



COMPLETING THE PUZZLE

KCU'S GUIDE TO PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT



INTRODUCTION

In a 2011 New York Times article, David Leonardt cited numerous studies that suggested the average American with a bachelor's degree was earning significantly more than his non-degreed coworkers in the same profession. Leonardt additionally noted that college graduates are "far less likely to be unemployed than non-graduates." The importance of having a bachelor's degree cannot be understated; however, the majority of adults do not possess these credentials.

According to the US Census Bureau (2012), 56.7% of U.S. high school graduates over the age of 25 lack the minimal educational requirements for a variety of occupations – a bachelor's degree. While 9.6% of America's adult population possesses an associate's degree, 16.7% have started their college studies but have never finished. Consequently 26.9% of all American adults 25 and older have some collegiate experience but do not have a four-year degree. For many Americans, not having a baccalaureate degree is the missing piece of their life's puzzle. Fortunately, these adults have learned through varied life and work related experiences; some of this learning can be translated into college credit.

Over the past several decades, American higher educational institutions have embraced the idea that collegiate level learning can occur outside of the traditional classroom. Such learning has many venues; and according to the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (2011), prior learning assessment (PLA) is defined as "learning gained outside a traditional academic environment. Put another way, it's learning and knowledge your students acquire while living their lives: working, participating in employer training programs, serving in the military, studying independently, volunteering or doing community service, and studying open source courseware. In short, PLA is the evaluation and assessment of an individual's life learning for college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training" (para. 3).

Furthermore, CAEL expands upon its definition in the following manner:

Prior learning assessment is not just one method or tool. It includes a variety of methods such as:

- **individualized student portfolios** or portfolio assessments, conducted by individual colleges or CAEL's LearningCounts.org, a national online prior learning assessment service;
- **evaluation of corporate and military training** by the American Council on Education (ACE); ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by noncollegiate agencies, or the ACE Guides;
- **program evaluations** done by individual colleges of noncollegiate instructional programs that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies, or the Evaluation of Local Training;
- **challenge exams**, or customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement; these may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill; and



- **standardized exams** such as Advanced Placement Examination Program, or AP Exams, offered by the College Board; College Level Examination Program, or CLEP Exams, also offered by the College Board; Excelsior College Exams (formerly Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams); and The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams, conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric (Sherman, Klein-Collins, & Palmer, 2012, p. 2).

THE VALUE OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT:

At Kentucky Christian University, we provide adult students the opportunity to use what they have learned in life to gain college credit. As noted above, there are several methods to achieve credit for prior learning. The advantage of prior learning credit benefits the student in numerous ways.

CAEL (2010) outlined the two greatest attributes for an institution's acceptance of prior learning credit – cost to the student and the ability to complete a degree in an accelerated fashion. By not reinventing the wheel, the institution uses a variety of methods to evaluate learning that may have occurred outside of the classroom – some of this learning may have already been evaluated by outside agencies and can be transcribed through the American Council on Education (ACE), The College Board, Thomson-Prometric, and other agencies. These types of learning experiences are generally two-fold in nature: credit by examination and the evaluation of professional certifications and training. These evaluations of learning are generally less expensive for the student than are traditional classes.

The process of reflecting upon one's own learning both past and present can be a transformative learning experience (Blaschke, 2012). Lamoreaux and Taylor (2005, p. 1) suggested, in addition to college credit, adult learners participating in prior learning assessment have "increased self-confidence related to affirmation of their experiential learning and increased self-knowledge from reflecting on experience, as well as improved writing and organizational skills." While experience does not always equate to learning, reflecting upon the experience, as noted by Van Kleef (2007), can initiate the learning process.

These experiences, which can be reflected upon, take many forms. They include, but are not limited to, the following: professional certifications, specialized training, avocational interests, volunteer experiences, employment activities, continuing education, participation in massive open online courses (MOOCs), and private/personal study. Often these experiences are in tandem with each other and provide the underpinning of learning. Remember, a key element in experiential learning is that "experience is an input and learning is an outcome" (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006, p. 14).

