Prior Learning Assessment by Portfolio Preparation Guide

The term *prior learning assessment* (PLA) refers to all of the processes the university uses to review and evaluate evidence of learning outside formal higher education for which academic credit cannot be granted through existing articulation agreements or course equivalencies. PLA assigns academic credit earned by ensuring standards of academic quality are met and the credit awarded is comparable to similar, existing credit-bearing experiences and courses. Evidence of such learning may be derived from previous academic work, testing, or various life and work experiences. At USA, credit for prior learning is assessed through the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Challenge Exams, ROTC/Military credits, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and by Portfolio.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) began in adult degree programs over forty years ago in recognition that adult students who are either beginning or continuing their college degree often bring considerable knowledge and skills gained from years of work experience, referred to as experiential learning. PLA is a way to award academic credit for this experiential knowledge as it relates to specific course outcomes.

Types of prior learning assessment can include:

- College Level Examination Program (CLEP) standardized tests
- Challenge Exams developed by departments
- American Council on Education (ACE) pre-assessed credit
- ROTC/Military credit
- Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate

What are the benefits of PLA?

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is the national organization that promotes effective strategies for the academic success of adult learners. CAEL conducted a study of over 62,000 adult learners at 48 colleges and universities across the country and found that students who earned credit through PLA:

- Completed their degrees faster
- Were more likely to graduate
- Had higher GPA's

In addition, earning academic credit through PLA can significantly reduce the cost of a college education.

How much credit can be earned through PLA?

At the University of South Alabama, students can earn up to 30 hours of academic credit through multiple types of credit for prior learning. As always, students should work closely with their academic advisors in determining the most appropriate program of study.

What is PLA by Portfolio?

 At USA we offer Prior Learning Assessment by Portfolio (PLA-P). It is a process by which evidence of learning outside the traditional academic classroom, that matches the learning outcomes of a specific academic course, is gathered, organized, and presented for review in the form of a detailed and comprehensive portfolio.

Such learning can be gained by:

- Work experience
- Continuing professional education and development
- Seminars and workshops
- In-service training
- Certifications and licenses
- Military Experience
- Non-credit courses such as MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses)
- Extensive reading, research, or independent study in a particular area
- Extensive volunteer experiences

Overview and Process at USA

What is PLA by Portfolio?

As previously stated, PLA by Portfolio is

….a formal communication, presented by the student to the college, as part of a petition requesting credit for learning outside the classroom. The portfolio must make its case clearly and succinctly, and it must provide sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it as the basis for their evaluation (Lamdin, 1992, p. 84).

What subjects are assessed through PLA by Portfolio?

The subject areas assessed through the process are wide and vary at each university. At USA, each department determines whether they will award credit through this process, and if so, which courses may be eligible. The PLA coordinator will meet with the student to help identify possible PLA-P course options and consult with academic departments to determine if the course(s) of interest is eligible for PLA-P credit.

How do I know if my learning is suitable for PLA by Portfolio?

Credit is awarded based on a match between the student's documented experiential learning and the specific stated learning outcomes of the identified course. The course description and syllabus can assist in determining whether it is a good fit. Reviewing the course textbook can also provide additional insight into the course content.

"Experience alone is not learning" (Snow, 2001, p. 3).

That is why the PLA-P process involves more than simply presenting a resume. In order for the learning gained through experience to be documented, evidence of progression in knowledge and skill must be presented. The portfolio should document increased advancement in activities, duties, job responsibilities, or positions. What lessons were learned through the experience, and how do those lessons relate to current best practice or theories in the field?

What does the final portfolio look like?

Prior to completing the portfolio, you will have completed the PLA by Portfolio application and met with the PLA Coordinator. The final portfolio should consist of the final documents.

- Cover Sheet
- Table of Contents
- Target Statement
- Course syllabus
- PLA resume
- Personal essay / General learning narrative
- Course Learning Outcome 1
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought, with supporting documentation
- Course Learning Outcome 2……
  - Learning narrative specific to the learning outcome of the course for which credit is sought, with supporting documentation
- Reflective essay
- Supporting documents
- References (if appropriate)

Process of Awarding Credit

What are the costs associated with PLA by Portfolio?

Students submit a non-refundable application fee of $100 upon submission of the application packet. Should the portfolio be awarded academic credit, it will be billed at a rate of $100 per credit hour.

How much credit may I be awarded through PLA by Portfolio?

