

PLA HANDBOOK
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS
AND EVALUATORS

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT
OFFICE
MARTIN UNIVERSITY

2008



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- I. AN OVERVIEW OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT
PLA AT MARTIN UNIVERSITY
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY
TRANSFER OF CREDIT TO OTHER INSTITUTIONS
CAEL STANDARDS
- II. THE PLA CLASS
PLA 130 COURSE DESCRIPTION
TUITION AND FEES
RELATIONSHIP TO DEGREE PLAN
- III. THE PLA PORTFOLIO
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
RESUME
SUMMARY OF REQUESTS FOR CREDIT
INDIVIDUAL REQUESTS FOR PLA CREDIT
DEGREE PLAN
DOCUMENTATION
TRANSCRIPTS
- IV. THE EVALUATION PROCESS
SUBMITTING A PORTFOLIO FOR EVALUATION
FACULTY EVALUATION
OUTSIDE EVALUATION
ACADEMIC AFFAIRS REVIEW
- V. AWARDING CREDIT
GUIDELINES AND LIMITATIONS OF CREDIT AWARDS
NOTIFICATION AND RECORDING OF CREDIT AWARDS
PLA ARCHIVE
APPEALS PROCESS
REOPENING A PORTFOLIO

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PLA RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) recognizes life and work experience by awarding college credit for knowledge and skills that are equivalent to college-level learning. This method of assessing the adult learner respects and validates the various ways in which they gain knowledge.

PLA has been a part of American higher education for decades. In 1974, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and other innovative institutions began to research the question of whether schools could reliably assess college-level learning that takes place outside of the traditional classroom. Three years of research concluded that schools could indeed evaluate learning from work or life experience, provided that assessors followed appropriate guidelines.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) was founded in 1977 to develop standardized guidelines for colleges and universities to assess prior learning and award college credit. As one of the pioneer institutions in portfolio assessment, Martin University began in 1979 to use and develop appropriate procedures for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Martin follows the guidelines established by CAEL and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC).

CHAPTER I: AN OVERVIEW OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

PLA AT MARTIN UNIVERSITY

Guided by certified CAEL experts, publications, and conferences, Martin University uses the portfolio method of assessment for the majority of its Prior Learning Assessment. Students may also demonstrate learning through standardized examinations (CLEP and DANTES) and American Council on Education (ACE) credit.

Students who chose the portfolio method must enroll in the six credit hour PLA course, PLA 130. The course will meet once a week as a regular class period and once a week as a lab to provide student-focused meetings with PLA instructor and university faculty.

During this course, adult learners write their life story with an eye toward what they have learned outside the classroom. Along with this autobiography, students prepare a complete resume and develop and document specific requests for college credit. These materials are assembled into the final portfolio which will be used to assess each student's prior learning. Before the end of the semester, each student, in consultation with the course instructor and PLA Director, will submit the portfolio for evaluation additional college credits.

The PLA Director and relevant faculty members review the portfolio in detail to determine credit awards. Once each department makes its credit recommendations, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs reviews the full portfolio. Finally, the Associate Vice President and the PLA Director complete the paperwork confirming credit awards. Copies are sent to the student, to the Registrar for transcription of awarded credit, and to the student's mentor. The President and/or Vice President of Academic Affairs have final oversight for all PLA matters.

STUDENT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

1. Students desiring to pursue credit through PLA must complete a questionnaire to determine their eligibility. Approval for enrollment will be determined by the PLA Director.
2. Students enrolling in PLA 130 must be eligible for or have completed EN 125 Freshman English or its equivalent.
3. Transfer students must have official transcripts on file with the Registrar before enrolling in PLA 130.

4. Students must enroll in PLA 130 prior to the first day of class of each semester; the course may not be added after the class has met.
5. Students that do not attend the first day of the class will be dropped from the course.
6. Students may not petition for credit during their last semester of coursework.
7. Students enrolling in graduate programs are not eligible to earn credit through PLA.

