

# Credit for Life Experiences

Getting Started with Prior Learning Assessment

# Contents

- About this document .....3
- Credit for life experiences.....4
- Defining Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) .....5
- How PLA can benefit your institution .....7
- Ways to accomplish and assess PLA .....10
- Conclusion and considerations .....13
- Additional consulting .....14
- Works cited.....15
- About D2L.....16

# About this document

This document provides recommendations and other considerations for institutions of higher education, as they consider the use of prior learning assessment and credit for life experiences. Areas of focus include:

1. Background of credit for life experiences
2. Defining prior learning assessment
3. How credit for life experiences benefits my institution
4. Ways to assess prior learning

# Credit for life experiences

Students today come from all walks of life. Traditional students, straight from a high school setting, now represent only a portion of the student population in colleges and universities. This is largely due to students fulfilling needs around work, family, and obligations outside of the traditional educational setting. These students bring with them wonderful personal and professional experiences that not only enhance the classroom experience, but also shape and contribute to their educational goals and aspirations. Many students feel they should be able to utilize their life experiences as part of their educational journey. This document will examine offering credit for life experiences, and how it can be mutually beneficial for students and institutions.

The concept of credit for life experience is not new by any means. Industry has always looked at previous experiences as indicators for growth and promotion within the workplace, while building upon those experiences to enhance the company and/or the employee's personal and professional goals. With that said, there have been mixed feelings regarding formally offering higher education credit for those similar experiences toward the completion of a degree. Particularly in education, the ability to show a mastering of a concept or experience through proven assessment is key to granting credit.

In a report published by the American Council on Education (ACE) Center for Policy Research and Strategy, author Mikyung Ryu states: "Validating and credentialing college-level knowledge and skills acquired outside of the classroom is increasingly seen as a vehicle for supporting increased education attainment, especially among adult non-traditional students. This alternative mode of academic credentialing, known as prior learning assessment or credit for prior learning (CPL), can benefit working adults entering postsecondary education from the workplace or the military." (Ryu, 2013)





# Defining Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

## What is PLA?

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is the ability for colleges and universities to offer credit to students, based on previous personal and professional experiences. These experiences can come from work opportunities, prior non-credit education and training, or any combination of experiences that are relatable to a course or program of study. Upon being assessed through a demonstration of competency and/or abilities in a specific area, students would receive credit for those experiences toward a course or program.

## How does PLA benefit my institution?

Prior learning assessment offers many benefits, not only to students, but to the credit-granting institution as well. Through offering credit for life experiences, institutions can recruit and offer educational opportunities to a targeted group, driving enrollments for programs. This is a great way to increase awareness and enrollments for under-prescribed programs at your institution. Another benefit of PLA is accelerated program completion timelines that support an increase in enrollments, while allowing for a larger number of students to successfully complete programs and degrees. In turn, this can increase retention and graduation rates of your students and ultimately benefit your institution.



***“The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned.”***

- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010

## Why is PLA Important?

Prior learning assessment can play an integral role at your institution, which can be mutually beneficial for students and the school. PLA essentially offers credit where credit is due, which is a huge selling point to potential students looking at your institution. It allows students to move through programs and coursework, closely aligned with their personal and professional experiences, at an increased rate. Additionally, the concept of credit for life experiences brings new knowledge to peers and the institution through the sharing of presentations and discussions based on the student's experiences. This can reinforce course theory and content in a real-world scenario the students can relate to. Finally, PLA offers networking abilities for the students as well as the institution through the experiences students bring. It opens the door to internships and potential job placement for students, while offering the institution networking for committees, volunteer work, and funding opportunities.

CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, a US non-profit organization) has been striving to lead the evolving national discussion linking adult learners and work. According to a research brief published by CAEL in April 2011, “Among PLA students and non-PLA students identified by race/ethnicity in our study, we found that for each racial/ethnic group, graduation rates for PLA students are higher than non-PLA students.” (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2011). With support from the Lumina Foundation for Education, CAEL conducted a PLA study of adult student outcomes. “The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned.” (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning 2010)

# How PLA can benefit your institution

A key step in bringing prior learning assessment to your institution is defining answers to the following categories of questions.

