Individualized Prior Learning Assessment: A Guide for Students

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INTRODUCTION

Individualized Prior Learning Assessment (iPLA) is the process by which students are able to explain and document their learning and be assessed by a qualified evaluator. Each year, more than 4,000 Empire State College students complete the iPLA process. Most students who go through the process find it satisfying, affirming and worth the time and effort.

Empire State College is committed that people should be awarded credit for verifiable college-level learning regardless of where or how it was acquired. Many Empire State College students have gained knowledge through sources that are not previously validated by regionally accredited institutions or organizations recognized by Empire State College. Learning that has not been pre-evaluated by one of these sources can be evaluated through the individualized Prior Learning Assessment process.

iPLA can save you time and money.

For current information on the fees associated with individualized Prior Learning Assessment, please visit www.esc.edu/Fees.

The evaluation of individualized prior college-level learning is conducted within the context of your degree plan. As you develop your degree plan, you also will develop your iPLA requests. There are multiple steps in determining whether college credit may be awarded for learning you have acquired from various life or work experiences.

STEPS IN THE INDIVIDUALIZED PRIOR LEARNING PROCESS

Steps in the iPLA Process	You	Your Mentor	Center Office of Academic Review (COAR)	The Evaluator	The Faculty Committee	Office of Collegewide Academic Review (OCAR)
Step 1 Identify your college-level knowledge ↓	• Work with your mentor • Examine your experiences and identify how your knowledge fits best into your degree plan	• Helps you identify your college-level knowledge	• Provides free workshops on iPLA			
Step 2 Describe and document your learning ↓	• Prepare your learning description with supporting documentation • Propose a title, the number of possible credits and credits designations (e.g., liberal arts and sciences, general education, level)	• Reviews your iPLA request and gives feedback, as needed				
Step 3 Submit your prior learning request ↓	• Log onto PLA Planner through MyESC/Academics/Your Degree Plan or www.esc.edu/PLA • Set up your request (learning description, supporting materials, credit information and link to degree plan) • Submit your request to your mentor for approval	• Reviews your request and, if ready, submits to COAR	• Provides assistance, as needed • Reviews your iPLA request and provides feedback, as needed			
Step 4 Request is reviewed and assigned to an evaluator ↓			• Reviews your request and, if ready, assigns a qualified evaluator			
Step 5 A qualified evaluator assesses your college-level learning ↓	• Contact the evaluator to set up your interview • You are interviewed by the evalautor			• Reviews your request and checks your degree plan for redundancy • Interviews you regarding your learning		
Step 6 The evaluator writes and submits a credit recommendation report ↓				• Requests additional information or documentation, as needed • The evaluator writes and submits a credit recommendation report		
Step 7 The college reviews and approves the evaluator's credit recommendation			• COAR reviews and includes the evaluator's recommendation report in your degree plan		• Reviews and approves the credit recommendation, as part of your degree plan review	• Approves the PLA credits as part of the final review (concurrence) of your degree plan and officially posts your PLA credits in your student record

Throughout the process, you will get feedback from your mentor, Center Office of Academic Review and the evaluator. You may be asked to make revisions or provide additional information based on this feedback. Their feedback is to help you provide greater clarity and stronger evidence of your learning. To keep the process moving, try to respond to questions as quickly as possible.

ROLES IN THE iPLA PROCESS

You and the college have a role throughout the individualized Prior Learning Assessment process.

Your role is to:

- reflect upon and self-assess your college-level learning

- describe and document your learning so that it can be evaluated

- revise, as needed, based on feedback

- meet with, and be interviewed by, a qualified evaluator

- provide any additional information.

The college's role is to:

- recognize which of your learning is college level

- evaluate and validate your college-level learning within the context of your degree plan

- credential your learning by assigning it an appropriate title and academic credits through the degree plan approval process.

IDENTIFYING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Working With Your Mentor

Your mentor and the Center Office of Academic Review are your resources as you review your learning and develop your request for credit.

They will help guide you as to:

- the form, content and length of your learning description

- the amount of credit you should request

- the determination of how it fits into your degree program

- the supporting documentation you should include in your request.

Throughout this process, you will work closely with your mentor to:

- develop realistic expectations regarding the kinds and amount of prior learning credit appropriate to your degree program plan

- determine if your prior learning is college level, appropriate for your degree program plan and not redundant with other learning

- review your learning description and supporting materials and make revisions based on your mentor's feedback

- agree that the request is ready to be assessed and that your mentor will submit the request to the Center Office of Academic Review through PLA Planner.

