



**PRIOR LEARNING
ASSESSMENT (PLA)
PROGRAM HANDBOOK**

2007-2008



2007 – 2008
Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Handbook

**A Regional University
Of the
University System of Georgia**

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Preface

Valdosta State University initiated a Prior Learning Assessment pilot program effective Spring Semester 2008. This new initiative was piloted with selective courses and departments during Spring and Summer terms of 2008.

This handbook is designed to provide students, faculty, administrators, and other interested individuals with information needed when seeking credit for prior learning which is related to specific courses at Valdosta State University. The handbook will be continuously revised after Spring Semester 2008 based upon lessons learned as the program progresses.

The Prior Learning Assessment program began as a pilot project funded by the Transition to Teaching grant and was cooperatively developed by faculty members from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Dewar College of Education. A PLA Working Group composed of members of both colleges was charged with developing the Pilot Project. Members of the PLA Working Group who developed the PLA program and related materials are Dr. Heather Brasell, Dr. Ada Burnette, Dr. Mary Ellen Dallman, Dr. Sharon L. Gravett, Dr. Christine James, Dr. Sean Lennon, Dr. Jerry Merwin, Dr. Jim Nienow, Dr. Beverly Richardson-Blake, Dr. Barbara Stanley, Ms. Karen Shepard, and Dr. Arsalan Wares.

Acknowledgements

Many people helped and provided encouragement during the development of the PLA pilot program and the resulting PLA program at Valdosta State University and other University System of Georgia higher education institutions. Among these are Dr. Ronald M. Zaccari, VSU President, and Dr. Louis Levy, Vice President for Academic Affairs; Dr. Linda Calendrillo, former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Dr. Philip Gunter, Dean of the Dewar College of Education. Other members of the original PLA Supporting Leadership Group included Dr. Kurt Keppler, Vice President for Student Affairs; Dr. Marsha Krotseng, former Associate Vice President for Strategic Research and Analysis; Dr. Brian Adler, former Dean of the Graduate School; Dr. John Gaston, Dean of the College of the Arts; Mr. Chuck Hudson, Registrar; Mr. Walter Peacock, Director of Admissions; and Ms. Maggie Roberts, Director of College of Education Advising Center. The Deans' Council has also been involved in the development of this project. We also acknowledge the contributions of one of the original PLA Working Group members, the late Dr. Adele Ducharme.

Important guidance was provided by Dr. Patricia Patterson, Executive Director of Teacher Quality Initiatives, University System of Georgia, and our consultants, Dr. Morry Fiddler and Dr. Catherine Marineau of DePaul University. Their wealth of knowledge gave the Work Group background information and sources, when coupled with their training and experiences, to develop the PLA program at VSU.

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INTRODUCTION

What is Prior Learning?

Prior learning is learning gained through life or work outside of structured higher educational courses. Many people learn through their experiences in life such as those in professional endeavors (through business, the military, or other work/training experiences) or through other educational experiences (through community work, family, travel, or personal study).

Why has Valdosta State University decided to adopt PLA?

The administration and faculty at VSU believes that PLA fits with the mission of the University. The mission of Valdosta State University (VSU) is to:

Prepare our students to meet global opportunities and challenges through excellence in teaching and learning.

Expand the boundaries of current knowledge, and explore the practical applications of that knowledge, through excellence in scholarship and creative endeavors.

Promote the economic, cultural and educational progress of our community and our region, through excellence in service outreach.

VSU seeks to accomplish this mission in a dynamic, student-centered learning environment marked by a respect for diverse abilities, backgrounds, and contributions by all members of the university community.

To better meet this mission, VSU will work with students from diverse backgrounds to evaluate their prior learning and determine if it meets the stands and requirements of college-level learning.

What is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)?

PLA is a process through which students **identify** areas of relevant learning from their past experiences, **demonstrate** that learning through appropriate documentation, and **submit** their materials so that they can be assessed and possibly awarded academic credit relative to specific course objectives at VSU.