## Strategic Alignment

- What does the concept of “prior learning assessment” mean to your institution?
- What is the institutional goal of accepting and providing credit for life experiences?
- What are the benefits?
- What are the liabilities?
- How does this support your institutional vision and mission statement?
- How does this align to your strategic objectives?

## Management and Oversight

- Who will be responsible for the oversight associated with the process?
- What department or individual makes the most sense to organize and lead this at your institution?
- Is this a short-term decision or does it make sense for long-term goals and needs?
- What policies and procedures need to be defined to support the process? (These should be developed as a means to identify roles, responsibilities and structure while enforcing and supporting the needs of the student and institution.)







## Process Definition

- How will it work?
- Which program(s) are a good fit for this?
- What will the process look like from the student point of view?
- What will the process look like from an administrative point of view?
- Which internal systems will be impacted by this change?
- What type(s) of assessment(s) will be used to determine the award of credit? (e.g. ePortfolio submissions, resumes, case studies, essays, projects, tests/quizzes, etc.)
- Who will review the submissions and determine the award of credit? (e.g. committees, faculty teams)
- How will the award of credit be processed and tracked for the learner?
- Can the award of credit be fully automated or will there be manual steps in the process?

## Institutional Impact

- What additional areas will need to be involved? (e.g. Registrar/Student Records, Admissions, Financial Aid, Marketing, Academic Affairs, etc.)

# Ways to accomplish and assess PLA

Once your institution decides to support credit for life experiences, developing means to assess these experiences is key. A process like this involves many parties, but can be very rewarding for both the student and those assessing the experience.





## Portfolios and Presentations

One of the important factors of offering credit for life experiences through prior learning assessment is the ability to assess the student's experiences. One way to facilitate this assessment is through the development of a portfolio or presentation highlighting the experience. Portfolios and presentations can be accomplished either tangibly or digitally. Students can create and/or submit artifacts that exemplify their experience, including descriptions, pictures, narratives, PDF documents, and opportunities for reflection. Collaboratively, these elements will showcase their mastery of a concept, and can assist in the assessment for credit.

## Review Committees

Once students have created and submitted a portfolio or presentation, they must be reviewed and assessed by educated, experienced, and competent individuals at your institution. This can be perceived as a very laborious and daunting task, however, it can be a very enlightening and gratifying experience for the assessor; reviewing materials focused on a shared interest and identifying experienced students who bring dialogue and perspective into the classroom. A way to lighten the load of portfolio and presentation assessment is to consider creating review committees. These can be structured based on the needs of your institution, but allow for a collaborative approach to assessment.

