

Earning College Credit for Prior Experiential Learning

A Student Handbook for the Focused Portfolio Development Program

Prepared and written by the staff of the Vermont State Colleges System Office of Prior Learning Assessment

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CHAPTER 1

An Introduction: Adult Students and the Assessment of Prior Learning

This handbook is written primarily for adults entering or returning to higher education who have enrolled in the Vermont State Colleges' Focused Portfolio Development (FPD) program.

Assessment and Other Programs for Adult Students

Adult students are part of higher education. Many colleges have created programs to serve adult students. Adults, in turn, are finding colleges to be a source for personal growth and a key to career achievements. Employment opportunities are increasingly requiring an associate or bachelor degree, or other post-secondary credential.

Most adult students have work experiences, community service activities, non-credit course work, and personal interests which yield learning of college-level quality. To acknowledge these special accomplishments, more and more institutions are awarding college credit, advanced standing or some other kind of recognition for learning acquired through these non-collegiate experiences.

A number of methods are used to determine how much credit should be awarded to an individual student. Among the most familiar are the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) exams. Some of the colleges, such as the Community College of Vermont, have special "Course Challenge" programs for their students, as well as the semester-long "Assessment of Prior Learning" course. The Focused Portfolio Development assessment program in which you are enrolled is another such method for awarding college credit for prior experiential learning. Assessment programs are often taken at the beginning of the adult's experience in higher education. They provide the essential link between a student's prior learning and their future educational goals or choices.

Awarding credit for prior experiential learning acknowledges that college-level skills can be gained

from a variety of experiences. One way to learn accounting, for example, is to take a course called "Principles of Accounting." Another equally valid way is to work for an accountant. Programs that assess prior learning compare and contrast the breadth of learning from a variety of experiences and then make a translation of this learning into the "currency" of higher education: the college credit, the accompanying course title, and a transcript.

Assessment as a Core Experience

Assessment can be a key experience for the adult student entering or returning to college. It gives the student a unique opportunity to look ahead at where they want to go in higher education, and then to look back at their past experience to determine learning that can help them earn college credit for what they have already learned. This will have a direct impact on their educational goal.

After the completion of the focused portfolio, students can use this process of looking ahead and looking back to make future decisions about their personal and professional goal.

Although we treat these subjects independently, they are very much related. The most successful students in FPD are those who integrating prior learning with future educational goals.

Looking Back

During the course, students complete a comprehensive examination of their learning, starting about the time of high school graduation and continuing up to the present. Students organize learning in a way comparable to the traditional organization of learning in college. They compare and contrast the various elements of their learning, then evaluate these elements against principles used to assess college-level quality. Although the task sounds complicated, it is explained in a series of manageable steps throughout the remaining chapters of this handbook. The faculty member teaching the FPD course is also part of the students' support system.

Planning Ahead

“The person who seeks an education, whether returning to college in the later years or in the first years after high school or at any other point, must involve himself in discovering the meaning of his own life and the relationship between who he is and what he might become. Without that vision of a personal future and a hard look at the reality of one’s own situation, the ultimate purpose of education itself, that is to grow, to change, to liberate oneself—is almost impossible to achieve...”

Harold Taylor quoted by Peter Meyer in **“Awarding College Credit for Non-College Learning”**

Relating a vision of a personal future to one’s current situation is important. Attending college and earning college credit for prior experiential learning do not occur in a vacuum. These activities are often the result of broader personal goals, such as professional advancement, a quest for knowledge, or self-discovery.

Planning ahead helps students describe the concrete educational steps necessary to realize a particular goal. All FPD students design a (draft) degree plan. This degree plan outlines the specific courses necessary to realize a specific educational goal.

Preparing for the Task

Almost all students who successfully complete an assessment of prior learning program earn credit for their prior learning. To be successful in FPD, students must meet four minimum requirements. They must:

- have enough time to do the required tasks, homework, and assignments
- be willing to participate in group activity
- have college level competence in writing
- know in which academic area they want to pursue a degree

Time

The process of assessing prior experiential learning can be a provocative educational experience, and it takes time to do the job well. Activities and tasks are not restricted to class time. There are many lengthy, out-of-class assignments. Earning many credits in one

semester is no easy task, and the amount of credit awarded is often directly related to the time invested.

How much time is enough? The amount of time needed depends on one’s writing style, the number of credits requested, and on how difficult it becomes to obtain documentation.

Group Interaction Skills – In Class and Online

FPD is, in part, a group activity. Although students will produce an individual portfolio, they are aided in this project by the discussion, comparison, feedback, and sharing of information found in class. Interaction with peers is important in determining how well the portfolio communicates. Group activity encourages students to break out of their routine into a new kind of learning environment. Class discussion also results in helpful suggestions for the description, organization and documentation of a student’s learning.

As part of the group activity in FPD, students may:

- Share the parts of their portfolio with other students;
- Review and critique the work of others; and
- Participate in discussions on learning styles, higher education, career paths, and goal setting.

Writing Skills

Throughout FPD, students will ask themselves some very complicated questions. Not only will they ask “What do I know?” but also “How can I state that I know it?” The most significant step in this process of inquiry will be the description and organization of the knowledge in written words that may be understood by a reader.

Although a number of writing exercises are part of the class, they are primarily designed to stimulate self-reflection and fluency in written expression.

Successful assessment students should be able to do all of the following prior to enrolling:

- Use the fundamental rules of grammar, including correct spelling and punctuation, subject-verb agreement and subject-object complement;
- Write clear and logical paragraphs and organize these into an essay;

- Compare and contrast concepts in both paragraph and outline form;
- Write formal and informal letters; and
- Write in an autobiographical style.

