Prior
Learning
Faculty
Guide
Table of Contents

External Degree Program Staff 1

Prior Learning Overview 2

Educational Context & Benefits 3

Parameters of Evaluation 4

Student Responsibilities 5

Faculty Responsibilities 7

EXD Sample Worksheet 8

Application to Submit Knowledge of Prior Learning (ASK) 9

Dean’s Permission Form 10

Professional Services Agreement 11

Prior Learning Evaluation Form 12

Frequently Asked Questions 14

Bibliography 16
Prior Learning Overview

Adult students enter the External Degree Program with a vast array of knowledge gained through experiences in business, government, community and social organizations. Because of the institutionalization of prior learning credit, these students are allowed to demonstrate the intersection of practical application and theory and receive college-level credit applicable to their degree. Prior learning credit is given for the “learning” and not the “experience.” This practice not only enhances the degree program of the External Degree student but also enriches the academic community by bringing an element of self-reflection to the typical course-based education. An additional effect is to bring together students and faculty from different “...social institutions, populations, life experiences and fields of inquiry, all of which require new types of understandings and skills” (Mandell 6).

The External Degree Program has identified that the assessment of prior learning is a vital element among the academic possibilities available to our students. Prior Learning assessment has been a part of the External Degree Program since its inception in the early 1970’s and is often the reason many of our adult students seek application to the program.

The integral place of prior learning assessment within the mission and purpose of the External Degree Program lies in its compatibility with the needs of the working adult student population served by this program. Based on the proven assumption that working adults will bring a variety of diverse and often specialized skills to the classroom, experiential learning tends to emphasize the application of this knowledge. By its very nature, experiential learning validates the richness and diversity of environments in which individuals can pursue meaningful learning.

Lois Lamdin defines prior learning in her text *Earn College Credit for What You Know* as “a process whereby learning acquired before the assessment, that has not been transcripted by a college, is evaluated to determine whether it is comparable with what is taught on college campuses and, if so, is recognized by the award of college credit” (63). The External Degree portfolio assessment program permits students to apply for assessment in academic fields for which a faculty evaluator can be found. The portfolio evaluators are University of Alabama faculty and staff, or professionals whose academic training represents expertise in areas such as the humanities, social sciences, sciences and business.
Educational Context

Perhaps no area of academic work is less understood and potentially of such great value in an undergraduate curriculum as earning credit through prior learning evaluation. Faculty and students, of course, have slightly different perspectives about prior learning and its uses.

The faculty are given the opportunity to work with adult students who have often spent many years practicing the theories and using the guiding principles taught in on-campus courses. It gives the faculty a unique window into their own fields at the practical level.

A student naturally tends to see the prospect of receiving credit for prior learning as having two great advantages. It can shorten the time and money expended in earning a degree, and it can also provide psychological rewards in verifying that what one has done in the past is worth academic credit for college-level learning.

Benefits

These practical benefits are important, but there are additional benefits in the educational principles that apply to a student’s prior learning analysis and presentation.

- Effective learning comes from combining both experience and concept. When theory and practice come together in a student’s mind, it can be said that something has been learned and that it will be remembered longer. This principle is a rationale for laboratory work and field experience in many degree programs.

- What one has learned is not directly dependent upon how it was learned. In other words, older students have often learned in the laboratories of their lives. If they have adequately combined those “laboratory” experiences with study and reflection, they can match the intent of the more traditional classroom delivery of theory about any given subject.

- The deepest levels of intellectual achievement occur through the process of reflective thinking. The ability to monitor experience perceptively and to draw from it effective guidelines for future action is a key to great advances in human thinking. Although we must be realistic about the extent to which this process may occur at the undergraduate level, understanding that this very process is at the heart of prior learning analysis and presentation is important to understanding the role that the prior learning process plays in a student’s educational development.

- A better understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses is gained.
Parameters of Evaluation

1. The student's presentation should stand alone. The evaluator should not have to infer that learning "possibly" took place because a student was in proximity to or engaged in activities that could have produced learning.

2. The learning should be at least on the undergraduate level, as understood in the evaluator's field of study. The learning should have characteristics of comparability and transferability that extend beyond the specific job or setting in which it was gained.

3. The learning should appropriately demonstrate a conceptual as well as a practical grasp of the subject matter. Most older students demonstrate an understanding of basic theories applicable to undergraduate courses of the general nature of the experiences being presented.

