The School for Graduate Studies

Master of Arts in Adult Learning

A GUIDE TO

DEGREE PROGRAM PLANNING

&

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT
A Message about Degree Planning

Welcome to the degree planning and prior learning assessment section of your Master of Arts in Adult Learning program. Individualized degree program plans and prior learning assessment (PLA) are two important aspects that distinguish SUNY Empire State College as a unique learning environment. Here you will learn about designing your MAAL degree program plan and the role of the degree program rationale in that process. You will also learn about PLA requests (including eligibility) as well as the philosophy and purpose of PLA in supporting your learning. Finally, you will gain a clear understanding of the steps involved in a PLA request and degree program plan.

Please don't hesitate to contact us with any questions you may have. We're truly honored to be part of your learning journey.

Sincerely,
Dianne Ramdeholl
MAAL Program Coordinator

Amy McQuigge
PLA Coordinator
CONTENTS

Developing the Degree Program Plan ................................................................. 1
  Overview of the Degree Program Planning Process ................................ 1
  The Degree Planning Process ...................................................................... 2
  The Degree Program Rationale ................................................................. 4
  Working with the Academic Advisor ......................................................... 5

Prior Learning Assessment ............................................................................... 6
  What is Prior Learning Assessment? ............................................................ 6
  Philosophy of PLA at SUNY Empire State College ..................................... 7
  Empire State College’s Standards for Graduate PLA ............................... 8
  Table 1: Graduate-level Prior Learning Assessment Rubric ..................... 10
  The Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) ......................... 14
  CAEL’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning .......................................... 14
  American Council on Education’s Standards and Criteria for Graduate-
  Level Credit Awards .................................................................................. 15

Developing PLA Requests ................................................................................ 16
  Developing the PLA Request ..................................................................... 16
  Sources of Graduate-Level Learning .......................................................... 19
  Defining Graduate Level Learning & Rubric ............................................ 20
  Differentiating Learning from Experiences ................................................. 21
  Redundancy .............................................................................................. 21
  Supporting Materials ................................................................................ 22

Submission and Approval Process for Degree Program Plan ....................... 23
  Degree Plan Submission without PLA Request or Transfer Credits ......... 23
  Degree Plan Submission with PLA Requests ............................................ 23
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLA Evaluation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree Program Plan Submission with Transfer Credits</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Degree Program Approval</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeals</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and Responsibilities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Degree Planning and PLA Request Approval Process Outline</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tools and Resources</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-evaluated Learning Organizations</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Source Online</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Organizations</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA Inside Out: A Journal on the Research, Theory and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept Mapping Tools</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography &amp; Articles</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing the Degree Program Plan

Overview of the Degree Program Planning Process

Students in the MAAL program will design their own degree around four required core courses. The four core courses of the MA in Adult Learning provide a foundation in the academic field of adult learning. Within the courses students learn how to develop and produce an individually designed degree program and an extended “rationale” essay that explores the relationship of their choices to their professional and social goals and must be grounded in adult learning.

The planning of students’ individual degrees is initially grounded in a critical exploration of their experiential learning as well as their needs as adult learning practitioners. Students craft a degree program plan and rationale essay that captures their prior learning, roles and responsibilities as learners and educators, their knowledge of the field in both capacities, and their professional and social values, commitments, and goals. The rationale essay also provides an initial articulation of their final project. Students will consider choices in designing the degree that will contribute to the collaboration, expertise, and methodologies needed to complete this final project.

Although students may have graduate-level learning from multiple sources, students will only use those credits that best meet the degree that they have designed. This prior learning must be assessed through the PLA process as outlined on pages 23-25. Empire State College reviews the credit recommendations made by an expert evaluator and awards advanced standing credit in the context of a degree program when:

- Learning is demonstrated at a graduate level based on the Empire State College’s standards for graduate-level PLA;
- Learning components make sense within the context of the student’s degree program;
- Learning components do not duplicate other credits in the degree program;
The Degree Planning Process

The final Masters of Arts in Adult Learning degree consists of 36 credits, which are a combination of required core courses, electives, any approved PLA credits, and a final project. Although all students take the same four required core courses, their degree is individualized based on the electives, PLA credits, and a final project. Students learn how to develop their degree program plan during their first four core courses while working with their academic advisor.