Students must be able to write at the college-level. Prior to enrolling in the FPD class, students will likely be asked to take a writing skills assessment, unless they have taken English Composition or a similar course at a college in the past. Depending on the outcome of a writing assessment, an advisor might recommend or require that students take a college-level writing (or another writing intensive) class before enrolling in FPD. Ease and confidence in one's writing skills are very important to enrolling in FPD.

Expectations and Benefits

There are almost as many reasons for enrolling in FPD as there are students who enroll. Each student's reasons will, of course, be determined by individual circumstances and situations. In addition to awarding college credits, FPD has the potential of being a richly rewarding educational experience in many ways.

Among the most common reasons for enrolling in FPD are:

- to develop a realistic understanding of your present level of competence;
- to obtain the credit you deserve in order to shorten the time to a degree;
- to meet the requirements of an employer or to obtain a promotion;
- to increase personal mobility;
- to satisfy the requirements of a degree program;
- to review, organize, analyze, and integrate parts of your past and present

The Lasting Benefits

There are many benefits to going through the prior learning assessment process:

Practical Benefits

Education is expensive and time consuming. In addition to the direct costs of tuition, fees and books, adult learners must often add indirect costs such as travel, meals and lodging. And, education also has another cost: the time spent in a classroom is time not

spent at a part-time job, or relaxing with family or a favored hobby. By earning credit in those areas in which they have prior college-level learning, FPD students save significantly in both time and money, making FPD one of the best education bargains around. The completed portfolio also has another practical value. As a single document of career, education, and life accomplishments, it can be used in seeking a job, a promotion, or in planning for the future.

Intellectual Benefits

FPD provides students with a realistic appraisal of their learning. They will have a better sense of what they know and don't know after completing the portfolio. This realistic appraisal is important in planning further educational activities, especially those which culminate in a degree.

Personal/Interpersonal Benefits

FPD builds self-confidence, a sense of self-worth, and a willingness to take risks. Looking critically and carefully at the accomplishments of one's life is a tremendous psychological boost. Students who begin by saying, "I haven't accomplished anything," may say, "I didn't realize I'd accomplished so much."

The Beginning and the End

The opportunity to enrich one's life through higher education has never been greater. Innovations that were non-existent 30 years ago now make higher education both more challenging and more realistic for adults. Among these innovations, assessment of prior and experiential learning is often central to the adult experience in higher education. In FPD, adults integrate their personal history with their hopes and plans for the future.

In beginning the assessment process, you are accepting an important challenge. Over the next eight weeks, you will join with others to examine your background. Through it all, the Office of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) staff and your trained, experienced instructor will assist you. We hope that FPD will become not only a way for you to get college credit, but also a process of transformation and a step to your own personal success.

CHAPTER 2

Focused Portfolio Development (FPD) with the Vermont State Colleges System

In Chapter One, we spoke generally about assessment, adult learners and higher education. In this chapter, we will specifically discuss the Focused Portfolio Development program. We will describe how this Vermont State Colleges System program is organized, define some terms, and outline necessary procedures to follow. Most importantly, we will suggest how to begin preparing your portfolio.

FPD is a service of the Vermont State Colleges System. The two Vermont State Colleges are:

- Community College of Vermont
www.ccv.edu
- Vermont State University
<http://www.vermontstate.edu>

FPD is administered by the prior learning office, the “Office of Prior Learning Assessment” (PLA). PLA has managed assessment options since 1975. Nearly 8,000 students have had their prior learning assessed for credit since then.

Applying FPD Credit to a Degree

FPD credit is transfer credit. It is transferable to any of the Vermont State Colleges above. This is important to keep in mind. Although you have enrolled in FPD through a specific college, you can transfer credit you receive through the process to many other colleges in Vermont and beyond. Of course, the *applicability of assessed credit to a degree* will vary among colleges. This variability, however, allows you to select a college most suited to your needs. In other words, just because you took the FPD course at CCV, it does not mean your credit can only be used at CCV. In fact, over 90% of all colleges in the United States accept transfer credit for credit gained through experiential learning.

Transfer Credit

The Office of Prior Learning Assessment awards the credit for your learning. As a result, this credit is always **transfer credit**. To apply it to a degree, you must **transfer** it from PLA to the college you wish to attend. This is true even if you intend to pursue your degree at the same college through which you enrolled in the FPD course. Once you have received the results of your portfolio review, you can request from PLA to have those credits transferred to the registrar’s office of the college you want to attend.

Transfer credit has advantages and limitations of which you should be aware: transfer credit is always subject to the restrictions of the college awarding the degree. Common restrictions are:

- The minimum amount of credit that must be earned “in residence” at the college (called “residency requirement”).
- The maximum amount of transfer credit that may be applied to a degree program.
- The maximum amount of prior experiential learning credit that may be accepted at the receiving institution.
- The fit of your credits to your specific degree program to meet requirements.

Flexibility - An Advantage

The range of possible college-level learning is, of course, broader than the range of courses offered at any one specific college. Rather than assessing your learning in comparison with exact courses at any particular college, PLA assesses your prior experiential learning against standards for general college-level quality and content in that academic field.

Some Terminology and Procedures

Most programs in higher education have unique sets of procedures and specialized terminology. FPD is no different: you need to know certain words and procedures. Understanding them will also give you insight into some of the things you

are required to do. We begin this with a word already used frequently: assessment.

Assessment: Any process used to determine how much credit or recognition you are to receive for your prior learning is known as ASSESSMENT. FPD has three basic steps:

- The description and documentation of your learning in a format that can be reviewed;
- The review of your learning by appropriate academic faculty called assessors;
- The awarding of college credit that can be transferred to a degree program.

In FPD, the entire process will be completed in one semester.

Prior Experiential Learning: The college-level knowledge you have already acquired has a special name: prior experiential learning. In the context of higher education, a number of words and phrases are used interchangeably to describe this learning. The most commonly used terms are “experiential learning,” “life experience learning,” “college-level knowledge,” “college equivalencies,” and “college-level competencies.

