

TALKING POINTS

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

WHAT IS PLA?

The concept of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is used to describe the process of evaluating learning gained outside the college classroom. PLA usually refers to learning acquired prior to the student's attendance at a particular college or university. Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) is often used interchangeably with PLA and calls attention to the purpose of the evaluation--receiving college credit equivalency for the acquired learning. Experiential learning is another term that has been used to describe this type of learning but it is used less frequently because it isn't life experience that garners credit, but rather knowledge gained. Regardless of the terminology, prior learning assessment (PLA) refers to a process of determining if knowledge gained outside of the traditional classroom, whether through formal or informal means, is the equivalent of knowledge gained in a college-level course.

PLA has traditionally been focused on adult learners but digital access has removed age and time barriers to learning in alternative formats. It is a course-centric process, matching knowledge gained with college course content, based on prevailing academic standards in higher education.

College-level knowledge may be acquired through:

- Work experience or employer-sponsored training programs.
 - Military training or military occupation experience.
- It may also be demonstrated and assessed through examinations, licenses and certifications or other methods:
- Examinations, including CLEP® (<http://clep.collegeboard.org/>), DSST (<http://getcollegecredit.com/>), Excelsior College® (<http://www.excelsior.edu>)

[edu/ecapps/exams/creditByExam.jsf](http://ecapps/exams/creditByExam.jsf)) Exams, and UExcel® (<http://www.excelsior.edu/exams>) exams, or departmental examinations.

- Assessments of non-credit courses, including MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), or study in preparation for professional certifications.
- Assessments of independent study (i.e. open educational resources).

**Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)
is used to describe the process of
evaluating learning gained outside the
college classroom.**

Knowledge acquired through these learning experiences or demonstrated through these assessments may be equivalent to college-level knowledge and skills and therefore warrant academic credit. Many colleges evaluate the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom for college credit or accept credit recommendations of external evaluators.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PLA?

There are many benefits to the use of PLA evaluations for the student, faculty, employer, and institution.

For the student and institution, it can motivate a student to complete their degree (Klein-Collins, 2010, 2011). By applying PLA at a college or university, the institution can shorten the time to degree for the student and improve the institutional degree completion rates. As accountability increases and outcomes rather than enrollments become more important in state funding formulas, this is an important benefit to consider. It can lower the cost for an education for the student and



TALKING POINTS

make it more likely that they can afford to persist as PLA is typically far less cost to the student than college tuition and less time to degree means less tuition and lower student debt. If talented students through experience and training can cover lower division course requirements, they can also advance to higher level courses sooner and use their advanced learning more quickly.

Employees who use their ACE CREDIT® or military personnel who use their military credit reviews, ensure that their employer tuition benefits are deployed most efficiently and effectively to achieve degree completion goals of both the employees and employer because tuition benefits don't have to go toward paying for courses covering material that the student already knows. Developing an understanding that learning is a lifetime proposition, whether on the job, in the community, or though continuing education, is also fostered by the use of PLA.

HOW IS PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSED?

Dominant PLA processes include 1) examinations, 2) review of training (military and corporate/agency/association), and 3) portfolio assessment.

Examinations

National exams have the highest acceptance rate by campuses and may include the following:

- The College Level Examination Program (CLEP®; <http://clep.collegeboard.org/>) is offered by The College Board. CLEP offers 33 exams in five subject areas, covering material taught in courses generally offered at lower division undergraduate levels. Most CLEP exams are designed to correspond to one-semester courses, although some correspond to full-year or two-year courses. CLEP® has been offered for 40 years and is now accepted by 2,900 colleges and universities. CLEP® is administered at 1,700 testing centers nationwide.
- Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST™ (<http://www.getcollegecredit.com/>) is a Prometric testing program delivered by 1,200 colleges and universities worldwide. It offers 38

subject-level exams in the areas of Social Science, Business, Mathematics, Technology, Humanities, and Physical Science at the lower and upper division baccalaureate level.

- Excelsior College® Exams (ECEs; <http://www.excelsior.edu/how-credit-by-exam-works>) include proficiency exams that provide credit by exam.
- UExcel® Exams (<http://www.excelsior.edu/exams>) is another Excelsior College® credit by examination program offered in a computer-based format at internationally distributed test centers in an alliance between Excelsior College® and Pearson.

Three common methods of assessing prior learning:

- Examinations**
Review of Training
Portfolio Assessment
-

Options exist for K-12 students as well. The College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program offers 34 courses whose scores can be applied for college credit. The International Baccalaureate® (IB), founded in 1968, is a non-profit educational foundation, offering four programs for students aged 3 to 19.

In addition to the national exams, academic departments at colleges and universities to substitute for taking the course have also developed independent challenge exams.

Review of Training

Review of training obtained in the workplace or training and experience through military service is another form of PLA. The long-standing provider of this type of review is the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE has been conducting military evaluations for the U.S. Department of Defense since 1945 and added CREDIT for non-military evaluations in 1974 for a variety of training venues and providers. ACE's National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training (<http://www2.acenet.edu/credit/>) documents training that has been evaluated



for credit by ACE in corporate settings, through governmental agencies, developed by training vendors, or other non-profit or association venues.

