Prior Learning

Assessment

Manual
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This Prior Learning Assessment Manual provides information to students and faculty regarding the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process at Northwest University. PLA is a general term used by the University to describe all college-level credit awarded or recognized for learning acquired in non-college settings. The University considers PLA credit by two methods based on whether a recognized organization has assessed the learning or whether Northwest University faculty must individually evaluate the student’s learning. This Manual describes both methods in their own respective chapters.

Chapter 1

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Overview

PLA Background

To obtain a college degree from Northwest University, students must accumulate a required number of credits in many specific areas as determined by the degree requirements of their respective majors. There are four primary methods to obtain these credits:

1. Students may transfer credits into Northwest University that were earned and documented by transcripts from other approved accredited institutions. (The policies addressing this method are explained in the Northwest University Credit Transfer Guide.)

2. Students may take courses at Northwest University itself. (The Academic Catalog describes policies governing this method.)

3. Certified Prior Learning (CPL) is learning from non-college sources which have already been assessed and determined to be college level either by a recognized organization or by NU faculty. This category includes credit for learning verified by exam from the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) and credit for the verified completion of training programs that have been assessed by the American Council on Education (including credit for military training and specialized non-military experiences). CPL credit may also be granted for recognized
learning verified by an earned professional license or credential and for verified completion of specific non-college training that has been assessed by NU faculty as college level.

4. The fourth method addresses learning that has been acquired through non-institutional means titled Credit by Portfolio. This method assesses learning from unevaluated on-the-job training, personal study, and mentored situations.

The concept of Prior Learning Assessment is based upon the acknowledgement that adult learners may have a number of experiences in their past during which they engaged in college-level learning. This learning, to result in college credit, must be verifiable. It must also be understood, retained, and explained by the student. The learning must not duplicate other learning for which the student has already earned credit (such as previous or current college courses). It also must be either learning which has been documented by professionals or knowledgeable individuals in the field or which has been assessed by recognized institutions such as the American Council on Education.

Adult learners continue to engage in collegiate-level learning throughout their careers. The Prior Learning Assessment concept is one that was developed to help these adult college students receive undergraduate college credit for what they have learned in situations outside the college classroom. PLA allows this learning to assist the adult in completing their college degrees.

The PLA Manual is structured to help college and university students understand the concept of PLA and then follow that process. Early parts of the Manual describe programs of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the American Council on Education. The chapters which follow in this Manual not only explain the process for PLA but also provide examples showing how documentation should be prepared.

Since the University grants credit only for courses needed by the student for graduation, the PLA process begins with the student understanding specific degree requirements. This knowledge is based on the Transcript Review Report, provided as part of the admissions process, and is clarified with an Academic Advisor. If the student’s prior learning was acquired through a source that has been previously assessed by an approved organization, the student follows the instructions contained in the Manual’s chapter on Certified Prior Learning. If the student’s knowledge was obtained through means other than a recognized, previously assessed training establishment or source, the
student may submit a Portfolio documenting their learning. Because all credits that make up a degree are a concern for Northwest’s accrediting association (the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities), the Office of the Provost, Office of Extended Education, and faculty are tasked with the responsibility of creating and monitoring the PLA process. Students should understand, therefore, that the process seeks to recognize the maximum number of credits while maintaining credibility within the higher education community.

**Prior Learning Assessment History**

Before preparing or evaluating PLA through either CPL or Portfolio, students and faculty may benefit from a review of the origins of these learning experiences. PLA began over 50 years ago, soon after World War II. The American Council on Education (ACE) began offering recommendations to colleges and universities for college credit awards based upon learning which had taken place in the military services. Thus began the recognition that not all learning occurs in college classrooms.

In the mid-60s, formalized tests for prior learning and assessing credit appeared (e.g., CLEP, DANTES, and Advanced Placement). These tests were an effort to offer additional alternatives to the more diverse field of learners which was coming to include greater numbers of women, racial minorities, and individuals who had left the collegiate classroom years before or who had not started college when they were the traditional college age (18-24 years old).

**The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)**

Northwest University’s accrediting association, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, specifically references the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) when its colleges seek to assess learning that did not occur in college classrooms. CAEL began in 1974 and became the source of encouragement to colleges considering nontraditional forms of higher education. CAEL exhibited considerable interest in the extent and variety of learning that people acquire on their own and the organization dedicated itself to researching methods that would enable educational institutions to conduct *valid, reliable assessments* of learning acquired outside those institutions.
The vision of CAEL is presented on their website:

CAEL pioneers learning strategies for individuals and organizations. We advance lifelong learning in partnership with educational institutions, employers, labor organizations, government, and communities. CAEL works to remove policy and organizational barriers to learning opportunities, identifies and disseminates effective practices, and delivers value-added services.

CAEL is dedicated to making our own workplace a model of lifelong learning, mutual respect, and commitment to our vision.

CAEL works with the educational institutions to develop, to improve, and to evaluate assessment of prior learning and other programs and services on behalf of adult learners. Northwest University has designed its policies and procedures in accordance with CAEL’s guidelines.

**American Council on Education (ACE)**

In addition to CAEL, the American Council on Education (ACE) provides the collegiate community with academic services and resources in adult education. The mission of the ACE is described below.

The American Council on Education (ACE), founded in 1918, is the nation's coordinating higher education association. ACE is dedicated to the belief that equal educational opportunity and a strong higher education system are essential cornerstones of a democratic society. Its approximately 1,800 members include accredited, degree-granting colleges and universities from all sectors of higher education and other education and education-related organizations. ACE is a forum for the discussion of major issues related to higher education and its potential to contribute to the quality of American life.