STEPS	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
Degree Plan		X	X			
Experience Lists	X					
Learning from Experience	X	X				
Learning Components		X	X	X		
Areas of Study		X	X	X		
Essay			X	X	X	
Documentation			X	X	X	
Resume			X	X	X	
Bibliography				X		
Submission of the Portfolio						X

Portfolio Preparation: The process of examining, identifying, describing, and documenting learning for college-level competencies and skills. Your prior experiential learning will be described in a portfolio to be assessed by the Vermont State Colleges System. Steps of the portfolio preparation and a suggested timeline are listed below.

Portfolio Preparation Steps and Timeline

1. Develop an **experience list** of significant personal events (jobs, marriage, military service, family, community service) to be used as the starting point for the portfolio. (More on this later in the handbook).
2. Draft a **degree plan** that reflects your educational objectives and lists the required courses.
3. Distinguish between **experience** and **learning**.
4. Extract learning from points on your experience list. Refine these rough statements into **learning components**.
5. Organize related learning components into **areas of study** and title each one.
6. Assign **credit amounts** to areas of study. You may ask for up to 16 credits in your focused portfolio. (Please note that while the course was designed for 12-course credits and 4-practicum credits, students can use the 16-

credits however they choose – as long as they are in the same curricular area.)

7. Eliminate areas of study and/or learning components that are not college level, or that do not fit into the general academic area of your FPD request.
8. Decide if you want to request practicum credits.
9. Request **documentation** from qualified others for the learning components and areas of study in your portfolio.
10. Integrate areas of study into a **final degree plan**.
11. Write an **autobiographical essay** that describes the origin and significance of your learning and learning experiences.
12. Combine all the portfolio parts into a **final portfolio**.
13. **Submit** the final portfolio to your instructor.

The Portfolio

Your individual student portfolio is the document through which your petition for college credit is made. At this point, you are probably wondering what a portfolio looks like. The sample portfolio created for FPD will give you a good idea of the final product.

Portfolio Parts

The focused portfolio has eight parts. While the content of each portfolio may be different, the format of all portfolios should be the same. Following the correct format contributes to the overall effectiveness of the final document, and facilitates the review process.

The eight parts of your portfolio are listed below:

1. Focused Portfolio Development Title Page and Committee Worksheet
2. Areas of Study
3. Degree Plan
4. Essay
5. Resume
6. Index to Documentation
7. Documentation (primary and secondary)
8. Bibliography

A portion of your success in FPD is based on the correct organization of your portfolio. If the portfolio is not organized acceptably, it will be returned to you either by your instructor or by PLA staff with an explanation of what needs correction. This might delay the evaluation of your portfolio significantly.

Portfolio Privacy

Your portfolio is about your life experiences and may contain material that is personal in nature. It will be read only by individuals authorized by PLA and is considered confidential.

Assessors

College faculty and other individuals called practitioners, who are competent, knowledgeable, and credentialed in the major content area of your portfolio, are selected by PLA to evaluate your portfolio.

College Credits and College Transcripts

Earning a college degree requires a certain amount of academic bookkeeping. You and the college need to keep track of your learning. The most common method is to assign credits to your learning. Credits are recorded on a document called a *transcript*. Credits may be earned in a number of ways. You may, for example, earn credit from regular college courses, CLEP tests, the military, and programs such as FPD. To obtain a degree, you will combine all these credits at a single institution.

Official Transcripts

Because we cannot award credit for learning you have already have credits for, PLA requires that your portfolio include official transcripts from all the colleges you might have previously attended to show which credits you have already earned. **An official transcript is one sent from the college you attended directly to another college.** An unofficial transcript is one which was sent to you or anyone else first. Your student copy or a copy on file where you work is unofficial for purposes of assessment.

Including transcripts in your portfolio serves two purposes. First, transcripts document learning. Transcripts can demonstrate to the assessors that you have prerequisite learning for some of the credits you are requesting in your portfolio. If, for example, you request credit in advanced accounting, you will also need to document your proficiency in beginning accounting. Having attended and passed an introductory level accounting course is one way to demonstrate your prerequisite learning in this area.

Secondly, the transcripts help assessors avoid duplicating previous credit awards. Credit will be awarded only in areas where credit has not already been earned. If you have already earned three college credits in Small Business Management, the assessors cannot award this credit again.

Colleges you have attended should forward transcripts directly to CCV or Vermont State University. When PLA receives your Information Form & Portfolio Release Permission, they will check for official transcripts in the system and send a copy to you. Use this stamped-by-PLA copy as your original in preparing your portfolio. It is your responsibility to ensure that you list all of the colleges and post-secondary institutions you have attended on your Information Form and that CCV or another VSCS institution receive official copies of ALL of your college transcripts.

Tests you may have taken to be awarded college credit (such as the CLEP, AP, DSST tests) are transcribed by the American Council on Education (ACE) and should be submitted to PLA as part of your portfolio's documentation. For more information, ask your instructor.

A Final Word on Terminology and Procedures

The terminology and procedures discussed above will assist you in portfolio preparation. Use them to formulate questions when you are having difficulty, to request documentation, or to aid in planning your degree. Additional helpful terminology and procedures will be highlighted throughout the text.

Goal Clarification

One of your first activities in assessment should be to prepare a statement of your goals. Formulating well-defined goals and examining their implications can be one of your most critical tasks. A goal is a statement about what you intend to do in the future. People have many goals. In FPD, we are most concerned with how your goals influence your educational choices and how your prior learning will apply to your degree.

