

Overview

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 policy and guidelines on assessing prior learning.

For many years, Washington State has 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. High education costs, scarce resources and pressure to acquire meaningful credentials have created the need for many adults to progress from where they currently are – not to repeat what they already know and can do.

Organizations outside of the college system, such as Boeing, have stated the need for this shift and away from repetitious learning. Many students are voicing their desire for assessment of prior learning before they take additional college courses. Institutions such as City University and the University of Phoenix have been responsive to these student demands and have been leaders in assessing prior learning and applying it to their programs. 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; the systematic observation of skill demonstrations, including role plays and simulations; and the evaluation of case studies or other assignments.

Goals:

- Consistency – Strive for consistency in the administration of PLA programs and for this method to be viewed as an integral part of the instructional process.
- Flexibility – Encourage flexible practices adapted to meet the needs of today's students. Provide faculty who hold a major role and responsibility in the design and development of quality assessment practices with flexible options to assess students.
- Efficiency – Prior learning assessment (PLA) can enhance access to education and training or accelerate a learner's progress towards a desired degree or other goal.
- Accessibility – Access is the key element. Every effort will be made to meet the needs of all learners through flexible assessment practice.

As with all other educational practices, the responsibility for ensuring quality prior learning assessment practices rests with the colleges. It is hoped that this document will foster consistency and quality across the system.

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.