4. The learning should be related to an academic field (although it need not be confined to an existing course content).
   
   • For most students presenting prior learning, the normal progression of resident courses is somewhat reversed. A student's out-of-class learning experiences may be at the specialized level of junior or senior "special topics" or "internship" type courses, not at the more general level of introductory first- and second-year courses.
   
   • Your precision in connecting your evaluation to specific courses is helpful to us in insuring that students do not receive duplicate credit.
   
   • On the other hand, we recognize that the way in which students have combined college-level prior learning experiences may not easily coincide with existing courses at this university or others. Sometimes, for example, a student's life experience puts him or her in interdisciplinary areas to which academic institutions have not yet reacted in developing needed courses.

5. As mentioned above, checking for duplication is part of our task in evaluating prior learning.

   • Included with the student's presentation is a copy of his or her Curriculum Worksheet, showing how the student's existing credit applies to External Degree graduation requirements.
   
   • If you note possible duplications with credit you are recommending from your evaluation, please call them to our attention. Please do not omit a portion of your recommendation because you feel it duplicates previous credit. Our registrar routinely checks prior learning credit recommendations and course equivalents (with other institutions if necessary) to avoid duplication of credit.

* Do not omit a portion of recommendation because it may duplicate previous credit.

* The evaluator should not have to infer that learning "possibly" took place.
6. An important aspect of prior learning in the undergraduate curriculum is that credit for prior learning contributes to definite degree plans of which both the student and The University of Alabama can be proud.

- If you feel that a student deserves credit for a presentation emphasizing applied experiences, but would benefit from additional work in the foundations of the subject area, please so recommend.
- If you feel that a student should expand his or her conceptual understandings by additional reading(s) or other work to supplement the presentation, please so recommend.

Such recommendations are particularly helpful in using prior learning to meet general education requirements and to develop depth study competencies.

7. Evaluations of prior learning are made on a pass basis since evaluators do not directly supervise the quality of the experiences being presented.

Student Responsibilities

When a student wants to present a portfolio for Prior Learning evaluation, he or she must submit an an Application to Submit Evidence of Prior Learning (hereinafter referred to as an ASK) to the External Degree staff. After the staff has reviewed and approved the ASK, the student has six months in which to prepare the portfolio for submission. During that six-month period the student can request instruction and advice about portfolio preparation. Prior to making this presentation, the student should have studied the Prior Learning Student Guide. This "guide" instructs the student to organize the presentation with the following components:

- A Letter of Transmittal to his or her External Degree academic advisor. This is a cover letter.

- A Title Sheet in the form of an Application to Submit Evidence of Prior Learning (see page 8 of this manual). This form provides some basic information about the student. It includes telephone numbers if the evaluator wishes to query the student directly about the presentation. It also indicates the subject area title of the presentation and the area of the student's Degree Plan to which he or she desires to apply any credit earned.

- A Table of Contents, which should be organized with accurate headings and page numbers to help the evaluator understand the presentation.
✓ A Resume to help the evaluator understand the life context of the prior learning presentation.

✓ A statement of how this area of prior learning relates to the student’s Degree Plan.

- We advise students to think of prior learning credit in the same way they would when considering enrolling for other courses. We want each student to understand the approximate scope and depth of his or her prior learning experiences as those learnings apply to the area in which the student is claiming competency.

- We advise students to visit college bookstores and examine textbooks in the areas of study each believes approximate his or her learning experience. This assists the student in recognizing what theoretical material is currently taught in a given field of study.

- This statement of relationship to Degree Plan should reflect understanding of how the student would have selected courses in an on-campus situation.

- Common sense applies in determining how rigidly this relationship should be tied to specific courses. Some areas of experience fit course descriptions closely; some do not.

✓ A Detailed Description of Experience. In this section the student should provide the evaluator with a clear description of the who, what, when and where details of his or her experiences. We tell the student that the purpose of this section is to make the evaluator comfortable with the student’s communication skills and the basic facts of the experience being presented. It also addresses the issue of currency.

✓ A Detailed Analysis of Learning from Experience. This is the most difficult and important section of the presentation.

- We advise the student to develop this part of the presentation around guiding principles he or she would share with someone else about how to understand the area of knowledge being presented for evaluation. Not all areas of prior learning presentation lend themselves to this approach, but most will.

- We also advise the student to illustrate each guiding principle from personal experience in applying that principle.