The Council of Adult and Experiential Learning defines PLA as follows: “The recognition of learning gained from experiences that may be granted credit or otherwise certified... The assessment of learning attained through experiences irrespective of the time and place in which they occurred.” (*Assessing Learning*, 2nd edition, By Morry Fiddler, Catherine Marienau, and Urban Whitaker p.12)

Who is eligible to participate in PLA?

Prospective students who fit the following criteria are eligible to participate in PLA:

- they are adults
- they are non-traditional students
- they have other learning experiences outside of a traditional college curriculum.

How should interested students determine if PLA is right for them?

Students who believe they might be eligible for PLA should schedule an appointment with VSU's PLA Counselor, Dr. Gerald Merwin

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Dr. Merwin will work with students to determine if they have prior learning experiences for which they could possibly earn college credit.

What are some ways of earning credit for prior learning?

Broadly speaking, one of the goals of college level education is to prepare responsible, reflective citizens who adapt constructively to change. College level education also helps students become critical thinkers and problem solvers in an ever-changing world. Students can acquire learning from a variety of sources outside the traditional classroom, and they can earn appropriate credit in their work towards a degree for verifiable college level learning acquired through life or work experience, not for the experience itself. Students who acquire the level of knowledge that meets the expectations and the learning outcomes of a specific course may get credit for that course, provided the students can demonstrate proficiency in that specific course. Students' knowledge of materials addressed in a specific course can be assessed in a number of ways:

CLEP

The College-Level Examination Program is administered by the College Board and provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate college-level achievement through a program of examinations in undergraduate college courses. CLEP examinations in five general areas ([Composition & Literature](#), [Foreign Languages](#), [History & Social Sciences](#), [Science & Mathematics](#), and [Business](#)) allow students to demonstrate mastery of material taught in about 30 courses that most students take as requirements in the first two years of college. (See <http://www.valdosta.edu/academic/CLEP.html> for CLEP test areas and minimum scores).

AP (Advanced Placement)

The College Board offers 35 examinations across 20 subject areas to high school students. Students with appropriate scores on appropriate examinations can get credit for specific courses at VSU (see page 21 of the catalog 2007-2008).

Credit by Departmental Exams

Students currently enrolled who present satisfactory evidence that they are qualified in a particular subject may receive credit by an examination developed and administered by the appropriate instructional department. Satisfactory evidence may be, but is not limited to, work experience, non-credit courses, course work taken at non-accredited institutions, or military courses. Permission must be obtained from the head of the instructional department offering the course; however, examinations will not be permitted in courses for which a student has previously taken an examination for credit or was previously enrolled at Valdosta State University as a regular or audit student. It is suggested that students check with their advisor and the Registrar's Office prior to requesting an examination for credit, to ensure that the credit will apply toward their graduation requirements. The credit will be entered in the student's academic record; however, the grade received will not calculate in the semester or cumulative grade point average. Students must pay the Business and Finance Office, in advance of the examination, the current non-refundable fee for credit by examination. The student will show the receipt to the faculty member conducting the examination. The instructional department is responsible for reporting the course number, title, credit hours, and fee receipt to the Registrar's Office for processing. Failing grades will be reported and posted to the student's record.

Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Educational Support (DANTES)

VSU will grant credit for DANTES/DSST examinations determined to be equivalent to CLEP. The same score minimums will apply to these tests as the CLEP. CLEP credit will be indicated by a "K" on the student's transcript. (See the [web site for the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs](#) for more information.)

ACE Credits

The American Council on Education (ACE) is an organization that provides guidance to colleges and universities on the acceptance of credit. VSU is a member of ACE and honors ACE credits as appropriate for the program of study for students. Students must contact their advisor and the [VSU Offices of Admissions](#) for information on documentation of ACE credits and verification of their application to programs of study. ACE can be found online at: <http://www.acenet.edu>.

PLA Documentation Course

If prospective students have other learning experiences that may fit courses not served under one of the above options, they may be advised to sign up for the PLA Documentation course (PLA 2000). This course is the method by which students will develop documentation for the courses for which they hope to earn PLA credit.

