

GRAND RAPIDS COMMUNITY
COLLEGE

PRIOR LEARNING
ASSESSMENT

PLA

STUDENT GUIDE

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WHAT IS PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

Adults who are returning to a learning environment often possess skills and knowledge gained through life experiences. For example, some adults have obtained skills while in the military, through hobbies, friends, television, or books. Colleges not only respect the various learning that adults have acquired, but also award college credit for it when it proves to be similar to what is taught in the classroom. Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) helps adults to receive credit for learning they may have acquired through life experiences. PLA is a process of defining, documenting, measuring, evaluating, and granting credit for learning acquired through various experiences. (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000)

WHAT METHODS ARE AVAILABLE TO TRANSLATE LEARNING INTO COLLEGE CREDIT?

PLA credits is a last resort and can be awarded only if there is no existing method for obtaining college credits.

Below is a list of the methods other than PLA for which students can earn college credits. More information on these opportunities for credit can be found at <https://www.grcc.edu/students-resources/academic-advising-transfer-center/transfer-center/transfer>. The advising center can be contacted for more information.

Examinations

1. Advanced Placement Program (AP)
2. College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
3. DANTES Examination Program
4. SCC Proficiency Examinations
5. Challenge Examinations

Program Evaluations

1. Articulation Agreements
2. American Council on Education Military Evaluations
3. American Council on Education College Credit Recommendation Services
4. NOTE: contact the registrar's office for more information

Transfer Credit

1. Credit from other universities
2. Credit for dual enrollment high school programs

WHO DO I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?

For information about any transfer credit process other than PLA, contact the GRCC advisement center. Contact information can be found on the GRCC website.

For information regarding only the PLA process, contact the PLA Coordinator below.

Chris Schell, Assistant Professor
Prior Learning Assessment Coordinator
Email: christopherschell@gccc.edu
Call (616) 234-3339

STUDENT SECTION

Introduction to what PLA is all about

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is an academic process of identifying, documenting, and awarding college credit for a student's previous knowledge and skills gained from prior learning. Assessment of prior learning experiences that occur outside the traditional borders of a college should verify that the same academic outcomes are found when compared to college-level courses. These experiences could occur through employment, volunteer work or personal development.

With appropriate portfolio documentation college students may request college credit for their alternative learning experiences. The portfolio serves as the tool to document these experiences. Credits earned through PLA may help students to reduce the amount of in-class time required to earn a degree. Students must analyze past experiences and determine which Grand Rapids Community College course(s) matches their prior learning. This task will take commitment to succeed in earning credit hours through this methodology. PLA does not replace transfer academic credit that has been received in other institutions.

To receive college credit students must meet the following criteria:

- Learning must have taken place prior to the portfolio submittal.
- Students must document, to the appropriate faculty assessor, that the knowledge they possess matches the Course Learning Outcomes of the course for which they are requesting college credit. The faculty assessor then matches learned competencies to specific Course Learning Outcomes.
- PLA cannot replace an existing method of obtaining credit(s) at the college, such as College Level Examination Program (CLEP), Challenge Examinations, DANTES, & Advanced Placement Programs.
- All PLA portfolios must be completed and submitted three months prior to planned graduation.

Important Things to Know

1. Because PLA credit may not be accepted by transfer institutions, it is the students' responsibility to determine transfer eligibility of PLA credits.
2. Prior learning credit does not meet the residency 15 hours required by GRCC and does not qualify for financial aid.
3. Prior learning portfolio assessment receives credit, but no letter grade. Therefore, PLA credit is not included in GPA.
4. Students are not eligible for prior learning assessment if they have failed the course for which they are seeking credit.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF PORTFOLIO

During the PLA process the portfolio may be viewed by office staff and faculty assessor for academic purposes only. If a student signs a PLA Information Release form, specified parts of the portfolio may be used by students, teachers, or in the classroom for educational purposes only. However, all personally identifiable or proprietary information will be removed from the portfolio. The student must not include in the portfolio any material that may violate the school or the legal and moral right to privacy of any individual or organization.

PORTFOLIO PROCESS

If desired, the student can schedule a meeting with the PLA Coordinator to discuss PLA eligibility and the process. The meeting may be held online, over the phone, or in person on the main GRCC campus.

1. Student identifies the general discipline and course for which they feel their learning is worthy of college credit. Course catalog can be found by clicking on the Course Descriptions button found online at <https://catalog.grcc.edu/>.
2. Student completes the PLA Pre-Assessment form and forwards it to the PLA Coordinator. The pre-assessment is used by GRCC to help guide the student to courses (if any) they might consider applying for credit under the PLA process. A link to the pre-assessment form can be found at <https://www.grcc.edu/students-resources/academic-testing-services/prior-learning-assessment-process>.
3. After receiving the list of courses to consider, the student reviews the Course Learning Objectives for courses they are considering for PLA credit, and determines whether their previous learning meets those course objectives. To find the course objectives:
 - a Go to <https://catalog.grcc.edu/>.
 - b Click on the “Course Descriptions” button.
 - c In the upper right-hand corner, use the pull down menu to change from the course catalog to the GRCC Curriculum Database
 - d Search for the course of interest.
 - e Click on the course in the search results and scroll down to find the Course Learning Outcomes.
4. Portfolio completion. Once the student determines they are going to pursue the PLA process they should complete the portfolio (ONE FOR EACH COURSE) and all of the forms included inside it. A link to the portfolio can be found at <https://www.grcc.edu/students-resources/academic-testing-services/prior-learning-assessment-process>.
5. Forward the Portfolio and the following, completed forms to the PLA Coordinator.
 - a Prior Learning Assessment Information Release Form
 - b Request for Prior Learning Portfolio Evaluation Form