Students may focus on the following areas of study in adult learning:

- Adult Basic Education
- Human Resource Development
- Online Learning
- Adult Learning in International Contexts
- Adults in Higher Education

**Core Course 1: Revisiting Experience and Learning**

During the first core course, *Revisiting Experience and Learning*, students will begin the exploration and construction of their entire degree program through a number of important themes and practices that characterize the MAAL program as a whole.

These themes and practices include:

- A deep respect for and attention to students’ experiential learning.
- Self-awareness concerning students’ values, goals, and commitments both individually and collectively.
- A habit of reflection on and revision of previous assumptions, interests, and expositions and engaging in continuous and open-ended inquiry

By the end of the first course, students are expected to have an initial draft of their degree program plan and rationale, including a clear view of their ongoing study choices leading up to the MAAL final project. This draft will be used in ongoing conversations between students and their advisors about their overall study plans.

**Core Course 2: Learning and Development in Contemporary Adulthood**

In this course, students will continue to explore and revise their ideas about their degree program plan. Throughout the course activities, especially while writing the literature review, students will reflect on possible ways to expand or deepen new areas of study and consider how they will describe and defend their study choices in their rationale essay.
They will also continue to conceptualize possible topics for prior learning assessment (PLA) and will work closely with their academic advisor.

**Core Courses 3 & 4: Strategies for Effective Adult Learning & Approaches to Critical Inquiry and Research**

During the second matriculated term, students will enroll in *Strategies for Effective Adult Learning* and *Approaches to Critical Inquiry and Research* and complete their degree program plan for the remainder of the program. At this time, students will be encouraged to submit their degree program plans (and accompanying materials) and PLA requests for initial review. Based on the recommendations of the initial review students will revise and resubmit their degree program plan and PLA requests for a final review.

See pages 23-25 for the initial and final PLA request and degree program review process.
The Degree Program Rationale

Degree-planning activities within the four core courses focus around a student's identified interests and questions in the field of adult learning, and are designed to assist the student in articulating his/her thoughts as clearly as possible in writing.

The degree program is accompanied by a rationale essay (of 10-12 pages) that describes and explains the student’s area of interest, proposed courses, prior learning assessment, and the proposed final project. Students should include the methodologies and theoretical/critical lenses the student will need in his/her studies.

The degree program rationale replaces the master’s exam that is typically given after the initial stages of a graduate program. Students are therefore expected to demonstrate that they have “mastered” the requirements of academic study. Specifically, the rationale must demonstrate that students can articulate research questions and shape courses around investigating those questions. Through the rationale the student demonstrates that they have “ownership” of their own academic program, have a clear vision of where they are going, what they mean to achieve, and why the program is an effective and appropriate way of meeting their intellectual and academic objectives.

In the rationale students are expected to:

- Create a comprehensive framework for their degree program.
- Explore their own background as learners and practitioners.
- Discuss the subject matter they wish to cover in terms of their goals and areas of interest.
- Identify specific courses and other learning opportunities and show how those various studies relate to and support one another, their goals, their final project, and adult learning.
- Demonstrate a level of writing and research that is appropriate to graduate-level study.
Working with the Academic Advisor

Academic advisors are resources for students as they review their learning and develop their PLA requests and degree program plans.

For PLA requests, academic advisors guide students as to the form, content and length of their learning narrative, the amount of credit they should request, the determination of how it fits into their degree programs and the supporting documentation they will need.

