



Extending Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Across Montana – a USA Funds Grant

May, 2015 – November, 2016

Via collaboration with the Governor's Office, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education was awarded a \$350,000 grant to help build a broader and deeper infrastructure to assess prior learning that may be eligible for college credit. With particular attention on Montana's veterans and adult learners, the United Student Aid (USA) Funds award is designed to help the Montana University System (MUS) scale up credit for prior learning, with a focus on:

1. Expanding communication and awareness of resources for veterans
2. Building PLA options within the HealthCARE Montana grant
3. Assisting with the implementation of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policy
4. Considering ways to meet the needs of the adult learner

1 & 2. Expanding Communication and Awareness of Resources for Veterans & Building PLA Options within the HealthCARE Montana Grant:

- Webinars and Workshops - were offered to provide PLA professional development for Montana HealthCARE faculty and staff:
 - ✓ Understanding Military Learning webinar
 - ✓ Building Crosswalks from Military Learning to Healthcare workshop
 - ✓ Aligning PLA and Learning Outcomes for Healthcare series
 - ✓ PLA Process Mapping webinar series

- Veteran's Outreach - Daryl Lee of the UM VETS Office engaged in a 13-day statewide trip during March, 2016 to initiate conversations regarding opportunities via Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). The goal of the effort was to reach out to campuses to expand awareness about the newly approved Montana University System PLA policy 301.19.

Daryl held meetings on 16 campuses with PLA Liaisons, Transcript Evaluators, Registrars, Admissions personnel, School Certifying Officials (SCO), and key personnel at undergraduate advising centers. These efforts helped create relationships with staff to assist in planning further outreach to local community veteran's organizations.

While in the community Daryl met with off-site veterans services such as veteran's centers, Job Service, Disabled Veterans Outreach Program, etc.

- Financial Literacy Workshops – Held in the spring, these workshops were designed to assist Montana veterans and their family members. Veterans received information to help them strategize on how to save time and money as they pursued higher education credentials. Workshops were held at selected campuses throughout the state (focus was on those campuses with a higher number of student veterans). Financial education appointments and one-on-one coaching was offered and resources were shared while training was given to faculty and advisors. Prior Learning Assessment resources and contacts were handed out at each location.

After the workshops, surveys were given to the participants. Veterans' surveys reflected knowledge gains in financial education and demonstrated a strong need for additional services.

3. Assisting in the Implementation of PLA Policy

- PLA Council Support - Montana's [PLA Council](#) was appointed by the Commissioner of Higher Education in late Fall, 2015 to oversee implementation of the Montana University System PLA policy 301.19. The USA Funds grant is providing support for the council meetings.
- Professional Development - Three faculty assessor workshops were attended by 51 MUS faculty. Two advisor training sessions were attended 78 MUS staff.

4. Considering Ways to Meet the Needs of the Adult Learner

- Reaching Out to the Adult Learner - This symposium will consider ways to reach out to adult learners with the intent to engage them in higher education. The goal is to inspire, gain new information, and share best practices among our higher education constituency in Montana and ultimately open doors to increase the number of adults with a meaningful higher education credential. Offered from 9 am-3 pm on October 11, 2016 in Helena, the symposium will begin with a welcome from Commissioner Christian from the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. The morning will consist of two expert speakers, followed by a student panel and the afternoon will consist of breakout presentations led by MUS faculty and staff. Continental breakfast and lunch will be provided free-of-charge.

Prior Learning Assessment Platform Pilot Project - [Montana PLA Finish Faster](#) is a website where prospective and current students can seek information on PLA, the assessment process, and determine how they might benefit. Finish Faster is a pilot of a system-wide software platform that is currently being used by three Montana colleges (Great Falls College MSU, Miles Community College, and Missoula College UM) in dealing with PLA.

The website connects the college student, advisor, faculty assessor, dean and administrators who are involved in the PLA process. It allows campuses to monitor, manage and record communication to insure responsiveness to student requests. Utilizing the college's own faculty to assess learning, this system allows students to upload text files, scanned images, video files, etc., necessary to support their petition to receive academic credit for their prior learning.