Documentation, as used at Valdosta State University, includes an organized set of verifiable evidence and reflections of prior learning (e.g., skills, letters, recognitions, certifications, and experiences) for which one seeks credit.

The PLA Documentation Course is a two credit hour course offered online. The course is taught by PLA Counselor. In this course, students will learn how to develop the appropriate documentation sets for the classes for which they wish to seek credit. By the end of the semester, they should have materials ready to submit to faculty assessors from the program in which they are seeking credit.

Credit for prior learning is recorded on the student's transcript in the form of a letter grade of **K**, **S**, or **U** associated with a particular course; these grades are not included in the computation of grade-point averages. In general, credit for prior learning documented through a test or program not administered by VSU (CLEP, AP, DANTES, ACE) is indicated by a grade of **K**, while credit for prior learning assessed by VSU through departmental exams or the PLA program is indicated by an **S**, or, in the case of a failed departmental exam, **U**.

NO MORE THAN A TOTAL OF 30 SEMESTER HOURS CAN BE EARNED THROUGH ANY COMBINATION OF CLEP, CREDIT BY DEPARTMENTAL EXAMINATION, CORRESPONDENCE COURSES, EXTENSION WORK, PLA AND ADVANCED PLACEMENT.

What are the National Criteria for Quality Assurance in Assessing Learning for Credit?

- I. Credit or its equivalent will be awarded only for *learning*, and not for *experience*.
- II. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning.
- III. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
- IV. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
- V. Credit or other credentialing will be appropriate to the academic context in which it is awarded and accepted. The program of study and the student's major, i.e., core, upper-division, or graduate, of the student determines the "academic context."

Adapted From:

Morry Fiddler, Catherine Marieneau & Urban Whitaker. *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, & Procedures*. Chicago: CAEL (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning), 2006.

For more information visit: The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) at <http://www.cael.org/>.

What are the advantages of PLA?

PLA will reduce the repetition of relevant course-related material for students with prior learning (or with prior degrees). The documentation course will also help students who have not been in

college before or who have not been in college recently to reacquaint themselves with college learning and expectations.

PLA will also reduce the time and the money required to earn an undergraduate or graduate degree although it will require the investment of both. Certain PLA components require fees such as testing (e.g., departmental examinations and standardized tests) and portfolio assessment. However, in general, PLA should take less time and money to complete than taking regular classes.

By evaluating prior learning, VSU verifies that the particular learning of students was important and was at the college level. Most importantly, PLA enables students to gain greater insight about themselves.

DESCRIPTION OF COURSES

What kinds of courses are available for PLA credit?

In theory, any course in the Valdosta State University curriculum could be eligible for PLA credit. However, students should be aware that there will be some courses that are more or less relevant to their learning experiences and to their degree program. New courses available for PLA credit will continue to be added; please consult the PLA Counselor.

Current courses for which assessments have been developed include the following:

Course
ACED 1100 Intro to Business
ACED 2050 Communication for the Workplace
ACED 3100 Computer Systems
ACED 3400 Applied Computer Technology
CHEM 1211 Principles of Chemistry I
CHEM 1212 Principles of Chemistry II
CRJU 2100 Survey of Law Enforcement
CRJU 4910 Internship in Criminal Justice
CS 4121 Data Communications and Networks I
CS 4122 Data Communications and Networks II
CS 4345 Operating Systems
Mathematics
MSED 7002 Content Methods
MSED 7005 Teaching Internship I

understandings, achievements, experiences, competencies, training, and certifications that align with specific course objectives. The portfolio developed in the documentation course should not only describe the relevant experience but should also identify the particular learning outcomes.

Students must also offer a critical self-assessment of what college-level learning has been acquired through selected non-traditional experience. This experience might include a variety of work, training, reading and research, civil and military service, or life learning.

Once students complete and submit the PLA portfolio, assessors will evaluate it to determine if that portfolio provides evidence that ties those skills to a specific course objectives. If the portfolio does so, credit can be awarded when assessors determine that the prior learning is acceptable for credit.

What does the PLA Counselor do?