Personal Goals

Defining your personal goals will help you in the portfolio preparation process. If your goals are clear, describe them in writing. If your goals are unclear, try to clarify them by answering the following questions about why you want to be a student. Answering these questions in writing will be useful as you think through your plans. Do you want to:

- learn a new vocation or profession?
- become a better, more informed citizen?
- learn more about yourself and your relationships with others?
- qualify for a specific college or professional school?
- acquire credentials for career advancement?
- increase your competence on the job?
- develop skills for leisure-time activity?
- receive recognition for what you have already accomplished?
- design your own education?
- break out of the routine of your life and learn something new?
- enrich your retirement years?
- study literature, a language, mathematics, science, psychology, history, art, or music?
- solve a specific problem, such as a legal issue or community concern?
- do several of the above?
- pursue some other objective?

Another approach to clarifying goals is to develop a life portrait for the future. FPD students commonly do this by asking "What do I want to be doing in five years?" or "What do I want to become in five years?"

Translating Life Goals into Educational Goals

Once you have established your life goals, you will need to translate these into educational goals. For example, if you want to be a graphic designer or computer specialist, you need to outline the steps to realize this objective. You will need to check out a number of colleges and the programs at each, compare degree requirements and tuition costs, and decide on the best option for you.

A good place to start this process is in writing down life goals and then translating them into educational goals. Here are a few examples of how this might be done:

Life Goals

- to help others to achieve their goals
- to develop more acute awareness of self and others
- to move from a production job to the management level

Educational Goals

- develop career counseling skills
- develop a deeper understanding of psychology and sociology
- gain knowledge of management theory and practices

You will increase the specificity of these educational goals when you prepare your degree plan.

CHAPTER 3

Experience and Learning

“There is nothing really new in the notion that learning takes place continuously from birth to death. What is new is the concept that credible, certifiable learning occurs through-out life and that the certifying and credentialing institutions of our society need to recognize this.”

Peter Meyer, **Awarding College Credit for Non-College Learning**

In this chapter we present material to help you begin the process of describing and organizing the prior experiential learning for which you will request credit. We will be “looking back” at your previous experiences to discover your competencies and skills. We will do this in a series of steps which together comprise the **experience-to-learning method**.

Before exploring each of these steps in detail, it is important that you understand the overall sequence. The steps of the experience-to-learning method are as follows:

1. Develop an experience list covering significant events in your life (jobs, marriages, moves, etc.)
2. Combine similar experiences into groups
3. Describe the learning that resulted from or contributed to each experience
4. Organize learning into areas of study based on the content of this learning
5. Refine learning within categories in concise, descriptive phrases called **learning components**
6. Check to make sure your descriptions meet expectations for college-level quality and content
7. Create titles for each area of study
8. Decide on credit amounts to request for each areas of study

Experience

When you prepare a resume for a job, you provide employers with useful information about your past experiences. For example, you may list the jobs you’ve held and how long you’ve held them. Some resumes list what you do with your leisure time or if you have a favorite hobby.

All these statements are about what you do or have done—your experience. You provide this information to an employer to create an impression of you as a person. You include information about former employment to show you are qualified for the job for which you are applying. You use your former experiences to help employers make judgments about you and your skills and abilities.

In assessment, we also begin with your experiences. We do not, however, use experiences as the basis for the award of credit. Simply knowing a person’s former experiences might be an unreliable basis for making judgments about what they learned from these experiences. Two people may have similar experiences, like being in the army, with the details of the experience being very different. For one, being in the army may have meant a tour of duty in Iraq. For another, it may have meant watching over a supply room in Nome, Alaska.

In assessment, you begin with a list of your significant experiences because this gives you an outline from which to build your portfolio. At the beginning of FPD, your instructor will ask you to work on an **experience list**, which is a general listing of events in your life that you consider important. Because we are concerned with college-level learning, it usually begins about the time of high school graduation or GED up to the present. The experience list may include your marriage and family, the various jobs you’ve held, training and education you have participated in, and the community service work in which you have participated. The most common experiences which can result in college-level learning include non-credit courses, seminars, in-service training programs, online courses, coaching by your supervisor or colleagues, community and volunteer service, hobbies and recreational activities, independent reading, work, and military service.

However, your assessors will not award credit based on your experiences. To earn credit, you must analyze each experience to discover the learning associated with it. You use your experiences to uncover what you know. A sample experience list appears below. You may employ a number of strategies in preparing one.

- Develop a chronological list of jobs held, including part-time jobs.
- Write a free-association list of people, places, and events from your past.
- Conduct a “remember when” session with your spouse, friends, and others who have known you.
- List key events, markers, or milestones in your life. Include successes and failures.

- Develop an interest or leisure pursuit list. Include procedures used and products developed by you.

Regardless of the strategy you use, the final list should be comprehensive, starting after high school and covering employment, community service work, independent learning projects, and other personal activities. It should also specify dates and locations.

After you have created your list, you may find it helpful to group related experiences. If, for example, you held a number of administrative jobs, or worked in more than one medical center as an aide, you may want to group these on a separate piece of paper or index card. This will help you in the next step, which is describing the learning associated with each experience.

Dates:	Experience:	Comments:
Summers 2001,2002,	Worked with pulp cutting crew and lumber company	Learned how hard it is to make a living!
2002-2004	U.S. Army Signal Corps	Went in a private and came out a sergeant
2004	Fell in love and married my wife	
1/2005 – 9/2005	Took course in real estate brokering and law, passed examination	I think this is when I began to want to get somewhere in life
2005 to present	Joined Westmount Church and started working with disabled kids	This started me thinking about other people and also about having kids
2005	Began selling real estate; this eventually developed into my own small business	That’s when my career started
March 12, 2006	Had our first baby; read Dr. Spock cover to cover and everything else we could find	This was one of the most important things that ever happened to me
June 14, 2007	Had a second child; didn’t read a thing	Ditto
April 2009	Went to Mexico with our church group to help build housing	Gave me a chance to practice our Spanish
May 2009	Sold my small business and joined a large real estate company for 3 years	Made a lot more money but also had to get used to having a boss
December 2012	Left Real Estate Company	I’m not a company man...but a good planner, organizer, supervisor
2012, 2013	Built a house and got part-time contractor jobs	Love working with my hands and using math and tech skills again, decided to get a college degree

From Experience to Learning

The most important distinction you will make in FPD is the one between experience and learning. Credit is not awarded simply for experiences such as being an accountant, a paraeducator, or attending a workshop. *Credit is awarded for the college-level learning that has resulted from these experiences.*

An experience is an event that usually can be measured in time. Experiences have a beginning, middle, and end. They are in your past, present, or planned for the future. For example, reading this book is an experience. When you put it down, the experience is over until the next time you pick it up again.

