

PLA Factsheet

1. What is prior learning assessment (PLA)?

No doubt you've had a lot of education beyond the walls of a classroom. Prior learning is learning gained outside the college classroom in a variety of settings and through formal and non-formal means, including:

- military training/service
- examinations: national exams such as AP, IB, CLEP, DSST, Excelsior College Exams, and departmental examinations
- workforce/employment training
- professional certifications
- independent study
- community service
- travel
- hobbies
- civic activities
- volunteer service

It may be equivalent to college-level skills and knowledge and warrant academic credit.

Many colleges evaluate the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom for college credit. This evaluation is called **prior learning assessment (PLA)**, but can also be called experiential learning or credit for prior learning.

2. What are the benefits of PLA?

Earning college credit through PLA can help you:

- **Save time:** It can shorten your time to earn a college degree or other postsecondary credential.
- **Save money:** Less time to degree can mean lower tuition costs.
- **Accelerate your academic progress:** You'll be able to take higher level courses sooner than you otherwise would.
- **Gain understanding:** You can better grasp the many different ways you learn and how you can apply that learning throughout your life, whether in jobs, the community, or additional schooling.
- **Develop your resume:** In addition to helping you get your college degree, you can demonstrate to employers that your prior learning adds value to your skill set.

3. What are some ways to demonstrate prior learning?

- Workforce training: Formal evaluation of workplace training by the college or university you plan to attend, or by the American Council on Education (ACE). The [National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training](#) can show you whether your workplace training has been evaluated for credit by ACE.
- Military training: Many colleges and universities recognize transcripts from the service branches and use ACE's credit recommendations for military training and occupations to determine transfer credit. Check out ACE's [Military Guide Online](#) for a detailed list of college credit recommendations for military training.
- Certifications: Many colleges and universities recognize national certifications that have been developed to meet industry/professional standards and award college credit for students holding these certifications. Use the VCN search tool to determine if your certifications have ACE credit recommendations.
- Exams: National examinations, such as CLEP, DSST, and Excelsior can also result in college credit (see FAQ #1 above). Some colleges and universities have developed their own exams as another PLA option.
- Portfolio Assessment: In a portfolio, you document the college-level learning you have gained through work and other experiences. You might want to pursue this option if you don't have formal workplace training or professional certifications. Faculty experts evaluate the portfolio and determine the amount of college credit you would earn. As with other prior learning assessment methods, each college develops its own process.

4. What *isn't* PLA?

PLA awards credit for learning, not credit just for your experience. What is being evaluated for college credit is not your learning experience, but the knowledge you acquired and how that knowledge translates into specific college-level courses.

5. How do different colleges handle PLA?

Individual colleges and universities assess learning and award credit differently. Look for their "transfer of credit" or "credit for prior learning" policies on the web site or course catalog of the college or university you're interested in attending. Their procedures should be clearly stated. A few things to look for:

- Credit maximum: Different institutions have different policies on the amount of college credit that they will award based on prior learning.

- Transferability: Not all colleges and universities accept other institutions' evaluation of prior learning. If College A awarded you 9 credit hours based on your military training and professional certifications and you decide to transfer to College B, that does not mean College B will recognize those 9 credit hours.
- Credit by Exam: Find out which exams your institution recognizes for credit. What are the equivalent courses for each exam? What is the maximum number of credits that can be granted? Are there any conditions or prerequisites to earn credit through exam?

Also, keep in mind that colleges use different assessment methods to evaluate prior learning. For example, some colleges may use several options, such as “credit by exams” and ACE credit recommendations for military and workforce training, while others use portfolio assessment. Methods may also vary according to the degree program.

Further, some colleges and universities will award credit for prior learning, while others will waive course requirements. For those that award credit, it might be applied in different ways: sometimes it can be used for elective credit, or to meet a general education requirement, or a requirement for a specific major.

6. What should I look for and what should I avoid?

Unfortunately, there are some unscrupulous companies and organizations that advertise “college credit for life experience” that don’t deliver on their promises. A few things to watch for as you’re looking at different ways to earn credit for your prior learning:

- Be skeptical of big promises: If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. Colleges and universities with recognized PLA programs do not award credit for experience alone. You must demonstrate that your experience translates into specific college courses or competencies.
- Accreditation: When selecting a college or university, make sure it is accredited by [an accrediting agency that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education](#). Watch out for online “diploma mills,” which are unaccredited institutions that offer degrees that are not recognized or accepted by employers and other colleges and universities. A sign that you might be dealing with a diploma mill is if it awards unlimited credit for prior learning (accredited colleges and universities typically state very clearly in their policy the maximum number of PLA credits and transfer credits they will accept). Further, an accredited institution will accept prior learning credits only if they are accompanied by thorough documentation and demonstration of competency. Finally, diploma mills will often require large payments upfront. It’s a good idea to compare any program you find to that of a recognized PLA program at an accredited college or university and make sure they require the same rigorous review.

- Transparency: Look on the web site or course catalog for clearly stated policies regarding PLA acceptance.
- Make contact: Find a contact person – such as an academic advisor, admissions counselor, or prior learning coordinator – at the institution to talk to directly about your prior learning and how it might be applied toward college credit.

7. How do I find a PLA program?

- If you have a college or university in mind, talk to the institution's academic advisor or admissions counselor and ask what type of prior learning assessment they accept (Credit by Exam, ACE credit recommendations, military training, etc.).
- Check out [ACE's Lifelong Learning Resource Center](#). It can help you determine whether you have training or examinations that carry ACE credit recommendations and how to go about getting your transcripts. It can also help you find institutions that recognize ACE credit recommendations.
- Contact [Learning Counts](#), a program of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning that helps adult learners assess their prior learning through portfolio evaluation.