- We give the student latitude in judging whether to organize these guiding principles around specific courses or
other schema, but we do insist that the content of a presentation be aimed at a single academic department of the university. We do not expect faculty to evaluate learnings in areas outside their individual professional preparations and teaching responsibilities.

- **An Annotated Bibliography.** This section should list the sources the student has used to develop his or her learnings and to put practical experience into conceptual context. Annotations should show as specifically as possible how the student has used the sources in practice.

- **Documentation** should be in the form of clearly identified appendices. We advise the student that documentation supports the narrative and analysis sections; it does not substitute for them. The student should cross-reference documentation in the narrative and analysis sections to help the evaluator see clearly how the documentation relates to the learnings being claimed.

### Faculty Responsibilities

#### Process:

- Once the student has prepared the portfolio and it has been received in the External Degree office, the Prior Learning Coordinator will seek a faculty member to do the evaluation.

- A permission form (see page 10 of this manual) is sent to the faculty member's officiating dean to gain approval of services.

- When the dean's permission is returned to the External Degree offices, the portfolio and appropriate evaluation forms are delivered to the faculty member (see pages 12-13 of this manual).

- The faculty member will direct any questions about the evaluation process to the Prior Learning Coordinator.

- The Prior Learning Coordinator will check with the faculty member on a rolling two-week basis to determine the evaluation progress and to give further assistance.

- The evaluator may call the student to clarify learning or to discuss the portfolio preparation.

- Once the evaluation process is completed, the faculty member will notify the Prior Learning Coordinator to arrange the pick-up of the portfolio and evaluation forms.

- Payment will be made to the faculty member according to the University of Alabama pay schedules.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Course Description</th>
<th>Gr.</th>
<th>Hrs.</th>
<th>Q. Pts</th>
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**Explanation of Symbols**

(*) = Less Than "C" Average, Original College Credit
(+)= Exceeds Junior College Limit Of 60 Semester Hours
(J) = Total Junior College Hours: 0.00
(P) = Professional Course Hours: 0.00
(R) = Repeated Course

[**] = Prior Learning

[**, w/ UA in Inst] = Prior Learning UA

[O] = Depth Study

[C] = Communication Skills

[H] = Humanities

[N] = Natural Sciences

[M] = Mathematical Skills

[E] = Electives

[SP] = Senior Project

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<td>Mathematical Skills</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Project</td>
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Registrar's Signature: _________________________ Date: _________________________
Regular ASK

NOTE: A student must submit this form for each subject area of prior learning he or she wishes to have evaluated. Submission of prior learning evidence does not guarantee credit. The fee paid for each submission of prior learning is an evaluation fee, not a tuition fee. Credit is earned on the basis of whether or not the evidence proves the learning is college-level, is current, does not duplicate credit already learned and makes a positive contribution to the student's degree plan.

NAME: _______________________________ STUDENT NUMBER: ___________________________

ADDRESS: _______________________________ DEPTH STUDY: __________________________

_________________________________________ EMAIL: __________________________________

TELEPHONE: (home) _______________ (work) __________________________

SUBJECT AREA TITLE (FIELD OF STUDY): _____________________________________________

(In general, subject area titles correspond to departmental headings in The University of Alabama catalog. Please discuss the appropriate title with your advisor before submitting this application.)

AREA OF DEGREE PLAN: I intend that any credit earned from this evaluation will be applied to the following area(s) of my curriculum worksheet:

___ Humanities ___ Natural Sciences ___ Mathematics ___ Social Science

___ Electives ___ Depth Study ___ Communication

If more than one of the above areas is checked, please explain:

____________________________________________________________________________________

TYPE OF PRESENTATION: (Specify portfolio, competency exam, oral/visual presentation, electronic, other.)

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

ATTACHED ARE: ___A. Brief Chronological Description of Experience (when)

___B. Brief Description of Learning Applications (how it relates to degree)

___C. Brief Analysis of Learning Outcomes (guiding principles)

___D. Tentative List of Possible Documentation

___E. Tentative List of Applicable U of A courses (UA or other institution)

___F. $500.00 check for evaluation fee

The actual presentation should be submitted within six months of the approval of this application.