TRANSFER OF CREDIT TO OTHER INSTITUTIONS

PLA was adopted at Martin as means to validate learning experiences outside of the traditional classroom setting as well as to accelerate eligible students through their chosen program of study, thus saving them unnecessary time spent in the classroom, redundant coursework, and tuition. In most cases, credits awarded through PLA are not transferable. Students desiring to transfer to another institution should check with the transfer school to determine their policy. Martin University does not accept transfer of PLA credit from other colleges or universities.

CAEL STANDARDS

CAEL has identified ten standards of good practice in prior learning assessment, which are detailed in the handbook *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures* by Urban Whitaker. Martin University faculty and many other universities use these CAEL standards for PLA. The standards are outlined below.

Academic Standards

- I. Credit should be awarded only for *learning*, and not for *experience*.

In order to demonstrate creditworthy learning, the student must be able to identify and describe what he or she has learned. The mere documented fact of a student's presence in a workplace, church, or community situation does *not* demonstrate learning. Ideally, the description of learning should describe the learning in detail as it relates to a specific college course *and* provide substantial documentation (both direct and indirect) that demonstrates not only presence and experience, but also progress and learning.

A more convincing case demonstrates learning that stems from more than one situation. If skills and learning were acquired in a variety of ways and places, this suggests mastery of general principles and not simply standard procedures that may apply only to one particular situation.

- II. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.

College-level learning may be defined in any of the following ways:

1. Learning relates to subject areas generally taught in colleges.
2. Learning is demonstrably at an achievement level comparable to college norms.
3. Specific learning is similar to that acquired through college-level work.
4. Learning that is grounded in theory, concepts and principles.
5. Learning relates to a student-defined goal that normally requires college-level learning.
6. Learning is of a type generally acquired after high school that is expected or required for professional acceptance.

Presentations of learning should address as many of the six areas as possible. In general, Martin's course-by-course method of granting credit addresses this standard since by definition, courses found in a college catalog are college-level. The exceptions to this are developmental courses, which may not be petitioned for credit. Additionally, some majors may exclude specific courses.

- III. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.

Striking the appropriate balance between theory and practical application is difficult for both students preparing their portfolios and for faculty assessing their requests. Adult learners tend to be heavy on practical applications and often appear to be light on theory.

However, research on adult learning suggests that most significant learning tends to be implicit (unconscious, difficult to verbalize) rather than explicit (conscious, easy to articulate). While adult learners may be able to function well in their chosen situations, they may have some difficulty in explaining the general underlying principles (the theories) that guide their actions. For this reason, particular attention should be given to the Narrative of Learning as a description of the broad principles that back up the practical knowledge derived from experiential learning.

- IV. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.

Martin University faculty members assess each individual Request for College Credit that is relevant to their Division or Department and to their specialized knowledge and education. In some cases, we may employ outside experts to evaluate credit requests. If we cannot locate and train an expert, we will not be able to evaluate the request or award credit.

- V. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

Martin University strongly recommends that credit requests be limited to courses contained in the Martin catalog, although catalogs from other colleges may be used with the approval of the PLA Director. This policy assures that credit awards fall within an appropriate academic context.

All Requests for College Credit must also specify where on the Degree Plan each credit award would fall. Martin can grant credit *only* for courses likely to contribute to graduation requirements as outlined on the Degree Plan.

Administrative Standards

- VI. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.

No requests should be made or granted for a course whose content significantly overlaps with another course for which credit has been granted. This includes transfer credits, previous study at Martin University, and other PLA requests. Duplicate awards will not be granted.

- VII. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.

This PLA Handbook outlines all the policies and procedures of portfolio based assessment at Martin University.

- VIII. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.

PLA 130 is a 6-credit hour course. Students pay tuition for the class using the same procedure as they do other classes. No fees are charged for credit awarded.

- IX. 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.

In addition to this handbook, which outlines all the policies and procedures of the PLA program, the Director of Prior Learning Assessment may meet individually, as needed, with faculty evaluators to discuss the standards and procedures of portfolio assessment and, when needed, to address individual cases.

- X. 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.

The PLA program and the needs of participating students are monitored by the Director of Prior Learning Assessment, the Assessment Committee and the Curriculum committee to ensure quality and compliance with Martin University and Higher Learning Commission guidelines and regulations. This includes a comprehensive review of the program and published material.