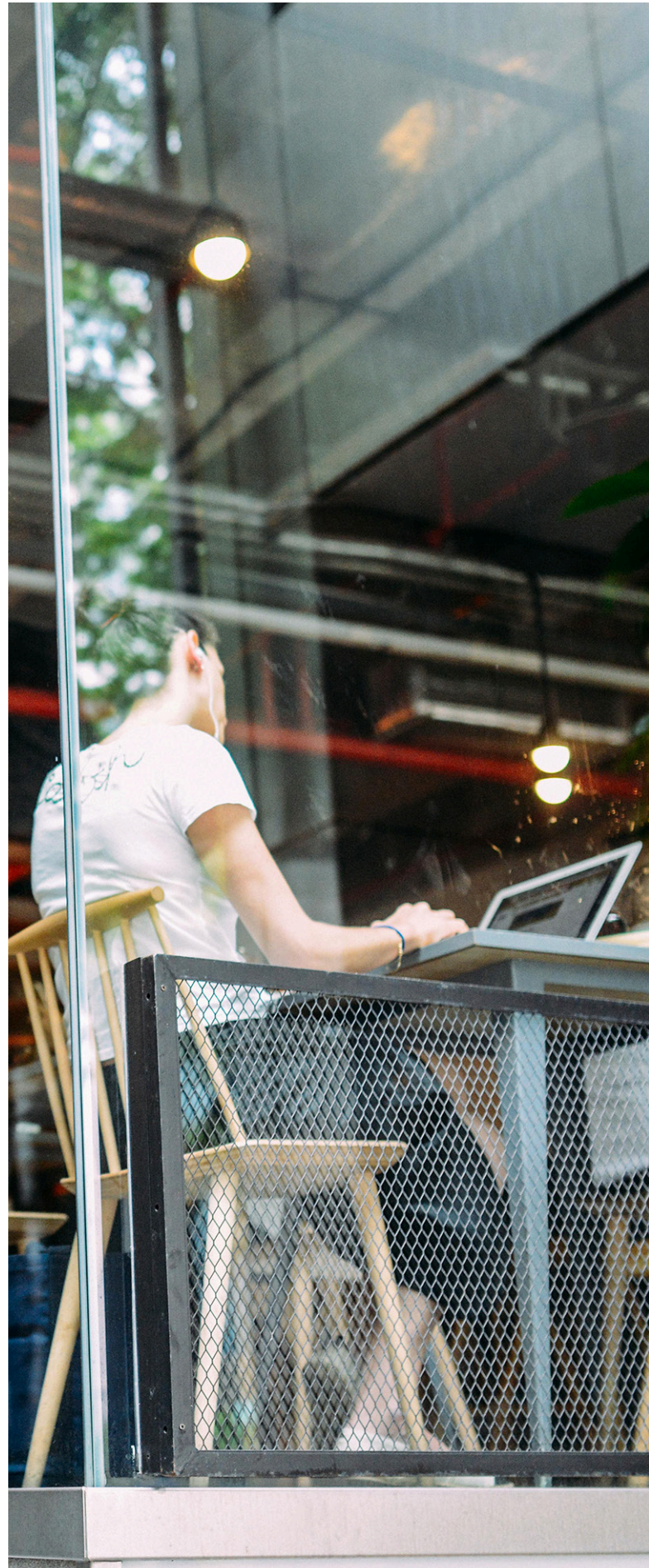


## Faculty Expectations

It is important to identify and clearly communicate faculty expectations associated with prior learning assessment. As stated above, individuals and teams will be required to assess the materials submitted by students, for consideration of credit. A great way to identify and communicate faculty expectations is through inclusion of faculty representation throughout the process. This allows for appropriate feedback and buy-in to the project. It also allows for faculty to drive the expectations and communicate it amongst their peers.

## New Technologies and Opportunities

Finally, the identification and use of appropriate technologies to assist in the assessment of prior learning is a key component to increasing efficiencies and effectiveness of the process. Digital portfolio tools are a great way to allow students to capture, collaborate, and archive their experiences in order to assess for credit. Additionally, collaborative technologies, such as discussion boards, or synchronous communication tools, are a great way for teams and review committees to effectively meet and discuss a student's experiences.





# Conclusion and considerations

Credit for life experiences, through a process known as prior learning assessment (PLA) or prior learning recognition (PLR), offers many benefits to both students and institutions who embrace the concept. Although criticized by some, credit for life experiences:

- Benefits students with personal and professional experiences, which are closely aligned with a degree or program of interest to them, by giving them college credit.
- Lowers the amount of time students take to complete degrees.
- Benefits institutions by increasing enrollments in identified programs of study.
- Promotes retention and graduation rates at institutions by supporting student needs, while assisting them through a program at an accelerated rate.

Things to consider when starting a prior learning assessment program at your institution:

- Define the process and what it means to your institution by personalizing the process to meet your needs.
- Identify what area, department and/or division will be responsible for the process and find ways to support it internally.
- Create policies and procedures to support the institution and students through the PLA process.
- Understand all implications and stakeholders involved, and include them as part of the planning process.
- Identify how best to assess PLA, whether portfolios and/or presentations, and in what format, using which technologies.
- Create and support review committees of faculty and staff to assess the student experiences.

# Additional consulting

D2L employs a number of experts with extended experience leading academic programs. The D2L community of users includes experts in many fields related to management and delivery of instructional programs and technologies. D2L stands ready to collaborate and coordinate collaboration of grant applications, advanced consulting needs, and research studies related to instruction.

Visit [D2L.com/services](https://d2l.com/services) to learn more.

## Works cited

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# About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes learning experiences better. The company's cloud-based platform, Brightspace, is easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, organizations can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that organizations can take action in real-time to keep learners on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore.

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