

**MONTANA BOARD OF REGENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**Policy and Procedures Manual**

SUBJECT: ACADEMIC AFFAIRS  
Policy 301.19 – Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)  
**Adopted September 17, 2015**  
**Revised March 10, 2017**

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**I. Board Policy**

- A. The Montana University System colleges and universities recognize the value of prior learning in the achievement of academic goals. It is the policy of the MUS Board of Regents that a student's previous college-level learning, including that acquired outside of the traditional college setting, may be evaluated for college credit upon the student's request. The credit evaluation should be done in compliance with institutional PLA policy and faculty requirements. MUS students need timely, clear and concise information concerning how prior learning assessment may help them.
- B. This policy applies to all units under the control of the Montana University System, and to the community colleges subject to approval by their local governing Board of Trustees. Non-public Montana institutions are invited to adopt these policies.
- C. When appropriate and with approval from the MUS faculties, PLA will be made available for approved programs in a consistent, transferable and comparable means for which students may be awarded credit for prior learning. Once recorded on an MUS transcript, PLA credit is transferable on the same basis as if the credit had been earned through regular study at the awarding institution.
- D. Each MUS institution is responsible for determining how best to implement PLA within the context of its mission, culture, student needs, and academic programs and in compliance with the MUS PLA Expanded Policy Recommendations. Each MUS institution will oversee and maintain the efficacy of this policy, as well as assuring students have access to the most appropriate prior learning assessment methods as deemed appropriate by its faculty.
- E. MUS institutions will assign oversight of PLA to the highest ranking Academic Officer for each campus or his/her designee. MUS institutions will work with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to support all PLA efforts. MUS institutions will designate Prior Learning Assessment Liaisons (one per institution) as a resource for faculty, administrators, OCHE, staff, and students. MUS colleges and universities will provide professional development for those faculty members, administrators, and staff working with PLA students to assure a high quality, transparent, and consistent academic program for evaluating and awarding PLA credit.
- F. MUS institutional leadership, in collaboration with the MUS Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, will support academic rigor according to the MUS quality principles for the assessment of college-level learning derived from outside of the traditional college classroom setting (MUS PLA Expanded Policy Recommendations) and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accreditation standards or applicable specialized accrediting organization standards, in alignment with the national guidelines of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Academic program leadership will determine how best to comply with special program accreditation requirements that may or may not preclude PLA.
- G. Prior learning assessment fees will be transparent throughout the Montana University System. Fees will be determined in accordance with MUS standards and reflect the operational cost of administering a PLA program. Fees will not be based on the number of credits awarded as per PLA Expanded Policy Recommendations, quality standard number eight.
- H. A **PLA Council** will be appointed to guide policy oversight, to assist campuses with implementation, and to review PLA data at the institutional and state levels to determine trends, student academic outcomes, and policy efficacy.
- I. The Commissioner will maintain the MUS PLA Policy Expanded Policy Recommendations documentation and will make that documentation available on the Commissioner's Office website.

## II. Principles and Standards

### A. Educational Principles

Through this policy, the Board of Regents recognizes the following educational principles:

1. Learning occurs both within formal educational settings and at the initiative of the individual learner.
2. The evaluation and transcribing of learning should take into consideration the degree objectives of the student as well as the learning outcomes articulated by the academic program, institutional and state system requirements. Consideration will be given to not award excess PLA credits that might not benefit a student's degree objective.
3. Prior learning assessment should provide substantive information about the knowledge, competencies, skills and habits of mind gained from outside of the college environment.

### B. Assessment Standards

1. The learning has been assessed in accordance with national, state system standards and best practices (see MUS PLA Expanded Policy Recommendations).
2. Prior learning may be assessed through these PLA methods:
  - a) Standardized Tests (CLEP, DSST, UExcel, AP, and IB)
  - b) American Council on Education (ACE) and National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS)
  - c) Faculty-Developed Assessments, including;
    - i. Challenge Exams, Portfolio Assessment,
    - ii. Individual Performance Assessment,
    - iii. Locally-Evaluated Industry and Workplace Education/Training Program Credit.
3. The learning is college-level and the learning is properly evaluated by faculty/subject matter experts.

