



Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

What is PLA?

What types of PLA are there out there?



Prior learning assessment (PLA)

Is a way for you to earn college credit for things you already know. It saves you from having to take courses in subjects that you have already understand. This means that you can progress more quickly towards getting your degree and you do not have to pay full tuition for these courses.

PLA *Prior Learning Assessment*

What is PLA?

Prior Learning Assessment (or PLA) is a method of evaluating what you have learned outside school for college credit. Your past experiences and knowledge (from work, hobbies, volunteering, and other sources) may be shown to be equal to what you could learn in a college classroom. If you can demonstrate this knowledge at the college level, then many institutions in Tennessee will award you college credit for what you already know.

Of course, your knowledge must be relevant to your proposed degree. You may not be able to get credit for your knowledge of computers for a degree in music; however, there are many options for what past learning you can demonstrate and how you can demonstrate it. If you can demonstrate what you have learned, then you may be given college credit, which means you no longer have to take that course. This saves you time and money.



Generally, students demonstrate PLA in one of three forms: **credit by examination, credit recommendations for past training, and portfolio assessments.**

Credit by Examination is a form of test-based evaluation. A student takes an examination in order to demonstrate what he or she knows. For example, you might take a Spanish test to show that you already know Spanish or an algebra test to show that you know algebra. There are several national testing services, which offer a wide variety of tests in many subjects ranging from the most basic to more advanced and specific. Furthermore, some institutions offer their own challenge exams for specific courses. If you pass the test, you get credit for that course without having to pay for and attend that class.

Credit recommendation for past training (or credit recommendation services) make recommendations for college credit based on the evaluation of a particular type of training (often workplace or military). If you have successfully completed the training, then you will be recommended for college level credit. There are several national

organizations, which evaluate hundreds and thousands of different training programs and make credit recommendations for each. Some of the most frequently used are for members of the military (provided by the American Council on Education (ACE)), but many businesses and other organizations have had their training evaluated as well. Furthermore, many institutions have also evaluated the training at local businesses and organizations for college level credit in the same manner. Lastly, some institutions are willing to award credit based on professional licensures, certifications, and apprenticeships.

Portfolio Assessment is often used to evaluate past learning that cannot be captured by credit recommendations or exams. Portfolio assessments are much like reports where a student documents his or her past learning and describes what he or she learned. It is important to note that this is much more than turning in a resume. The student must not just show that they have done something, but that they have learned something from those experiences. After students have compiled their documentation and written analysis of what they have learned per the instructions of their college or university, faculty experts evaluate the portfolio for college level credit. This is also a good option for students who may find standardized test to be difficult.

Why Should I Use PLA?

PLA allows you to earn credit for things you already know. It saves you from having to take courses in subjects that you have already understand. This means that you can progress more quickly towards getting your degree. Also, you do not have to pay full tuition for these courses either.

PLA is Quick

Some forms of PLA can earn you credit much faster than even the most accelerated college courses. For example, an institution may award you credit for military or work training based on an ACE transcript. Once submitted to the institution, this credit is almost immediately awarded without you needing to take any additional steps. There are also hundreds of examinations you can take to show proficiency in a subject area. This means that you can take a 1-3 hour exam, and be awarded up to 12 credit hours at once. It could take a semester or more to earn those credits in a traditional college classroom.

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PLA is Inexpensive

Nearly all public colleges and universities in Tennessee award PLA credit below the cost of full tuition at their institutions. In some cases, the institution does not charge a fee at all. This means, for example, that you could pay \$80 for a CLEP examination and earn 3 credit hours. It could cost you \$500 or more to earn the same credits in a traditional classroom.

PLA Rewards You for What You Already Know

Many adults find it challenging to start back at getting a college degree. Is it worth your time? Will your experience be the same as someone right out of high school? PLA allow you to jump-start your college career. The fact is that quite a lot has happened in your life since you finished high school. You have learned a lot about life, but you have also gained a lot of experience at work, in the military, or in volunteer positions. This knowledge may mean that you do not need to start from scratch. PLA can reward you for this and may make you much closer to your degree than you know.

What is PLA Not?

PLA is not automatic credit for past experiences. We have all had many experiences in our lives, but many of them do not deserve college credit. Furthermore, students cannot simply turn in resumes or work histories and expect to be awarded credit. Students must prove that they have learned something and prove that what they have learned is at the college level. While this site can help you determine if your past experiences might be worth college credit, in many cases the faculty and staff at colleges and universities can help you determine if your knowledge is at the college level. It is also important to understand that the burden is on the student to prove that they deserve credit, whether this means passing a test or discussing the knowledge they have gained in a written portfolio. Furthermore, the credit must be relevant to the degree that you wish to earn.

PLA is not free credit. PLA can often save you time and money because the costs of PLA are dramatically lower than paying the tuition for traditional courses. However, there are costs and fees associated with PLA. To find out more, please see the costs of PLA at each Tennessee public institution by going to <http://www.tn.gov/thec/PLA/PLAFactSheetsbyType.html>.

Types of PLA

Below is a list of most of the types of PLA. There are a wide variety of options of both the types of PLA you can use and what subject areas they cover. To find out more about what types of PLA might be the right fit for you, please look at our self-assessment tool.

Credit by Examination (Test-based PLA)

ACT (American College Testing) - The ACT is a standardized exam typically given to high school students and used in college admissions. It covers areas of English, mathematics, reading, science reasoning, and writing. While mostly an admissions tool, some institutions will award college level credit for certain scores on the ACT.