You and your mentor will engage in early and ongoing conversations regarding your background, potential areas for prior learning assessment and potential areas for new learning – in other words, the overall scope of your degree program and plans for your new learning. The college provides online, print and in-person resources that support you in this process. However, there is no substitute for your ongoing conversation with your mentor.

Examining Your Experiences

The college awards credit for demonstrated and verifiable college-level learning, not just for experience. This is an important concept to understand: credits are awarded for learning, not for experiences.

To help understand the distinction between learning and experience, think about what you did today. Perhaps you got up, made breakfast and got kids off to school. You got yourself ready and drove to work. When you got there, you read email, worked on a report, or met as part of a team. These actions are all experiences, but probably did not provide you college-level learning in themselves. However, that report may have required you to do research or data analyses that did require learning, or that team meeting may have been to discuss a problem you acquired new learning by solving. During the prior learning assessment process, you will be examining your experiences to find the learning that has occurred for you.

Not all similar experiences have the same learning outcomes. For example, consider the following two students, Suzanne and Tom. They each own a restaurant and are involved in the day-to-day operations. Since their experience is similar, one might expect them to have the same knowledge and skills, but that is not always true.

Tom began cooking in the military and, after he returned to civilian life, focused on preparing gourmet meals. He started a local cooperative so he could buy fresh, local products. In addition, he learned a lot about nutrition because of some health problems and has been incorporating this knowledge into menu choices.

Suzanne focused totally on the business aspect of her restaurant. She does the accounting for the business, has developed a marketing plan and is trying to expand into a catering business. She also is on the board of the local homeless shelter, which she became involved with when she realized that some of the food not used by her restaurant could be donated.

When these two students started to develop degree programs with their mentors and explore credit for prior learning, they discovered that they knew different things. Tom might focus his iPLA requests on nutrition, food preparation and running a cooperative. Suzanne might focus hers on her business skills and knowledge of community organizing.

Both students also might be able to acquire prior learning credits through additional venues. For example, Tom might be eligible for credit for his military training (see the Student Degree Planning Guide for more information, www.esc.edu/studentdpguide). Suzanne might take standardized examinations in accounting and marketing. Both students might take a standardized examination in small business management.

The examples of Tom and Suzanne demonstrate that even though students share similar experiences, the learning each acquires from those experiences is unique. Your mentor can help you determine how best to have your knowledge evaluated and which makes most sense for the iPLA process.

Sources of Prior College-Level Learning

Empire State College recognizes that adults have many opportunities for valuable learning in their everyday lives and work. Think about the following list. What are all the things you have done in your life that fit into one or more of these areas? You might want to prepare a short biography or resume of these experiences to discuss with your mentor.

Learning Source	My Experiences
Work experience	
Licenses, certifications and other credentials	
Continuing professional education, including some continuing education units (CEUs)	
Noncredit courses	
Seminars and in-service training programs	
Learning acquired through Open Educational Resources (e.g., MOOCs)	
Volunteer work in the community	
Hobbies and recreational activities	
Independent reading and research	
Military training that has not been evaluated by ACE	
Study at postsecondary/proprietary schools that may be licensed but not accredited	
Other	

Identifying Your College-Level Learning

Defining college-level learning involves many factors, and you and your mentor will discuss these. College-level learning represents your ability to take your knowledge and relate it within a particular context and to other contexts within and outside your field. College-level learning involves:

- acquiring new information
- engaging critical inquiry
- analyzing, synthesizing and integrating the information
- situating knowledge into a broader context
- applying knowledge.

This may sound complex, but there are different ways that college-level learning can be demonstrated. For example, a current project funded by the Lumina Foundation, has been exploring universal college-learning outcomes that students can use to document their learning, regardless of when, how or where they gained their knowledge. Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF) is still under revision, but even in its current version, may be helpful to you. We encourage you to use this framework to help you think about your knowledge and develop your learning description.

Using Other Sources for Identifying College-Level Learning

Some topics historically have been taught in colleges or universities. You may want to consult the course descriptions found in other institutions' catalogs to get an idea of what is typically taught.

Another source for information about what is typically considered college level is standardized examination descriptions, such as CLEP, which can give you information about the range of knowledge a particular exam assesses and the amount of credits awarded. See the Student Degree Planning Guide (www.esc.edu/studentDPguide) for full information about standardized exams accepted at Empire State College.