For the degree planning process, academic advisors guide students to craft a degree program plan and rationale essay that captures any related prior learning, roles and responsibilities as learners and educators, their knowledge of the field in both capacities, and their professional and social values, commitments, and goals. Advisors work with students to develop realistic expectations regarding the kinds and amounts of prior learning credit appropriate to their individual degree programs. Students need to understand that the college awards prior learning credit for demonstrated graduate-level learning, not for experience.

Advisors and students engage in early and on-going conversations regarding the student's background, potential areas for prior learning assessment, and potential areas for new learning – in other words, regarding the overall scope of the student’s degree and plans for learning. The college provides resources that support students in this process; however, there is no substitute for this ongoing advisor-student conversation.
Prior Learning Assessment

What is Prior Learning Assessment?

Within the Masters of Arts in Adult Learning, prior learning assessment (PLA) is a process through which students identify areas of relevant graduate-level learning from their personal, professional, and non-formal educational experiences, and are accessed for graduate-level credits. Students demonstrate their learning through a PLA portfolio that requires a narrative reflection and appropriate documentation of their learning. Students develop and submit the PLA portfolio through their Educational Planning workspace in the GRAD community. The learning is assessed by a content expert for possible academic credit relative to specific course objectives within the MAAL or for appropriate learning and competence that is not codified in a particular course.

Students coming to the program with a background in adult learning may have knowledge that has both the critical depth and conceptual breadth associated with graduate-level learning. When this is the case, and when this learning is directly connected both to the student’s individual focus and to the academic expectations of the degree, a student may earn up to six credits for prior learning.
Philosophy of PLA at SUNY Empire State College

The MAAL program is grounded in the belief that experience plays a central role in the creation of all knowledge and that the exploration of that experience through multiple social and intellectual lenses allows for the development of new insights and possibilities.

Students revisit their knowledge and practice as central tenet of Empire State College’s approach to mentoring and learning. Studies often take students’ experiences, insights and questions as a starting point; integrate these experiences into the coursework; and construct dialogues using experiences and formal academic theories, assumptions, discourses, and ways of knowing. The MAAL program emphasizes that knowledge about adult learning is created in both academic and nonacademic settings and that the mutual integration of [academic and nonacademic] multiple forms of knowledge is, itself, an important source of new learning.

Throughout the program, students have opportunities to reflect back on their prior learning in the light of new insights and knowledge. Students are encouraged to revisit old assumptions and to explore the ways that new lenses have reconfigured, challenged, or deepened their understandings of themselves as learners and educators.
Empire State College’s Standards for Graduate PLA

The college’s criteria for assessing experiential learning at the graduate level are consistent with principles for distinguishing between undergraduate and graduate credit and with best practice in the field. The CAEL and ACE standards (pages 14-15) are incorporated into the college’s expectations and procedures. Individuals requesting graduate-level credit at ESC must demonstrate learning that meets the college’s standards for graduate-level learning. Experiential learning that is accreditable at the graduate level evidences the following characteristics:

- It forms an integral part of the student’s degree program and the field of adult learning.
- It is grounded in a body of practice-based and/or academic knowledge.
- It is articulated as a result of critical analysis, integration of disparate ideas and information, original research or synthesis, discovery, and/or the scholarly and professional application of specialized knowledge.
- It is indicative of such habits of mind as independent thought, critical self-awareness, and the ability to locate ideas and practices within broader social, intellectual, and political contexts.

The following standards are the basis of the rubric (Table 1) by which PLA Evaluators will access requests for credit. Students must demonstrate learning in the following categories using the rubric to for a more detailed description of these learning outcomes.

- Understanding of a complex body of knowledge at the forefront of an academic or professional discipline and with an increased intensity, complexity and density of study.
- Show originality in the application of knowledge.
- Understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research.
- Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively.
- Show originality in tackling and solving problems.
- Possess qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgment, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.