In a study of prior learning students at 48 institutions in the US and Canada, CAEL (2010) and the Lumina Foundation also discovered that students who utilized prior learning assessment were more likely to complete a degree program than other adults who did not utilize PLA credit. The results were irrespective of institutional size and type, individual student ability and grade point average (GPA),



demographic attributes (gender, age, economic status, race, or ethnicity), or whether the student qualified for financial aid.

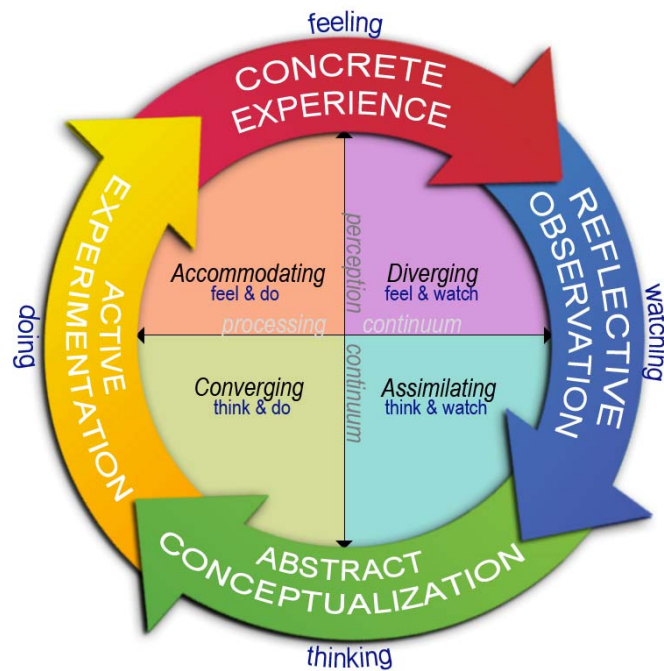
These findings suggest that prior learning assessment was often the catalyst for an adult's success in a degree program. The American Council on Education (ACE) concurs, and students who utilize a credit for prior learning model have a high success rate (82%) towards earning a degree, as the time to completion was shorter for non-traditional adults (Ryu, 2013).

There are additional benefits of prior learning assessment. According to the American Council on Education, it "plays a dual role—meeting continuous learning demands of today's knowledge-driven economy as well as contributing to the nationwide efforts to raise the education levels of average American citizens" (Ryu, 2013, p. 1).

THE PROCESS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

Beginning in the 1970s, Dr. David A. Kolb at Case-Western Reserve University began assessing various pathways that adults learn by experience. Drawing from the works of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, Kolb (1984) constructed his model of experiential learning (see Figure 1). His theory was based that adults learn experientially through having concrete experiences, observing and reflecting upon these experiences, forming abstract concepts based on the experiences, and by testing new concepts. The cycle is continually repeated.

Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Model



According to Kolb (1984), "Experiential learning theory, however, proceeds from a different set of assumptions [than does traditional learning theories]. Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience" (p. 26).

Kolb's model fits well into the adult learning process as cited by Miller (2006):

The non-traditional learner typically learns through another means, or style. The non-traditional learner typically is not afforded the structured learning environment enjoyed by the traditional learner. The non-traditional learner may learn in any number of environments—on the job, performing some activity at home, donating her/his time to charity, serving in the military service, participating in a recreational activity or hobby, and/or any number of activities. The non-traditional learner learns through experience, through participating and by being active in a process. Whereas the traditional learner typically learns by listening to lectures, reading a text, learning vocabulary, taking tests, etc., the non-traditional learner is busy learning by doing. The non-traditional learner learns by trial and error (p. 4).