Some sample iPLA requests with evaluator recommendations are located on the Web.

> An easy way to search other college catalogs is to use College Source™ (http://www.collegesource.org.library.esc.edu/).
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> This is a subscription database that the college provides for students, mentors and evaluators to research course descriptions. You will need your student login information to access College Source.

DESCRIBING AND DOCUMENTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Describing Your Learning

When you prepare your learning description, you need to be able to describe the learning that you have acquired. This is the hardest part of preparing your request, but it also is very satisfying when you see what you really know. Before you start to create your learning description, you should spend some time organizing your thoughts about the knowledge you have.

This critical reflection involves:

- identifying the concepts you know
- organizing concepts to describe your learning in a way that makes sense to you
- connecting the concepts to show that you see how they are related.

Your learning description should provide a clear summary of each learning topic for which you are requesting credit, while also describing the source, nature and extent of your learning.

You should:

- introduce how you acquired your learning to provide context for your learning
- organize your knowledge in a logical way and elaborate on what you know as a result of your experiences
- demonstrate your knowledge and related competence and skills through examples and documentation
- indicate how the learning is related to your degree plan and your overall learning and professional goals
- identify the topics and issues that you are prepared to discuss in more detail during the interview with the evaluator.

The following worksheet might help you think about your knowledge and how it is interrelated:

Prior Learning Assessment Worksheet

This worksheet is to help you think about and describe what you know. In the boxes below, think about the various topics involved in your learning and ways in which you have developed and applied them. Use the GLQF learning outcomes and questions to help you think about your learning in more detail.

Area of my learning to be assessed: _____

What have I done?	• Provide examples of your experiences and background in this area. • Provide a list of some examples of your work in this area.	
What do I know about this area?	• Create a list of different topics in this area. To help you start, think about: o If I was to write a book, what would my chapters be? o If I was to teach someone else, on what would I focus?	
How have I applied my knowledge? How have I applied my knowledge to other areas?	• Give examples of how you have applied your knowledge (e.g., solving problems or working on projects). • Give examples of how your knowledge connects to other things that you do or have learned.	
How did I learn this knowledge?	• Provide examples of how you learned your topics (e.g., workshops, on the job or personal study).	
How have I gathered more information about my area?	• Provide ways that you have gathered information about your area, including resources or research that you have done.	
How have I shared what I have learned?	• Provide examples of how you have worked in teams, taught others, or shared your knowledge (e.g., reports or updates).	
How have I learned more about my area?	• Provide examples of your learning goals, how you have used feedback and ways your learning has grown over time.	

How would I title my learning? _____

Preparing Your Learning Description

You will provide a learning description for each topic you have identified to be assessed. Often the learning description is presented as an essay, but you can present your learning in alternative formats, as long as it clearly presents your learning in a way that can be evaluated. The particular form, content and length of a learning description varies depending on the type of learning involved, the amount of verification available and the amount of credit requested. You should consider your learning description as a way of introducing yourself and what you have learned to the qualified evaluator. Your mentor will advise and assist you in determining the best strategies for presenting your knowledge.

The learning description serves several functions:

- enables you to focus your ideas and be specific about the types of learning for which you want to be evaluated

- helps the college select a qualified person to evaluate your learning

- introduces the evaluator to your learning and presents your knowledge and skills, so your interview and evaluation can be efficient and productive.

Your final learning description should represent college-level work. Write drafts of your learning description and give them to your mentor to review and critique; this can be done through PLA Planner. Think of this as a learning process in which preparing a draft and making appropriate revisions is the first part. The interview with the evaluator is the second part. Once you have completed a satisfactory model, you will find that preparing additional learning descriptions is easier. A checklist to consider while developing your learning description is available at www.esc.edu/iPLAguide.

Supporting Materials

To the extent possible, you should include supporting materials to document your learning. The supporting materials are evidence of your learning and can help the evaluator understand the extent of your learning. Here are some thoughts to consider:

- If you are using learning acquired through employment or volunteer work, you should try to include proof of employment, proof of volunteer work, training records, or any other supporting documents you can obtain.

- If you are using learning acquired through performance areas, such as music, theater, public speaking, grant or creative writing, computer programming, or financial analysis, you should be prepared to provide samples of your work. These samples can be presented through pictures, videos, audio clips, or other means that best presents your work.