Written evaluations by PLA Evaluators will describe how the learning demonstrated meets the criteria of the rubric. Additionally, the Evaluators will determine if the learning is
appropriate for inclusion in the Master of Arts in Adult Learning program either within the core or within the student’s focus. If the request is to receive credit for a particular course, the Evaluator will also determine if the learning objectives for that course have been met. The MAAL Program Coordinator will have final approval of PLA credit.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge in the field</th>
<th>Does Not Meet (Advanced UG level learning)</th>
<th>Meets (Master’s level learning)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline.</td>
<td>Understanding of a complex body of knowledge at the forefront of an academic or professional discipline and with an increased intensity, complexity and density of study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systematic understanding of key aspects of the field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline.</td>
<td>Systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conceptual understanding that enables the student: a) to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline and b) to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline.</td>
<td>Conceptual understanding that enables the student: a) to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline, and b) to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge Production and Boundaries of Knowledge</td>
<td>Does Not Meet (Advanced UG level learning)</td>
<td>Meets (Master's level learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline.</td>
<td>Show originality in the application of knowledge. Comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply methods and techniques to review, consolidate, extend and apply knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects.</td>
<td>Conceptualize, design and implement projects that are original in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and inquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquire an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.</td>
<td>Understand how the boundaries of knowledge are advanced through research.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Does Not Meet</td>
<td>Meets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis, Problem-solving and Communication</strong></td>
<td>Does not meet advanced UG level learning. Develop analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of situations or employment. Critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgments, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution - or identify a range of solutions - to a problem. Communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences.</td>
<td>Meets Master's level learning. Show originality in tackling and solving problems. Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgments in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self Direction</strong></td>
<td>Manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).</td>
<td>Demonstrate self-direction and originality in tackling and solving problems, and act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level. Continue to advance their knowledge and understanding, and to develop new skills to a high level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Employability</td>
<td>Does Not Meet (Advanced UG level learning)</td>
<td>Meets (Master's level learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Possess qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.</td>
<td>Possess qualities needed for employment in circumstances requiring sound judgment, personal responsibility and initiative in complex and unpredictable professional environments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)

The Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines PLA in the following way: “The recognition of learning gained from experiences that may be granted credit or otherwise certified... The assessment of learning attained through experiences irrespective of the time and place in which they occurred (12).”


CAEL’s Ten Standards for Assessing Learning

The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning provides widely accepted standards for prior learning assessment.

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.

9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.

10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

American Council on Education’s Standards and Criteria for Graduate-Level Credit Awards

According to the American Council on Education (ACE), graduate level courses are “oriented toward independent study, critical analysis, original research, and the scholarly and professional application of specialized knowledge within a discipline.”
Developing PLA Requests

Developing the PLA Request

Through the degree program planning process, students may identify prior learning that they may want to develop into a prior learning assessment request. The PLA request includes a narrative reflection that serves as a primary vehicle for communicating their knowledge. The narrative reflection must be clear, descriptive, and provide effective statements of learning that are specific and precise. Students must clearly articulate the content of the learning and explain its significance, reflect upon and critically analyze their learning in the broader context in which it is situated, and describe how it meets the standards for graduate-level learning. Additionally, when addressing a particular course, students describe how the learning meets the learning outcomes for the course. The narrative should address theoretical as well as practical components of the learning and should be supported by examples and/or documentation that clarify and explain the nature of the learning.

Learning can occur at various levels of complexity. For example, a student may have knowledge about adult development. At a basic level, s/he may understand and be able to discuss a range of adult-development theories and analyze their role in helping to understand the human condition. This is an appropriate undergraduate upper-level learning outcome. At a more complex level required for graduate-level credit, the student would be able to:

- critically evaluate current research and advanced scholarship in adult development,
- effectively use this knowledge to construct supports for clients in a social service agency, and
- evaluate the relevance of the scholarship based on the outcomes of the programming created.

The development of a PLA request should take place in two stages: the writing and submission of an initial PLA request draft for initial review and the development and submission of a final PLA request.