Learning, on the other hand, is something you take from experience to experience. Learning is not only *what you think*, but *the way you think* as well. What you learn from this book is very different from the physical act of sitting in a chair

and reading it. Although all students in your class will have the same experience of reading this text, they will all learn something slightly different. In this sense learning is more complicated and more individual than the description of the experiences that triggered the learning.

EXPERIENCE / LEARNING

When you prepare your portfolio, you will use your experience list as a basis for focusing on the things you know. You will need to examine each item on your experience list and ask yourself two important questions: “What did I learn from this experience,” and/or, “What did I have to know to have this experience?” By doing this you will take the first major step toward writing your portfolio. The following examples illustrate how this step may be applied to a number of experiences:

<i>What I did</i>	<i>What I learned or had to know</i>
Vice-President of the “Downhill Ski Slope”, from 1990 to 1994	public relations techniques principles of accounting public speaking price setting and inventory control personnel hiring and firing procedures interviewing
Volunteered with the Vermont Chapter of the Girl Scouts, 2002 - 2009	how to counsel adolescent girls normal growth and development patterns of children camping techniques first aid procedures public relations and fundraising
Dog owner & breeder & 4-H class instructor from 1996–2000	nutrition requirements knowledge of animal health care how to teach dog owners proper animal care how to develop a lesson plan how to speak in public knowledge of breeds and AKC regulations and policies
Managed the Bartonville Equestrian Riding Academy from 2008-2012	breeds of horses and horse diseases/ illness prevention how to design a barn purchasing and inventory control how to supervise and motivate employees how to teach inexperienced people to ride a horse some learning about anatomy and physiology of people and horses

A number of points can be made from reviewing these examples. The most important one is that different experiences can result in the same or similar learning.

The vice president of the Downhill Ski Corporation and the person who established a home maintenance learned inventory control, price setting, and aspects

of personnel administration. When you examine your experiences, you will probably discover more than one contributed to your learning in a particular area. You should note these similarities. Later, you will need to group related learning together to prepare your **areas of study**.

Second, a broad range of learning can result from a single experience. The manager of the Bartonville Riding Academy not only learned about horses and barns, but about inventory control, staff supervision, and training methods as well.

And third, because the focus of your portfolio is on *learning*, the description and organization of this learning is more important than its source. When your assessors review your portfolio, they will not distinguish learning acquired on the job, in a workshop, or through independent reading. They will be concerned with **what** you know, and **that** you know it, and only secondarily with **where** this learning came from. If your learning meets standards for college-level quality and content, and if it is adequately verified, your assessors will award credit for it regardless of its source.

This means that the way you describe and organize your learning is an important factor influencing your credit award. In the following section, we present guidelines on selecting learning areas for your portfolio, and criteria by which to organize and describe the learning you include.

The Complexity and Diversity of Learning

The Many Kinds of Learning

Not all things we learn are considered college level. Learning that results from a religious experience or from marriage and child rearing is often *outside* the range of commonly defined college-level learning.

Early in FPD, you will need to decide what learning is appropriate for your portfolio. When you examine each of your experiences to describe your learning, you will need to eliminate those for which college credit is not awarded. Your instructor will guide you in the process of this examination.

The Many Ways to Learn

People process information and learn in many different ways. For example, when assembling a child's bicycle, some people start by carefully reading the directions, while other people consult the directions as a last resort. Some people need absolute quiet to study, while others study best with the radio playing. Some people need a neat, orderly space in which to study, while others learn best in more relaxed settings. Some people prefer teachers who set clear, specific expectations for classes and insist that students meet those expectations. Other people learn best from teachers who take a more collaborative approach to establishing expectations.

Psychologists refer to these individual differences as **learning styles**. While they might disagree about exactly what constitutes a person's learning style, it might include some or all of the following dimensions:

- *Involvement* — A hands-on, experimental approach, or a reflective, observational approach
- *Structure* — An orderly, structured setting, or in a more relaxed, loosely organized setting
- *Direction* — Learning directed by experts, or directed by the learner
- *Sociability* — Learning while working in a group setting or learning alone

There is no one best way for everyone to learn, but each person tends to have a preferred learning style. The portfolio development course tends to concentrate on **what** you have learned, but it is also valuable to assess your best learning experiences to become aware of your preferred learning style, or **how** you learn.

One reason to be aware of your preferred learning style is that every college has a philosophy of education which emphasizes different aspects or ways of learning. One school may emphasize developing the student's ability to master traditional topics while another may emphasize developing a student's ability to direct their own learning and to learn to think critically. A student could learn Accounting, Economics, and Marketing and obtain a Business Management degree from either school, but these subjects might be presented in very different ways.

Another reason to be aware of your preferred learning style is that using your preferred style can make the assessment process easier. While some students start by writing learning components in neat orderly lists, others start by verbalizing their learning and record it because it helps them to **hear** their learning. Others start by drawing diagrams of areas of study because it helps them **picture** their learning. You may want to experiment with different ways of approaching the task of organizing your learning components into areas of study to find a way that fits your learning style.

