



POLICY ANALYSIS



Opening Credits: An Introduction to PLA Policies

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Prior learning assessment policies allow students to earn college credit for knowledge and experience gained outside of a classroom, which can accelerate their time to graduation. Research shows that students who receive PLA credit accumulate more credit and graduate more quickly and at higher rates than their peers who do not receive PLA credit.¹ PLA policies are particularly beneficial for adult and military students, as they often step foot on campus with years of workforce experience and skills.

PLA refers to a process used by postsecondary institutions to award academic credit for a student's knowledge and expertise acquired through life and professional experience, as long as the student's knowledge and skills are determined to be equivalent to college-level learning.

This resource provides details and policy examples of common elements of PLA policies across states, including:

- Informing students of PLA opportunities and requirements.
- Assessing student knowledge.
- Recording academic credits.
- Collecting and reporting data.

Also included are military-specific PLA policies, which award students academic credit for their military training and experience.

State or postsecondary-system policymakers can use the elements outlined here when reviewing or considering PLA policies. Some PLA and military-specific policies are codified in state statute, while others are established in postsecondary systems' board rules. These differences reflect the unique governance structures in each state.

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The adult student population plays an increasingly important role in states' attainment goals. PLA policies are one tool to help them receive academic credit for their workforce knowledge and skills.

Education Commission of the States reviewed PLA policies in two 50-State Comparisons: [Prior Learning Assessments and Academic Credit for Military Experience](#).

Informing Students

States and postsecondary systems attempt to raise awareness of PLA policies, particularly among military students, in a variety of ways – from requiring institutions to maintain a website list of courses eligible for PLA credits to requiring students to meet with college advisors. Additionally, many PLA policies clearly define fees and costs, limits on the number of credits students may earn and if PLA credit counts toward GPA or honors standing.

Why It Matters

Adult students balance an abundance of life and career responsibilities, which limits the amount of time they have to engage with and learn about their campuses.² This puts the onus on institutions to make extra efforts to ensure that adult students are fully informed of PLA opportunities. Additionally, by making policies transparent, students can map out degree plans and allocate financial resources. Clear communication provides students ample time to review for any required exams, build portfolios that showcase their expertise or otherwise prepare to demonstrate their learning.

Policy Examples



Arizona [state statute](#) requires the governing bodies of public universities and colleges to develop a military-specific PLA policy. Applicants, who are current or former military members, to public institutions must be notified that they may be eligible to receive credit for their military experience. The statute requires that the number of credits awarded must be based on length of active duty service; the skills, knowledge and competencies acquired during military service; and a transcript of the military member's training and education.



[State statute](#) in **Hawaii** establishes a college-credit equivalency program. Institutions must publicize the list of courses eligible for PLA credit, number of credits that may be earned for each course, minimum standards and grades to earn credit and criteria by which military experience will be assessed.



Idaho State Board of Education [policy](#) requires prior learning to be evaluated upon a student's request. Each institution must designate at least one liaison (a person or a place) to serve as a resource for faculty, administrators, staff and students.

Question to Consider



What opportunities exist to inform additional populations, such as first-generation students or adult student scholarship recipients, about PLA credit?

Assessing Student Knowledge

Most PLA policies provide postsecondary institutions wide authority over assessing student knowledge. Often the policies require postsecondary systems or institutions to utilize recommendations from a nationally recognized organization and to ensure qualified faculty administer assessments. Common PLA assessment methods include portfolio-based reviews, internally developed exams and externally assessed standardized exams such as [CLEP](#) or [DSST](#) exams.

Why It Matters

Consulting national organizations and faculty expertise ensures that students do not receive academic credit for years of experience only. Determining if a student's prior learning is equivalent to college-level learning maintains the quality of a postsecondary degree.

Policy Examples



Indiana state law requires postsecondary institutions to adopt a military-specific PLA policy to award academic credit to students who successfully complete a [CLEP](#), [DANTES](#) or [Excelsior College exam](#).



Michigan state law requires that once an applicant has submitted their military transcript, the institution must evaluate the transcript and notify the applicant what credits are available to them for their college-level military training and education.