1. Initial proposal: Given the labor-intensity for all who are involved, an initial proposal is required to ensure students have appropriate feedback before the final evaluation. The initial draft of the PLA request would:
• Provide an overview of the student’s experiential learning, how it was acquired, and how he/she has used and built on it
• Explore the relationship of that learning to his/her goals for the program and new areas for learning
• Discuss the criteria for graduate-level PLA and provide an initial discussion of why he/she believes the learning meets those criteria

The initial proposals will be read by the MAAL Program Coordinator in consultation with the academic advisor, PLA Coordinator and other faculty (as needed). Decisions will be conveyed and explained to the student in writing and will include suggestions for the full proposal.

2. Final request*: After reviewing and revising the initial draft based on the recommendations, a final request for PLA credit should be submitted at or shortly after the end of their core course sequence. This final request will include:
   • A detailed description of the learning, using the descriptive and analytical methodologies developed in Revisiting Experience and Learning in Adulthood.
   • A discussion of the learning in terms of the broader field, addressing such questions as: What is the organizational, social, or professional context within which this learning was gained, used, developed, synthesized, and/or communicated to others? What problem was it created to solve? How does it contribute to the field as a whole? In what ways does it contribute to the ongoing development of the field? Where does this learning ‘sit’ within a broader field of knowledge beyond the student’s specific experience, as shown by some familiarity with comparative professional practice, broader organization change, or scholarly and/or professional literature?
   • Supporting materials and documentation

Once the final PLA request is submitted for review, it will be assigned to an evaluator to assess the student’s graduate-level learning for credit recommendation. As part of the assessment process, the student will engage in an interview with the evaluator. The interview, in many ways, is the most important part of the evaluation and can be very interesting and rewarding. It can provide the evaluator with the student’s knowledge more than his/her narrative reflection and supporting materials the student provided. Direct interaction between the student and the evaluator is necessary in order to verify the learning and reach an accurate conclusion. Every student should be interviewed in real time (e.g., in person, over the phone, web-based software), as facial expressions, voice
tonality, body language all help in understanding how and what the student knows. Email may be used for follow-up to the interview, but is not appropriate for the actual interview.

The interview is an opportunity to engage in an in-depth discussion with the evaluator regarding the learning being assessed. The narrative reflection, supporting materials, and degree program plan, provide a context for the learning; however, their interview provides an opportunity for the student to share the depth and breadth of his/her learning.

The college does not have preset questions for interviews. The evaluator will develop questions based on your narrative reflection and supporting materials and his/her understanding of the knowledge characteristic of the field and appropriate to graduate-level learning. Appropriate questions include how the student has acquired the learning, ways in which the student has used the learning (to solve problems or develop new method of application), and how he/she has used the knowledge to teach others.

*Students will be charged $100 for PLA evaluation when they submit their final request.*
Sources of Graduate-Level Learning

Some possible sources of prior graduate-level learning that might be considered for individual evaluation include:

- study at postsecondary/proprietary schools that may be licensed but not accredited;
- work experience;
- noncredit courses;
- continuing professional education;
- continuing education units (CEUs);
- seminars and in-service training programs;
- volunteer work in the community;
- hobbies and recreational activities;
- independent reading and research; and
- military training that has not been evaluated by ACE.

Empire State College cannot directly transfer credits from these sources, but recognizes that they offer potential graduate-level credit when appropriately evaluated by an expert. The academic advisor, PLA Coordinator, or MAAL Program Coordinator can help the student determine whether the student’s prior learning might be graduate level and whether it would be appropriate to include in the student’s degree program.

Please note that the college does not award credit for experience only, but for demonstrated graduate-level learning developed during that experience.
Defining Graduate Level Learning & Rubric

When developing the narrative reflection, students should use the Empire State College’s Standards for Graduate PLA including the rubric for assessing graduate-level learning.

