

# USHE Prior Learning Assessment

## Quality Standards and Best Practices Handbook

### PURPOSE

The Utah Board of Higher Education wants to provide students with more options for demonstrating college-level learning from their previous educational, work, or life experiences in order to help them complete their degree requirements as quickly as possible. Prior learning assessments can save students time and money as they work on their degrees. There is a strong correlation between credit for prior learning and increased completion rates, and prior learning assessment (PLA) can be an important tool for closing equity gaps. For example, a national study of more than 230,000 adult students at 72 colleges and universities found that 49% of students who received credit for prior learning completed a degree or certificate compared to only 27% of their peers (<https://www.cael.org/pla-impact>). Easing the process by which students earn credit for prior learning is also beneficial to institutions, as it often pays for itself in increased retention. A recent WICHE/CAEL study found that students who earn PLA credit end up taking 17 more course credits at the institution that granted it than do students without PLA. (<https://www.cael.org/hubfs/PLA%20Boost%20Report%20CAEL%20WICHE%20-%20October%202020.pdf>) Streamlining the processes for students to earn credit for their prior learning becomes especially important as the economy shifts and workers will be required to continually reskill and upskill and will need to do so as quickly and efficiently as possible (<https://www.wiche.edu/key-initiatives/recognition-of-learning/pla-future/>).

UHSE institutions are encouraged to expand the opportunities their students have to demonstrate college-level learning and to earn appropriate credit for it. They should ensure that students know their options, that faculty and key staff (like advisors) are trained on the types of prior learning assessments available for students at their institution, and that institutions consider ways they might expand the kinds of assessments available to students. This guidebook provides suggestions and links to examples from other organizations to help.

Credits earned through prior learning assessments are for demonstrated college-level learning articulated to recognized college courses and programs, as determined by faculty/subject matter experts. It is not credit granted simply based on experience. The assessed learning outcomes must reflect an appropriate breadth, depth, sequencing, and synthesis of learning to demonstrate its relevance to degree programs and its alignment with course content, rigor, and quality.

Undergraduate students must be admitted and enrolled at a USHE institution to be eligible to earn PLA credits. The number of credits earned for prior learning that are awarded by institutions may be limited. All prior learning assessment policies, services, and procedures must comply with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) standards, as well as any specialized or program accreditation guidelines. Some limitations may be imposed by the

residency requirements of the regional and other accrediting bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the student degree plan.

Each institution's chief academic officer or designee is responsible to oversee credit earned through prior learning. Board policy also specifies that a Prior Learning Committee, appointed by the Commissioner, will establish and maintain this quality standards and best practices guidebook for USHE institutions. The committee will review methods of PLA through which institutions provide credit and the total amount of credit for prior learning the institution provides to determine trends, student academic outcomes, and policy efficacy. The committee will also ensure information technology systems will consistently record and track data collected related to prior learning, as well as enable accurate reports.

### **ACCEPTABLE TYPES OF PLA**

Utah Board of Higher Education policy requires institutions to establish policies on credits earned in extra-institutional settings (structured and non-structured) through prior learning assessment and also asks institutions to expand the range of educational opportunities that may be assessed, incorporate them into the credit award system, and remove restrictions to access. The policy defines "Prior Learning" as knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired through formal or informal education outside a traditional academic environment or at the initiative of the individual learner, including through participation in employer training programs, military service, and independent study. It defines "Prior Learning Assessment" as a proven, validated process through which faculty subject matter experts evaluate a student's previously learned competencies in a particular field and grant college credit when appropriate. The process is faculty-driven, although it may sometimes be performed by faculty at other institutions contracted by a national organization such as the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National College Credit Recommendation Service.

The types of prior learning assessments institutions should include are:

- National standardized exams such as Advanced Placement (AP); College-Level Examination Program (CLEP); DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST); and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams.
- Assessments performed by respected national organizations such as the American Council of Education (ACE); the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS); the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL); or other Board-approved postsecondary associations.
- Faculty-determined institutional assessments, including challenge exams; portfolio assessments; or individual performance assessments;
- Program evaluations, completed by an institution, of non-collegiate programs or training courses to recognize proficiencies; and
- Locally evaluated industry and workplace credit.

Recognized Standardized Exams—Advanced Placement (AP); College-Level Examination Program (CLEP); DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST); and International Baccalaureate (IB): USHE Faculty Major Committees meet to make recommendations on the minimum

scores/maximum credits and course equivalencies for which students may receive the credit; those recommendations are forwarded to the Utah Board of Higher Education for approval. These minimum scores, maximum credits, and course equivalencies are standardized across the USHE institutions and will be retained following transfer to another USHE institution. The approved list is available at: <https://ushe.edu/initiatives/prior-learning-assessment/>

Institutional Course Challenge Exams: Institutional challenge exams are developed by faculty or curriculum teams and administered through campus testing centers or academic departments. Departments determine which courses can be challenged; the minimum standards that must be met for demonstrating adequate mastery of the course learning outcomes, skills, and knowledge; and exit competencies based on those minimum standards. Institutions should clearly identify processes for students to prepare for the assessment, for example, by consulting with a designated faculty member in the department to discuss course content and the feasibility of taking the course challenge exam.