- If you are requesting to be evaluated for your knowledge in areas that do not have easily observable products, such as management, supervision, or human-service skills, you might expect the evaluator to ask for additional evidence to support your claims or provide multiple examples of how you have used your knowledge.

Supporting materials are attached electronically to your request in PLA Planner. If you have documentation that cannot be captured electronically, please speak to your mentor for advice on the best way to share your documentation with the evaluator.

TITLE, CREDITS AND CREDIT DESIGNATIONS

Title of Your Learning

The title for your request should describe the learning that took place. Empire State College does not require that the title match an existing course, but it may if appropriate. Your title should be descriptive of the learning, but also be appropriate to be listed on your degree plan.

For example, Mary has been running her own child care center for the past 15 years. She has developed learning in supervision, but this learning may not fit a typical business-oriented supervision course. Instead, her learning may be more specific to the context of child care and doesn't include some of the learning that would be expected in a typical college course on supervision. Mary decided to title her learning Supervision in Child Care Settings, which is a better descriptive title to explain her learning.

In reviewing your learning, your mentor and/or the evaluator may make recommendations to change your title to better reflect your learning.

Number of Credits

You consult with your mentor to determine the number of credits for your request. Although your mentor or other college faculty members have a good idea of how many credits might be reasonable, here are some points to consider when deciding on an appropriate credit amount:

- If your knowledge is similar to the knowledge acquired in a college course, you might use the number of credits typically assigned to that course.

- If your knowledge includes significant general/theoretical as well as practical knowledge, additional credits may be added to reflect the learning represented by the practical experience. In these cases, sometimes the learning is best presented as two different titles, one representing your overall knowledge and one representing your applied knowledge.

- Your credit amounts should represent learning in a particular topic. If there are large blocks of credits, this usually means that either there is more than one topic being represented or that the learning is at both an introductory and advanced level. In general, try to keep your credit amounts similar to other studies listed on your degree plan.

> As you develop your prior learning requests, keep in mind:
>
> - Your initial estimate of credit is just that – an estimate.
> - An evaluator's recommendation is not an award of credit – it is a recommendation.
> - The college awards credit upon the approval of your degree plan through the review and approval process.

Credit Designations

For each iPLA request, you will indicate if the credits are:

- liberal arts and sciences or applied learning

- lower or advanced-level learning.

In addition, you can use iPLA credits to meet the SUNY general education requirements. For a complete description of each of the types of credit designations, see the Student Degree Planning Guide at www.esc.edu/studentdpguide.

SUBMITTING YOUR PRIOR LEARNING REQUEST

PLA Planner

The iPLA request and approval process is managed through PLA Planner, an online tool developed by the college. In PLA Planner:

- You submit your PLA request to your mentor.

- Your mentor reviews and provides you with feedback on the request. You work closely with your mentor to make sure that the learning description clearly explains what you know.

- Your mentor submits your request to the Center Office of Academic Review, which also reviews your request and may give you feedback.

- The Center Office of Academic Review assigns an evaluator.

- You are notified through email of the assignment, with contact information for the evaluator. The evaluator interviews you outside of PLA Planner.

- The evaluator submits a recommendation report after evaluating your learning.

- The recommendation is included in your degree plan for review and approval.

> More information about using PLA Planner is available at www.esc.edu/iPLAguide.
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> To access PLA Planner go to:
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> www.esc.edu/MyESC
>
> Under the Academics tab, look for the section called Your Degree Plan. There you will find a link to PLA Planner and a full guide to using the program.
>
> OR go to:
>
> www.esc.edu/pla

REVIEW AND ASSIGNMENT OF YOUR REQUEST

Your mentor reviews your request and, when ready, submits it to the Center Office of Academic Review. The Center Office of Academic Review also reviews your request to ensure that it is ready to be assessed. In addition, COAR needs to understand your topic well enough to place it with the appropriate evaluator.

If either your mentor or the Center Office of Academic Review advises you that your request needs more edits, you will have the opportunity to work on it further before it is evaluated.

Qualified Evaluators

The evaluator has been selected by the college specifically to evaluate your learning. This selection is based on the evaluator's qualifications and background. The college tries to select an evaluator with expertise in an area as close as possible to your learning based on what you have described in your iPLA request.

The evaluator may be:

- a faculty member from Empire State College

- a faculty member from another college

- an expert in the field with equivalent credentials to a faculty member.

Review of Your PLA Request

Once assigned to your PLA request, the evaluator reviews the request through PLA Planner. The evaluator reviews:

- your learning description

- any supporting materials you submit

- your proposed degree plan to determine if there are any overlaps (redundancy) with the learning being evaluated and other learning identified on your degree plan.