ACE conducts numerous regional conferences which deal with adult learning and are designed to help colleges guide students in the development of prior learning projects. ACE also publishes several reference books which document previously evaluated professional training. The four-volume set addressing military training programs is used frequently by college registrars. *The National Guide* is similar to military evaluations. It focuses exclusively on corporate and industrial training programs which have been evaluated by college faculty. Credit recommendations are given based upon faculty review of the programs.

The ACE, composed of more than fifteen hundred institutions of higher learning and national and regional education associations, is the major nongovernmental body in the United States concerned
with postsecondary education. A nonprofit, independent organization, the ACE reflects a characteristic of American higher education, a system without national control, comprising a large number of autonomous colleges, universities, and other units. In its voluntary capacity, the ACE convenes leaders of these institutions for cooperative effort to improve educational standards, policies, services, and procedures. The ACE works in the nation's interest to provide leadership on issues of broad consequence to postsecondary education, to represent the academy's interests and purposes, and to coordinate action required to meet objectives.

Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI)

The Program on Non-collegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI) builds on the work of ACE over the last thirty years to provide college recognition for formal military education and training. Since 1945, ACE has evaluated courses conducted by the Armed Forces and has published the results in *The Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services*, a companion publication to *The National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs*. PONSI is a not-for-profit educational advisory service that links learning experiences that take place outside of college classrooms to college degrees.

Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials

Another activity of ACE is the Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials. This organization

- Fosters and operates programs to establish credit equivalencies for extra-institutional learning;
- Operates registries of credit recommendations, which provide a record of an individual's educational accomplishments for which credit is recommended by ACE's evaluation programs;
- Provides an alternative means of achieving a high school credential through the operation of the General Educational Development (GED) Testing Program;
- Provides guidance to postsecondary educational institutions for developing policies and procedures for awarding credit for extra-institutional learning;
• Monitors educational credit and credentialing policies for postsecondary education and educational quality and standards;

• Develops and disseminates statements, definitions, guidelines and standards related to awarding educational credit and credentials;

• Sponsors conferences and workshops pertaining to the learning of adults and recognition of that learning, including external education and institutional policies for awarding credit for extra-institutional learning; to the clarification of the roles of postsecondary education institutions in servicing adult students; and to adult education issues;

• Urges specific action by state and federal governments and postsecondary educational institutions to provide education and training for adults directed at maintaining and enhancing their occupational skills in the face of technological change, developing or providing equal access to education for all adults;

• Stimulates increased inter-sector collaboration among the providers of adult education and training;

• Publishes and disseminates the results of its recommendations and activities in a series of guides, directories, research studies, research briefs, memoranda and statements.

The Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials indicates that it will “continue a tradition of excellence as the pioneer in evaluating extra-institutional learning and in serving many clients including presidents, trustees, academic and staff administrators and faculty members; adult students, educators and trainers from business, labor unions, professional and voluntary associations, and governmental agencies, including the military; test publishers; and department and ministries of education that participate in the GED Testing Program.”

**Differences Between Experiential and Classroom Learning**

If PLA is to evaluate learning which has happened outside the college classroom, then the difference between learning which has formally been obtained in a classroom setting and learning which is evaluated through the Portfolio process is important. Sam Coleman has described the difference as follows.iv

**Information Assimilation (classroom learning)**

1. receiving information (through symbolic sources such as lectures or reading);

2. assimilating and organizing information so that a general principle is understood;
3. applying the general principle in specific areas; and
4. applying the general principle in new circumstances.

**Experiential Learning**

1. acting and observing;
2. understanding the effects of the action in specific instance;
3. understanding the general principle; and
4. applying the general principle in new circumstances.

The most important difference cited by Coleman in the book *Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics and Assessment*, is the source of information. In traditional learning the source is "symbolic"—such as listening to lectures or reading (but note that both are also experiences). In experiential learning the source of information is "acting" or "observing," that is, something the learner does, or watches as somebody else does, rather than something about which the learner heard or read.

**Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)**

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is the granting of college-level credit based on learning that has occurred in non-college settings, including workshops, seminars, self-study, noncredit or unaccredited classes, training programs, and work experiences. For information about this process beyond what is covered in these pages, please refer to CAEL.

Within the PLA process are two means for measuring and ultimately assigning college credit:

- Certified Prior Learning (CPL)
- Credit by Portfolio

**College-Level Learning**

When evaluating either CPL or Credit by Portfolio, faculty will be looking for college-level learning. Lois Lamdin in *Earn College Credit For What You Know* indicates that college-level learning must have the following characteristics:
• be measurable;
• be at a level of achievement defined by the faculty as college equivalent or consistent with the learning of other students engaged in college studies;
• be applicable outside the specific job or context in which it was learned;
• have a knowledge base;
• be reasonably current;
• imply a conceptual or theoretical as well as a practical understanding;
• show some relationship to degree goals and/or lifelong learning goals; and
• not repeat learning for which credit has already been awarded.

These factors are closely followed by the administration and faculty of Northwest University while evaluating student’s prior learning. Students must ensure that each factor is clearly addressed in the presentation of their learning for evaluation.

**Prior Learning Assessment Policies**

The following institutional policies have been developed to insure that the University’s accrediting association’s requirements are satisfied and to ensure that students’ learning is treated consistently. Students with questions about any of these policies should confer with their advisor, or traditional students may contact the Office of the Provost and LEAP students may contact the Office of Extended Education.

1. PLA recognizes that collegiate-level learning will occur outside the college/university classroom and that the institution must have a valid and reliable means of recognizing and evaluating that learning in order to grant credit to matriculated students.