While Kolb (1984) did not advocate tying outcomes to experiential learning, this is what precisely must be done in order to assess whether learning equivalent to classroom type learning has occurred. Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker (2006) argued, "Statements of learning outcomes are fundamental to a transparent assessment process" (p. 109). Furthermore, "Without the benefit of articulated outcome statements, assessors may inadvertently ask learners to demonstrate learning at a level that is above or below the standards applied to course-based students" (Fiddler, Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006, p. 109). Meeting the stated learning outcomes, as Cabell and Owston (1997) advised, is critical to the granting of college credit for experiential learning; thus, successfully meeting the course outcomes becomes a benchmark for whether an adult learner's experience is equivalent to the learning that occurs on ground at a college or university.

THE PROCESS OF EARNING CREDIT:

While accepting transcribed credit is one method Kentucky Christian University uses to aid students in finishing an uncompleted bachelor's degree, there are other methods to demonstrate collegiate level learning. A KCU Departmental Exam, which is similar to what CAEL (2011) terms as a "challenge exam," is one of these approaches.

Where an exam is available, students have an opportunity to "test out of" a particular subject and earn credit in the process. The cost per exam is calculated at the rate of one credit hour for each exam irrespective of the credit that is awarded. The student would pay this amount whether or not he or she passes. Similar exams are available through agencies such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), DSST (formerly DANTES) exams through the Department of Defense and Prometric, The College



Board's Advance Placement program, Excelsior College's Credit by Exam program, and other offerings by similar agencies.

An additional opportunity where KCU directly provides assessment of prior learning is through a portfolio where a student demonstrates his or her learning. A learning portfolio, which is evaluated by a KCU faculty member, is defined as "A formal written communication, presented by the student to the University, requesting credit or recognition for extra-collegiate learning. The portfolio must make its case by identifying learning clearly and succinctly, and it must provide sufficient supporting information and documentation so that faculty can use it, alone or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for their evaluation" (Lamdin, 1997, p. 84).

For students interested in pursuing prior learning assessment, KCU will only consider evaluating equivalent learning to courses listed in its most recent undergraduate catalog. Students may opt to combine courses that are similar in nature and scope into one portfolio for evaluation. For example, someone who has experience in preaching might combine "COM 101 Fundamentals of Speech," "CMP 240 Introduction to Preaching," and "CMP 321 Expository Preaching" into one document for the evaluation of nine credit hours. If there is great disparity in the disciplines (i.e., a psychology class and a music class), then each course's evaluation would require its own portfolio.

Where two or more courses are combined in a single portfolio, an evaluator may determine that credit is given for one or several of the courses and not for others. In addition, KCU has limited the number of portfolio-based credit that it will grant to 24 undergraduate hours.

THE PROCESS OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT:

To initiate the process, the student submits a form (see appendices) to the KCU Distance Education office requesting a portfolio evaluation. Once submitted, an evaluator will be contracted. Prior to submission to the evaluator, KCU's Dean of Distance Education will assist students in completing the portfolio process.

Be aware that some courses such as mathematics and other skill based classes are not generally well suited for portfolio evaluation. Students, however, may find an acceptable standardized exam that will score competency. This would be less time consuming and involved than trying to construct a portfolio for evaluation. The KCU Department of Distance Education will provide guidance in this regard where applicable.

While the distance education office assists the student in the process of creating his or her portfolio, the evaluation and the recommendation to grant credit is determined by the portfolio evaluator who is a subject matter expert and a KCU faculty member. By examining all of the evidence that is presented in the portfolio, the evaluator will determine whether course objectives are met for a passing grade in the subject area. If the evidence indicates that the objectives have been satisfactorily met, the faculty



evaluator will submit a completed rubric (see appendices) to the KCU registrar with the notification of a passing grade or "P" to be granted for the class.

If the evidence is insufficient, the faculty member may suggest that the student refine his/her portfolio for resubmission (at no additional charge) so that an evaluation of the learning can properly occur. If the student does not meet a majority of the course objectives, the faculty member will enter a failing grade on the rubric submitted to the registrar. A failed attempt of portfolio credit will not appear on the student's transcript. It is important to remember that the submission of a portfolio is no guarantee that a person will receive passing credit when evaluated.