DATE: ____________________________ STUDENT SIGNATURE: __________________________
TO:

FROM: Ms. Rebecca Pow  
Director, Academic Programs and Services  
External Degree Program  
Box 870182

DATE:

STUDENT:

PROPOSED PRIOR LEARNING PORTFOLIO:

FACULTY MEMBER IDENTIFIED:

PAYMENT TO BE RECEIVED: Portfolio Evaluation: $250.00

We appreciate your efforts on behalf of this adult student and The External Degree Program.

Please return this form with your decision by:

TO EXTERNAL DEGREE OFFICE

_____ Approved as outlined above

_____ Alternate faculty member I have contacted who is willing to assist student

APPROVAL ___________________________ DATE ___________________________

Department Chair

APPROVAL FOR SUPPLEMENTAL COMPENSATION

Vice President ___________________________ Date ___________________________
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AGREEMENT

TO:

FROM: Rebecca Pow, Director
The External Degree Program

(If University of Alabama Faculty/Staff, please check one of the following)

_____ 9-month appointment  _____ 12-month appointment

This Professional Services Agreement between you and The University of Alabama
External Degree Program specifies conditions of service.

For evaluating a prior learning portfolio, you will receive $250.00 per evaluation,
whether credit is recommended or not.

Upon receipt of the student’s prior learning evaluation, the External Degree Office
will process the paperwork. Payment for these services is processed through The
University of Alabama’s supplemental payroll, which is distributed once a month on
the 15th of each month.

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICE TO BE PERFORMED: Prior Learning Evaluation

STUDENT’S NAME:

ACCEPTANCE OF AGREEMENT
Sign below:

I wish to receive payment for services rendered:

_________________________________________  Social Security #

Signature

Date: ________________________________

The External Degree Program is grateful for your assistance with adult students.
EVALUATION OF PRIOR LEARNING

In examining a portfolio for the purpose of recommending credit for what has been learned from experience, you may wish to consider the following criteria:

1. The learning gained from the experience must have been demonstrated by the student.
2. The learning should be at least on the undergraduate level.
3. The student should have demonstrated a conceptual as well as practical grasp of the subject matter.
4. The learning should be applicable outside of the specific job or setting in which it was gained.
5. The learning should be related to an academic field (although it need not be confined to an existing course content).

Your recommendation will be the basis for awarding credit by the External Degree Program. Please forward your recommendation to the External Degree Program, 305 Martha Parham Hall, or (mailing address) P. O. Box 870182, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35487-0182.

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PLEASE RATE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING AS :

GOOD      AVERAGE      NEEDS WORK

GENERAL COMMENTS:

1. How the student addressed the area of requested credit.  
2. Organization of portfolio.  

NARRATIVE:

1. Explanation of how the learning was acquired. 
2. The student's general understanding of the field. 
3. The mixture of theory and practice appropriate to the subject.
4. The student's college level writing skills. 
5. Organization of narrative.  

EVIDENCE:

1. The nature and quality of the evidence. 
2. The authenticity of the evidence.  

POSSIBILITY OF ADDITIONAL CREDIT:

(Please elaborate on conditions or requirements for possible additional credit.)

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MESSAGE TO STUDENT:

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12
RECOMMENDATION: Upon examination of the material submitted by ________________
the following recommendation is made: (check at least one of the four categories)

1. Semester hours to be awarded: ______________ Grade (Pass) ______________

   Credit to be recorded as ___________________________________________________________________

   Equivalent UA courses, if applicable (please provide course number, titles and semester hours)
   ______________________________________________________________________________________

2. ______ The learning demonstrated duplicates that for which the student has already received credit.

3. ______ The learning demonstrated does not appear to be college-level and no credit can be awarded.

IF YOU ARE NOT RECOMMENDING A CREDIT AWARD, PLEASE CHECK ALL OF THE FOLLOWING THAT APPLY:

   ______ evidence is inadequate
   ______ narrative is too brief
   ______ evidence does not support knowledge of topics in area of requested credit
   ______ it is not clear how the knowledge was acquired
   ______ knowledge demonstrated is not at the college level
   ______ student's knowledge lacks the breadth of the subject area

   ______ other: ____________________________________________________________________________

If more work is required, what information should be provided?