2. PLA credits are assessed only for Northwest University students. Although PLA is discussed prior to enrollment, credits are not awarded until enrollment and not recorded on the transcript until the end of the student’s first successful academic term.

3. PLA may be earned only for documented learning and is not earned based upon experience alone.

4. PLA can only be assessed where a qualified faculty member is available and willing to evaluate the learning proposals.
5. PLA is accomplished on a course-by-course basis through a student-generated proposal for credit. The process includes completion of the appropriate institutional forms. Appropriate documentation is required for learning to be assessed.

6. PLA is limited to 30 semester credits.

7. The guidelines of CAEL are followed except where they might conflict with existing policies of the University.

8. Credit assessment necessitating a faculty content expert requires an assessment fee. No assessment is performed until the fee is paid. No promise of credit is connected to this fee – it is an assessment fee, not a tuition fee.

9. Credit assessed via Certified Prior Learning that has already been conducted by another credit-granting agency does not have an associated fee.

10. Credit assessed via Credit by Portfolio is only an option for students who have been admitted to the LEAP program.

11. Credit is granted that aligns with existing courses offered by an accredited college or university. The student is responsible for referencing the specific course, although the Academic Advisor and Registrar’s Office may be able to assist in the process with resource materials.

12. PLA credit is earned only if approved by a faculty member qualified in the respective discipline. This provision means that some learning acquired by students will not be able to be assessed because the University does not have faculty in the particular discipline.

13. The PLA process is administered for traditional students by the Office of the Provost and for adult students by the Office of Extended Education. The Assistant Provost and/or the Director of Extended Education, in conjunction with the Dean, are responsible for assigning PLA evaluation to the respective faculty members of the University. Some professional PLA proposals will be reviewed by the Assistant Provost or the Director of Extended Education directly, using CAEL and ACE guidelines, ensuring academic integrity of the evaluation process.

14. The University reserves the right to conduct further investigation into a particular area presented for assessment to verify the level of competency possessed by the applicant. This investigation may involve personal interviews with the applicant, conversations with those documenting various experiences, additional documentation, or examination over certain cognitive areas.

15. Certified Prior Learning credits that have been recognized by the University are posted on a student's transcript in the portion at the transcripts heading titled “Transfer Credit Summary.” Each course is recorded individually by listing course prefix, number, course title, credit value, and coded as “CPL.” No grade is earned for CPL credits.
16. Credits by Portfolio are posted in the Transfer Credit Summary section of the student’s transcript by course prefix, number, course title, credit value, and coded as “PORT.” A grade of “P” for passed is recorded.

17. Because each college, in conjunction with its existing policies and respective accrediting associations, determines policies on transfer of course work and on prior learning assessment, students are advised that such credit awarded by this college will probably not transfer to other institutions.

18. Since students do not register for PLA credits, these credits do not apply towards a student’s residency credit requirements, are not specifically assigned to a particular semester, do not apply towards being enrolled for a particular semester, and cannot be submitted for financial aid or other scholarship assistance in a given semester.

19. CLEP or DANTES exams are the preferred method of PLA evaluation when available for the desired subject.

**Prior Learning Assessment Procedures**

The above policies are implemented by a series of procedures which are detailed in this section. The PLA process is owned by the faculty of the University and administered under the Office of the Provost and Office of Extended Education, in conjunction with the student’s advisor and the sponsoring division of the respective course.

1. The student clearly understands his/her degree plan and its requirements, including all transfer credit that has been evaluated and applied. This process requires that official transcripts from all previous college-level work have been received and evaluated.

2. The student and advisor discuss the student’s learning backgrounds and settings to clarify the level and extent of experiences that may provide a foundation for college-level PLA courses.

3. If the appropriate assessment process is Certified Prior Learning, the student completes a request for Certified Prior Learning following the procedures in the appropriate chapter of this manual.

4. If the appropriate assessment process is Credit by Portfolio, the student contacts the Office of Extended Education.

**Standards for Evaluating Prior Learning**

CAEL provides standards for evaluating learning which has taken place outside of the college classroom. Faculty and PLA personnel are familiar with these standards, and students may be
introduced to them through the recommendation of their advisor. The following standards appear in Urban Whitaker’s *Assessing Learning*vi (underlines added for emphasis).

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

**Note:** The following five standards are related to the administrative context in which the assessment and awarding of credit occur.

6. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

**Chapter 2**

**Certified Prior Learning (CPL)**

Certified Prior Learning (CPL) is learning that has been acquired and assessed by accepted institutions and establishments with formal training processes, defined classes and subjects of study, knowledgeable trainers, and documented learning records. Although these organizations are not strictly educational institutions, training of their staff may be an important part of their operations.
These institutions have submitted their training programs for assessment either to recognized organizations such as the American Council of Education (ACE) or directly to Northwest University.

Because the student’s training has already been evaluated by professionals in the respective academic discipline, the Office of the Provost has the primary responsibility of initially approving the credit granting process and subsequently insuring that the process is followed. If the CPL does not necessitate direct assessment by a Northwest faculty, no special assessment fee is charged. If the CPL is not directly certified by ACE, CAEL, or PONSI, an individual student’s learning must be assessed by a Northwest University content expert and is subject to a flat assessment fee. The credits are recorded on the student’s academic transcript under the “Transfer Credit Summary,” do not include any grades, and are not considered in calculating the student’s grade point average. CPL credits are not considered toward satisfying the required residency credits at the University.

The process begins with the student submitting the appropriate forms and documenting materials supporting the student’s learning to their Advisor who reviews the material. If the content is in order, the materials are submitted to the Office of the Provost (for undergraduate students) or the Office of Extended Education (for LEAP students). The signature of the Dean of the school, a faculty content expert, and the Assistant Provost or the Director of Extended Education will be necessary prior to the form being considered complete. The Registrar’s Office then verifies the credits are needed, that the proper process has been followed, and that the credits are correctly recorded on the academic transcript.