At the time the portfolio is presented, the student will also submit payment of \$300.00 for each portfolio to be evaluated. Checks are to be made payable to Kentucky Christian University. The fee is based on the number of portfolios submitted and not on the number of courses or credit hours requested for evaluation. The fees are for the evaluation process and not for the amount of credit evaluated or awarded.

Following the evaluation process, KCU retains the portfolio for future documentation and reference purposes.

THE PORTFOLIO'S CONTENT:

This section will help delineate what is necessary to successfully assemble a portfolio for evaluation of credit. While the next section will enumerate the presentational aspects of the portfolio, this segment will outline the necessary content to be presented. The portfolio is to include the following elements:

1. A Title Page
2. Portfolio Request Form (see appendices)
3. Current Resume
4. Autobiography (with stated educational goals)
5. Degree Plan
6. Evidence and Documentation for each Class
7. Conclusion
8. Resources/Bibliography

Each section is described in detail below.

Title Page (1 page)

The title page will include the following information:

- Student's name
- Student's KCU ID number



- Student's address
- Student's email addresses (both KCU and private addresses, if applicable)
- Student's phone number
- Date of submission
- Evaluator's name, title, and area of expertise (i.e., business, music, etc.).
- The number of credit hours that are being petitioned.

Table of Contents (1 page)

The student will construct the table of contents with the major areas of the portfolio listed with the corresponding page numbers.

Portfolio Request Form (1 page)

This is the signed form listing the courses being petitioned for credit and a copy will be returned to the student prior the formation of the portfolio. It must be completed with course numbers and names and signed and dated by both the student and the Dean of Distance Education. See the appendices for a blank form.

Current Resume (2+ pages)

The resume will acquaint the reviewer with the petitioner's educational and work history. The resume should include the following information concerning the petitioner:

1. Educational history since high school (including all professional certifications).
2. Professional history giving the company name, location, dates employed, and a brief summary of job duties and accomplishments for each.
3. Military experience including dates of service, ranks and ratings, citations, and an outline of training and certifications awarded during the student's years of service. This includes participation as a member of any of the seven uniformed service agencies of the United States, their related reserve and National Guard components, and the US Merchant Marine Service.
4. Volunteer activities and/or unpaid ministerial service with the names of organization, the nature of the service, and the dates of participation.
5. Avocational interests and hobbies and a brief statement concerning the student's learning in these areas.
6. Listing of credentials and professional memberships (past and present) held by the petitioner.
7. A list of three to five professional/educational references. Include names, current position, relationship to the petitioner, years known, and current contact information. Letters of recommendation can also be included.



Autobiography (3-5 pages)

In narrative form, the petitioner will introduce himself/herself to the reviewer in the following manner.

- A brief discussion of the student's educational and career goals.
- A description of how these educational goals are linked to the student's work and life.
- Stated reasons why the student desires a university degree.
- An affirmation why the student is petitioning Kentucky Christian University for prior learning assessment.
- How prior learning assessment fits into the student's degree plan.

Specific Course Evaluation (a separate section for each course to be evaluated)

1. Prior Learning Outcome Form (see appendices) (1 page).
2. A list of course objectives (from syllabus) that are numbered sequentially (1 page).
3. Course syllabus (supplied by KCU) (multiple pages).
4. Documentation for each course objective (varies). Include a narrative that explains the following:
 - a. venue of employment/activity and location(s),
 - b. petitioner's occupational or volunteer status and responsibilities
 - c. dates of learning activities,
 - d. evidence on how the objective was met,
 - e. supporting documentation; this can include the following (copies not originals):
 - i. professional certificates,
 - ii. samples of work,
 - iii. letters from employers/project managers,
 - iv. newspaper articles, and
 - v. additional direct or indirect evidence.

Certain evidence that lends itself to a digital presentation (i.e., PowerPoints, video files, photo files, audio files, spreadsheets, & etc.) may be submitted on CD-ROMs or DVDs and can be included with the portfolio. If the petitioner chooses a digital format for submission, these files may be embedded into the portfolio document or sent as separate files.