USA allows for up to 30 credit hours to be awarded through various forms of PLA, including the portfolio. These hours can be awarded through one option, or a combination various forms.

Each department, however, determines which courses and how many hours of credit will be accepted through PLA-P. This should be discussed with the PLA coordinator prior to beginning the process.

Who decides if credit is awarded?

Once the portfolio has been completed, it is reviewed by the module instructor and PLA coordinator, who may suggest revisions or additions. When approved, it is sent to the appropriate department for review along with an evaluation rubric. For example, if credit is being petitioned for BLY 320, the portfolio would be sent for assessment to the biology department. The department determines the appropriate faculty member to assess the portfolio.

The faculty assessor can request revision, additional information or to meet with the student. There is no direct communication between the faculty assessor and the student unless requested by the faculty assessor.

The faculty assessor makes a recommendation to the department chair, who has the option of accepting the recommendation, revising, or rejecting the recommendation, or requesting more information. The decision of the chair for the awarded credit is then sent to the PLA coordinator for review with the student.

It is important to keep in mind that credit is not guaranteed. While this tutorial is designed to guide you in the development of a portfolio that documents experiential learning to the greatest extent possible, it is up to the faculty assessor and department chair to determine if credit is awarded, and if so, how many credit hours.

If the requested credit is not awarded, is there an appeal process?

If the credit requested on the initial application is not awarded, the student can submit a letter of appeal to the PLA coordinator, along with any supporting information or documentation. This is then returned to the department for a second review. The decision from the second review is final.

Creation of PLA Portfolio:

Assignment 1: Target Statement

The target statement for your portfolio is a brief overview of your experiences and subsequent learning that you will be documenting in the portfolio, ending with the identification of the course for which you are applying for credit. This statement should be approximately 100 words.

Example:

TARGET STATEMENT

Real estate has been the focus of my professional life since 2010, when I accepted my first position as a manager for a vacation condominium company. I quickly recognized this as my passion and obtained my real estate license and opened my own real estate office in 2015. Since that time, I have successfully built my business through buying and selling vacation properties on the Gulf Coast. I believe this portfolio will document the achievement of the course outcomes of RE 101 through my professional experience over the past 12 years.

Assignment 2: Course Syllabus

Upload the syllabus for the course for which you are applying for PLA credit.

Assignment 3: PLA Resume

You are probably very familiar with the traditional resume designed for employment. Just as the traditional resume shows your qualifications as a potential employee, the PLA resume highlights your qualifications for academic credit through the PLA process. There are, however, some significant differences in the format and information provided.

The PLA resume will address the specific knowledge and skills you have gained through your experience that are relevant to the course for which you are applying for PLA credit. Sources of the experiential learning can include jobs, job training, professional development, military service, certificates or licenses, community involvement, volunteerism, etc.

As the first document the reviewer sees, it is very important that the PLA resume be detailed yet concise and well-organized. The content must clearly relate to the learning outcomes of the academic course identified on the course syllabus.   The experiences should be presented in chronological order and linked to the specific outcomes of the course.

An example of an PLA resume is included in below.

The PLA resume should include all professional or volunteer experience, with a **focus on that which is related to the course objectives**. The resume should include:

* Name   * Expected date of graduation

 * Major   * Department

* Academic Course for PLA credit   *Course Department

* Course Outcomes

Related to each course outcome include:

- Source of learning:
    - Employment and work activities
    - Specialized training (certifications, training, licenses, etc.)
    - Life experiences (employment, military service, volunteer experience, practical experience, etc.)
- Activities
- Dates

An example of a PLA Resume can be found in below. While you do not have to follow the exact format, all identified information must be included. The resume must be detailed, concise and well-organized.

PLA Resume Example

Name: Elizabeth Cole   **Expected Date of Graduation:** Fall 2023
Major: Interdisciplinary Studies   **Department:** Integrative Studies
Academic Course for PLA Credit: RE 101   **Department:** Real Estate Management

COURSE OUTCOME	SOURCE OF LEARNING	ACTIVITIES	DATES
1. Define basic real estate terminology	Real Estate Agent, Cole Real Estate Licensed in Alabama and Florida	Sell residential real estate	2015 – Present
2. Examine the principles of property management	Manager, Beachfront Condominiums Pensacola, Florida	Managed vacation condominium rentals	2010 – 2015
3. Apply the steps in mortgage loan brokering	Real Estate Investor	Buy and sell residential vacation properties	2012- Present
4. Identify and explain real estate law	Advanced Training Certificate in Real Estate Law (appended)	Completion of intensive 40-hour training course	2018
5. Apply the standards of appraisal practice	Real Estate Investor	Appraise properties for potential investment	2012 – Present