Students who believe that they may have prior learning that can be used for academic credit should schedule an appointment with the PLA Counselor who will work with them to determine if the portfolio documentation process is appropriate. If students decide to pursue this route, the PLA Counselor will enroll them in the PLA documentation course.

How can prior learning be made to match the learning outcomes at Valdosta State University?

Prior learning will provide students a way of thinking about broad categories of learning. The learning outcomes will help the PLA Counselor in guiding students to align and categorize their prior learning with the learning outcomes at VSU.

What are the learning outcomes at Valdosta State University?

The VSU core curriculum provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions indicative of an educated person and foundational to lifelong learning. The eight student outcomes of VSU's general education curriculum are:

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of the society of the United States and its ideals.
2. Students will demonstrate cross-cultural perspectives and knowledge of other societies.
3. Students will use computer and information technology when appropriate.
4. Students will express themselves clearly, logically, and precisely in writing and in speaking, and they will demonstrate competence in reading and listening.
5. Students will demonstrate knowledge of scientific and mathematical principles and proficiency in laboratory practices.

6. Students will demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultural heritages in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.
7. Students will demonstrate the ability to analyze, to evaluate and to make inferences from oral, written, and visual materials.
8. Students will demonstrate knowledge of principles of ethics and their employment in the analysis and resolution of moral problems.

Upper division and graduate programs also have further outcomes which students are required to meet.

How do students register for the PLA Documentation Course?

Students register for the PLA Documentation Course in consultation with the PLA Counselor.

What are PLA Documentation Course requirements?

The portfolio as used at Valdosta State University includes an organized variety of verifiable evidence, documentation and reflections of prior learning experiences (e.g., skills, letters, recognitions, certifications and experiences) for which a student seeks credit. Students and the PLA Documentation class professor must agree upon the content and prior learning outcomes achieved as documented in the portfolio.

In the portfolio class, the outcomes set the requirements and include the following:

- Establishment of a working relationship with the Prior Learning Counselor for ongoing identification and development of evidence for the assessment of students' prior learning.
- Information on the format, length, content, and structure of the portfolio.
- Understanding of the system by which prior learning is assessed in a given program or organization at the University.
- Determination of sources of prior learning which may include, but not be limited to, the candidates' evidence of job descriptions, work samples, videotapes, performance appraisal reports, promotion letters, awards, correspondence, newspaper articles, reports, work logs, learning logs, college activities, students' perceptions, journal articles, presentations, book reviews, photographs, professional organization involvement, and other life experiences from teaching and training, continuing education unit, hobbies, professional activities, recognitions, non-credit courses, clinical experiences, public and non-public service, military service, internships, licensure examination scores, membership in professional or trade organizations, military separation papers, military record, travel, homemaking, annotated resource lists, conversation with experts, paintings done, dances choreographed, exhibits, expert testimony, testimonials,

- Documentation and organization of possible and appropriate supporting sources of prior learning events and experiences that have contributed to students' learning as individuals or as members of a group to show evidence of creditable learning. Produce only those items that are acceptable to VSU and the program in which credit is sought and that can be assessed.
- Analysis of events and experiences in students' lives, including the provision of reflections on the prior learning.
- Identification of the different parts of the portfolio, suitable labeling of the parts, and appropriate evidence for inclusion in the total portfolio and all of its parts.
- Establishment of the appropriate length and structure of the portfolio.
- Ascertain the educational, personal, and career goals and plans as a context for the assessment of students' prior learning.
- Application of criteria for determining the college-level qualities of students' learning.
- Demonstration of knowledge and usage of program-specific forms and formalities for submitting evidence of learning for assessment
- Usage of the outcomes of a learning assessment process to plan future educational and professional activities.
- Development and submission of the portfolio for the classes in which students are seeking credit by students using Standard English in well written documents which are properly word processed and which use appropriate guides for writing based on departmental requirements (e.g., APA and MLA).

What are the appropriate PLA Documentation Course enrollment and completion times?