It is important to note that a preferred learning style is not the only way a person can learn, but it is the way that feels easiest and most natural. As you go through the portfolio development process and articulate what you know, take some time to also assess how you learned what you know and how you prefer to learn. Writing the portfolio itself might be difficult for some students whose learning style does not relate well to a very specific, prescribed way of doing things. While content and writing styles vary with each student, everyone must produce a portfolio with the same format and layout. Your instructor will assist you through the process, so even if your learning style does not welcome this format, you will have support and guidance from both your instructor and your fellow students.

The Many Levels of Learning

College-level learning not only occurs in specific, unique areas, but also at different levels of complexity within each of these areas. You may, for example, know something about United States history. At a most basic level you may know the names of the Presidents, list the dates and locations of important battles, and recall parts of important speeches like the *Gettysburg Address*. At a more complicated level, you may be able to isolate and interpret trends like frontierism and imperialism. At still a more complicated level, you may be able to evaluate social issues, like class conflict, or to compare the women's rights movement in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As a general rule, the credit awarded to you in a given area is related to the complexity—depth and breadth—of your learning within that area. This means that as you move from knowledge of simple

facts and names to more complicated skills of analysis, evaluation, and comparison, you will generally increase your potential credit award.

In the mid-1950's, the educator Benjamin Bloom edited a book that catalogued the various levels of learning. These levels were published in a taxonomy of educational objectives ("Bloom's Taxonomy") with verbs often used to express an individual's depth of understanding. In describing your learning, be certain to consider the full range of areas represented in the taxonomy; it is useful as you work on your learning components.

Learning Components

The description of your learning derived from experience is the basis for developing your learning components. Learning components are concise phrases or groups of words which describe your learning in a particular area. They communicate information about the content of your learning as well as your approach to organizing that content. In one sense they are not unlike the ingredients in a recipe. If you are going to bake a chocolate cake, you need to know more than just **what** the ingredients are. You need to know **how much** of each ingredient to add and **in what order**. Your learning components communicate information about what you know and how much you know, and why that knowledge is important. By the way you organize your components, you also give the assessors information on how this learning relates to your general understanding of a subject area. Later, your learning components can tell a college registrar how your learning will transfer to a specific degree program.

Conveying the Depth and Breadth of Your Learning

Utilizing Bloom's taxonomy helps in creating effective learning components. Initially, these can assist you in clearly distinguishing your **learning** from the significant **experiences** which led to that learning. This is because Bloom's taxonomy and the associated verbs describe levels of **knowledge** exclusively, not action or experience. Beginning each learning component with an appropriate verb from the Bloom-based list ensures that you are characterizing your learning, not your experience.

For instance, if in running your own small auto parts business you had learned much about inventory control, you might begin by articulating your experience and learning as “set up an automated inventory system.” This is an important accomplishment and may well have led to or been dependent upon some fairly sophisticated knowledge which you can describe in greater detail.

By scanning the taxonomy list for your highest and most appropriate level of knowledge and understanding in an area of learning, you can more easily and accurately convey the depth and breadth of your learning. For instance, from the experience of setting up the inventory system, you may have acquired a significant and specific level of understanding of inventory control. In this case, perhaps, the experience required that you **recognize** the need for such a system, that you **evaluate** the effectiveness of various inventory systems, and that you **design** an appropriate system for use in a small retail operation.

Your learning components will have three sections:

1. A description of your skills using verbs (explain, calculate, create, etc.)
2. A learning statement (what it is that you can explain or calculate)
3. The condition (why is this important?) that is used in most learning components.

While the verb portion of the learning component describes your level of knowledge, and the learning statement portion describes content, the condition addresses why this knowledge is important. It is helpful to ask yourself the question, “Why would anyone want or need to know this?” Your answer to the question can then be rephrased to become the last portion of the learning component. It is here where you can explain that the skill and knowledge you have learned by experience fits into a larger picture; that there is a theory or principle or reason behind what you did. Here are two examples:

- *Review and compare financial reports in order to track business growth.*
- *Differentiate between the needs for short-term and/or long-term investments in order to determine an effective savings strategy.*

Evaluating the depth or breadth of learning is a very difficult task for assessors unless you have articulated your learning clearly. That’s where Bloom’s taxonomy and the verb lists are most useful. They help you describe your learning in measurable, concrete terms. They also help you characterize the depth and breadth of the learning, and they assist you in outlining and organizing your learning within an area of study in a way that enables others to accurately and quickly assess the depth, breadth, and content of that learning.

Strategies for Organizing Components

There are two common strategies for developing learning components. The one you choose will be based on how you have initially described your learning. If you have organized your learning under general statements, you may need to increase the level of specificity of these statements when you develop your components. If, on the other hand, you have come up with detailed lists of the things you know, you may need to combine these into a more generalized format. The latter approach is the most commonly used.

From General to Specific:

The statement, “I know the fundamental principles of accounting,” helps your assessors distinguish your learning from other areas, like early childhood education or social services. It does not, however, tell them which “fundamental principles” of accounting you do, in fact, know. The above statement, therefore, would make a poor learning component.

Good learning components in the area of accounting, for example, would allow the assessors to distinguish your knowledge of accounting from basic bookkeeping. After reading your components, the assessors would also know if you knew basic or advanced accounting, or if you had specialties within the area, like tax accounting or costing. Here are three learning components that succeed in doing this:

- Analyze, interpret, and prepare financial statements (for example, income statement and balance sheet).
- Demonstrate the fundamental mechanics of double entry accounting, such as debits and credits, standard accounting format, and trial balance.

- Explain the purpose of the general ledger, and post a variety of transactions to it, both electronically and by hand.

When you describe your learning, you will need to apply the same general principles to each area for which you request credit.

