Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning:

A handbook for faculty and staff

Developed by

Washington State Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning Work Group

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October 2012

Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges

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Purpose

This guide is designed to help colleges develop policies and implement practices of advising, assessing, and awarding credit for prior learning which meets the outcomes of currently offered college courses. It explains the importance of PLA in Washington, provides an introduction to the basic elements of prior learning, and gives examples of current policies, processes and practices. For more detailed information and references, see the SBCTC 2010 report to the Washington State Legislature.

Definition of Prior Learning

In 2011, in House Bill 1795, the Washington State Legislature defined prior learning as: "...the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions."

Need for Prior Learning Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) enables individuals to earn credit and recognition for the skills and knowledge they have already acquired. Current changes in higher education, the economy and society in general, provide the impetus and context for the development of consistent and transparent policy and guidelines on assessing prior learning, and the implementation of practices that support increased assessment and award of credit for prior learning.

For many years, community colleges in Washington State have attempted to provide adults with opportunities to earn credit for what they know and can do. Across the system, individual colleges have a wide variety of different practices, policies and procedures already in place.

The students in the community and technical colleges represent a large, diverse group of individuals with a wealth of previous learning acquired through life experiences including work, training and independent study. Rising education costs, scarce resources and pressure to acquire meaningful credentials have created the need for many adults to progress from where they currently are – and to avoid coursework which repeats what they already know and can do.

Organizations outside of the college system, such as private businesses, apprenticeship programs, and the military services, as well as the Washington State Legislature, have stated the need for this shift to greater assessment and award of credit for prior learning. Many students are voicing their desire for assessment of prior learning before they take additional college courses. PLA can enable colleges to become more responsive by providing increased access and flexibility for individuals. This increase in service will enable colleges to meet the needs of students, both current and potential.

The assessment of prior learning, although long associated with only portfolio development and assessment, can also be offered using a variety of other methods. These include course challenge and oral examinations; standardized tests; credits earned through the American Council of Education's College Equivalency Program (military education and training); the systematic observation of skill demonstrations, including role plays and simulations; and the evaluation of case studies or other assignments.

PLA Improves Student Retention and Completion

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), with support from the Lumina Foundation for Education, conducted a multi-institutional study on PLA and adult student outcomes, using the records of 62,475 students at 48 colleges and universities. The data from CAEL's study (see Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success) show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned. PLA students in this study also had much higher degree-earning rates than non-PLA students. More than half (56%) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so.

Limitations

It is important to note that the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the regional accrediting body for Washington State public institutions of higher education, has set a cap on credit for prior learning. According to Accreditation Standard 2.C.7, no more than 25% of a certificate or degree may be granted through credits for prior learning.

Methods of Assessment

Challenge Exam

A challenge exam is very similar to a comprehensive final exam. It can be a written, verbal, or demonstrative test that evaluates whether the student has achieved each of the course objectives. The student must score a specified percentage (often 80%) to qualify for receiving credit for the course. This method is simple to implement and because comprehensive exams are commonly used to assess mastery of course objectives it is easy to justify its validity.

To implement challenge exams:

1) Budget for faculty compensation to proctor and, if needed, to develop the exams
2) Consult with faculty to identify entry level courses that students tend to have experience in
3) Contract with faculty to develop challenge exams or use existing comprehensive final exams for those courses
4) Communicate with your college registrars, advisors, faculty and others on your campus, that challenge exams can be offered for select classes

Portfolio

Another method to evaluate PLA is with a portfolio created by the student. The portfolio should include evidence that the student has achieved each of the learning objectives for the course. This evidence may be in the form of certificates, pictures of projects, affidavits from employers, writing to prove understanding and application, video, etc.

Students often need assistance with translating their life experience into learning objectives and with finding evidence to demonstrate their mastery of the objectives. Colleges may offer a portfolio class to guide students through the portfolio development process, facilitating the deep thinking about the student's own learning preferences and challenges, as well as teaching the skills required to adequately articulate how the prior learning meets the outcomes of specific college credit courses. Some colleges offer a technical writing credit for the portfolio development course. The portfolio method of assessing prior learning usually involves more time on both the part of the student and the part of the faculty/assessor.

