

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Prior Learning Assessment Policy

Introduction

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) refers to the process of recognizing, evaluating, and awarding credit for college-level learning acquired outside the confines of university-sponsored instruction. Most commonly associated with adult learning experiences, PLA provides a powerful entrée into higher education for adult students and an academically rigorous set of practices for higher education institutions to follow in determining when credit has been earned. Research on PLA reveals higher levels of degree attainment for students who earn PLA credit, as well as savings in both time and money. Additionally, these students tend to register for and earn more course credits at their institutions, perhaps as a result of greater rates of persistence. These positive outcomes hold regardless of racial, gender, socioeconomic, or other demographic factors and have the potential to close the equity gap for traditionally underrepresented populations.

The policy statements below adhere to the guidelines of University of Wisconsin System policy (SYS 135, Sec D & Appendix A) as well as principles established by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and in the “Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit” published by the American Council on Education (ACE), American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

Definitions

For the purposes of this policy, “college-level learning” is understood to be learning that combines theoretical and practical understanding of a topic and results in outcomes analogous to subject matter taught at UWM. Learning that does not have an analogue at UWM will be excluded from recognition through PLA.

PLA covers several distinct options for assessing learning. The following will be covered in more detail in the sections below, as they possess unique characteristics:

- National Testing Services
- Military Courses and Occupations
- Pre-evaluated, Non-Collegiate Learning Experiences
- Challenge Exams
- Portfolios/Individualized Assessment

In order to be awarded PLA credit, students must be admitted to a degree program at UWM.

National Testing Services

Standardized exams offered by national testing services represent one way for students to demonstrate learning. Examples of these exams include:

- Advanced Placement (AP)
- International Baccalaureate (IB)
- Project Lead the Way (PLTW)
- College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- DSST

Credit for AP & IB is awarded to high school students who complete coursework and pass exams aligned with college-level content. PLTW provides coursework and examinations in STEM subjects and, pending departmental review of the exams, may be considered for college-level credit as well. Similarly, CLEP and DSST offer students an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of college-level subjects similar to what would be learned in a comparable college course. Upon receipt of an official score report, UWM, in keeping with the principles of accommodation outlined in SYS 135 and Board of Regents policies, will award college credit for passing scores obtained on the exams above. Academic departments determine course equivalencies and, in some cases, cut-off scores for credit. See the table below for a summary of required scores and links to access equivalency information.

Exam	Minimum Score	Equivalency Information
AP	3 (higher score may be required for equivalent course credit)	https://uwm.edu/onestop/wp-content/uploads/sites/82/2017/07/UW-AP.pdf
IB	4 for Higher Level Exams 5 for Standard Level Exams	https://uwm.edu/onestop/wp-content/uploads/sites/82/2017/07/UW-IB.pdf.pdf
PLTW	Cut-off scores to be determined by academic unit.	No policy document currently published.
CLEP	50 (Some subjects require B-equivalent scores—see link.)	https://uwm.edu/registrar/external-services/testing-center/tests-administered/college-level-exam-program-clep/
DSST	400 (C-equivalent score)	No policy document currently published. See note below.

[NOTE: Justification for recognizing DSST comes from its specific referral in SYS-135 as a viable PLA option. Presently, over half (7 of 13) of UW universities accept DSST exams. Like AP and CLEP, DSST carries ACE recommendations for credit and offers tests in common subjects taught in college classrooms. These exams are popular among military personnel, frequently appear on Joint Service Transcripts, and would further enhance our commitment to serving military-connected students. Therefore, this policy strongly recommends awarding credit for DSST exams. Departmental review is needed to determine specific equivalencies.]

Military Courses and Occupations

Learning acquired during service in the armed forces is documented in the form of Joint Services Transcripts (JST) and Community College of the Air Force (CCAF) transcripts. Official copies of these documents are required for credit to be recognized. The JST is used by the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, National Guard, and Coast Guard and contains credit recommendations from ACE. As a regionally accredited college, the CCAF serves current and former members of the Air Force. Per Wisconsin statute 36.31(4), UWM will transfer all credit identified by ACE as lower-division associate/baccalaureate or upper-division baccalaureate. Although rare, graduate credit may be considered on a case-by-case basis for the specific program to which the student is admitted. Vocational credit does not transfer. Deductions to ACE credit recommendations will be made as appropriate to avoid awarding duplicate credit. Based on the content of the learning, faculty review may be sought to determine whether and how this credit can be applied to program requirements. No limit is placed on how many credits can be transferred, in compliance with the statute.