5. Summary/Conclusion.

Bibliography/Resource List

List any books, journal articles, and websites that aided in the formation of the portfolio. Include the authors' names, title, year of publication, publisher, publisher's location, and URLs. Since evaluations may cross disciplines, use a style of your choosing for the reference page. Recognized styles are APA,



MLA, SBL, and the University of Chicago (Turabian). Information regarding these styles can be accessed at the following web sites:

- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>,
- <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/publishingwithsbl.aspx>, and
- <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/>

THE PORTFOLIO'S PRESENTATION:

While the portfolio's presentation has no bearing on whether a student's petition for credit is granted, a well organized, succinct, and aesthetically pleasing portfolio will aid in the overall evaluation process. Except for KCU syllabi and documentation provided by others, it is recommended that one typeface be consistently used by the student. The student may choose to submit his or her portfolio in one of two methods: a hard copy in a three ring binder or as a digital copy.

If the student chooses to submit a hard copy, the major sections of the portfolio are to be separated by binder dividers with tabs. Digital evidence may be included on a CD-ROM or DVD that accompanies the binder.

If a digital submission is desired, the student may use one of several digital formats. While a Portable Document File (.pdf) that can be read by Adobe Acrobat is recommended, several other document formats are acceptable. These include the following: Microsoft Word files (.doc or .docx), Rich Text Format (.rtf), and Open Document Text (.odt). Any of these formats can be read by Open Office or MS Word. Digital evidence may be imbedded into these files or saved separately.

APPEALING A DECISION:

On occasion, a petitioner for prior learning credit may dispute an unfavorable decision of an evaluator. The reasons why an evaluator may decide not to grant credit may vary; however, a student has the right to appeal the faculty member's decision. Although worded in regard to traditional classes, the academic appeals policy from KCU's 2013-2014 Student Handbook delineates the process:

On occasion, a student may not be in agreement with a decision made by a professor in whose class the student is enrolled. The point of disagreement may relate to any aspect of the course such as course requirements, the grading scale, the attendance policy, teaching methods, grading procedures, etc. If such a disagreement occurs, the student must first discuss the issue with the professor in a prearranged/scheduled meeting. Impromptu meetings before or after class or in the hallway do not prove effective in dealing with such issues. In most cases, dialoging with the professor concerning the issue leads to resolution for both the student and the professor. If resolution is not reached and the student feels the issue warrants further



consideration, the student may file a formal written complaint to the instructor. A written appeal must be filed within 30 days of the incident in question. If resolution is not achieved with the instructor, the student may forward the written appeal, along with the instructor's written response, to the Dean of the school. If resolution is still not achieved, the student may file a written appeal to the Academic Appeals Committee; the appeal should include the written responses of the course instructor and the Dean of the school. The Academic Appeals Committee will render a written recommendation to the Vice President of Academic Affairs within two business days of receiving the appeal. Appeal forms and further instructions are available under the Academic Affairs page of the KCU website (www.kcu.edu) (pp. 13-14).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Although most of these questions are answered in the preceding text, we have segregated the questions that students may ask regarding the prior learning assessment process.

1. **Can prior learning assessment be used for graduate credit?** No, Kentucky Christian University only allows experiential learning for undergraduate credit.
2. **Is there a limit on the number of credits that I petition?** Currently, KCU limits the number of portfolio credits to 24 semester hours.
3. **Are these credits considered KCU credits?** Yes, the credit awarded is based on KCU's course objectives and the evaluation is made by a KCU faculty member. Therefore, the credit earned is KCU credit.
4. **Would I be able to transfer these credits to another institution?** That is the decision of the other institution; however, be aware that some schools will not accept prior learning credit that they did not evaluate.
5. **If a portion of my credits toward my degree come from prior learning assessment will this negatively impact my chances of admittance into graduate school?** Although the venue of learning was non-traditional in nature, equivalent college credit is awarded to the student. PLA credit should not affect graduate admission. The graduate program should be more concerned with an award of a bachelor's degree and not the modalities through which credit had been earned.
6. **Will my PLA credit be accredited?** Credit is not accredited; only schools and programs are accredited. While certain KCU degree tracks having specific programmatic accreditation, KCU is regionally accredited through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' Commission on



Colleges. Numerous schools within the SACSCOC region offer prior learning credit as an option. Most notably are the University of Alabama and the University of Tennessee System.