Advanced Placement (AP) Exams

A series of tests developed by the College Board initially for AP High School courses, including 34 exams in 19 subject areas. For more information visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/subjects.html>

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams

CLEP exams are 33 exams in 5 different subject areas offered by the College Board. Most CLEP tests cover lower level and introductory knowledge of certain subjects, many of which fall within general education requirements. The cost is typically \$80-90 per exam. For more information visit <http://clep.collegeboard.org/>

Course Challenge Exams

Local tests developed by a college to verify learning achievement for a particular course. Often in the form of a final exam, this is usually developed by individual departments or faculty members.

DSST Credit by Exam Program

Formerly known as the DANTES Program, owned and administered by Prometric, tests knowledge of both lower-level and upper-level college material through 38 exams in 6 subject areas for upper and lower division credit. Originally only available to military personnel, DSST exams have been made available to the general public for a fee of \$80 per test. Because of its military origins, some exams have a focus more useful to military personnel. Also, exams cover both general topics, as well as more specific and advance topic. Military personnel should see

http://www.dantes.doded.mil/Sub%20Pages/Exams/Exams_Main.html for more information. If you are not in the military or a veteran, please see <http://www.getcollegecredit.com/>.

Excelsior College Examinations (formerly, ACT-PEP/RCE)

Excelsior exams are a set of 29 general test and 17 nursing tests offered by Excelsior College, NY on a wide variety of subjects. While often more specific than other standardized exams, Excelsior exams cover both upper and lower division subject areas for college credit. While most of the exams are paper-based, Excelsior does offer 8 lower division exams in a computer-based format (called UExcel). While the cost of each exam can vary, they typically are about \$95-\$375 per exam. For more information visit <http://www.pearsonvue.com/excelsior/>.

International Baccalaureate Programs Exams

The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme is an internationally accepted qualification for entry into institutes of higher education. The Diploma Program is designed for students aged 16 to 19; it is a demanding two-year curriculum leading to final examinations in 18 different subject areas. Graduates of the IB program must demonstrate competency in languages, social studies, the experimental sciences and mathematics. In addition the program has three core requirements that are included to broaden the educational experience and challenge students to apply their knowledge and understanding. To receive a diploma, students must achieve a minimum score of 24 out of a possible 45 points, as well as satisfactory participation in the creativity, action, service requirement. For more information visit <http://www.ibo.org/who/>.

SAT Reasoning Test

The SAT is a standardized exam typically given to high school students and used in college admissions. It covers areas of critical reading, mathematics, and writing. While mostly an admissions tool, some institutions will award college level credit for certain scores on the SAT.

Thomas Edison State College Examination Program (TECEP)

TECEP exams are a collection of 22 exams in 7 subject areas for both upper and lower division credit. The topics of TECEP exams in many cases are specific and advanced, although there are some introductory subjects covered. Each test costs \$99. For more information, see <http://www2.tesc.edu/listalltecep.php>.

Credit Recommendation Services (training assessed for credit)

American Council on Education (ACE) Assessed Training and Examinations

ACE CREDIT (Workforce-Based Credit Recommendation service)

This is a service offered through ACE to recognize learning that takes place in the work place in the form of training (corporate, nonprofit, government, etc.) to transfer toward a college degree at participating institutions. Over 600 businesses, agencies, and organizations have had their training evaluated by ACE resulting in thousands of evaluated courses. Students request that ACE compile the details of the training that they have taken into an ACE transcript. The credit is kept on file through ACE and transferred by transcript to institutions, which means that students may need to request the transcripts to apply this credit. The first transcript costs \$40, with copies costing \$15 each. Samples of training programs include those offered through McDonald's and Wal-Mart. For more information visit <http://www2.acenet.edu/credit?fuseaction=browse.main>

ACE Military Credit

This is a service offered through ACE to recognize learning that takes place in the military. The courses are offered through the military, but ACE records the credit through its transcript service. For more information visit <http://www.militaryguides.acenet.edu/>

ACE Examinations

ACE does not offer its own examinations, but it does evaluate standardized exams provided by other organizations for college credit. While technically part of the military and CREDIT services, the ACE catalog includes a list of standardized examinations. While this includes CLEP, Excelsior, DSST, and other standardized exams, it also includes others that are less common (such as the Foreign Service Institute, the Defense Language Institute, and the National Institute of Automotive Servicing). These examinations should be taken through their respective providers, but ACE's list of examinations is often helpful to many students. Please see the military and CREDIT sites for details.

PILA

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Assessment of Licensure/Certificate/Apprenticeship Programs

Some institutions and organizations have evaluated professional certifications and apprenticeships for college credit. Also, in some cases, some professional qualifications can become part of a portfolio assessment. Please check with your institution for more information or check out our information on portfolio assessment.

Locally Assessed Training

Much like ACE's workforce training evaluations, many colleges and universities make special arrangements with local businesses and organizations to evaluate their training for college level credit. Please check with your organization or your local institution for details.

National College Credit Recommendation Service

Formerly known as PONSI, NCCRS is a national training evaluation service, offered by the University of the State of New York - Regents Research Fund. 76 Businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations have their trainings evaluated for college level credit. Although most of the participating organizations from the northeast United States, examples can be found from across the country. For more information, see <http://www.nationalccrs.org/>.

Other

Portfolio-Based Assessments

A portfolio is a compilation of documents or other evidence that demonstrates college-level learning. These are reviewed by faculty at the institution and credit is awarded based on their assessment of the portfolio. Each institution in Tennessee currently has its own policies and practices, and in some cases, these vary by departments and programs as well. Please check with your institution for details.



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