Please refer to pages 8-9, “ESC Standards for Graduate PLA.”
Differentiating Learning from Experiences

Empire State College awards credit for knowledge acquired, not for the experience in which it may have been acquired.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) established guidelines for the assessment of non-college based learning. Central to these guidelines is the idea that credit is not awarded for experience but only for demonstrated knowledge that was acquired through experience. If you think about this for a moment, this is precisely what every teacher does: evaluation is based on student’s learning and not on a mere fact that a student has been attending a class. Educators assess not the fact that the student was present in class or the input from readings and exercises but the outcomes gained from the learning experience.

This distinction between learning and experience can be applied to non-academic learning and experiences. The fact that a person has worked for 15 years for an organization or participated in training does not mean that this person has acquired knowledge. The experience of working or the award of certificates sets the context, but the student’s knowledge is dependent upon the application and articulation of that learning beyond the particular experience. For example, if an individual has worked in a Human Resources department, he or she may have experiences working with diversity issues. The extent of knowledge that person has gained regarding diversity can be assessed. When that person can talk about how to work with different diversity issues across or within different contexts and can connect that learning to theories, readings, and research, one begins to understand the depth and breadth of learning that has occurred for that individual.

People unfamiliar with the assessment of experiential learning often assume that what is being assessed is the experience itself. This assumption stems from the concern: “How is it possible to assess experience?” However, the experience is not being assessed; rather the knowledge outcomes are being evaluated. By focusing on the knowledge a student has acquired, can articulate, and can demonstrate, the evaluator can begin to assess the extent of that student’s learning.

It is the learning, not the experience, that is being assessed.

Redundancy

Prior learning assessed credit cannot overlap or be redundant with any other graduate-level courses. In other words, students are awarded credit for their knowledge only once.
Academic advisors help students review prior learning to determine if it is graduate level, appropriate for the proposed degree program, and is not redundant with other learning.

**Supporting Materials**

To the extent possible, the student should include samples of their work, proof of employment or volunteer work, training records, book lists or any other supporting documents he/she can obtain. The evaluator might ask for additional evidence to support the student’s claims.
Submission and Approval Process for Degree Program Plan

Degree Plan Submission without PLA Request or Transfer Credits

After careful preparation of the degree program plan and degree program rationale, the student will submit his/her degree program plan and supporting materials to the academic advisor. The student may be advised to make changes to his/her degree program plan before it can be further reviewed. After the student makes any suggested changes, the academic advisor reviews the plan, approves it, and sends it to the PLA Coordinator. The PLA Coordinator will review the degree program plan for policy compliance and submit it to the MAAL Program Coordinator for approval. Prior to final approval, the student may be asked to make revisions based on the PLA Coordinator’s or/and MAAL Program Coordinator’s feedback.

Degree Plan Submission with PLA Requests

Initial Review
After careful preparation of the PLA request and degree program plan, the student will submit his/her PLA request and degree program plan to the academic advisor. If approved, the academic advisor will submit the PLA request and degree program plan to the PLA Coordinator who will then conduct an initial review. Once the PLA Coordinator has reviewed the PLA request and degree program plan for policy compliance, the PLA request and degree program plan is submitted to the MAAL Program Coordinator for approval. The student may be advised to make changes to his/her PLA request or/and degree program plan at any point during the initial review process.

After the student makes any suggested changes, he/she resubmits the PLA request* and degree program plan to the academic advisor. The academic advisor re-reviews the PLA request and degree program plan and submits it to the PLA Coordinator for PLA evaluation.

*Students will be charged $100 for PLA evaluation when they submit their final request.

PLA Evaluation

Assignment of Evaluator
After the student’s PLA request and degree program plan has been initially reviewed, the PLA Coordinator will assign a PLA Evaluator who is a content expert at the graduate level to review the student’s PLA request.

Evaluator Review & Interview
The PLA Evaluator completes a review of the student’s PLA request, after which there will be a one-on-one interview with the student, lasting about an hour. The interview is an
opportunity for the student to be able to express his/her depth and breath of knowledge on
the topic beyond what was documented in the PLA request.