- 7. I have experience as an engineer; can I submit a portfolio of my learning in that area?**
Unfortunately KCU has no engineering department and thus no evaluators on campus. We have limited PLA evaluation to those courses listed within our current undergraduate catalog.
- 8. If a class has both a theoretical and practical base, how can I demonstrate my understanding of the theory?** While often this is the most difficult part of constructing a portfolio, many candidates have a good understanding of the theoretical aspects through their practical experience. In some cases, it is helpful to identify these competencies through consultation of the discipline's literature. You may document your proficiency of the theory by constructing an annotated bibliography of works consulted. This will serve to strengthen your evidentiary material. For information on constructing an annotated bibliography, see the following resource from Purdue University: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/614/01/>.
- 9. I will get credit by submitting a portfolio, right?** Wrong. There is no guarantee that by submitting a portfolio that credit will be granted. In some cases, no credit or partial credit may be awarded. If the evidence that learning occurred was lacking and there is indication that the course objectives have not been met, credit will not be awarded.
- 10. If I do not get credit for my portfolio, can I appeal the decision?** Yes, see the section titled "Appealing a Decision" in this document.
- 11. How much does portfolio evaluation cost and can I use financial aid for the process?** As with many institutions offering PLA options, KCU charges \$300 for each portfolio evaluation and not for the credit that is being evaluated. Petitioners may combine several courses from the same discipline (i.e., finance, accounting, marketing, and economics) into one portfolio. On occasion, courses from related disciplines (speech and homiletics) may be combined for a single portfolio. A petition for PLA credit of courses from diverse disciplines (art and bio-ethics) would require individual portfolios for each and the student would be charged accordingly. Financial aid cannot be used for portfolio evaluations.
- 12. If I don't get credit for my portfolio, can I get a refund?** No, the minimal charge for portfolio evaluation pays for services of the faculty evaluator as well as other administrative costs.
- 13. How long will it take my portfolio to be evaluated?** We estimate that the evaluation process should take no longer than 30 days for each portfolio.



- 14. How will I be notified regarding the success of my submission?** Upon completion of the evaluation, the faculty member will email you regarding his/her decision on whether you received full, partial, or no credit for your submission.

FINAL WORDS:

Kentucky Christian University and its faculty are committed to aiding students through the portfolio process. If at any time a petitioner needs advice concerning the construction of a portfolio, he or she can contact the KCU Office of Distance Education with specific questions or issues. Good luck in the process.



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APPENDICES



KENTUCKY CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT REQUEST

(submit two copies of this form)

Student Name _____

Student Address _____

Student Email _____

COURSE NUMBER	COURSE NAME

Student Signature

Date

To be completed by KCU

Assigned Evaluator(s)

Dean of Distance Education

Date



KENTUCKY CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT FORM

Student Name _____

Student Email _____

Course Number _____ Course Name _____

Evaluator _____ Date _____

Attach a separate sheet with the student learning outcomes numbered sequentially.

Attach additional forms as necessary.

Outcome Number	Exceeds expectations for the learning outcome 4 points	Meets expectations for the learning outcome 3 points	Meets most of the expectations for the learning outcome 2 points	Meets some of the expectations for the learning outcome 1 point	Fails to meet any of the expectations for the learning outcome 0 points

Additional justification based on portfolio examination: _____

Score (1 - 4): _____

Total _____ Average _____ ☐ Pass (2.0 average minimum) ☐ Fail

Evaluator

Dean of Distance Education





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