Selected Accomplishments
- Sold over $5 million in real estate in the first year of starting my own real estate company.
- Voted Realtor of the Year by the Pensacola Realtor's Association, 2020.
- Gave professional presentations on property management, appraisals and brokering at Florida Realtor's Association, 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Assignment 4: Personal Essay / General Learning Narrative

The personal essay is designed to give the reviewer a wholistic picture of who you are and plan to become - educationally and professionally. The essay should be two to four pages, double spaced and include:

- Current educational and/or employment status that can include degrees held/sought, current employment (if employed), volunteer activities, licenses/certifications/training.
- Long-term educational and professional goals
- Description of what is needed to achieve these goals and your plan for achievement
- Narrative to present a picture of yourself and your learning development

Assignment 5: Course Learning Outcome 1

Part 1: Critical Learning Events Narrative

The **Critical Learning Events Narratives are** detailed summaries of your experiences and how those experiences contributed to the achievement of each of the specific learning outcomes in the course for which you are petitioning for credit. This is your opportunity to present clear evidence that your learning outside the classroom meets the course outcomes.

These narratives will be a bit different from student papers you have written in the past. They should be written in first person (I, me, my). It is a persuasive document, meant to convince the faculty reviewer that you have met the learning outcomes for the course.

A narrative should be written for each course outcome and include:

- Identification of the **course outcome**, bold and center-justified.
- A detailed description of your **experiences** as they relate to the course objective (dates, activities/responsibilities). Include challenges that you faced and learned from, as well as success.
- A detailed description of the **learning** that took place as a result of these experiences, specific to the course objective.
- Citations in the text of the narrative that link the experience/learning with theory and academic sources. Citations should be in APA format.
- A reference list that includes the reference for each of the citations in the text. References should be in APA format, beginning with the header **References** in bold, center-justified.

Part 2: Sources of Supporting Documentation

Create a list of the supporting documentation you will append for each Learning Outcome. Put the Learning Outcome at the top of the page, bold, center-justified. Then list each item you are appending. All supporting documentation should be appended in order at the back of your portfolio.

What are potential sources of supporting documentation?

Experiential learning must be verified by providing supporting documentation. The greatest sources of such documentation can include verification from:

- *Employers, managers and supervisors*
- *Clients*
- *Colleagues from other companies*
- *Professional development trainers*
- *Those connected to community activities or self-employment*

Information from these individuals can be requested through a **Letter of Solicitation**. This is not a letter of reference or job verification, but a letter that confirms specifically what is written in the learning narratives, including duties, responsibilities, projects, accomplishments, and indications of professional growth and learning.

Other sources of verification of learning include:

- Performance reviews that address the learning relevant to the course
- Reports, letters or other documents
- Media, websites, etc.
- Forms, graphics or databases created
- Licensures or certificates, including the requirements
- Training evaluations, certifications, etc.

* Any questions regarding appropriate documentation can be discussed with the PLA coordinator.

Course Learning Outcome 2, 3, 4...

For each Course Learning Outcome include:

- Critical learning events narrative
- Sources of supporting documentation

Assignment 6: Reflective Essay

The final component of your portfolio is the reflective essay. This document should be a minimum of 500 words and summarize the information presented in the previous sections. It should be engaging, well-organized and highlight the learning you have gained through your lived experiences.

Assignment 7: Supporting Documentation

Supporting documentation is the evidence you provide for having met each course objective. This documentation is critical for the substantiation of your learning. **See the Supporting Documentation section** for examples of possible sources of documentation.

Each supporting document should be submitted with an APA running header that says Appendix A (B...) on the left and Objective # on the right side of the header, so that the link between the supporting document and associated course objective is clear.

All supporting documents should be submitted as PDF files to preserve the material format.

* The faculty reviewer may request additional documentation.

Final Portfolio

You have now carefully developed each of the required components of your PLA portfolio. It is now time to put each of the sections in a single document for submission for review. The portfolio will first be reviewed by the PLA coordinator, who may suggest or request revisions prior to submission for faculty review.