As "certified" implies, this learning is certified by an organization or group recognized by the faculty of the University and is accompanied by some form of earned credential (i.e., licenses, certificates, diplomas), earned ratings or professional "cards" (i.e., journeyman's electrician or EMT) or by an official record of learning from the institution that delivered the learning or certification. The Office of Extended Education and the Registrar’s Office provide an up-to-date list of currently recognized sources.

**Policy for Awarding CPL**
1. Certified Prior Learning refers to credit awards from previously certified sources, such as learning that has been required for a professional license earned through an approved agency and recognized by University faculty.

2. Content must be college level. This is satisfied by referring to the appropriate ACE or equivalent guide, by documenting that the course is offered through the University, or that it is offered by another accredited institution whose credits are transferable to this University.

3. Credit may be lower or upper division according to the content of the course, the requirements for admission to the program, and the nature of the group or organization offering this course.

4. CPL refers to completed technical and professional training for which the student has not received college credit. Transcripts from unaccredited professional and technical schools usually apply to CPL unless these credits are received as direct transfer credit. Some other examples of certified learning include Military ACE recommended credits, American Institute of Banking and American Management Association courses, police academies, current licenses, and formal courses provided by public and private employers outside an accredited postsecondary educational institution (as they relate to college-level courses offered through accredited institutions).

5. These courses are generally not taken at a college or university. Certificates of professional and military schools should be included whether or not they appear on transcripts.

CPL Documentation

For Certified Prior Learning to be considered for credit, the following items must be included:

1. Credit by exam:
   - An official transcript from CLEP, DANTES, Advanced Placement, or International Baccalaureate

2. Military training and experience:
   - Copy of DD-214 form
   - Official transcripts from Community College of the Air Force or AARTES (Army) transcript, if applicable.

3. Professional licenses and certifications:
   - Verify that the earned credential is on the list of approved licenses and certifications recognized by the University faculty for college credit.
   - For approved credentials, submit a certified copy of the earned license or certification.
If the credential is not on the approved list, contact your Advisor, the Office of the Provost, or the Office of Extended Education for further information.

4. Professional training assessed and approved by ACE and PONSI:
   • Complete a Certified Prior Learning Credit Request for each learning experience.
   • Attach verification of successful completion of the course along with dates of attendance (may be presented in a letter from the agency sponsoring the course, the instructor, the training or personnel officer, or in a certificate or license of completion - letters of verification must be on letterhead stationery).

5. For professional training programs certified by University faculty:
   • Complete a Certified Prior Learning Credit Request for each learning experience.
   • Pay the CPL assessment fee for each learning experience.
   • Attach verification of successful completion of the course with dates of attendance (may be presented in a letter from the agency sponsoring the course, the instructor, the training or personnel officer, or in a certificate or license of completion - letters of verification must be on letterhead stationery). Verification of the number of class hours and inclusive dates of attendance:
     1) may be presented in any of the above listed forms or in a brochure, program schedule, or course outline, if the hours are indicated;
     2) must be verified on the certificate or in a letter;
     3) if certificates are not given by an agency or are unavailable, a copy of the student's personnel file or a letter of verification signed by the student's training officer or supervisor is acceptable;

Guidelines for Evaluating CPL Credit

Students who wish to obtain CPL credit must pay close attention to the following criteria as it relates to the evaluation process. All granting of credit is subject to policies and standards as established by the University.

Material is evaluated as follows:

1. Content is verified to be college level.
2. The CPL Credit Requests are to be used to identify learning and to aid in evaluation of prior learning.
3. Credit value is determined primarily by course competencies in relationship to established competencies already defined by the certifying agency and by the University. Usually the number of contact hours is also considered, in part, using the following information: hours of classroom instruction, lecture, or contact hours. The Carnegie Formula may also be used where deemed useful and realistic to the learning presented. ("A standard three credit-hour course requires students to spend 45 hours of class time and 90 hours of out-of-class work in order to receive credit."\(^\text{vii}\))

4. The CPL Credit Requests are the means for the student to demonstrate the depth and breadth of learning attained.

5. Courses with fewer than 30 hours may be grouped with courses of similar content for purposes of review.

6. Students who have earned licenses may be eligible for CPL credits, depending on the following criteria:
   a. Did the license involve an appropriate procedure for measuring learning?
   b. Was the content of the test on the postsecondary level?
   c. Has the license ever been evaluated for credit by an accredited college or university, or by ACE or PONSI, or by a University content expert?
   d. Has the student already earned credit in this area?

7. A number of shorter courses may be evaluated together if they meet the following criteria:
   a. They cover the same general topic.
   b. They can be considered as employee development.

8. Because of the broad acceptance of CLEP, DANTES, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB), transcripts containing these credit recommendations are directed to the Registrar’s Office without CPL Credit Requests. CLEP and DANTES credits are posted on the student’s transcript individually under Transfer Credit Summary, whereas AP and IB credits are posted collectively.

9. Credits from military training are also processed without CPL Credit Requests. The Transcript Analyst works closely with the Veteran’s Coordinator to verify as many credits as possible and as needed. These credits are posted to the student’s transcript under one combined entry.
Chapter 3

Credit by Portfolio

Overview

The Portfolio is the student’s formal document containing various learning description materials intended to be evaluated and assessed by faculty for credit. Students may earn credit for individual courses by writing about their experiences in a Portfolio Course Request. Through these requests, students demonstrate to college professors that, while they never had classes in a subject area, they have acquired equivalent knowledge and skills. For example, someone who has been in sales for ten years with no college background in that area could possibly discuss and illustrate concepts and theory ordinarily covered in a course on salesmanship. Thus, the learning outcomes would be considered equivalent.