Setting Up the Interview

Once the evaluator has accepted your iPLA request within PLA Planner, you will be notified through an automated email. You need to log into PLA Planner to find the contact information for the evaluator. You are responsible to contact the evaluator immediately to set up your interview. If you have any difficulties contacting the evaluator, or if there are any delays in the process, you need to let your mentor or your Center Office of Academic Review know immediately.

Once you and the evaluator connect, you set up a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview. The interview needs to be in real time. That means that you and the evaluator are interacting in person, over the phone, or through videoconferencing or other technology-enhanced methods (e.g., Skype). Email interviews are not in real time and should be used only to make initial contact and for follow-up questions. The interview can last from 30 minutes to several hours.

The interview is an opportunity for you to provide your evaluator with a deeper understanding of your learning. Please plan to spend at least an hour speaking with the evaluator for each topic within your PLA request.

If you are doing a face-to-face interview, we recommend that you meet at the college or a public environment. You should not meet at the evaluator's or your home.

The Interview

After the evaluator has reviewed your request, he or she will conduct an interview with you to gain a more in-depth understanding of your knowledge. You are expected to participate actively in the evaluation process. The evaluator may ask you to demonstrate or elaborate further on your learning. The evaluator needs to be confident that your learning is college level and not redundant with other learning in your degree program plan.

The interview process can be interesting and informative. The interview is an opportunity for you to discuss ways in which you have used your knowledge and have applied this knowledge in different situations. It can result in an increased understanding of your learning and provide you with new or differing perspectives.

The evaluator asks questions that help clarify and verify your knowledge and to gain a better understanding of the depth and breadth of your learning. The evaluator may ask about possible redundancies between a particular credit request and other studies that are listed on your degree program. The evaluator also may suggest changes in the title of your learning components, the number of credits, the level of learning, or liberal arts and sciences credit designations.

Providing Additional Information

At any point in the process, the evaluator may ask for:

- more information in writing

- additional documentation, such as official records of workshops attended, accomplishments in military service or bibliographies of materials that you have read

- answers to specific questions

- products that you have created, such as publications, videotapes of performances, photographs, musical compositions or designs

- other additional supporting materials.

Most of your supporting materials can be submitted electronically through PLA Planner. Otherwise, you can make arrangements to share the materials at the interview, or through other means acceptable to the evaluator. Unless the evaluator requests to see original documentation, you can use copies, photos, videos and/or websites to document your work. You need to make arrangements to have any original work returned to you.

THE EVALUATOR CREDIT RECOMMENDATION REPORT

Once the evaluator has reviewed your request and has communicated with you about your learning, the evaluator will write and submit a written recommendation report through PLA Planner. The evaluator is expected to make an academic credit recommendation that is in keeping with the standards of a regionally accredited collegiate institution.

The evaluator's recommendation report is a recommendation to the college as to the title, number of credits and credit designations. The evaluator may suggest changes in the titles and may recommend credit amounts or credit designations differently than you requested. The college, as part of the degree plan review and approval process, awards the credits.

Information regarding the recommendation report is provided at www.esc.edu/iPLAguide.

THE REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF THE INDIVIDUALIZED PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT REQUEST

Award of Credit

The award of credit for your prior learning is done within the context of your degree plan review and approval process. When you submit your degree plan for approval, the evaluator recommendation report is included. The Center Faculty Assessment Committee reviews the evaluator's recommendation report for your prior learning, and if the committee agrees with the recommendation, the credits are approved.

Sometimes, the faculty committee may suggest some changes to the recommendation. In these cases, the Center Office of Academic Review will work with the evaluator and/or you and your mentor to determine the best resolution.

The Office of Collegewide Academic Review is the administrative office located in the college's Coordinating Center responsible for reviewing your degree program plan for concurrence (final approval). As part of that process, the office also reviews and approves the evaluator's recommendation report in conjunction with the decision made by the Center Faculty Assessment Committee regarding the award of credit.

For more information on the degree program plan approval process, please see the Student Degree Planning Guide at www.esc.edu/studentdpguide.

> Once your degree program plan is concurred, your prior learning assessment credits are official and become part of your transcript.

Fees Related to Individualized Prior Learning Assessment

For the latest information on the fees associated with individualized Prior Learning Assessment, please visit www.esc.edu/Fees.