CHAPTER II: THE PLA CLASS

PLA 130 COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides an opportunity for incoming students to reflect on their life and evaluate the possibility of requesting college credit for lifelong learning. Not only does the process potentially award college credit for lifelong learning, it also creates a valuable record of each student's life and accomplishments. Students will:

Compose an autobiography tracing their personal and career histories and lifelong learning experiences;
Develop a chronology of their lives and a functional resume;
Relate learning to specific college courses for inclusion in a portfolio documenting their lives and accomplishments.

The students completing PLA 130 will achieve the following CAEL recommended learning outcomes:

1. Articulate educational goals and plans as a context for the assessment of their experiential learning.
2. Identify events and experiences that have contributed to their learning.
3. Understand the system by which experiential learning is assessed at Martin University.
4. Apply one or more models of how adults learn from experience to the analysis of events and experiences in their life.
5. Identify possible and appropriate forms of evidence to document their claims of creditable learning.
6. Produce evidence of their learning that is acceptable to the university and amenable to assessment.
7. Apply criteria for determining the college-level qualities of their learning.
8. Know and use the program-specific forms and formalities for submitting evidence of learning for assessment.
9. Use the outcomes of a learning assessment process to plan future educational activities.
10. Establish a working relationship with an advisor for ongoing identification and development of evidence for the assessment of one's learning.

Before completion of this course, students will submit their portfolio for evaluation of PLA credits. These credits will be recorded on the students' transcripts and will be used to fulfill the requirements of each student's degree plan.

TUITION AND FEES

The tuition charged for the six hour PLA 130 class covers the administrative costs for the class, advising from the PLA office, evaluation of the portfolio, and transcription of credit. Any credits awarded through the portfolio evaluation process are awarded without further fees or tuition.

The following fees apply:

1. \$500 for reopening a portfolio.
2. Maximum of \$200 for employing an outside evaluator.

RELATIONSHIP TO DEGREE PLAN

PLA 130 fulfills six hours of liberal arts or social science electives requirement of the general core curriculum of the degree plan.

CHAPTER III: THE PLA PORTFOLIO

The PLA Portfolio consists of 7 sections, each designed to assist in documenting a student's prior learning in order to receive college credit. All contents of the portfolio, except certain forms of documentation, must be typed, edited for grammatical and mechanical correctness, and printed or photocopied clearly. Electronic versions of all forms are available and provided at the start of the course.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The PLA autobiography is a ten to fifteen page essay describing the PLA candidate's lifelong learning experiences, particularly those that are connected to the student's Requests for College Credit. Normally, this document is considered an opportunity for the student to provide an overall sense of his or her personality and character, as well as to place the PLA process into the context of his or her life and goals. Also, the autobiography contextualizes the material in the narrative of learning.

RESUME

This should be a detailed resume including all relevant experience after high school. Although a standard chronological format may suffice, often a functional resume is more useful for prior learning assessment because it focuses on transferable skills rather than job descriptions.

SUMMARY OF REQUESTS FOR CREDIT

This form (Appendix A) lists all of the courses for which the student is requesting credit. Faculty evaluators use this form to indicate whether credit has been approved or denied.

REQUESTS FOR COLLEGE CREDIT

Each course for which a student requests credit must have an individual Request for College Credit (Appendix B). On this form, the student specifies the course for which he or she is seeking credit. Courses should be selected from the Martin University catalog. When Martin courses do not fit the prior learning of the student, courses from the published catalog of a regionally accredited institution may be requested with the permission of the Director of Prior Learning Assessment.

In addition to identifying specific course requests, the student also uses this form to indicate the times and places where the prior learning occurred, and to provide a detailed Narrative of Learning which articulates the content of the student's prior learning and its relationship to the specific requirements of the course. The narration should address theoretical as well as practical components of that learning.

Finally, the Request for College Credit indicates how the course fits into the student's degree plan and indexes the location of relevant documentation within the portfolio by page number.

DEGREE PLAN

The portfolio will include an updated copy of the student's degree plan. The degree plan reflects all transfer credits, ACE evaluated credits, credit by exam, and prior coursework at Martin University. It does *not* include credits that are requested in the PLA process. The degree plan should be completed and signed by the student's mentor.