Topics are not limited to those courses described in the University’s academic catalog. Other college courses from equally accredited colleges can be used for this process, depending upon the presence of a University faculty member to assess the learning. The amount of credit awarded for any prior learning will vary and is contingent upon the credit worth of the course in the catalog, the depth and breadth of a student's knowledge, and the ability to articulate relevant learning outcomes. The following four parts are to be presented for each course submitted for assessment.

Course Request Part One: Description of Learning Experiences

The initial step in the Course Request is to set the stage for the evaluator to understand the setting in which the learning occurred. In writing this section, most students tend to overstate the experiences in which the learning occurred. Credit is earned as the student articulates learning, not what has been accomplished. However, the setting and activities help the evaluator to comprehend the learning events more accurately. The following guidelines should be followed when completing the Description of Learning Experiences:

1. Use a list format; information in this section should be no longer than one page
2. Use first-person (The student constantly refers to ‘I’ throughout the description).
3. Provide a chronological description of the various settings, including the information below. The student should consider the following questions and provide the answers:

- What did I do?
- When and for how long did the learning events occur?
- Where did the learning events occur? What were their settings?
- How many other people were involved? What was my role and level of responsibility?
- If I was part of a group, what was my contribution compared to those of the group or committee? What did I do compared to what I supervise others doing?
- What was the extent of my involvement?

4. Avoid providing an autobiography of everywhere one has worked or lived. The Faculty Evaluator will read over this part to obtain an idea of the various learning situations encountered by the student for this course, not for his/her entire career.

5. Choose experiences that support the learning that will later be presented for this course, not for all courses submitted for review. This part is repeated for each course listing the learning experiences applicable for the course under review.

6. Each course must stand alone because different evaluators may evaluate different courses.

7. List only learning experiences that can be documented. Someone or something must support the learning experiences of the student. The documentations are supporting the learning experiences, not the learning; what was done, not what was learned through the activities. (see Documentation section below.)

8. Use key words - “I did ….”, “While I was at (location) I was involved in…..”

**Course Request Part Two: Description of Learning Principles**

In this section the student actually defines what is important to know and be able to do after having course equivalent learning. However, this section is not a free association of disconnected ideas and concepts, measured by the length of content and number of words. Rather, the specificity of the description is critical, and the student must systematically define what is important to know and to have mastered to receive credit in the course. These guidelines should be followed when completing Part Two:

1. Imagine that you are going to teach a series of classes on the topic. What topics should be included? What principles, concepts or rules of thumb are important for students to understand?
2. Present 10-12 key foundational principles or concepts, describing each one in a detailed paragraph. This portion is the heart of the Portfolio.

3. Make principles suitable to the academic level of the course. For instance, the principles involved in a freshman-level speech course are much less than those in a senior-level communication course. The lower level principles must be addressed, but the senior level principles must also be clearly evident to earn credit for a senior level course.

4. Consider the breadth and depth of your knowledge. Introductory courses are often more difficult for students to receive assessed credit, since these courses are very broad in their coverage and address a multitude of principles. The student may have prior experience in several areas, but not in all the areas required for the course.

5. For upper-division courses, focus the principles more narrowly and provide greater depth of information.

6. Follow the appropriate format exactly. For this section one must present the principle and briefly explain why it is important. Students don’t explain what they have done in this section but what they know - what anyone should know to be considered a candidate for this course.

7. Use technical language associated with the discipline as much as possible (as long as it is understood) and reference the theory and skills expected to be mastered by colleges that offer the challenged course. Often, reviewing current college-level textbooks and college course syllabi in the subject may be beneficial.

8. Use key words - “A person must know…”, “To be effective, one must understand…”, “Critical to this course is…”

Course Request Part Three: Sources of Knowledge

Every course has a body of knowledge, a theoretical foundation, upon which the associated skills are based, as referenced in Part Two. There are specific definitions, terms, and principles expected to be understood and mastered. This part allows the student to list those sources from which these have been acquired. The following information can help students to complete this section successfully.

1. Although this is usually the shortest of the Portfolio areas, it is considered critical to Faculty Evaluators.

2. Sources should be current and reflect a broad approach to the discipline. They should communicate to the Faculty Evaluator that the student has been exposed to college-level material in the discipline.

3. Each individual entry must have an annotation explaining its specific contribution to the student’s overall knowledge in the field.
4. The evaluator must insure that the student’s knowledge and skills are applicable to the current state of the discipline. For example, knowledge of computing skills 10 years ago may have been very effective then, but the field has changed and the student is requesting the granting of credit today not 10 years ago. The evaluator must be able to verify currency in the course, and this award is partially based on the currency of the learning resources.

5. Learning resources may include textbooks on the subject, periodicals to which the student subscribes, conferences, and other indirect sources of knowledge.

6. Resources may also include individual mentors from whom significant knowledge and skills were learned.

7. The student may ask and answer the following questions:

   • What were the significant written sources of information that assisted me in being successful in this field?

   • Who were the significant leaders and mentors who assisted me in my success in this field?

8. Some key words to use: “A book that was very valuable to me was (book name, author, edition and date of publication) because…”, “I was mentored by (name) who showed me the importance of….”

