financial support, additional human resources and materials. Some key suggestions for improvement are identified below. Practical examples were provided and are listed below:

*"The only area for improvement would be in the area of finances. \$5,000 does not cover much, so a large in-kind contribution was made by the*

*institution. There need to be long-term, secure research and development funds available to develop policies and protocols for programs. In addition, it would be good to have funds for professional development."*

*"Time and resources would have helped the project proceed more smoothly. More time is necessary to work with the students and more time to prepare staff and faculty."*

*"I did appreciate the Susan Simosko workshop and maybe more support like that for projects would be helpful. For example, if contracted staff could attend the sessions in addition to the Coordinator."*

*"It is nice to know there is a place to go for information. If PLAR is taking place in Saskatchewan, we need information that is unique to Saskatchewan. We need a clearinghouse with information specific to Saskatchewan, whether it is PLAR Services Project that provides this or someone else."*

*"One suggestion would be to organize meetings of pilot projects. It would be very helpful to share information on pilots."*

*"Having real examples of completed work would be very helpful."*

Prior to delivering portfolio development workshops  
*"I would have attended a portfolio development workshop to complete my own portfolio and collected some sample portfolios for display."*

*"Early in-service would be helpful. It is good to start with a pilot, and see it develop. It is a sequential process where the initial steps are small enough to be manageable. We need to be wary of taking on something too big in the beginning."*

*"At this point the PLAR Services Project could be looking at now giving more information that is more concrete. For example, information on how to write learning outcomes, how to translate curriculum*

*into learning outcomes, creating and evaluating portfolios. The "how to" would be very useful. The project could develop in-depth, hands-on workshops. Move from the "what" to the "how to." If the philosophy is to move forward we must get to "how." We must be able to help people actually do it."*

*"Updated information on new developments would be useful. Information on new things that are happening, such as improved communication of what information is available on the PLAR Services website. Perhaps notification should be sent to people involved that there may be new information of interest to them."*

*"An instructional video targeted to staff and students on what PLAR would be useful. The video should show what PLAR is, how to do PLAR, what is happening in the process, outcomes, etc. This would be very helpful."*

## 5.4 Summary of Comments

Many of the respondents stated that the support received was beneficial, although some pilot projects encountered some challenges in obtaining the desired support. A Coordinator stated that her advice to another organization wishing to undertake a pilot project is to "maintain contact with the PLAR Services Project. It offers needed support." Another Coordinator echoes these comments stating that should another organization wish to undertake a PLAR initiative "talk to PLAR Services Project people. They have information and can provide support. There are also materials available, from people who are involved in pilots, such as me."

One comment related to the process as well as to the form of the support provided. This comment is from a Coordinator who had not been aware of PLAR prior to the pilot project, but became interested and involved in various activities of the PLAR Services Project. She stated:

*"The PLAR Services Project included everyone and I feel that my opinion was valued. As a process to introduce PLAR to the province, this was the most effective, efficient and nicest process. It was inclusive! The project really wanted to hear from people. Project staff were there to hear what you had to say. Actually, if the process could be packaged it would be nice. The process worked by taking so many people together to develop common understanding and common language."*

The report represents the findings of research conducted by someone who was not involved in the pilots from the beginning. Not being involved in the pilots from the beginning added to the challenges of writing this report, in that the author needed to familiarize herself with the project objectives and activities after the fact. The PLAR Analyst stated that perhaps being new to the pilot projects "will allow the report to be developed from a fresh perspective which is strong."

## 6. Considerations

This report presents an overview of the eleven PLAR pilot projects currently underway in Saskatchewan. The diversity of the projects demonstrates the variety of ways in which PLAR can be applied throughout the post-secondary learning system. It is also evident that ongoing exploration of PLAR concepts and processes are required to further examine the implementation of PLAR within the context of post-secondary institutions. The respondents identified many benefits of implementing PLAR. In addition, many of the key considerations for improving institutional capacity have been identified. Although the participants identified many potential benefits of implementing PLAR, there are also precautions that a program should consider prior to implementation.