To implement:

1) Determine, with faculty, if a need for a portfolio class exists
    a. Are students coming into class with lots of previous experience? Can the course objectives be proven with the types of evidence listed above?
2) Check to see if current curriculum for an unused portfolio class that is still in your college's catalog
3) If current portfolio development curriculum doesn't already exist...
    a. Develop curriculum, **or**
    b. Adapt/adopt portfolio development curriculum from other colleges in the Washington community and technical college system**, or**
    c. Look online for other open resources in portfolio development.
4) As part of the curriculum develop a thorough syllabus/handbook for the student (see an example here, http://www.scribd.com/doc/97687961/Portfolio-Development#fullscreen)
5) Communicate with all appropriate campus staff and faculty (including the PLA contact/office) about the portfolio development process and course, if one is offered.

Crosswalk

Crosswalks describe how training programs (including military training, apprenticeships, and other standardized training) compare to a college's current course offerings. Faculty evaluate the curriculum and learning outcomes of the prior training program to determine how well it matches the learning outcomes in their own courses, creating a clearly articulated connection – crosswalk – between the two sets of learning outcomes.

Once the crosswalk is created it can be used in two ways...

1) As a resource used by the PLA contact/office determine to which classes the student's experience applies **OR**
2) to grant a student credits for their experience without an additional assessment (a faculty's signature is still required to verify that the training is sufficient)

One very well-established crosswalk called the ACE Military Guide has been developed to crosswalk military experience to higher education. The guide gives recommendations for granting a student credit based on the type/intensity of their military training. While the ACT guides are helpful, they do not provide specific, measureable learning outcomes against which colleges can compare their own specific course learning outcomes.

Policies, Processes and Practices

There are many variations of how the PLA process works. What is important to note is that policies, processes and practices should meet NWCCU standards and WACTC-adopted guidelines. Always consult with your college PLA Point of Contact, if you have any questions. A current list of contacts can be found on the State Board for Community and Technical College PLA web page at http://sbctc.edu/college/_e-assessprior learning.aspx

Also, **coding is critical to tracking.** That is, if we are to assess our own progress in increasing the number of students and the number of credits being awarded for prior learning – and be able to document our progress in our annual report to the legislature - we must accurately and consistently code PLA credits.

Appendix A: Legislation, Standards & Guidance

2010 – SB 6357

SB 6357, passed by the 2010 Legislature, found that "Washington institutions of higher education [need to] develop valued, reliable, and transparent policies regarding the academic recognition of prior significant life and learning experiences to be consistently applied at all Washington institutions of higher education."

- Directed SBCTC to bring stakeholder groups together and "develop policies for awarding academic credit for learning from work and military experience, military and law enforcement training, career college training, internships and externships, and apprenticeships"
- Policies that should "provide for consistent application by all institutions of higher education and a basis for accurate and complete academic counseling."
- Report to the Legislature December 2010 with recommendations. (http://sbctc.edu/college/education/academic_credit_pla_recommendations_dec2010.pdf)

2011 – HB 1795

HB 1795 implemented SB 6357 recommendations

- Work group continued from 6357 before bill passed.
- Purpose of workgroup – to coordinate and implement the goals from 6357 and report progress on goals and outcome measures by December 31st of each year.
- Definition from 1795: For the purposes of this section, "prior learning" means the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.
- **GOALS**
    - Increase number of students earning PLA, number of students receiving PLA that counts toward major, degree, certificates, credentials (high quality, course-level competencies)
    - Increase number and type of academic credit accepted as PLA
    - Develop transparent policies and practices
    - Improve practices across institutions
    - Create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding PLA; share best practices
    - Develop articulation agreements for programs and pathways.
    - Develop outcome measures for above.