**Course Request Part Four: Skills and Competencies**

After identifying relevant learning outcomes (principles, theories, ideas, laws, etc.—Part Two), the learner must explain that he/she can apply that knowledge. Part Four is tied directly to the principles in Part Two. The student has already stated that the principles are critical and now briefly explains that he/she has applied them. Just as each of the principles in Part Two was explained in a separate paragraph, each principle has its own application paragraph in Part Four.

The faculty is interested in the fact that students can demonstrate what they understand from their experiences. Students should spend time analyzing their experiences and just enough time collecting documentation to furnish sufficient verification to convince a reasonable person that they have, in fact, participated in the experiences which they have described in their portfolio.

A few important points that should be considered when writing this section of the Portfolio are as follows:

1. The best format for Part Four is to address each of the principles in Part Two with a paragraph beginning, “During my time at (Learning Setting referenced in Part One) I was
able to apply effectively (Principle referenced in Part Two)…”. This part has a constant first-person reference (“I”), and seeks to tie the Course Request Parts together.

2. The evaluator should be able to connect the principles in Part Two directly to the Skills in Part Four.

3. The student should ask and answer the following questions:
   - What have I done?
   - How have I used what I have learned?
   - How successful was I in doing it?

4. Using key words: “I can…”, “I have the ability to…”, “I have the capacity to…”, “I am competent to….”

**DOCUMENTATION OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

As was presented in Part One, each learning situation and experience must have someone or something to document its existence. For instance, if a student said that she worked in a Real Estate Office for two years and made several group training presentations to office staff, some means of documenting these events must be included. Documentation could include a letter from a supervisor who was personally at each presentation verifying that the student did make the presentations on the dates indicated and that the presentations were effective. Employee evaluation records that specifically mention the training sessions could also document the learning events. In the event that these kinds of documents are not available, a statement from a co-worker supporting the presentations along with an outline or notes of the presentation would communicate to the evaluator that the event did take place and that the presentation’s quality was equivalent to the presentations expected of all students receiving credit in the selected course. Generic statements made by people who did not personally witness the events are not satisfactory – one can only certify what was personally witnessed.

At times, students may have actually experienced a situation in which they learned a great deal of college-level subject matter, but are unable to document the event. It must be realized that the Faculty Evaluator can only award credit based upon documented learning. In this event, the student must submit proof of the knowledge and skills important to the course. The proof may involve a
combination of written examinations, oral interviews, video tapes, and other documentation arrangements. The student must be aware however, that at times prior learning may not be able to be awarded because of the inability to document its existence.

**Portfolio Documentation Format Options**

**Direct Observation** refers to the direct observation of the student’s performance during the time involved. The documenter must have personally observed the experiences listed by the student. The observations are usually communicated through a signed letter specifically listing the learning experiences, the documenter’s direct observation of the student, and an evaluation of the student’s effectiveness in the event. Letters of verification are commonly used by documenters to communicate their support. Usually the student drafts a letter listing the events, their dates and settings, and other details as he/she remembers them. This letter is then sent to the documenter who either agrees with the letter or edits it for accuracy, and prints it on his/her letterhead, and returns it to the student. The letter must meet the following requirements:

1. The person furnishing the letter must have directly observed the experiences listed by the student. The documenter must identify the activities he/she directly observed.

2. One person may verify more than one of the student’s experiences. However, any written statement provided by the documenter must comment directly, separately, and clearly on each experience.

3. The letter of verification should be accurate and complete.

4. The documenter must identify his/her relationship to the student and his/her qualification for commenting on the experiences. This statement is extremely important. The more expertise the documenter has, the more weight the letter will carry in supporting the claims of the experiences and competencies.

5. The letter should be written on the official letterhead of the organization with which the person writing the letter of verification is currently associated.

6. Letters of verification from close relatives or a spouse should only be used when no other source is available and in rare situations. These, of course, will tend to weaken the objective weight of the verification process.

7. The student should make it clear to the author of the letter that it is to be written as a verification of learning experiences, not as a personal or professional recommendation.
8. The letters of verification should be coded in such a way as to make it clear to the Portfolio Faculty Evaluator which experiences are associated with which documentation.

**Indirect Observation.** These are experiences for which the documenter did not necessarily directly observe the student, but otherwise can attest that they were accomplished. Examples of documentation for indirect observations include formal commendations, awards, newspaper and magazine articles, letters of corroboration from co-workers, certificates of attendance, clients served, and supervisors. Although these documents do not carry the weight of direct observations, they do help the evaluator better understand the learning experiences.

**Product Assessment.** This method of documentation utilizes actual examples of the products produced by the student. Samples might consist of bulletins, tapes, videos, or books, depending upon the course. For instance, a student providing evidence for a speech course could provide videos of actual or staged speeches and/or speaking notes to support accomplished communication skills.

**Examinations.** This method of documentation utilizes the Faculty Portfolio Evaluator as the documenter of the student’s claimed learning and skills. Examinations are particularly appropriate with courses that are heavily cognitively-based, that possess a well defined body of knowledge, terms and definitions, particular philosophy or precise methodology widely accepted as required in the discipline. Examinations are rarely the actual final exam for the classroom course, since students cannot be expected to have mastered exactly the same principles and issues as have classroom students. If the method of documentation is examination, the Advisor and/or the Office of Extended Education coordinates between the student and the Faculty Portfolio Evaluator for an examination to be constructed and administered. Once completed, the examination becomes a part of the student’s Portfolio Documentation.

The following pragmatic and ethical standards apply to Portfolio Documentation:

1. The faculty member will attempt to balance the standard requirements of the course with the unique learning that has been acquired by the student. He/she realizes that the student has learned in a different setting than a regular course, and that this learning has credibility.