One interviewee stated that “the devil’s advocate is a very important role.” Sometimes by raising difficult questions, the critic can help develop thoughtful strategies that avoid problems in the long run. In addition, this role was seen as critical in ensuring that projects are undertaken for the “right reasons” and are in line with the organizational culture and philosophy. Several organizations pointed out that they would not have taken on the pilot projects if they did not fit in with their existing philosophy and needs. Sometimes it was the possibility that PLAR presented a potential solution for an existing dilemma that motivated the program to move. Many programs mentioned that they would have explored PLAR even without the funding support, although receiving financial support was advantageous. Funding can assist in reducing impacts on existing workload and resources.

One of the guiding principles of PLAR is fairness and equity. An SIFC professor identified important considerations for individuals or institutions planning to implement PLAR initiatives.

*“A question is who is the process for? What are the criteria for including or excluding people? What is the selection process? We need to ensure that there is equity in the selection process. For example, a concern with this process is that rather than offering the opportunity to one person, it should be a case of saying: “this is a pilot, would you be interested in participating.” This would have been much better than selecting the person. There needs to be fairness in the process. To ensure fairness, it must be open to everyone.”*

Another faculty member at SIFC who was aware of the pilot, but not directly involved in the pilot project stated that although one can support the idea pragmatically, we still need to continue to ask questions. Adult education principles emphasize the value of experience that people bring with them into the classroom, and “we should support people who are trying to show learning in other ways.” It is also beneficial for people who do not necessarily follow the normally accepted path to arrive at a formal education institution. However, he also points out that it is difficult to really know what someone may gain from participating in a course, and some learning will not be easily captured in learning outcomes. Emergent curriculum presents some specific challenges. This does not negate the benefit of PLAR; however, we need to remain vigilant that we do not take a reductionist approach or allow PLAR to become a ‘Trojan Horse’.

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) states that

*“within Canada there is a growing interest in the use of outcomes-based learning for occupations and professions. [...] As a result, many post-secondary education institutions in Canada are showing an increased interest in the use of occupational standards to*



*ensure the employability of students completing professional education and training programs" (p. 50).*

This increased interest has resulted in formal exploration of various approaches to outcomes-based learning. Debate revolves around the underlying assumptions and philosophies of education and its purpose. Tensions may arise depending on the individual definition and value of learning outcomes (whether they encompass attitudes, values, and judgement, in addition to knowledge and skills). Tensions can also develop relating to each person's understanding of the nature and purpose of education and training.

As presented under "Resistance" in lessons learned, there are various reasons why faculty, staff and learners may be reluctant to embrace PLAR. Understanding the underlying reasons can prove beneficial in taking proactive measures to ensure communication and consultation strategies are in place. Knowing what resistance may occur can facilitate implementing measures to reduce the likelihood of encountering major obstacles. For instance, there was concern expressed that in conjunction with PLAR, the potential exists for the imposition of behaviorism and the attempts to quantify all learning. The principles of flexible assessment, and in particular the values inherent in portfolio assessment, were felt to be potential

safeguards against attempts to quantify all learning.

Another important consideration is whether to adopt materials and processes developed in a different context. Processes and structures can be established in one context and they may provide valuable examples to learn from. Having a basis to build from provides an efficient means to develop familiarity and minimizes the need to develop everything "from scratch." Nevertheless, several interviewees pointed out the importance of streamlining or adapting these processes, structures or tools to suit the new context. In this regard, cultural and ethnic as well as organizational considerations need to be taken into account.

These additional considerations reveal the complexity of implementing new initiatives within diverse settings. As the PLAR Analyst emphasized earlier, "one size does not fit all" and there is a need to reflect on the specific requirements of each context. For all programs involved in the PLAR pilots, the goal is to enhance the teaching/learning system for learners, educators, trainers, career/employment counsellors, educational institutions and the wider community. The active engagement of the pilot project Coordinators towards building institutional capacity for PLAR as presented in the findings of this report provide a solid basis for future PLAR initiatives.