   ______ additional evidence, i.e.: ______________________________________________________________________
   ______ rewrite narrative: ___________________________________________________________________________
   ______ a written exam is required: ____________________________________________________________________
   ______ an oral interview is required: __________________________________________________________________

FACULTY MEMBER'S NAME (please type or print) ____________________________________________________________________________

FACULTY MEMBER'S SIGNATURE ____________________________ DEPT. ____________________________

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER ____________________________ DATE ____________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________

EXD APPROVAL:

Registrar ____________________________ Advisor ____________________________ Director ____________________________

Date ____________________________ Date ____________________________ Date ____________________________
1. **Do you mean that this student is asking for credit and hasn't had a course?**

   The student may not have taken a campus-based course in the area that he or she is seeking portfolio credit, but the student has been given instruction as to how to seek out the guiding principles and theories that govern campus-based courses. The student is encouraged to examine texts used by campus-based instructors, and to talk to professionals in the area. Often the students have taken a course in "portfolio preparation" and have resources that will assist them in the demonstration of their learning. Whether the student has taken foundation courses or not should be clear upon examination of the Degree Plan worksheet and the portfolio. Ultimately it is not necessary that a student have courses in the area that he or she is seeking credit as long as learning is apparent and well articulated in the portfolio.

2. **How much credit may be awarded?**

   SACS regulations dictate that only 1/4 of a student's credit can be earned through prior learning portfolio evaluation. This translates to 30 hours of portfolio credit. Students can have additional prior learning credit from other sources such as ACE (American Council of Education), CLEP (College Level Examination Program) and AP (Advanced Placement) evaluations. However, this is not portfolio-based credit. The total amount of prior learning credit that any one student may receive is 45 hours. This can be achieved through a combination of any of the aforementioned types of credit. As evaluator, you have the right to recommend the credit you feel comfortable giving. If the student demonstrates learning that would be comparable to what is taught in a three-hour on-campus course, that student should receive three hours of credit. If on the other hand, the student only demonstrates partial knowledge of a three-hour on-campus type course (perhaps two hours worth) then you should recommend only the two hours and not the full three hours of credit. If there is credit from what would be multiple courses (the student grasps what would be three hours from 101 and what would be only two hours from 102), then you can recommend multiple hours of block credit or list the hours with separate titles. Any partial credit given is not then an actual equivalent.

3. **What do I call the credit?**

   Evaluators generally choose to title prior learning credit after typical courses taught on the University campus. However, some evaluators choose to assign more generic titles to the credit given (ex: *Electrical Engineering Field Work* or *Management Internship*). The program Registrar and the student's Academic Advisor will usually agree to use the evaluator's title. The inclusion of course names (course equivalents if any) is helpful in checking for credit duplication. If there is a question the Registrar or Prior Learning Coordinator will consult with the faculty member.

4. **What sort of grade do I give?**

   Prior learning credit is given a PASS grade because the student is not taking a course.

5. **Can I have contact with the student?**

   We encourage faculty to contact the student if there is a need to clarify learning. If there are questions about the presentation, the faculty member is free to contact the student or the Prior Learning Coordinator.
6. What if I see learning in the portfolio, but it is not well documented, or there may be additional credit if the student did additional work?
If it is apparent that there is learning within the portfolio but it is not well articulated, you should feel free to contact the Prior Learning Coordinator, or the student directly, and ask that a more clearly written explanation of learning be prepared. You may request that the student do some additional reading, writing or documentation to add to the portfolio.

7. Can I ask someone else to look at the portfolio?
There may be times when other faculty in your department may be better able to evaluate portions of a portfolio or the portfolio in its entirety. If this is the case, you should notify the Prior Learning Coordinator, who will in turn seek permission from your dean.

8. May I copy the portfolio for future reference?
Some evaluators wish to keep “good” portfolios for demonstration in campus-based courses, or as additional references in personal libraries. Please contact the Prior Learning Coordinator for permission to copy prior learning portfolios.

9. Is it proper to include notes to the student with the evaluation?
The External Degree Program encourages the faculty to include notes with their evaluation that speak to the level of work presented.

10. How will the prior learning credit be recorded on a transcript?
Please see page 7 of this manual.

11. Is prior learning credit accepted on a transcript at the graduate level?
That is a school-by-school, department-by-department decision. Many students have gone on to graduate work with their prior learning credit accepted intact.

12. Is prior learning credit awarded for experience?
NO! Credit is only awarded for the LEARNING demonstrated.

13. Can I assign zero (0) hours of credit?
If you believe that the student has not met the minimum requirements toward appropriate articulation of the learning, then you may assign “No credit.”
PRIOR LEARNING BIBLIOGRAPHY


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16
Notes