From Specific to General:

It is possible, however, to err on the side of specificity. In preparing your initial descriptions of what you know, you might list far more information than is necessary for the portfolio. The problem with listing is depicted in the example below. It is a student's initial description of their knowledge of woodworking:

1. Purpose and use of the hammer
2. Purpose and use of the saw
3. Different types of saws: keyhole, coping, crosscut, rip saw
4. Care of saws
5. Care of hammers
6. Purpose and use of planer
7. Purpose and use of mitre box
8. Best uses of pine
9. Best uses of fir and cedar
10. Best uses of hardwood, such as maple
11. Butt joints
12. Mitre joints
13. Dovetail joints

These 13 items were eventually restated more concisely and effectively in the following three components:

1. Discuss the purpose, use, and care of the most common hand tools used in woodworking including hammers, various saws, chisels, planers, and mitre box.
2. Distinguish between soft and hard woods, and use each correctly.
3. Recognize and describe various types of joinery and demonstrate the following joints: butt-end, dovetail, mitre, rabbet, and dado.

One of the best ways to avoid listing is to remember that you are describing your learning to experts. As a general rule, you can describe about three credits worth of learning using 8 – 12 learning components.

In Summary

In your portfolio you communicate what you know through your **learning components**. Each component is a phrase or sentence that conveys unique information about your knowledge. The two challenging tasks in preparing learning components are:

- grouping the appropriate components together, and
- striking a balance between generality and specificity in each component.

CHAPTER 4

Guidelines for Organizing, Crediting and Evaluating Prior Experiential Learning

In this chapter and the next, we will continue our discussion of learning. In presenting guidelines on categorizing and titling your learning, we will suggest some standards by which you can evaluate its college-level quality and content. We will also present some rules for assigning credit requests to your areas of study. This process will culminate in the preparation of the areas of study.

Organizing Prior Experiential Learning

When you organize your components, examine them to identify how the content of each is similar to or different from the content of all the others. Try to see trends and patterns which describe your learning, and then group your components based upon those patterns. To do this, it is helpful to ask questions like the following:

- Does a particular component or set of components appear repeatedly through two or more experiences? If so, then group these components together.
- Can some general categories be used to divide up the learning you have described? These categories may be: “people-related skills” or “computer-related skills.” If so, then use these categories as general headings for groups of components, without regard to their source.
- Can you isolate a general area, such as marketing, supervision, or website design, which seems to summarize many of your components? If you can, then use this area as a starting point for organizing.

The purpose of organizing your learning is this:

1. You want to combine similar learning components into groups based on their content.
2. Each of these groups need to have a unique set of learning components.
3. The learning components in one group should be different from those in other groups if you are to ask for separate credits.

4. You want each of these groups to represent your current understanding of the content and organization of the subject matter for which you are requesting credit.

The example below may suggest a general approach to organizing your learning:

Jason

By analyzing many years of employment with a number of firms, Jason was able to identify a broad range of skills he had developed. In the late 80’s, he worked as a car salesman in Massachusetts. In this position he learned sales techniques and advertising. In the mid-90’s, he worked for a large auto manufacturer as a customer service representative in the New England region. As a service representative, he expanded his knowledge of sales and advertising and added skills in marketing and management. In 1999, he moved to Vermont. He got a position as a sales manager for a computer manufacturer in the Burlington area. In his new role, he was responsible for all sales of a product line. He enhanced his knowledge of sales, advertising, and marketing and learned new skills in the area of management and supervision. In 2012, Jason enrolled in Focused Portfolio Development as a way to speed up his way to a business degree.

Jason’s Approach to Organizing His Learning

In analyzing his business knowledge, Jason looked for trends and patterns that characterized this learning. For example, he grouped his sales techniques from all three companies in one category. Likewise, his management and supervisory techniques from the auto manufacturer and the computer firm were also grouped. He felt, however, that the marketing knowledge he developed at his last job was distinct enough to request separate credits for. After categorizing his learning, he analyzed these categories to determine the depth and complexity of the learning in each.

After these considerations, Jason asked for the following credits and titles:

<i>Principles of Sales</i>	3 credits
<i>Introduction to Supervision</i>	3 credits
<i>Marketing for the Small Business</i>	3 credits
<i>Principles of Management</i>	3 credits

Selecting Areas of Study

As you organize your learning into groups, you also will need to develop area of study titles. An area of study title is a phrase describing a group of related learning components. Areas of study are based on an examination of your components and when possible should correspond with college course titles.

Generally, areas of study titles are:

1. Three to five words in length.
2. Developed by you based on your learning components.
3. Descriptive — the relationship between the title and its learning components should be direct and immediately evident.
4. Descriptions of learning as opposed to experience or job titles, e.g., “Principles of Accounting”, “Office Procedures”, and “Methods of Teaching Reading” are acceptable areas of study titles while “Accountant”, “Administrative Assistant”, and “Teacher’s Aide” are not.
5. Specific rather than general, e.g., “English Composition”, “Child Psychology”, and “Small Business Management” are acceptable while “English”, “Psychology”, and “Business” are not.
6. Descriptions of about three credits worth of learning. (While there are some exceptions to this guideline, you should be comfortable in requesting about three credits for each area of study in your portfolio. Avoid asking for six credits, for example, for an area that is clearly a three credit course in most colleges. Large groups of learning should be subdivided using more specific qualifiers like Theory vs. Practicum, Level I and Level II, Introductory vs. Advanced.)

College-Level Learning

As you organize your learning into areas of study, you should examine your learning components to see if they meet standards for college-level quality. Setting college-level standards for learning is no easy matter. Some educators may disagree on what makes a learning experience college level. Interestingly enough, others agree on general standards, but disagree on how to apply these standards to a specific area.