DOCUMENTATION

Students should provide enough specific documentation to support each course request. Quantity is not the same as quality here—excessive documentation hinders evaluators in their task, weakening rather than strengthening the case for credit.

Direct documentation is the strongest form and consists of materials that have been created by the student him- or herself. Examples include but are not limited to reports you have written or co-written; solutions to mathematical problems; articles, plays, poems, or stories you have written, pictures of drawings, sculptures, or other artwork; and audio or video tapes of presentations or performances.

Indirect documentation consists of materials documenting the student's learning from outside sources. This can include letters of documentation, certificates, licenses, job performance reviews, test results, and education or training transcripts.

Documentation of presence in a course or job does *not* equate to documentation of learning—holding a job does not mean that it was performed well or that a general understanding of theoretical principles as well as practical applications was learned. Every course request must be supported by specific documentation of the student's learning in that subject area.

Martin University reserves the right to contact documentation sources to verify the information provided.

TRANSCRIPTS

Students must include copies of transcripts from all previous college and professional work. An official copy of each transcript must be on file with the Registrar. After assessment is complete, the PLA Director will add a copy of the student's Martin University transcript reflecting the credits that have been awarded through the PLA process.

CHAPTER IV: THE EVALUATION PROCESS

SUBMITTING A PORTFOLIO FOR EVALUATION

Prior to the completion of PLA 130, each student will complete an Intent to Petition for Credit to state whether or not he or she will submit the portfolio for credit evaluation. If pursuing credit, the completed form is inserted in the portfolio which is submitted to the PLA instructor by the date designated in the course syllabus.

Should the student choose not to submit a portfolio, the PLA course will fulfill six credits of liberal arts requirement on the degree plan and the student will have no further obligation.

FACULTY EVALUATION

When the completed portfolio has been submitted to the PLA office, the Director of Prior Learning Assessment will oversee the evaluation of the portfolio by appropriate subject area experts. In most cases, the chair of the department reviews PLA requests, although the chair may designate another member of the departmental faculty to review requests in specific areas. In some situations, trained outside experts may evaluate credit requests (see Chapter IV, Section C, Outside Evaluation).

The procedure for such evaluation is as follows:

1. The Director of PLA drafts a memo outlining which courses have been requested and establishing a completion date, then sends the memo and portfolio to the faculty evaluator.
2. The faculty evaluator reads the relevant sections of the portfolio. These include the autobiography, the resume, the individual requests for credit with their accompanying narratives of learning, and the supporting documentation for each of those requests.
3. The evaluator compares the learning documented in the portfolio to the objectives for each requested course and determines if the portfolio documents prior learning equivalent in depth and balance between theory and practice to course requirements.
4. At his or her discretion, the evaluator *may* substitute a course for the one requested, if the documented experience would be more accurately described and credited by the alternative course.
5. The evaluator indicates preliminary approval or denial of credit on the Summary of Requests form, verifying with his or her initials and the date of the evaluation. The evaluator also records his or her explanation for the credit decision on the Evaluation of Portfolio form.

6. The evaluator then returns the portfolio along with the evaluation form(s) to the Director of PLA.

This process is repeated until all course requests have received a preliminary evaluation from subject area experts.

OUTSIDE EVALUATION

Because PLA requests may be made for courses from other regionally accredited colleges, occasions may arise where no current Martin University faculty members possess the necessary expertise to evaluate the request. In such cases, the student must complete a Request for Outside Evaluator form giving permission to charge a maximum fee of \$200 in the event the evaluator requires payment for services rendered. The Director of Prior Learning Assessment will attempt to locate and train a subject area expert from outside the university to evaluate the request. If such an expert cannot be found within a reasonable time, the request cannot be evaluated and will be disallowed. Additionally, evaluators requiring more than \$200 for their services will not be employed.

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS REVIEW

Once all appropriate evaluators have made their credit recommendations, the Director of PLA forwards the portfolio to the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs for final review and approval. The purpose of this review is to insure that all PLA policies and procedures have been followed.

The Associate Vice President may deny course requests that do not satisfy the policies and procedures outlined in this handbook, request further review of particular course requests, or require revision of one or more parts of the portfolio before credit is granted.