2. Written exams are superior to oral exams because there is a written record of documentation able to be retained in the event that someone questions the student’s knowledge or skills in the respective discipline.
3. If an oral exam is used, the portfolio steps listed above must still be completed and submitted to the Faculty Portfolio Evaluator. Thus, the oral exam must have written documentation of the principles and skills verified by the Faculty Portfolio Evaluator.

4. Conflict of interest must be prevented to insure that the student is best served by the Portfolio process. At times this ethical concern may involve consultation with the academic dean responsible for the course.

Questions the student should ask and answer:

1. Who was present when the learning occurred? What were the qualifications of this person to attest to the success of my endeavors?

2. What records are available that specifically mention the knowledge and skills I have mentioned?

3. Are there other courses for which I am requesting assessment that can share documentation with this course, allowing only one document to serve several courses?

4. What forms of documentation are available, such as letters, video tapes, CDs, journals, notes, outlines, and audio tapes?

5. When will document copies suffice rather than original documents?

Special Notes Concerning Portfolios:

1. The portfolio has a particular level of confidentiality because it contains comments and recommendations from a number of sources. By submitting the Portfolio, the student grants the University certain rights regarding the evaluation, assessment, and verification of the courses, which may involve several University offices and personnel.

2. Periodically the University receives permission from the student to make copies of the portfolio to maintain it as an example for other students.

3. The portfolio is kept on file at the University for one calendar year from the time of approval. Therefore, the student must understand that documentation will not be available for use by the student until the returned time occurs. After one year, the student can request that the Portfolio be returned. It is the student’s responsibility to contact the Office of Extended Education for the return of the material. If the student does not request return of the Portfolio, the Division will retain the portfolio for at least one more year, after which it will be destroyed. The Portfolio List of Courses for Assessment sheet and Portfolio Course Requests are retained as a part of the student’s permanent educational file.

Portfolio Worksheets
Portfolio Worksheets are intended to assist the student and Northwest Staff and Faculty to determine whether or not a particular course is a good candidate for Portfolio. A worksheet should be completed for each prospective course as part of the Portfolio development process. It also serves as a guide during the completion of the student’s portfolio, and determines the type of format appropriate to the course (see pages 22-24 for format options). When a student is intending to submit courses for evaluation that are not normally offered by the University, the student’s Advisor or the Office of Extended Education verifies with the respective Divisional Dean that the appropriate faculty and provisions exist to serve the student’s request. Thus, the student is made aware of courses that should not be considered as portfolio candidates because of their academic nature.

**Portfolio Evaluation Process**

Portfolio construction has several important steps, as listed below.

1. The student’s Portfolio construction process begins with the completion of a Portfolio Worksheet. The student may also choose to attend a UNIV 1791 Introduction to Prior Learning Assessment, during which time the student works closely with his/her instructor in the construction of the Portfolio.

2. Once the Portfolio is completed, the Office of Extended Education signs each Credit Request application indicating that the portfolio meets the minimum requirements as described by this Manual.

3. The Portfolio and the proof of payment of the Portfolio Assessment Fee are submitted to the Office of Extended Education for further processing. As of the 2012-2013 academic year, the fee per credit evaluated is $70.00.

4. If the Portfolio is in proper order, the Office of Extended Education coordinates its evaluation through Faculty Evaluators. The Portfolio remains under the control of the Office of Extended Education at all times.

5. The Faculty Portfolio Evaluator reviews the portfolio and may recommend approval of the credit requested, recommend the awarding of partial credit with additional development and/or verification requested, or recommend the denial of credit. The evaluator may recommend changing the department and/or course title on the petition if he/she feels another department or course is more appropriate for the student's learning and returns the portfolio to the Office of Extended Education for rerouting.

6. The Office of Extended Education provides whatever materials are requested to the course’s respective divisional dean for his/her review.
7. The Office of Extended Education does a final review of credit awarded. Copies of the Portfolio List of Courses for Assessment and each Portfolio Course Request are sent to the student and the originals are sent to the student’s permanent academic file in the Registrar’s Office.

8. In the event that the Faculty Portfolio Evaluator recommends additional work on a course, the student edits the Course Request for that course, working in conjunction with the Faculty Evaluator, the UNIV 1791 Introduction to Prior Learning Assessment professor, and the Office of Extended Education. Once the revisions are completed, the revised Course Request is resubmitted through the Faculty Evaluator. No additional assessment fee is required. Special approval must be received from the Office of Extended Education for assessment opportunities after one resubmission.

9. The Registrar receives the Faculty Portfolio Course Evaluations and coordinates its recording on the student's transcript. The credits are recorded under the “Transfer Credit Summary” portion of the transcript with grades of “P” for passed and with the notation “Port:” prefixed to each course title. Portfolio courses do not affect the student’s grade point average.

10. Once the Credit for Portfolio process is complete, the portfolio is available in the Office of Extended Education for student pick up.
Certified Prior Learning – Credit Request

Student Name ____________________________________________  Student ID __________________
Major ______________________  Academic Advisor ____________________________

I request that Northwest University (NU) assess for college credit the training and certifications listed below. The materials contained in this request are accurate and true to the best of my knowledge, and I authorize NU to verify any details necessary in the process of assessment.

Signature _____________________________________________ Date ______________________

Authorization: ACE, PONSI, Professor, State of WA, etc.