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## 8. Interview Respondents

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## 9. APPENDIX

### PSEST- PLAR Pilot Projects Questionnaire



## Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project

Dear PLAR Pilot Project Coordinators:

The following is a **draft** questionnaire proposed for gathering information on the Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (PSEST) - Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) pilot initiatives. This draft is being sent to you for your **review and feedback**. Please forward any comments you may have to Lori Petruskevich by (January 8, 2002).

**It is anticipated that the final version of the questionnaire will be distributed in mid January 2002.**

The information collected through this questionnaire will serve two purposes:

1. It will form the basis for a PSEST Status Report on the PSEST pilot projects. The Status Report will provide a comprehensive description of the eleven PSEST pilots currently underway in the province, with particular emphasis on lessons learned and best practices. The Report will be distributed to the participating PSEST pilot departments/institutions, and will assist the Department in planning future PLAR initiatives. PSEST also anticipates that the findings could support development of potential PLAR implementation models.
2. It will serve as a source document for the SLFDB-PLAR Services Project Final Evaluation Report and will assist the Project's evaluator, Trimension Group, in ascertaining how the PSEST pilot projects have contributed to the Project's two primary project objectives: awareness raising and capacity building. (Please note that in January 2002 you may be contacted by Trimension Group directly for a quick 'check-in' on this matter.)

Regarding the completion of the questionnaire, our experience has been that a face-to-face interview works best. Face-to-face interviews provide an opportunity for explanation and/or clarification 'on the spot' and can also expedite the completion of the questionnaire. If, for any reason, you will not be available for a face to face interview, please mention this when you return this questionnaire with your comments.

Thank you for your ongoing assistance. We look forward to hearing from you.

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## Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project

4. How has the pilot affected planning at your program (institution) for the:  
a) short term (1-2 years)?

b) long-term (3-5 years)?

5. Please indicate the approximate number of people whom you feel have increased their awareness of PLAR as a result of the pilot?

Faculty	Staff	Employer	Learner/Client	Other

6. What are the next steps that you envision for the pilot?



7. Based on your experience with the PSEST-PLAR Pilot Project underway in your program and/or institution:
- Briefly describe what you believe to be the key factors for success in implementing PLAR in your institution.
  - What are the main challenges you face in relation to these key factors?
  - What strategies or resources can you identify to overcome these challenges?

a) Factors for Success	b) Challenges	c) Strategies or Resources
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•
•	•	•

8. Have you or your colleagues experienced a defining moment in the PLAR process? (e.g., a situation or event that has made it all “click”)

- Yes  
 No

- a) If yes, please describe the defining moment.



## Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project

b) What effect did this have on the pilot?

9. Briefly describe the advice you would offer if another program/institution was seeking information about implementing PLAR (e.g., necessary steps, key resources, best practices, pitfalls, etc.).



## Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project

10. Given your experience to date:

a) Is there anything that (e.g., resources, tools, etc) would have made your pilot project proceed more smoothly or efficiently? (please elaborate)

b) Is there anything you would have done differently? (please elaborate)

11. Regarding the SLFDB-PLAR Services Project:

a) Briefly describe the level and/or type (s) of support you received from the Project.

b) How did this support affect (+ or -) the development and/or implementation of your pilot project?



# Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project

c) What suggestions could you make to improve the support that the SLFDB-PLAR Services Project provides?

\*\*\*\*\*

May we contact you for follow-up, should additional questions arise during analysis of the responses?

Yes

No

Not certain at this time



## **Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board PLAR Services Project**

Established in 1994, the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) is a non-profit organization that brings together the diverse perspectives of its constituent groups: Business, Labour, Education & Training Providers, Agriculture, First Nations, Metis, Women, Persons With Disabilities, Racialized Canadians, Youth, Low Income People, and Government. Co-chaired by Business and Labour, the SLFDB works to produce new partnerships, dialogue and consensus that leads to positive changes in training systems and the workplace.

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