Workplace training evaluations Students with workplace education/training and professional experiences may want to be evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE). More information is available through the National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training, <https://www.acenet.edu/national-guide/Pages/default.aspx>. Institutions should also consider developing assessments for workplace experience through partnerships with local employers, where appropriate, and should identify when professional licensure standards can equate to course credit in particular programs.

Credit for current and former military personnel: Upon student request, USHE institutions will provide credit for current and former military personnel based on a review of recommendations from a Board-approved postsecondary association to include the American Council on Education and other sources as deemed appropriate by the institution. To receive credit under this provision, current and former military personnel must meet with an academic advisor to discuss applicability of credit to program requirements, possible financial aid implications, and other factors that may impact attainment of the student's educational goals, such as competencies that are transferable to a course of study.

Representatives from USHE institutions who have responsibility for veterans' services shall meet at least annually to review institutional policies and practices relative to awarding credit for current and former military personnel with the goal of maintaining consistent system-wide practices for evaluating and awarding credit.

#### Portfolio Assessments or Individualized Prior Learning Assessment Options:

Some students may have unusual experiences that do not neatly map to existing assessments of prior learning. Portfolio assessments provide them with an opportunity to request course credit for knowledge and skills as displayed in a portfolio package of samples of their work related to the specific skills, theoretical background, and content knowledge of a particular course or courses.

It is important for institutions to develop processes for students to petition for and receive credit for those experiences where appropriate. Ideally, institutions will have designated advisors or mentors who can work with the student wanting to petition for credit, to help them examine their previous learning experiences, identify their college-level knowledge, and determine if that knowledge fits within their degree plan. Next, the student should work with a faculty member, department chair, or dean to determine whether a portfolio or other type of individualized prior learning assessment is suitable for demonstrating content mastery for particular courses. The student prepares documentation of college-level knowledge, with feedback from the advisor or mentor. The documentation is then reviewed by department faculty or by a college-wide prior learning assessment committee which awards and posts credits for prior learning. Portfolio assessments and the development and scoring of challenge exams can be labor intensive; institutional policies should address faculty workload and compensation.

Institutions might find it helpful to look at models from other institutions when developing their process. A few examples:

Empire State College has created a guidebook explaining to students how they can petition for individualized prior learning assessments when assessments for their particular configuration of learning and skills are not already available. The guidebook walks students through the different types of PLA available, how to document previous learning, and provides forms and worksheets for them to use. Details are available at: <https://www.esc.edu/media/academic-affairs/ocar/2013-14/iPLA-2013-2014.pdf>

The University of North Georgia stipulates that students cannot request portfolio assessments for courses which already have AP/CLEP or other assessment options in place. In addition to preparing the portfolio, students are required to write a critical self-assessment of how their experience equates to college-level learning. See: <https://ung.edu/veteran-adult-learners/uploads/files/PLA-Student-Handbook.pdf>

## **TRAINING**

Institutions' chief academic officers and chief student affairs officers are responsible for communicating PLA methods, standards, costs, transcription requirements, and processes to faculty, advisors, registrars, bursars, and other support staff. Institutions should train faculty and advisors on PLA processes as well as on designing and implementing portfolio-specific prior learning assessments. For examples of training or guidelines for faculty and staff at other institutions, see:

[https://www.achievingthedream.org/sites/default/files/resources/atd\\_nrc\\_pla\\_handbook.pdf](https://www.achievingthedream.org/sites/default/files/resources/atd_nrc_pla_handbook.pdf);  
<https://eagle.northwestu.edu/academics/office-of-the-provost/files/2018/01/Prior-Learning-Assessment-Handbook.pdf>.

ACE recommendations for institutional best practices are available here:

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Charting-Institutional-Practice-for-Sustainability.pdf>

## MARKETING, OUTREACH, COMMUNICATIONS WITH STUDENTS, AND ADVISING

USHE encourages the institutions to make PLA information hard-to-miss and welcoming to students from a variety of backgrounds. Where students learn about PLA will make a significant difference in whether they know about and take advantage of the options available to them. They should not have to seek out information but should receive frequent invitations to participate in the institution's PLA opportunities. How the process is presented is also important, as it can either be intimidating (i.e., "you have to prove yourself") or inviting ("the college has provided multiple opportunities to recognize the knowledge and skills that you already have").

Board policy requires institutions to inform students of opportunities to earn college credit via PLA through institutional websites, through the Utah Transfer Guide, and to provide, at minimum, the following information:

- Accepted forms of prior learning assessments and how students can access them;
- How credit is awarded for prior learning;
- Potential effects on financial aid;
- Transferability of credit for prior learning among institutions;
- How prior learning is transcribed; and
- Costs associated with PLA and earned credit.