Formal evaluation of military occupations and training can be done either by a college faculty on their own or by ACE through its national faculty review process. ACE's Military Guide Online (<http://militaryguides.acenet.edu/>) provides a detailed list of college credit recommendations for military training and occupations that have been conducted by nationally recruited faculty for ACE. Tens of thousands of courses are listed in the ACE guides.

The National College Credit Recommendation Service (formerly National PONSI), conducted by the Board of Regents of The University of the State of New York has been evaluating training and education programs offered outside the traditional college classroom for college-level credit equivalency since 1973. It focuses on corporate training, and education offered through unions, religious organizations, and proprietary schools. Descriptions of evaluated non-collegiate sponsored instruction are published in an online guide at CCRS Online (<http://www.nationalccrs.org/ccr/home.html>).

Portfolio Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) also includes development and assessment of a student portfolio that documents learning for enrolled students for whom there are no available standardized options. Portfolio assessment typically requires students to first successfully complete a course on the development of a portfolio. This step in the process is generally required because students are being asked to make their tacit knowledge explicit and to articulate and document their learning in a manner that can be assessed by faculty reviewers. Therefore, providing guidelines on the development of a portfolio improves the likelihood of success of the portfolio although no guarantees are provided to the student that they will receive a credit recommendation.

One such three-credit course developed by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL; <http://www.cael.org/>) is called Prior Learning Assessment: Theory and Practice. The student prepares the portfolio

displaying their learning in a reflective manner—often including an essay—and presents supporting documentation. The student then petitions their college or university to accept the portfolio for course credit. Colleges and universities may have their own faculty review these portfolios for college course equivalency or outsource this for review to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL's) LearningCounts.org™, that engages nationally recruited faculty in the portfolio review.

Kaplan Higher Education Corporation has created an online PLA center as well, called KNEXT (<http://www.knext.com/>), to provide a portfolio review service for institutions who wish to expand PLA options for their students.

Many colleges and universities also recognize national certifications, including apprenticeships, which have been developed to meet industry or professional standards and award college credit for students holding these certifications. ACE CREDIT® (<http://www.acenet.edu/credit/>) has evaluated many such certifications for credit equivalency.

ARE THERE SOME COMMONALITIES IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENTS?

There are a couple of factors to be aware of when considering PLA. Credit recommendations that come from national reviewers (e.g. from ACE CREDIT® or military reviews, Excelsior College® Exams, CLEP®, or CAEL's LearningCounts.org™) are all conducted by current college teaching faculty with academic credentials and discipline expertise in the content area under review. The reviews are not assessing learning outcomes directly or demonstrated competency but are matching learning objectives articulated in a training program, exam or portfolio that are assessed to what you would expect to see in a typical college course. By doing so, transcripts can be issued for those who have completed the exam, training, or portfolio at a passing level and transfer credit can be accepted by a college or university.

IS YOUR INSTITUTION USING PLA CREDIT?

Typically, responsibility for PLA resides in the Registrar's Office and its transfer credit staff but each institution



TALKING POINTS

handles PLA differently. Ideally, your college should have “transfer of credit” or “credit for prior learning” policies on the web site or course catalog. These policies would address credit maximums allowed through PLA, transferability, and which credit-by-exams are accepted. Some colleges may use several options, such as “credit by exams” and ACE credit recommendations, while others use their own or external portfolio assessments. These may vary by degree program within an institution as well. Some institutions don’t award credit despite external recommendations, some waive course requirements instead, and some award elective credit only, or general education credit. Some institutions currently award credit for a specific degree major.

State or national data are not reported on acceptance of PLA credits so we do not have a good sense of actual usage of PLA. We know some institutions have a cap on the number of credits they will accept, accreditation bodies also have limitations on credit acceptance levels, so we don’t know what the gap is in the number of credits earned versus credits granted by institutions. Some data do exist to inform us of PLA acceptance, however, at the level of individual states, e.g. Alabama, or nationally through the American Council on Education or Council on Adult and Experiential Learning.

WHAT RESOURCES CAN HELP ME BETTER UNDERSTAND PLA PROGRAMS?

Contact ACE’s Lifelong Learning Resource Center (<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Lifelong-Learning-Resource-Center.aspx>) to learn more about ACE credit recommendations and ACE transcripts. The Center can also help you find institutions that recognize ACE credit recommendations.

Contact CAEL’s LearningCounts.org™ to learn more about prior learning through portfolio evaluation.

See Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges’ *Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning: A Handbook for Faculty and Staff* (http://sbctc.edu/college/education/prior_learning_handbook_nov2012.pdf) for a current comprehensive resource on how to set up PLA on your campus.

REFERENCES

Council on Adult and Experiential Learning, 2012. *Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Research Highlights*. Chicago, IL.

Klein-Collins, Rebecca, 2011. *Underserved Students Who Earn Credit through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree*. Research Brief. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Chicago, IL.

Klein-Collins, Rebecca, 2010. *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Chicago, IL.

Travers, Nan, 2012. *What is Next After 40 Years? Part 2: Prior Learning Assessment: 2012 and After*. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education 60:117-121.

Washington State Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning Work Group, 2012. (Based in part on the work of Eric Moore, Assessment Coordinator, AirWashington.) *Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning: A handbook for faculty and staff*. Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, October.

Author: Patricia Book, WCET Fellow
and former Assistant Vice President at
the American Council on Education