6. PLA arranges for a qualified faculty member to do the assessment. Faculty assessment may take four to six weeks. After the assessment is complete, the PLA Coordinator will inform the student of the assessment results. If the assessment results in credit being granted, the PLA Coordinator will work with the registrar to have the course credit appear on the student's transcript. Final decision for credit(s) awarded rests with the assessor.

PORTFOLIO TIPS: EVIDENCE OF COLLEGE-LEVEL LEARNING

The portfolio must be typed, organized, grammatically correct, and complete. The pages need to be numbered and include references to appendices. Please keep in mind that the portfolio must have a professional appearance. Students should use the portfolio template to structure their portfolio.

What you need to show?

The portfolio is used to provide "evidence" that life experiences have allowed the student to master the Course Learning Objectives as though they had taken the class. It is up to the student to prove to the assessor that they have theoretical and practical understanding of the subject matter; simply providing documentation of hours of experience is insufficient.

The case presented in the portfolio should provide the faculty assessor documentation which exemplifies the previously learned skills coincides with the Course Learning Outcomes for which they are requesting credit(s). This process requires a detailed narrative with a supporting appendix. The supporting appendix may include employer letters and/or certificates.

Examples of Necessary Evidence

Student(s) should be prepared to authenticate all submitted evidence.

1. Post-secondary schools licensed but not accredited academically which might include business or theological institutions.
 - Transcripts-*must be official*
 - Record of assignments
 - Number of hours on assignments, in class, or clinical/practicum
 - Evidence of successful completion
 - Diplomas
2. In-service training, company or professional courses, workshops, or conferences.
3. Continuing education courses supporting evidence:
 - Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Note: CEUs do not equate to credit
4. Work experience/testimonials from third parties. These must be original and include dates, credentials of author, and signature on letterhead.
5. Career Evidence:
 - Job description

- Letters of commendation
 - Letters of verifications from superiors, peers, patients
 - Promotion evaluation
 - Evidence of suggestions adopted
 - Licenses
 - Scores of licensing exams
 - Membership in professional or trade organizations
 - Military separation
 - Bill of sales
 - Work samples
 - Certifications
6. Community Services Supporting Evidence:
- Commendations or awards
 - Newspaper and magazine clippings
 - Letter of verification from co-volunteers
 - Hobbies or recreational
7. Other Supporting Evidence
- Books published
 - Pictures painted
 - Music written
 - Programs performed
 - List of books read
 - Patents obtained
 - Countries visited
 - Mementos from countries lived or visited
 - Speeches given
 - Writing samples
 - Audio-visual presentations
 - Proposals written
 - Conversations with experts
 - Courses taught
 - Workshops presented
 - Grants written and funded

How to write a request letter for prior learning testimonials:

This is not a letter of recommendation. The steps for obtaining letters of verification are to ask the person to prepare a written statement verifying your experience. The letter should address how the person has directly observed you obtaining the prior learning. The letter should generally address how your experiences verify the content of the courses in which you are asking to receive prior learning credit. The student will achieve better results if he/she outlines the description of the learning for the person verifying the learning experience. The “verified” must identify their relationship to the student, and provide their qualifications as the verifier of experience. The letter must be written on company, organizational or institutional letterhead. The verifier or person writing the letter should be informed that several people will read the portfolio; and the portfolio is considered public information. A sample letter of a verification request is included to assist the student.

Example Letter: Request for Prior Learning Documentation

June 30, 2009

*Mr. Louis Fenton
Human Resources Manager
Fenton Tool and Die
XXXX Louis Drive
Grand Rapids, MI 49501*

Dear Mr. Fenton:

I am currently a student at Grand Rapids Community College and would like to earn college credit for my previous work experience as a Tool and Die Maker. Consequently, I am in need of your assistance in obtaining documentation for those skills.

I would be most appreciative if you would forward a letter to me addressed to Katie Vander Meer, Prior Learning Assessment Coordinator, Grand Rapids Community College indicating whether I have demonstrated the skills and knowledge in the following areas:

- *Horizontal and Vertical Mills*
- *Surface Grinders*
- *Lathes*
- *EDM Machines*

Thank you in advance for taking time from your busy schedule to honor my request. Please feel free to contact me at (your home phone number) or (your cell phone number or work number) should you have any questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Your First and Last Name

Your Home Address

Your Home Phone

Your Cell Phone or Work Phone Number