Outreach should occur through:

A centralized PLA web page: USHE asks each college and university to create a central landing page on the institutional website to provide information on all available PLA options on the campus. Those landing pages should be easy for students to find—such as on an Admissions page—since students may not know to look for information about PLA by looking under “transfer” or “assessment,” which is often where PLA information is housed. PLA pages should centralize all information in one spot so students do not have to search out separate pages for each form of PLA and they should inform students of things like departmental challenge exams, portfolio options, pathways for veterans, and how to earn credit for work-based learning.

Student PLA Handbooks or Guidelines should also be available through the PLA Webpage to help walk students through the details, process, and cost of different PLA options, and should include information on how students might petition for credit that is not covered in existing institutional assessments. Examples of student handbooks or manuals can be found at Lone Star College [http://plaportal.org/Assets/PLA-PORTAL/LSC\\_PLAResourceManual.pdf](http://plaportal.org/Assets/PLA-PORTAL/LSC_PLAResourceManual.pdf); University of North Georgia <https://ung.edu/veteran-adult-learners/uploads/files/PLA-Student-Handbook.pdf>; and Empire State College <https://www.esc.edu/media/academic-affairs/ocar/2013-14/iPLA-2013-2014.pdf>; Wenatchee Valley College [https://wvc.edu/students/access/registration/prior-learning-assessment/media/documents/WVC\\_PLA\\_Handbook\\_revAug2016.pdf](https://wvc.edu/students/access/registration/prior-learning-assessment/media/documents/WVC_PLA_Handbook_revAug2016.pdf); University of

Mary [https://www.umary.edu/\\_resources/pdfs/Prior-Learning-Handbook\\_2016.pdf](https://www.umary.edu/_resources/pdfs/Prior-Learning-Handbook_2016.pdf);  
University of Alaska Fairbanks <https://www.uaf.edu/advising/files/cpl/CPL-Handbook-2016.pdf>

Advising, including during

- Orientation meetings;
- Individualized meetings with advisors to discuss major pathways and progress toward graduation;
- Informational meetings about particular majors;
- Online advising or degree planning tools.

Advisors should walk students through a formal degree audit to see if the credit for prior learning is relevant to their proposed degree.

Note: state law requires advisors to discuss the applicability of credit to program requirements, possible financial aid implications, and other factors that may impact attainment of the student's educational goals, such as competencies that are transferable to a course of study for current and former military personnel. This should be a best practice for all students.

Also note: Pursuant to Utah Code 53B-16-107, all USHE institutions shall provide written notification to each student applying for admission that the student is required to meet with a college advisor in order to receive credit for military service and training.

The Utah Transfer Guide, where students can receive information on how much credit they can earn, how it articulates to classes, and how it applies to major pathways.

We strongly encourage institutions to also consider:

Marketing PLA options to students: Institutions should also make an effort to reach out directly to students to inform them of their PLA options. This can happen through:

- Institutional marketing materials, especially those aimed at adults
- Recruiting events
- Admissions letters

Information should be available in languages other than English where appropriate.

## **COSTS, TRANSCRIPTING, AND REPORTING OF CREDITS EARNED THROUGH PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENTS**

### **Cost**

Prior learning assessment fees must be transparent and reflect only the operational cost of administering a PLA program. Fees may not be based on the number of credits awarded.

### **Transcripting credits**

Board policy says that if a student successfully demonstrates college-level learning, institutions shall award credit and transcript it as credit for prior learning. Once recorded on a Utah System of Higher Education transcript, credit earned for prior learning is transferable within USHE on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through regular study at the awarding institution. Institutions are not obligated to assess prior learning that would likely articulate with courses they do not offer and do not have to award credit if it duplicates credit students have already earned.

Credit earned through prior learning will apply toward appropriate general education, degree, or certificate requirements. Upon transfer within the USHE, a student may present a transcript from a USHE institution to a receiving USHE institution to determine the applicability of credit to the student's chosen major. The receiving institution shall evaluate the credit to be transferred pursuant to board policy. This information should also be marked in the Utah Transfer Guide where possible.

### **Annual reporting**

Credits awarded: The state law on credit for prior learning requires each institution to annually report to the Board of Higher Education on (a) each form of prior learning assessment for which the institution provides credit for prior learning; and (b) the total amount of credit for prior learning the institution provides to students. We ask that institutions disaggregate those data to identify which students are successfully accessing PLA opportunities and which students are being left behind. Institutions are required to specify credits awarded to current and former military personnel as part of those annual reports.

Institutional PLA implementation: In 2019, institutions submitted plans for communications about PLA, for faculty and staff training, and for increasing student access to credit for prior learning. Institutions should provide an update to those implementation plans, including links to PLA landing pages on institutional websites, as part of their annual reports.