

**Faculty Senate
Memorandum of Action**

MOA-20/01

**Revision to Create Faculty-driven Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)
Opportunities for Graduate Programs**

Name of Council(s)/Committee(s):
Graduate Studies Council

Approval Date:
January 23, 2020

Implementation Date:
Upon Administrative Approval

Responsible Office(s) and Responsible Enforcement Official(s):

The Office of Academic Affairs is in charge of monitoring, enforcing, and revising this policy/document.

RECOMMENDATION:

Revise existing graduate catalog language to allow the creation of voluntary faculty-driven prior learning assessment (PLA) opportunities for graduate programs. This would involve a decentralized program-level process for PLA decision-making, with some centralized data reporting. The revised policy includes a process and specific requirements for proposing and approving such PLA procedures.

1/23/2020

Timothy Michael, Chair, Graduate Studies CouncilDate

☐ Approve ☐ Disapprove ☐ Other Action
Comments:

3/27/2020

Richard A. Gershon, WMU Faculty Senate PresidentDate

☐ Approve ☐ Disapprove ☐ Other Action
Comments:

Jennifer Bott4.10.2020

Jennifer P. Bott, Provost and Vice President for Academic AffairsDate

☒ Approve ☐ Disapprove ☐ Other Action
Comments:

4/12/2020

Edward B. Montgomery, WMU PresidentDate

**Western Michigan University
Faculty Senate
Memorandum of Action**

MOA–20/01

**Revision to Create Faculty-Driven Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)
Opportunities for Graduate Programs**

RECOMMENDATION

Revise existing graduate catalog language to allow the creation of voluntary faculty-driven prior learning assessment (PLA) opportunities for graduate programs, beyond just the one current form of PLAs, credit by examination. These revisions would involve a decentralized program-level process for PLA decision making, with some centralized data reporting. The revised policy includes a process and specific requirements for proposing and approving such PLA procedures.

RATIONALE/PURPOSE

PLA is a process for evaluating prior learning, as acquired through previous work experience, training, course products, and/or other learning experiences, and awarding college credit when those experiences align with specific requirements and learning outcomes in academic majors and graduate programs. The process of evaluating prior learning often involves a comprehensive portfolio development and review procedure.

Research has indicated that there are many benefits of PLA for the students and for higher education institutions. For example, a Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's (CAEL) survey of over 62,000 adult learners at 48 higher education institutions revealed adult learners granted PLA credit take more college courses and graduate at higher rates than do traditional or adult students without PLA credits. The persistence and completion rate is also dramatically higher for students of color.

PLA is not necessarily a new idea, and WMU has several examples of PLAs in place. These include awarding university credit for Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses taken while in high school. The World Languages and Literatures department uses a WMU policy that awards retroactive credits for students who test at certain proficiency levels in various languages. Military credit and credit via the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) are also available.

While PLA is not new, there are several current driving forces for further expansion of PLA options. These include the significant numbers of non-traditional students seeking degrees after many years in the work force or military. The fact is that there are fewer traditional college-aged students in the Midwest, while there may be many individuals interested in completing a degree. While many WMU programs have successfully developed schedules that support working professionals (e.g., weekends; hybrids; fully online), none have been able to award significant numbers of credits for prior learning.

Also, fairly new is the concentrated focus on establishing measurable learning outcomes for all courses and programs. This focus makes it more feasible for programs to evaluate prior learning through portfolios and/or other methods that document work, training, and learning experiences.

Another driving force is that many institutions are far ahead of WMU in their use of PLAs. A recent review looked at PLA policies within various universities such as Central Michigan University, Penn State,

University of Alabama, University of Wisconsin, and the University of Maryland, and found established procedures. All involve an assessment fee and a significantly reduced tuition cost for credits awarded. Indeed, Central Michigan notes that to date they have already evaluated over 10,000 portfolios. It is time to allow interested WMU faculty to also offer such opportunities for their programs and students. It is also important to note that the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) recognizes and supports the use of PLAs. Within its Assumed Practices regarding Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support (CRRT.B.10.020.B.g), it notes that an institution must have “a clear policy on the maximum allowable credits for prior learning as a reasonable proportion of the credits required to complete the student’s program. Credit awarded for prior learning is documented, evaluated, and appropriate for the level of degree awarded.” HLC does not require their approval for programs that use a PLA process, as long as it follows a clear university policy.