NWCCU Accreditation - Standard Two

2.C.7 Credit for prior experiential learning, if granted, is: a) guided by approved policies and procedures; b) awarded only at the undergraduate level to enrolled students; limited to a maximum of 25% of the credits needed for a degree; d) awarded only for documented student achievement equivalent to expected learning achievement for courses within the institution's regular curricular offerings; and e) granted only upon the recommendation of appropriately qualified teaching faculty. Credit granted for prior experiential learning is so identified on students' transcripts and may not duplicate other credit awarded to the student in fulfillment of degree requirements. The institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution's review process.

WACTC-approved Guidelines for Prior Learning Assessment

Approved by WACTC January 2000
Washington State Community and Technical College
Guidelines for Prior Learning Assessment

Assessment

Prior learning assessment methods include portfolio development; course challenge and oral examinations; standardized tests; credits earned through the American Council of Education's Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services (ACE Guide); the systematic observation of skill demonstrations, including role plays and simulations; and the evaluation of case studies or other assignments.)

- Assessment of the learning should be the responsibility of faculty who are content specialists from the awarding institution, and the names and qualifications of those making an assessment should be recorded.
- Practices used in assessing prior learning should be consistent with good contemporary assessment methodology.
- Learning assessed for post-secondary credit should be:
- Linked to established learning outcomes or other criteria consistent with institutional standards for a given course. It should not be linked to time spent;
- Transferable to contexts other than the one in which it was learned;
- Current and relevant;
- At a level of achievement equivalent to that of other learners engaged in studies at that level in that program or subject area;
- Assessed using a range of strategies consistent with institutional standards for a given course.

Credit

- Faculty, as the content specialists, will assess and recognize prior learning and will make the determination of credit awards, with external advice as necessary. Credit may be granted only upon the recommendation of faculty who are appropriately qualified and who are on a regular appointment with the college on a continuing basis.
- Learners may be awarded recognition for demonstrating college-level learning that combines theory and practice, not for experience alone.
- The number of credits to be granted should be determined by the institution, based on their identified learning outcomes or other criteria.
- Credit will be awarded for demonstrated learning outcomes that are appropriate to the subject, course or program offered at the awarding institution.

Learner Orientation/Preparation

- Learners should have access to adequate information about and orientation to all PLA processes. Information could be available in quarterly schedules and in other marketing materials from a single point of contact.
- Institutions should offer a variety of opportunities to support learners' progress through the assessment process; for example, single point of contact, advisors, one-stop access, and portfolio templates.

Administration and Support

General

- Institutions will regularly monitor, review, evaluate and revise prior learning assessment policies and practices to maintain and improve institutional standards.
- Policies and information about prior learning assessment processes, including provision for appeal, will be readily available.
- Nationally administered examinations, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Dantes and CLEP could be brought into a course in the college catalog or can be handled separately based on local college decisions.
- The Instruction Commission recommends that PLA must be tied to catalogue offerings.

Fees/Enrollment

- The fees for assessment will be based on actual costs plus reasonable administration. The fees will be based on the amount of credit requested, not the amount of credit awarded.
- Fees should be published and consistently applied.
- Fees should be consistent to the extent possible across the system.

Transcripts/Transfer:

- Grades or credits will be assigned to PLA awards and will be entered accordingly on the learner's transcript.
- Credits earned through PLA at Washington Community and Technical Colleges will be accepted toward the appropriate course or program at any other Washington Community and Technical College.

Inter-College Reciprocity Policy

Approved by Instruction Commission, February 2005
Residency Requirement Updated by the Articulation & Transfer Council, April 2005
Diversity Requirement added by Instruction Commission, May 2011
Added statement that includes reciprocity of Prior Learning Credit, May 2012

Background:

It is healthy and desirable to promote diversity among the transfer curricula at various community and technical colleges. This diversity allows colleges to meet specific community needs and interests, to develop innovations and best practices, and to capitalize on unique faculty and institutional resources, campus to campus.

However, as students, of necessity, transfer among colleges, it is equally important to ensure that they are not penalized by the differences in the specific requirements imposed by individual campuses within the general guidelines of the Transfer degrees (DTA and AS-T) as approved by the Instruction Commission.

In the spirit of compromise between these competing interests, colleges of the Washington State CTC system have developed and adopted guidelines, as follows, for reciprocity of transfer coursework among colleges.