Pre-evaluated, Non-Collegiate Learning Experiences

UW System Administration policy governing PLA recognizes the validity of ACE evaluations for civilian learning as well: “Each UW System institution may provide opportunities for an admitted student to demonstrate college-level learning through the review of previously completed military and non-military training reviewed by [ACE].” ACE has evaluated hundreds of learning experiences from employers, government agencies, private course vendors, licensing bodies, and more. Using the same rigorous, faculty-informed evaluation process as that for military training, ACE’s CREDIT program is an industry standard in recognizing college-equivalent learning from non-collegiate experiences.

Students who have completed an ACE-evaluated course or exam may submit an official ACE Registry Transcript for evaluation, preferably during the admissions process. The UWM Registrar’s Office will perform an initial review for the presence of college-level learning according to the definition above. Items considered college-level will be forwarded to appropriate academic departments for evaluation and credit awarded based on departmental recommendations. Note that faculty may consider a student’s major in determining credit awards, exercising greater latitude where appropriate for students majoring in subjects other than the evaluating department’s. The student’s learning will be identified on the transcript as ACE credit and recognized as elective or course credit based on faculty review.

The National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), a product of the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York, provides an additional resource. Because the NCCRS does not provide transcripts, its recommendations may be leveraged but will require independent documentation from the student to provide proof of completion. Based on initial review by the Registrar’s Office and subsequent faculty evaluation, credit may be posted to the student’s record as PLA credit.

Departmental Challenge Exams

Challenge exams are a widely practiced assessment mechanism for testing student knowledge as it pertains to an identified course. Academic units may design such examinations and provide them for students who profess knowledge and/or skill equivalent to specific course outcomes. Departments may compose such exams upon student request or determine courses in advance for which exams would be most appropriate. A list of available challenge exams should be made public. The Registrar’s Office will work with colleges and schools to compile a comprehensive list of challenge exams.

Portfolios

Portfolio submissions consist of evidence provided by students proving that they have acquired learning through prior personal or professional experience suitable for college credit award. The exact contents of a portfolio will differ depending on the nature of the learning as well as the course/credit being pursued. A typical portfolio might consist of a learning narrative, resume, job description, letters of validation, certificates, licenses, artifacts associated with identified learning outcomes, and/or other documentation. Skill demonstrations may also be requested and assessed to determine whether equivalent, college-level learning has been acquired.

Students interested in completing a portfolio should begin by identifying a course that matches the learning they have previously achieved. The portfolio will then provide a platform for documentation that aligns the student’s learning with that course’s outcomes. Colleges/schools and departments should design a process to instruct students in how to put together a portfolio and the requirements needed to earn credits but refrain from providing any form of instruction. This process may include creation of a credit-bearing course in portfolio preparation, a common practice and one used by other

UW schools. Individualized coaching from academic advisors and/or faculty may also be used. Professional development in PLA best practices should be sought by UWM staff and faculty to ensure students are advised appropriately. Credit should never be guaranteed or promised but awarded based on the assessment of the student's evidence of learning. Record should be kept of submissions and the results. Where credit is earned, results should be communicated to the Transfer Team in the Registrar's Office.

In designing a portfolio submission process, academic units are advised to adhere to CAEL's 10 Quality Standards:

1. Credit or competencies are awarded only for evidence of learning, not for experience or time spent.
2. Assessment is integral to learning because it leads to and enables future learning.
3. Assessment is based on criteria for outcomes that are clearly articulated and shared among constituencies.
4. The determination of credit awards and competency levels are made by appropriate subject matter and credentialing experts.
5. Assessment advances the broader purpose of access and equity for diverse individuals and groups to support their success.
6. Institutions proactively provide guidance and support for learners' full engagement in the assessment process.
7. Assessment policies and procedures are the result of inclusive deliberation and are shared with all constituencies.
8. Fees charged for assessment are based on the services performed in the process rather than the credit awarded.
9. All practitioners involved in the assessment process pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs are regularly monitored, evaluated, and revised to respond to institutional and learner needs.