CHAPTER V: AWARDING CREDIT

GUIDELINES AND LIMITATIONS OF CREDIT AWARDS

There is no limit to the total number of credits that students may request through PLA, but the following should be kept in mind:

1. The maximum allowable credits that can be earned via any PLA method such as portfolio preparation and CLEP will be 60 credit hours.
2. CLEP exams must be completed prior to start of PLA course.
3. Students must meet the university's minimum residency of 34 credit hours.
4. Students may earn a maximum of 24 credit hours in their major; however, each division will have authority to decrease the maximum but none may increase it.
5. Each division will have autonomy to determine which, if any, major courses are eligible for PLA credit and which must be completed through coursework.
6. Divisions may require students petitioning for credit in a 300 or 400 level course to take a proficiency test.
7. Each division will establish and maintain a list of certifications, licenses, seminars, etc., that are recognized as equivalent to a particular course or courses.
8. Students may request courses from other colleges as long as such courses would be eligible for transfer credit and have a place in the Degree Plan. However, if we cannot find a qualified evaluator, the credit will not be granted.
9. Credit for prior learning will be awarded if the student meets the requirements for portfolio submission as explained and directed in PLA 130 and meets the expected course learning outcomes as determined by evaluators. Completion of the PLA course and submission of a portfolio does not guarantee credit will be awarded.
10. Students transferring from unaccredited colleges or universities may not use PLA as a means to transfer courses.
11. Students that are unable to provide official transcripts from regionally accredited colleges and universities because of a balance owed, or any other reason, may not use PLA as a means to circumvent transferring credits

NOTIFICATION AND RECORDING OF CREDIT AWARDS

When the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs approves the final portfolio, the Director of Prior Learning Assessment draws up a list of approved credits and a letter explaining the credit award for the Associate Vice President's signature.

The Registrar is notified of awarded credit and enters the credits on the student's permanent transcript. Credits appear as regular courses on the transcript with a notation of G (Granted through PLA). The Registrar returns a copy of the student's transcript reflecting the granted credits to the PLA office, where it is added to the student's portfolio.

The credit award letter and official transcript are mailed to the student as the official notification of the results of the PLA process. Additional copies of the credit award letter are placed in the student's PLA file and sent to the student's mentor.

PLA ARCHIVE

The completed portfolio, including the transcript reflecting the credits granted, is secured in the PLA Archive. Martin University will keep portfolios in the archive for three years after credits are awarded. When the archival period has expired, students will be notified about retrieving the portfolio. Portfolios not collected within thirty days of the notification letter will be destroyed.

APPEALS PROCESS

A student who is unsatisfied with the credit awards may appeal in writing the decisions of the subject area experts and the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs. To do so, the student must complete a Request to Appeal PLA Credit no later than thirty days from the last day of the semester in which the student was enrolled in PLA 130.

REOPENING A PORTFOLIO

Sometimes a student will develop further college-level learning separate from coursework at Martin University. A student may petition to the Director of PLA to reopen the PLA portfolio by completing a Request to Reopen PLA Portfolio form and document the additional learning. If the Director of PLA determines that the new learning is sufficient to pursue additional requests for credit, a supplement to the original portfolio may be created. A \$500 fee will be assessed and must be submitted before the new request is forwarded for faculty evaluation. Completion of the form and submitting the fee does not guarantee credit will be awarded.

Request for PLA University Credit

Name:	Major:	Minor:
S.S.#:	Semester:	Date:
Course Number and Name:		
Name of College if other than Martin University:		
Catalog Description:		
Time(s) of Learning:	Place(s) of Learning:	
Narrative of Learning:		
Requirement: Core Course: _____ Major: _____ Minor: _____		
(If your request does not fit into any of these 3 categories, consult instructor before making your request.)		
Documentation [provide page number(s) and brief summary of each relevant item]:		

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PLA RESOURCES

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. www.cael.org

Fiddler, Morris, Catherine Marienau and Urban Whitaker. *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures, 2ed.* Philadelphia: CAEL, 2006

Higher Learning Commission, www.ncahlc.org

Lamdin, Lois. *Earn College Credit for What You Know, 4ed.* Chicago: CAEL, 2006.