Reciprocity of Individual Courses:

If a student transfers an individual course that meets a Communication Skills, Quantitative Skills or Distribution Requirement at the sending college for a specific transfer degree, that course is considered to have met that

requirement at the receiving college for a similar transfer degree, even if this course does not have an exact equivalent and even if the course credit is awarded through prior learning credit.

If a student transfers an individual course that meets a Diversity Requirement at the sending college for a specific transfer degree, that course is considered to have met that requirement at the receiving college for a similar transfer degree, even if this course does not have an exact equivalent and even if the course credit is awarded through prior learning credit.

Reciprocity of Distribution Areas/Specific Requirements:

The receiving institution will accept an entire Distribution, Communication Skills, Quantitative Skills, or other requirement for a transfer degree as met if that student:

A. Has met the sending institution's residency credit and meets the receiving institution's policy on continuous enrollment (enrollment pattern needed to complete under the catalog at entrance1)

B. Has met the entire Communication Skills, Quantitative Skills or Distribution Requirement of a transfer degree, according to the sending institution's degree criteria*

The receiving institution will accept an entire Diversity Requirement for a transfer degree as being met if that student has met the entire Diversity Requirement of a transfer degree, according to the sending institution's degree criteria.

*Note: Example criteria include number of disciplines, allowable disciplines, credits, sequence requirements (or lack thereof). In all these instances, the sending institution's requirements govern for that particular Communication Skills, Quantitative Skills or Distribution Requirement component.

C. Has maintained a cumulative college-level grade-point average (GPA) of 2.0 or better at the sending institution.

The receiving institution agrees to consider the requirement area met if these conditions, upon review, are met. (There is no limit to the number of requirement areas to be considered.)

In view of staff limitations for transcript review, the receiving institution cannot be expected to search every transfer-in transcript to see if the reciprocity provisions apply. It is, therefore, the student's responsibility to initiate the reciprocity process and to gather appropriate documentation as needed. However, all institutions agree to make transfer-in students aware of these provisions, to publish them in college catalogs and other transfer-related resources, and to provide transfer-in students with a clear contact point and process for pursuing reciprocity.

Local Provisos:

The receiving college retains the right to impose unique, local prerequisite and graduation requirements. Such requirements might include learning communities/coordinated studies requirements, writing-intensive course requirements, and physical education/health requirements.

Transcript Notation:

Transcripts will include notation of requirements met by reciprocity. Notations will include the name of the sending institution.

Coding and Tracking

In April of 2012, a system-wide PLA coding process was implemented in the Washington State Community and Technical Colleges. By July of 2012, all colleges were using the new coding system, which would allow for accurate tracking of PLA credit being awarded.

Registrars

CC: Presidents
Vice-Presidents of Instruction
Vice-Presidents of Student Services

FROM: Carmen McKenzie, Data and Research Manager, SBCTC

DATE: April 248, 2012

SUBJECT: Coding Prior Learning Credits – New Process

This memo is intended to clarify the new process for coding Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Credits in the Student Management System (SMS). This coding method was recommended by the Washington Prior Learning Assessment work group and approved by the Instruction Commission and WACTC at their February 2012 meetings.

Procedure for coding (similar to Tech Prep):

1. The student must have a Transcript Biographic record. Use screen SM6008 to enter this information if a record does not exist for the student.
2. Using screen SM6013, enter the course and grade information **using a SECTION code of "PLC".**
3. Change the Grade Post Indicator at the bottom of the page to "N", since there is no enrollment record to update.
4. Run job SG080R or SG085R to append this record into the Transcripts database.

What is most important is that the courses are built with the SECTION code of "PLC". This coding will allow SBCTC staff to distinguish these credits from others earned at your college within the Data Warehouse. The SECTION code will not be printed on the student's transcripts

Background

A work group established by SSB 6357 in 2010 recommended development of a consistent method of tracking PLA credit. This was codified by ESSHB 1795 in 2011, which stipulates that institutions must develop measures to track increases in the number of students receiving PLA credit and increases in the number of PLA credits that count towards their major, degree, certificate, or credential. The PLA Washington work group developed the following definition for Prior Learning and Prior Learning Assessment in Washington:

Prior Learning is the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.