Ordinarily, a limit of 35% of the total credits needed for an undergraduate degree is placed on what can be earned via portfolio, challenge exam, and/or ACE or NCCRS recommendation (42 credits in a 120-credit degree). Exceptions to this limit must be approved by appropriate department chairs and college/school deans. Academic residency requirements for the student's major must be met regardless of the amount of PLA credits or other transfer credits applied to the degree.

For PLA at the graduate level, credits awarded may not exceed transfer credit limits. Programs should specify courses for which PLA credit may and may not be granted.

Non-Credit to Credit Coursework

Students who have completed non-credit bearing coursework or learning pathways in the School of Continuing Education (SCE), TechEd Frontiers (TEF), or other academic unit may be able to convert their learning experiences to college credit based on parallels between the completed classes and credit-bearing courses at UWM. Academic departments develop crosswalks between non-credit and credit coursework, with a focus on parallel learning outcomes and measures of learning to be used in determining credit worthiness. Academic units should coordinate with SCE and TEF administrators and devise a process for students allowing them to petition for credit for the learning from their non-credit-bearing education experiences. This process may follow guidelines similar to that for portfolio submission (the work of individual learners is assessed by the department, for a fee), or it may take the

form of a department approving the course/learning pathway such that all learners who complete the pathway are eligible for credit if they enroll at UWM. The second option is similar to the process for approving military or other ACE-generated credit. Crucial to this process should be verification that learning has occurred through some form of assessment.

Transcription

Per UW System policy, PLA credit will be posted on the student's transcript and appear above transferred coursework. Credit will be identified with a matching UWM course or as elective credit, whichever is most appropriate for the learning. Military learning is entered as course credit for the purpose of transcription only. No grades are entered for credit granted through PLA. PLA credit is considered transfer credit and may not be used for the purpose of establishing academic residency or enrollment status. PLA credit that duplicates prior, completed coursework will not be transcribed.

Portfolio and other internally assessed PLA credit awarded by one UW System institution must be accepted in transfer by another UW university per SYS 135. UWM will transfer and apply internally assessed credit as identified on the sending UW institution's transcript. Credit assigned a specific course equivalency, for instance, will transfer identically as the course would. PLA credit from institutions outside the UW System is not accepted in transfer. For UWM to recognize learning transcribed as PLA credit by a sending institution outside the UW System, a student would need to pursue a similar, approved PLA option within UWM, if available. PLA credit earned in completion of an associate degree from a college in the Wisconsin Technical College System may transfer within the terms of a specific program-to-program articulation agreement.

Fees

PLA's strength lies in its ability to assist students in accessing a college education efficiently and inexpensively. Recognizing learning previously acquired allows students to avoid redundant coursework, advance to higher-level content more quickly, and progress to degree more affordably. Fees, therefore, should be set according to these goals and according to institutional best practices.

According to CAEL standards, charges for PLA should not be based on whether credit is awarded nor strictly on the amount of credit, but on the administrative costs of assessment itself. (See CAEL Quality Standard #8 above.) Academic units should set fees well below the cost of tuition. One best practice is to set charges as a percentage of tuition. For example, fees set at 10%-20% the cost of tuition would be in line with those at other UW universities. For schools that utilize a portfolio preparation course, charges for PLA may be waived entirely, with tuition for the course used to cover the costs of assessment. Challenge exams, which are typically more easily administered, would likely incur a lower cost than portfolio submissions. Fees may be used to compensate faculty assessors as well as cover administrative expenses. Students should be charged at the time of submission. Fees may not be waived nor refunded for unsuccessful petitions.

No fees are charged to post national testing, military, or pre-evaluated credit.

Appeals

Students may always request a reevaluation of their transfer credits. The same is true of military credit recognition, national testing options, or pre-evaluations. No formal appeal process is necessary. Depending on factors such as the recency of the last evaluation and changes in course or exam content, a new faculty review may be required.

For portfolio assessments, an appeal process should be developed by the appropriate academic unit that allows students to challenge assessment results. No additional evidence of learning may be submitted by the student. The appeal should be based solely on the fairness of the process and subsequent assessment. Appeals should be directed to department chairs or academic deans, as appropriate, and may be resolved in a number of ways, including upholding the original result, allowing an amended submission, overturning and revising the initial assessment, ordering a second assessment, or other determination.

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