

Thinking about writing a portfolio?

Portfolios are written in an effort to obtain college credit for college level knowledge learned outside of the traditional classroom. This knowledge can be learned via trainings, seminars, job related duties and life experiences. It is important, though, to realize that credit is given for experience alone; the credit is awarded for the *knowledge* that comes from those experiences.

Many individuals are attracted to the idea of earning credits for “life experiences.” It sounds so easy and what better way to earn credits that count toward your degree? However, one primary concept in the PLA process is that credit will not be granted for your *life experiences*. Universities grant credit for the *knowledge* one acquires while going to school, not for the experience of just attending class. This same concept applies to assessment of prior learning. The PLA process is one of assessing your life experiences and determining the learning, the knowledge, related to the experiences. In some cases, you will be discussing the knowledge and skills you had to possess in order to accomplish the activity and in others, you will be discussing the knowledge and skills you acquired as a result of doing the experience. In education terminology these are called *learning outcomes* and they form the basis of how one assesses the complexity and level of the knowledge acquired.

There are really several very valid reasons why someone might decide to write a portfolio.

- Validate knowledge that does not appear on a university transcript
- Meet pre-requisite requirements for more advanced courses
- Demonstrate proficiency in a specific area related to career goals
- Acquire hours toward graduation more rapidly than could be done by taking classes
- Personal satisfaction

Although developing a worthy portfolio requires a significant investment in time and attention to detail, for many individuals the results are worth the effort. For others, the idea may sound great but the idea of validating knowledge they already have is not consistent with their goals for completing a degree. In other words, some individuals want to take advantage of the college-level learning they have acquired outside the classroom while others would prefer to be exposed to new knowledge by taking classes. Either way is appropriate.

Standards for PLA Evaluation

In this evaluation process, there are *categories of standards* to which all prior learning assessments must be applied. These standards were developed by Dr. Whitaker and, working with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), have become internationally recognized and adopted.

How is experiential learning assessed? The standards are:

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

These standards were developed to provide guidance in the assessment process, and, according to Whitaker, “to state specific goals as to the qualities most essential to sound assessment.”

Standard I is, perhaps, the most important standard of the five because it focuses on the experience versus learning. It clearly defines the concept that experience, in and of itself, may not have resulted in knowledge that is relevant to college level learning. Certainly experience is a viable means of acquiring knowledge but it is important to understand that there is a difference between *input* and *outcomes*. For example, an instructor may determine to assign points for attendance in a class (experience) but the question becomes, does attendance result in knowledge (learning outcomes.) If we take this concept and apply it to the world of work, does years of experience on a job automatically equate to significant learning at the college level?