For more information regarding coding, please contact Carmen McKenzie at 360-704-4369, or cmckenzie@sbctc.edu ; for more information about assessing prior learning or the PLA work group, please contact Noreen Light at 360.704.4345, or nlight@sbctc.edu

Appendix B: Examples of PLA Processes

Sample PLA Process

Step 1: Student receives PLA information in college marketing materials, orientations, or conversations with faculty, advisors, or other college staff

- These materials may include; website, student handbook, course catalog, information for veterans and other outreach materials (see sample language for materials in the Appendix).
- List a single contact person or office to handle all PLA inquiries. Possible fits for this role on your campus could be:
    - Office of counselors or academic advisors
    - Testing center
    - Admissions
    - Check the State Board for Community and Technical College PLA web page for a current list of staff/faculty who have been identified as PLA contacts http://sbctc.edu/college/_e-assessspriorlearning.aspx

Step 2: PLA contact advises student on which classes best apply to their experience

- The student is given a PLA form (see examples) or is directed to an online site and the PLA process is explained.
- The PLA contact can use pre-determined crosswalks from common industry certificates, classes, and experience to determine which classes it applies to.
    - For military experience your college may use the ACE recommendation on military transcripts or the online guide, http://www.militaryguides.acenet.edu/
    - If a crosswalk is used, attach a copy to the PLA form for the faculty to see.

Step 3: Student meets with appropriate faculty member

- The student should bring their PLA form, any documentation of relevant experience, and any crosswalk information given to them by the PLA contact to their meeting with the faculty.
- Faculty signs the student's PLA form to verify that they will evaluate the student's experience.
- Faculty can use the provided crosswalk information as sufficient for granting credit or require a challenge exam or portfolio.

Step 4: Student is assessed an evaluation fee

- This fee should be charged before the evaluation, but it should be clear to the student that it does not guarantee that they will receive credit.
- After paying, the cashier attaches the payment receipt to the PLA form, or indicates in the online system.
- Each college determines the PLA assessment and transcription fees, based on the cost to the college. According to the WACTC-adopted guidelines, the fee will be "actual cost, plus reasonable". This might include faculty time to develop, administer and evaluate assessments, registrar time for transcription, or other staff time, plus general overhead costs.
    - One method of determining fees for PLA is based on the following formula: average hourly wage of faculty multiplied by the average time spent on administration of competency assessments for prior learning, plus the indirect cost rate.

Step 5: Student arranges an evaluation with faculty

- This evaluation must be done by the faculty and the method of evaluation will be agreed upon by the faculty and the student. An evaluation could be any of the following:
    - A portfolio created by the student
    - A crosswalk of the student's experience to college classes (e.g. ACE military guide, industry certificates/training, etc.) if the faculty believes the experience is sufficient to cover the learning outcomes of the class
    - A challenge exam (written, verbal, or demonstrative) proctored by faculty
        - Challenge exams should be comprehensive enough to assess each of the learning objectives for the course separately (i.e. a comprehensive final exam).
        - Courses that have common learning objectives between them may share a single challenge exam. Collaborative development of challenge exams within departments or between colleges would increase consistency.
- After the evaluation the faculty indicates whether or not the credits have been earned and signs the PLA form.
- Assessments may be marked as pass/fail or assigned a letter grade to indicate how thoroughly the student achieved the learning objectives for that class. A letter grade improves transferability.
- A written appeals process should be offered to the student to comply with WACTC-adopted guidelines.
    - An appeal might be heard by the department chair or dean of the division. A successful appeal would result in a separate evaluation by another qualified faculty.