## III. Procedures

With regard to awarding credit through any one of the PLA methods:

- A. To be eligible for PLA credit, undergraduate students must be enrolled and fully admitted at an MUS institution to earn PLA credits for their program of study.
- B. PLA credit will apply toward appropriate degree or certificate requirements.
- C. A PLA appeals process will be available to MUS students, in accordance with other appeals policies, such as grade appeals.
- D. MUS institutions award PLA credit on a course-by-course equivalency basis. Institutions may establish their own rubric(s) for awarding credit using any of the following accepted sources and validation methods:
  - a. Credit recommendations listed in the American Council on Education (ACE) National Guide to College Credit for Workforce Training and the ACE Military Guide.
  - b. Credit recommendations listed by National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS).
  - c. Credit demonstrated by successfully passing national for-credit examination programs such as: DSST Exams, UExcel Exams, CLEP, IB or AP exams at nationally normed passing or above scores as determined by academic program leadership.
  - d. Prior learning credit awarded and transcribed by other similarly accredited institutions.
  - e. Individual portfolios assessed by faculty/subject matter experts based upon MUS-determined quality guidelines.
  - f. Faculty-approved industry-recognized certifications.
- G. Wherever programmatically possible, institutions may assign traditional letter grades for awarded PLA. Institutions may allow use of learning graded as "Credit/No Credit" toward program or degree requirements (particularly for portfolio/performance assessments).
- H. The institution will clearly articulate whether or not the application of experiential learning-based credits for prior learning counts toward institutional academic residency requirements.

- I. Instructional-based prior learning credits will not count toward academic residency requirements.

#### IV. Evaluating PLA in the MUS

- A. The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education will produce a Prior Learning Assessment Annual Report. This report will include student usage information, such as the number and demographic of students with credit for prior learning, number of credits for prior learning awarded, type of assessment methods, associated costs to the student, etc., which will be available for annual reports to MUS and OCHE to the extent practicable with MUS and institutional information technology systems. The report will include recommendations to summarize/evaluate the efficacy of PLA on a statewide basis.

#### V. Definitions

**25% PLA Cap:** The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU Standard 2.C.7) limits the number of experiential learning-based credits to no more than 25% of the credits required for any degree.

**Excess Credit:** Military-related credit: Any military-related PLA credits that are not applicable toward a degree or credential requirement are considered “excess credit.” It is recommended to not record excess credit recommendations on a transcript. Military-related credits may result in excess credit if all American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations are placed on the student’s transcript without regard to the degree or credential requirements. Excess credit may affect a student’s financial aid eligibility (See MUS PLA Expanded Policy Recommendations, Appendix B, Maximum Credit).

**Experiential Learning-Based Credits:** College-level learning acquired through work and learning acquired outside of the traditional classroom, learning activities such as independent reading and study, mass media, open courseware or other self-directed learning may be assessed for PLA credit. The assessment may be via portfolio assessment, individual performance or demonstration assessment, or other faculty-determined assessment methods. Experiential learning-based credit awards may not exceed 25% of the required credits for any degree per Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU Standard 2.C.7).

**Instructional-Based Credits:** Credits earned as a result of formal instruction and/or assessment. Examples of instructional-based credits include, but are not limited to: AP (formal Advanced Placement passing exam score), IB (formal International Baccalaureate passing exam score), military training and educational programs (evaluated by the American Council on Education), faculty-developed course challenge exams taken within the first three weeks of a course, formal training and educational programs offered via business and industry evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE) or the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), and assessment methods such as CLEP, DSST and UExcel standardized exams. As such, these credits are not considered experiential learning-based credits and do not count toward the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU Standard 2.C.7) 25% PLA cap.

**Course Challenge Exam:** A student who takes MUS faculty-developed Course Challenge Exams or Assessments without enrolling in or registering for the course in which he/she is seeking credit will be considered attempting instructional-based PLA assessment. These exams taken are independent of course instruction and will not count toward the NWCCU Standard 2.C.7 25% PLA cap. Challenge exams do not exist for all MUS courses.

**Recording PLA Credits:** Prior learning assessment credits will be coded, documented, and tracked in student records for purposes of research and reporting.

**Transcription of PLA Credits:** If the student successfully demonstrates evidence of college-level learning, credit will be awarded by the institution and identified on the student’s transcript as credit for prior learning and the institution makes no assurances regarding the number of credits to be awarded prior to the completion of the institution’s review process.

#### History:

Item 168-106-R0915, Policy 301.19 adopted September 17, 2015.  
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