STAKEHOLDERS

For interested faculty who agree to create PLA opportunities for their graduate programs, this proposed revision could assist in recruiting more nontraditional students to their programs, as well as supporting such existing students. It can also positively impact the time to degree for current or potential graduate students engaged in such programs.

HISTORY:

- a) Effective date of current version: Unknown
- b) Date first adopted: Unknown
- c) Revision history:
- d) Proposed date of next review: None

CURRENT POLICY MODIFICATION (additions in bold and deletions with strikethrough): listing of the sections that are being changed.

From within the Graduate Catalog: Academic Standards:

*Graduate Credit by **Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)** ~~Examination~~*

Each academic unit responsible for offering a graduate program may, with the approval of its dean, establish a procedure for granting credit **via PLAs, including the use of examinations**, for any **graduate** course. ~~numbered 5000 through 6990~~. All credit by **PLA examination** is subject to the following regulations:

1. The academic unit which offers a graduate program shall determine if a **PLA process** ~~an equivalency examination~~ may be used to obtain credit for a particular ~~5000–or 6000–~~ **graduate** level course in that academic unit.
2. All **PLAs** ~~equivalency examinations~~ will be administered and graded, **and/or reviewed**, by no fewer than two faculty members. **If the unit offering a given course for which PLA credit is sought is different than the unit offering the overall program, then faculty from both units need to be engaged in the assessment of such courses.**
3. All **PLAs** ~~credit by examination~~ shall be graded “Credit” or “No Credit.” “Credit” will be posted on the transcript as “Credit earned by PLA ~~examination~~” without letter grade or honor points. Students who do not achieve a sufficient score to receive “Credit” will have no entry made on their transcripts.

4. **All credit awarded via PLAs** ~~credit by examination~~ can be used to meet all other University graduation requirements. ~~except the residency requirement.~~
5. Credit **awarded via PLAs will be placed on a student's transcripts only after being** ~~examinations earned only by those students~~ admitted to a specific graduate degree or certificate program, **although the assessments may occur prior to such admission.** ~~and who are enrolled concurrently with the examination for credit.~~ **Such credits will be listed as completed credits for one or more courses within a given program, but not counted in the grade point average .**
6. **PLA credit as awarded** by examination earned at another university may transfer in accordance with the current policies of the Graduate College governing the transfer of credit.
7. **The maximum number of credits allowed to be granted via PLAs must be a reasonable proportion of the credits or courses required to complete a student's program. This amount may vary per program; however, the number of credits awarded may be no more than one-half of the total credits required to complete a student's program (as rounded-up to include all credits for a given course). For certificate programs that are less than 15 credits, this amount can be no more than one-third.**
8. The process to create a PLA opportunity for a given graduate program must be initiated by faculty from that program, and the written procedures must be approved by their unit chair or director, and college dean. These written procedures must detail at least the following framework items:
 - a) the specific courses for which PLA credits can be earned within a given program;
 - b) detailed learning outcomes for each of these courses;
 - c) rubrics that show how prior learning, as evidenced by an applicant via a portfolio or other means of previous work experience, training, course products, and/or other learning experiences, will be evaluated against the learning outcomes for each specific course;
 - d) the overall review process including the number of reviewers and timelines; and
 - e) the detailed application process, including when a PLA application can be made (e.g., before or after admission to a given program, or while a student is currently enrolled in the program), how such an application is to be submitted (e.g., portfolio, credentials, demonstrations).
 - f) the maximum number of credits, and justification for such number, that an applicant could apply for PLA credit, not to exceed the university maximum amount.
9. Each department with program faculty engaged in reviewing and approving credits via any type of PLA process, shall provide uniform data on such activities to the appropriate WMU entity for reporting and Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accreditation purposes.