Step 6: Credits are recorded and appear on the student's transcript

- A completed PLA form may be given to the Office of the Registrar and kept in a student's file
- NWCCU requires that PLA credits must be clearly indicated on the transcript.
    - Example: follow the WA system coding and add a PLA notation in the comment field
- The current process for coding PLA:
    - The student must have a Transcript Biographic record. Use screen SM6008 to enter this information if a record does not exist for the student.
    - Using screen SM6013, enter the course and grade information **using a SECTION code of "PLC".**
    - Change the Grade Post Indicator at the bottom of the page to "N", since there is no enrollment record to update.
    - Run job SG080R or SG085R to append this record into the Transcripts database.
    - What is most important is that the courses are built with the SECTION code of "PLC". This coding will allow SBCTC staff to distinguish these credits from others earned at your college within the Data Warehouse. The SECTION code will not be printed on the student's transcripts

Community Colleges of Spokane PLA Policy

CCS recognizes several methods by which students may receive college credit outside the traditional program of class attendance. Methods for evaluating nontraditional learning include credit by articulation; Certified Professional Secretary (CPS) evaluation; Certified Administrative Professional (CAP) evaluation; departmental challenge examinations; prior learning/life experience evaluation; Advanced Placement Program, sponsored by the College Board; and military education and experience evaluation.

Students who have made application to attend SCC, SFCC or the IEL shall be eligible for nontraditional credit evaluation. Credit awards will not be granted until the student has completed one full quarter of enrollment with at least 10-quarter credits earned.

The student must initiate a request for nontraditional college credit at SCC, 509-533-7026; SFCC, 509-533-3164; or IEL, 509-279-6001.

Nontraditional Credit Awards:

- may be used to meet any appropriate graduation requirement.
- do not count toward the residency requirement of 30-quarter credits.
- will not satisfy credit hour requirements in the veterans benefit program or any other financial assistance program.
- may be granted for prior learning/life experience following completion of a portfolio class and evaluation of the learning/life experience portfolio. (Additional costs for portfolio evaluation may be assessed.)
- must be approved by the appropriate department chair or designated department faculty member in the discipline for which credit is sought

DEPARTMENTAL CHALLENGE EXAMINATIONS OR PRIOR LEARNING/LIFE EXPERIENCE EVALUATION

Students who wish to apply for a course challenge or prior learning/life experience evaluation must be interviewed and approved through the instructional department. Students should have justification for their request, a high school or college transcript, portfolio and/or other information pertinent to the request for credit. A course may not be challenged if the student is currently enrolled in, has previously earned credit in or has previously audited the course. A student may challenge a course he/she has previously enrolled in and received a grade only with the permission of the appropriate dean and department chair and/or designated department faculty member in the discipline for which credit is sought. (For transfer courses, check with the receiving institution for policies concerning challenge credits.)

The student must pay a nonrefundable $10 nontraditional credit evaluation fee before taking an examination or having prior learning/life experience evaluated. Processing fees are charged at the rate of $5 per credit for the departmental challenge examinations and prior learning/life experience evaluation.

Community Colleges of Spokane

APPLICATION FOR NONTRADITIONAL CREDIT

Name _____ Student Identification Number _____ Date _____
PLEASE PRINT Last First Middle

Local Address _____ ZIP _____ Phone _____

Quarter	Course No.	Course Title	Cr. Hrs.	Grade

A: Nontraditional credit application fee $ _____

B: Nontraditional credit fee $ _____

TOTAL $ _____

Comment _____

Type of evaluation:

- ____ Certified professional secretary
- ____ Credit by articulation
- ____ Departmental challenge examinations
- ____ High school AP program
- ____ Military credit & experience
- ____ Prior experience evaluation
- ____ Other

A: I petition for the above evaluation.

Student's signature _____ Date _____

Counselor's signature _____ Date _____

Evaluator's signature _____ Date _____

B: I certify that each grade is correct based on the official evaluation.

Evaluator's signature _____ Date _____

I petition for the above grade(s) and credit(s) to be granted.

Student's signature _____ Date _____

CCS 4062 (Rev. 1/96) 130 White—Registrar Green—Student (B) Canary—Cashier Pink—Instructor (A) Goldenrod—Cashier

A: NONTRADITIONAL CREDIT APPLICATION FEE
(nonrefundable)

B: NONTRADITIONAL CREDIT FEE
(nonrefundable)