Type of Training/Certificate (Copy must be attached for review):

Comments:

Amount of credit requested: _________
Equivalent NU or other accredited college course:______________________________

Office of the Provost/Office of Extended Education _________________________________   Date ____/_____/_____
Content Evaluator ____________________________________________________________   Date ____/_____/_____
(Signature indicates agreement that the content of the course listed is equivalent to college-level learning.)
Divisional Dean _______________________________________________________________   Date ____/_____/_____
Registrar ___/_____/_____

Lower division credits granted ____________
Upper division credits granted ____________
Credit by Portfolio – Worksheet

1. Title, academic level, and semester credit worth of the portfolio candidate course:

2. Course Description for the portfolio candidate course, including the college, catalog year, credit worth, and course code used by the college:

3. Learning Experiences and settings associated with this course:
4. **Learning Principles and Concepts** associated with this course (10-12)
   1.
   2.
   3.
   4.
   5.
   6.
   7.
   8.
   9.
   10.
   11.
   12.

5. **Learning Sources of Knowledge** associated with this course:

6. **Documentation Sources** associated with the course:
Portfolio Evaluation

Policies, Procedures and Fees

Northwest University

Policies

Northwest University adheres to the following standards established for portfolio assessment by the Council for Adult Experiential learning (CAEL):

1. Credit is awarded only for **learning**, and **not for experience**.
2. College credit is awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit is awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
5. Credit is appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

Northwest University adheres to the following standards regarding administrative guidelines for portfolio evaluation:

1. Credit awards and their transcript entries will be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
2. Policies and procedures applied to evaluation, including provision for appeal, will be fully disclosed and prominently available.
3. Fees charged for evaluation will based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded. Accreditation standards require that adequate precautions must be provided to ensure that payment of fees does not influence the award of credit.
4. Credit for prior experiential learning may constitute no more than 30 semester credits of the credits needed for a degree.
5. Credit may be granted only for documented learning that falls under the definition of Prior Learning Assessment as established by Northwest University.

Appeals Process

1. All appeals must be done in writing within 30 days of academic department or Registrar’s final credit determination.
2. The student must submit a written appeal stating all reasons for requesting reevaluation of the portfolio, as well as why he/ she thinks the portfolio should
receive credit that was not granted. The student should provide any documentation or clarification they think necessary which will help the Appeals Committee review the portfolio. The Appeals Committee will consist of a faculty member chosen in consultation with the appropriate Dean from the department reviewing the portfolio for credit (other than the faculty member who originally evaluated the portfolio), the Director of Extended Education, the Registrar, and the Dean of the related school.

3. The student must submit the appeal to the Director of Extended Education, who will then distribute the appeal to the Appeals Committee for review.

4. The student will receive written notice of the action taken on their appeal from the Appeals Committee within 60 days of a student’s written request for a review.

Procedures

Portfolio Submission

Students are recommended to take Expository Writing, or its equivalent, prior to submitting a portfolio for evaluation.

In consultation with their advisor, UNIV 1791 Introduction to Prior Learning Assessment Instructor, and/or Director of Extended Education the student will submit a portfolio for evaluation along with the payment of fees. Evaluation will not occur until fees are paid.

The portfolio will be submitted to the Office of Extended Education for processing. The Director of Extended Education, in consultation with the Dean of the appropriate department, will assign a faculty member(s) to review the portfolio according to the content areas presented (i.e. business faculty for business credit, communication faculty for communication credit).

At the recommendation of the Faculty Evaluator, a portfolio may be returned to the student one time only with a request for clarification of the portfolio content.

The maximum award for prior learning (including CLEP/ DANTES and Certified Prior Learning) is 30 semester credits.

Credit awarded via the portfolio process on the basis of prior experiential learning is not transferable to other institutions apart from the bachelor's degree itself.

Fees

Portfolio evaluation fees are set by the Financial Planning & Priorities Committee (FP&P).

Fees for evaluating a portfolio are as follows for the 2012-2013 academic year:

$70 per semester credit evaluated
Example: a standard three semester credit course would be $210.

*Payment of fees does not guarantee an award of credit. Payment is for the evaluation process only.*

My signature below indicates that I understand the provisions of the Portfolio Policies, Procedures and Fees.

Student Name ________________________________

Signature ________________________________ Date ________________

Note: A signed copy of this document will be kept in the student's file.
Credit by Portfolio
Faculty Evaluation and Credit Recommendation

Student Name __________________________________________ Student ID _________________
Course ID _____________________________ Title _______________________________________
Number of Credits _________ Portfolio Instructor ______________________________________
Evaluator__________________________________________

1. Is relevant personal experience clearly described? ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. Does the student demonstrate knowledge of generally accepted principles, theories, laws or rules that apply to the topic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. Does the student demonstrate a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practice? ☐ Yes ☐ No
4. Does the student show an understanding of how to apply these principles to new situations? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student show sufficient mastery (70% or better) of the commonly accepted learning outcomes for this topic? (Check one of the following)
☐ Yes, college level learning is evident and ____ credits are awarded.
☐ No credit is awarded at this time:
   O Return for rewrite  O Need further evidence of learning
   O Meeting with student is requested  O Learning is not college-level

Comments: (required if partial or no credits are given)

Evaluator’s Signature __________________________________________ Date _________________
Course’s Divisional Dean Review __________________________________________ Date _________________
Portfolio Documentation: ☐ Written Report
Attachments: ☐ CD  ☐ Audio Tape  ☐ Video  ☐ Disc

☐ Accounting Office Date _________________ ☐ Payroll Date _________________ ☐ Registrar Date _________________
Amount _________________  Amount _________________  Credits _________________
Endnotes


iv Paraphrased from Sam S. Coleman, Chapter Five, pp. 49-61, in Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics and Assessment by Urban Whitaker, Assessing Learning, p. 2.

v Earn College Credit for What You Know, by Lois Lamdin, p. 101. Published by CAEL (The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), 1992, for "College-level learning" above.


vii (Earn College Credit For What You Know, CAEL, Lamdin, p. 124).