**Evaluator Recommendation**

Once the PLA Evaluator reviews the submission, interviews the student, and evaluates the
request against the PLA assessment rubric the PLA Evaluator makes a credit
recommendation within the context of the student’s degree program. The PLA Coordinator
reviews the recommendation and submits it to the MAAL Program Coordinator. At this
point, the student also has the opportunity to review the PLA Evaluator’s recommendation.
The MAAL Program Coordinator makes the final credit decision based on the Evaluator’s
recommendation.

**Degree Program Plan Submission with Transfer Credits**

The student will submit his/her proposed degree program and any transfer credit requests
during the degree program submission process to ensure that the transfer credits request
align with the program’s sequence and requirements. The total number of transfer credits
and PLA credits combined cannot exceed nine credits.
Final Degree Program Approval

The degree program plan becomes official upon the MAAL Program Coordinator's final approval of the student's degree program, in which the PLA and/or transfer credits may be a component. The college awards and records the PLA credit and/transfer credit upon this final approval. Approved degree programs, including advanced standing credit (transfer credit, PLA), are recorded in the college’s student information system and is stored electronically as part of the permanent student record.

Appeals

Appeals of academic judgments including judgments about the suitability of the degree program plan, degree program rational, PLA recommendations, and proposed final project follow the college’s student academic appeal policy and procedures. Service issues are addressed through the student grievance procedures. Students are encouraged to contact the program chair to seek informal resolution before pursuing formal actions.

These processes are summarized and illustrated on pages 29-31.
Roles and Responsibilities

The following outlines the roles and responsibilities for each constituent involved in the degree program planning and prior learning assessment processes.

Student

In the initial draft process the student is responsible for:

- Reviewing PLA and degree program requirements
- Preparing PLA portfolio and degree program draft with the support of their academic advisor
  - The PLA portfolio includes the narrative reflection and supporting documentation
  - The degree program plan includes the degree program rationale
- Submitting the PLA portfolio and degree program draft to his/her academic advisor

In the final draft process the student is responsible for:

- Reviewing recommended revisions and preparing final draft
- Submitting final draft to academic advisor
- Scheduling and completing the interview with the PLA Evaluator
- Reviews the final recommendation by the PLA Evaluator and making any changes as necessary
- Following the approved degree program to complete their MAAL program

At any point in the process the student may be asked to revise their PLA portfolio or degree program draft.

The student has a right to appeal the outcome to MAAL Chair.

Academic Advisor

Academic Advisors are Empire State College graduate faculty. Within the degree program planning and PLA process, they act as a resource for the students and guide them to:
- Design the degree program plan
- Identify prior graduate-level learning
- Identify potential topics for prior learning requests

In the initial draft process the academic advisor is responsible for:

- Working with the student during the preparation of PLA portfolio and degree program draft
- Reviewing, recommending, and submitting the PLA portfolio and degree program draft for MAAL program initial review

In the final draft process the academic advisor is responsible for:

- Working with the student during the preparation of PLA portfolio and degree program draft
- Reviewing the final PLA portfolio and DP draft
- Recommending the PLA for evaluation and the DP approval
- Advising the student based the final outcome of the PLA and DP review

**PLA Evaluator**

PLA evaluators are experts in their field who assess students’ prior graduate-level learning within the context of their degree.

In the final draft process the PLA Evaluator is responsible for:

- Reviewing the PLA portfolio and DP draft
- Scheduling and completing an interview with the student
- Writing and submitting a PLA credit recommendation report based on program guidelines
- Communicating with the PLAC regarding any concerns during the evaluation process

**PLA Coordinator**

The PLA Coordinator is responsible for supporting and communicating with students, academic advisors, and PLA Evaluators throughout the initial and final draft stages.
In the initial draft process the PLA Coordinator is responsible for:

- Reviewing the PLA portfolio and DP draft for policy compliance
- Submitting the PLA portfolio and DP draft to the MAAL Program Coordinator

In the final draft process the PLA Coordinator is responsible for:

- Reviewing the PLA portfolio and DP draft for policy compliance
- Assigning the PLA Evaluator
- Reviewing the Evaluator recommendation report for policy compliance
- Notifying the student of the recommendation report
- Combining the PLA final draft and Evaluator recommendation report with the DP
- Submitting the final DP with the PLA request and the Evaluator report to the MAAL Program Coordinator
- Entering outcomes in the student’s record
- Notifying the student and the academic advisor of the outcome

**MAAL Program Coordinator (or designee)**

In the initial draft process the MAAL Program Coordinator is responsible for:

- Reviewing the PLA portfolio and DP draft and making recommendations for final PLA portfolio and DP draft

In the final draft process the MAAL Program Coordinator is responsible for:

- Reviewing PLA Evaluator recommendation
- Awarding PLA credit and approving final DP

**Education Chair**

The Education Chair reviews all student appeals and informal complaints and is a resource for the MAAL Program Coordinator.
The Degree Planning and PLA Request Approval Process Outline

Initial Draft Process

- The student reviews PLA/DP requirements
- The student prepares PLA portfolio and DP draft with the support of their academic advisor
  - The PLA portfolio includes the narrative reflection and supporting documentation
  - The DP includes the degree program rationale
- The student submits the PLA portfolio and DP draft to academic advisor
- The academic advisor reviews the PLA portfolio and DP draft
- The academic advisor recommends and submits the draft for program review
- The PLA Coordinator (PLAC) reviews the draft for policy compliance
- The PLAC submits draft to MAAL Program Coordinator (MAALC)
- The MAALC reviews the PLA portfolio and DP draft and makes recommendations for final draft

Final Draft Process

- The student reviews recommended revisions and prepares final draft
- The academic advisor reviews final draft and recommends for evaluation
- The PLAC assigns the PLA Evaluator
- The Evaluator and student schedules and completes the interview
- The Evaluator reviews PLA portfolio and DP draft and makes PLA credit recommendation
- The PLAC reviews Evaluator recommendation and adds PLA to DP
- The PLAC notifies the student of the recommendation
  - The student reviews the recommendation
- The PLAC submits the Evaluation to the MAALC
- The MAALC reviews Evaluator recommendation and awards PLA credit and accepts DP
- The PLAC enters outcome in system and notifies the student
- The student may appeal outcome to MAAL Chair
- MAAL Chair reviews appeal and makes decision
Advisor Reviews DP Draft
Advisor Supports MAALC Reviews & Makes Decision for DP
If meets requirements
If approved

Student Reviews DP Requirements

PLAC Supports
PLAC Reviews DP Draft
If major revisions
If major revisions
If major revisions
If approved

MAALC Reviews & Makes Decision for DP
If approved

Advisor Submits DP Draft to PLAC

PLAC Enters Outcome in Student’s Record
Student Reviews
Appeals
Chair Reviews & Makes Decision

Key
Student
Academic Advisor
PLA Coordinator
MAALS Coordinator
Education Chair

Degree Program Planning Approval Process
Tools and Resources

Pre-evaluated Learning Organizations

American Council on Education (ACE)
National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS)

College Source Online

College Source Online has current and past college catalogs for most accredited United States institutions:
This link requires that you use your college login information.

Related Organizations

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)
The Prior Learning International Research Center (PLIRC)

PLA Inside Out: A Journal on the Research, Theory and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment

PLA Inside Out: A Journal on the Research, Theory and Practice in Prior Learning Assessment is the first peer-reviewed, on-line journal totally dedicated to the field of prior learning assessment.

Concept Mapping Tools

MindMeister
Bibliography & Articles


**Dissertations from the US**


Halberstadt, T. (1986) ‘Faculty knowledge and attitudes regarding credit for prior learning in the community college system of the state of Massachusetts (life experience, non-traditional education)’. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Massachusetts. Dissertations & Theses: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection, (Publication No. AAT 8612043).