In the University of **Wisconsin** System, a faculty-based [task force](#) developed PLA principles and guidelines for its institutions. [System policy](#) incorporates the guidelines, allowing institutions to grant credit for prior learning using department exams and portfolio reviews, recommendations from national organizations, or externally assessed standardized exams. Each institution has the right to establish proficiency score levels.

Questions to Consider



What incentives or opportunities exist for faculty professional development, such as training on [Joint Services Transcripts](#) or learning about best practices?

Who in your state or postsecondary system should be involved with developing PLA assessment methods and faculty professional development materials?

Recording Academic Credit

Recording academic credit on a student's transcript can involve many different campus offices (for example, financial aid and admissions) and administrators (for example, registrars and advisors). PLA policies often address whether PLA credit must be identified as such on a student's official record and if PLA credits may be applied toward degree program requirements, general education or elective credits.

Why It Matters

Because transcription requirements determine how PLA credit is applied (for example, toward degree requirements or elective courses) and transferred between institutions, this can impact how long it takes a student to earn a degree. In some states, PLA credit applied toward common general education courses must be accepted upon transfer, while others allow the receiving institution to evaluate PLA credit to decide whether to accept it.

Policy Examples



In **Missouri**, [administrative rules](#) for military-specific PLAs specify that public institutions have authority over which academic credits may be earned through which evaluation method (for example, exams, portfolios, etc.). Priority is given to awarding credit that fulfills major requirements, but credit should be awarded for general education or elective courses if not applicable to a student's major. In addition, PLA credits are transferable among all public institutions of higher education in the state.



[State rules](#) in **West Virginia** allow for PLA credit to be applied toward majors, minors, general education requirements, electives and prerequisite requirements. PLA credit that satisfies core coursework transfer agreements must be accepted upon transfer. Credit may only be awarded if the student has declared a major, and the credits must be clearly identified on their transcript.



Montana University System [policy](#) defines excess credit as credit not applicable toward a degree or credential requirement, and recommends not recording military-related PLA credits that result in excess credit on a student's transcript since the excess credits may affect their financial aid eligibility.

Questions to Consider



Does your state or system's policy allow students to apply PLA credits to any course in which they demonstrate knowledge, or only to degree program requirements?

Do transfer agreements address PLA credits?

Collecting and Reporting Data

A handful of PLA policies require data collection and regular reports to be submitted to education or military affairs legislative committees or the head of the state agency. Common data collection requirements include tracking how many students receive PLA credit and how many credits are awarded. Legislative reports often require updates on policy implementation.

Why It Matters

Outcomes for students who receive PLA credit can only be understood and improved upon if correct data are collected. Most often, states and systems are interested in calculating graduation and transfer rates of PLA students.

Policy Examples



In **Maryland**, [state regulations](#) require that a report be submitted to the secretary of higher education when graduates earn more than 50 percent of their degree requirements through PLA.



Utah [statute](#) requires the board of regents and board of trustees to submit an annual report to the department of veterans affairs that details the number of academic credits awarded to students with military experience.



In **Washington**, [state law](#) established a working group to examine a variety of PLA practices. The group was charged with developing outcomes measures and articulation agreements when patterns or pathways are identified.

Questions to Consider



Does your state or postsecondary system have a data system that can collect PLA data?

Who receives PLA data, and what decisions do the data inform?

Final Thoughts

States and postsecondary system policymakers have utilized a variety of tools to develop and implement PLA policies. Not all the policy elements identified here need to be addressed in state statute. In some states, postsecondary system governing bodies may be better suited to issue guidance on PLA policies. Wherever PLA policies are established, policymakers can continue promoting student success by asking:



Are PLA policies consistent across the state or postsecondary system?

Can students use state or institutional financial aid to cover PLA fees?

ENDNOTES

1. Rebecca Klein-Collins, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes* (Chicago: The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, March 2010), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524753.pdf>.
2. Carol E. Kasworm, "Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education," *New Directions for Student Services* 2003, no. 102 (Summer 2003): 3-10, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/ss.83>.

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