The PLA Course must be taken upon entry into a University program when students select the portfolio as the means of entry. The PLA Documentation class must be completed by the end of the junior year (90 semesters of credit) for undergraduate programs since no provision will be made for receipt of credit during the senior year of undergraduate programs. At the graduate level, the PLA Documentation Course must be completed by the end of second semester of enrollment.

What should the portfolio for the PLA Documentation Course include?

The material contained in the PLA portfolio will vary depending on the course and department for which students seek credit. An example of what a portfolio might contain follows:

- A cover and a title page
- A table of contents
- A resume'
- A copy of all transcripts (unofficial)
- An autobiographical essay
- A critical reflection
- Present and future educational and career plans
- A written statement of the prior learning related to the course for which credit is sought
- Materials to document and support the prior learning being claimed.
- A summary statement.

How are portfolios evaluated for credit?

The assessors (evaluators) of the portfolios are, in most cases, faculty members, from the department(s) in which students hope to receive course credit. In some special circumstances, professionals in a given field may do portfolio assessments. The assessors will evaluate the submitted portfolios using already determined content area standards, such as learning outcomes, objectives, and criteria as outlined in documents such as those used in SACS reviews. The students' PLA Documentation Course instructor will guide them through the process in this class.

When will students learn what credit they have received?

The departments responsible for grading particular examinations determine the grading timeline for the examinations. Portfolios are due three weeks prior to the end of the semester for consideration of receipt of credit by PLA. The portfolio due date permits the announcement of the assessors' decisions to coincide with the final examinations and regular grades of that semester.

Do students get feedback from the portfolio assessors?

Credit could be awarded after the first submission, in which case the student will be notified that credit has been granted. The assessors may specifically outline areas for improvement and encourage students to resubmit their documentation one time during the next semester. The assessors will provide a report giving specific feedback to students.

How do students resubmit portfolios?

Students may resubmit the portfolio for re-assessment, with a revision of the documentation set and inclusion of any noted areas for improvement in the semester immediately after the PLA Documentation Course or the original assessment of that particular documentation set. Students

are allowed to resubmit only one time for any given course.

How will the credit be reported and recorded on students' transcripts?

If the assessors deem a portfolio “satisfactory,” they will submit a PLA Credit Approval Form (available at <http://www.valdosta.edu/pla/resources/>). This form must be approved by the assessor, the assessor’s department head and dean, and the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs before being sent to the Registrar’s Office. Students will earn a grade of satisfactory (S) or unsatisfactory (U) for the PLA Documentation Course and the course or courses for which students have successfully earned PLA credit will be noted on the transcript with a letter grade of “S”. These “S” or “U” grades will not be part of the student’s grade point average (GPA).

PLA Documentation Course Summary

The portfolio provides students the opportunity to show what they have learned, how that learning was acquired, and their ability to apply that learning as well as to reflect critically on it. A well written, appropriately documented portfolio in a quality presentation format provides the opportunity to earn credit for previous learning, not just prior activities. Competencies acquired must be clearly shown.

NUMBER OF PLA DOCUMENTATION COURSES PERMITTED

A maximum of 30 semester hours can be earned through any combination of CLEP, credit by departmental examination, correspondence courses, extension work, advanced placement (AP), or PLA credit. Students should also work with the PLA Counselor and their academic advisor to determine any additional requirements they may need to consider.

TUITION AND OTHER COSTS

What fees are charged for the PLA Documentation Course?

The PLA Documentation Course has the same tuition rate as any other two-hour VSU course. Students may qualify to use financial aid for this course, depending on the specific rules and regulations of their financial aid package.

Is there a PLA documentation assessment fees?

When students have successfully completed PLA 2000, they are allowed one free assessment as part of their enrollment in that course. For every assessment after the first (or a resubmission of the first), students must go the VSU Bursary to pay a \$50 PLA Assessment fee. They will then submit their receipt for this fee to the PLA Counselor who will submit their portfolio to the appropriate assessors. Students must pay this fee for each assessment for which they apply after the first. If students take a departmental examination without enrolling in the PLA 2000 course, they must pay the departmental examination fee.