For college-level learning to have any meaning, however, we must distinguish it from other types of learning. As noted in Chapter Three, not all learning is appropriate for college credit. If everything you learned was automatically college level, then there would be little reason to assemble a portfolio and go through this credentialing process.

In defining college-level quality we look at what historically has been taught by colleges. In this way we are able to isolate bodies of knowledge (or disciplines) common to higher education. These disciplines (like computer skills, graphic design, or business) help set the range of the content of college-level learning.

In establishing standards, we also look at the content within these disciplines to “discover” principles which seem to define college-level quality. These principles help establish how theoretical or applied and how specific or general college-level learning should be. They also help define the techniques necessary to measure college-level skills.

A summary of the standards employed to assess portfolios is presented below. Use them, therefore, to make judgments about what to include and omit from your portfolio.

A. The learning is describable.

As a general rule, college-level learning can be communicated to another person using written or verbal language. In fact, communicating learning through language is the basis of portfolio preparation. Therefore, for you to earn credit for your learning, you must be able to *describe it in words*. This is especially true in skill areas like computer skills or auto mechanics, or in more affective areas like personal growth or interpersonal communication. Students often report “I know I can do it, I just never think about it much.” However, it is the “thinking about it” that helps establish learning as college level.

B. The learning has general applicability.

Your learning should be *applicable* outside of the situation in which it was acquired. For example, you may know the personnel procedures at the company

at which you work. For you to earn credit for this knowledge, you would also need to know how those procedures would apply at other companies, or how they relate to the field of personnel administration in general.

C. The learning fits into academic disciplines.

Your learning should relate in some way to the *academic areas traditionally taught* by colleges. By examining three or four college catalogs, you can get a general idea of what the traditional academic disciplines are. Your learning may be similar to or very different from the specific areas within a discipline. Nevertheless, establishing a relationship between your learning and these disciplines is an important dimension in receiving credit.

D. The learning includes both theories and applications.

Your learning should include both *theoretical and practical understanding* of a subject area. If your learning is theoretical, you should be able to apply your knowledge in a practical context. If your learning is practical or applied, you should understand the “whys” and “hows” of what you do. You cannot receive college credit for the mere application of a manual skill or a narrowly prescribed routine.

E. The learning is verifiable.

You must be able to *verify* your learning to receive credit for it. Verification is the process of assembling evidence that you know what you claim to know.

F. The learning is more than “common to all.”

Some very common learning is not acceptable as college-level learning. Learning which results from marriage, parenting, and family living is usually not appropriate for the portfolio. Your learning in these areas may qualify for credit only if you have enriched it through:

1. Readings and research: For example, complementing your knowledge gained from child rearing by reading and researching in the area of child development or education.
2. Analytical thinking: For example, comparing the American family with family units in other countries.

3. Communication: For example, teaching skills, presentation skills, writing newsletters or articles about events or ideas.

Credit Requests

The final step in preparing your learning for evaluation is assigning a credit value to each area of study. Your assessors will, of course, make the final judgment on the credit awarded to you. However, they expect you to make a reasonable and appropriate credit request.

The Three-Credit Formula

If you have previous experience with higher education, you will recognize that most courses in the college curriculum are offered for “three credits.” That is, upon successful completion of the course, the student is awarded three college credits. The *credit* is the currency of higher education; it is the measurement of student progress through a college degree program.

Determination of what constitutes a college credit is referred to as the Carnegie Formula. Using this formula, every 15 hours of instruction and 30 hours of preparation is measured as one credit. Since a typical college course requires 45 hours of class time and 90 hours of out-of-class work, the most common credit designation is three.

General Guidelines on Credit

- Wherever appropriate, you should think of your learning outcomes in terms of three-credit blocks. This will assist faculty in equating your areas of study to equivalent college coursework using a measurement standard that is common throughout higher education. It may also help you determine how much learning to include in an area of study as you develop your portfolio since the Focused Portfolio is limited to sixteen credits (most commonly four 3-credit course requests and one 4-credit practicum request).
- Assessors most commonly award credit in units of three. If you are requesting more credits than this for any specific area of study, you may

need to break the learning into smaller, identifiable, and documented units. Your credit request should be made in consultation with your advisor or instructor.

- Your prior experiential learning must be college level and its quality must be equivalent to at least a satisfactory or passing level of performance (a grade of “C” or better). You are not, however, required to prove exceptional, excellent, or above average work in order to receive credit.
- Credit for learning can be granted only once. Learning already credited by an accredited college via a transcript from that institution cannot be again granted credit again through your portfolio. In cases where your credit requests are similar to previously earned credits, it is your responsibility to demonstrate that your prior experiential learning is new and different.

Areas of Study

The final step in describing your college-level learning is organizing it into areas of study. For each of your credit requests, you'll create an area of study that describes your learning. It is the part of your portfolio that provides the most detailed information about your understanding of the content and organization of your knowledge.

Each area of study appears on a separate page and should follow the standard format shown in the sample portfolio. Notice how the page is divided into three columns, which are headed: source of learning, learning components, and documentation. You cross-reference your sources of learning and documentation to the areas of study and use learning components to go into detail on their content.

Because your learning must be presented in this format, you may find it helpful to organize your early drafts of areas of study and learning components like this. When you prepare your final version of the area of study, you may also want to use the following guidelines:

Title:

The title of your area of study serves as a crucial point for your assessors. If possible, use common course titles found in the curriculum of programs in your area of request.

Credit Request:

When deciding on the credits for your area of study, remember:

1. Credit requests refer to areas of study. If you have four areas of study, you will have four separate credit requests.
2. Since most college courses are 3 credits, it's recommended to assign 3 credits to your areas of study.

3. Areas of study with large credit requests are difficult or impossible to evaluate. Keep credit requests within the range of about 3 credits. Practicums and internships are usually 3, 4, or 6 credits, depending on the credits available after your course requests, within the 16-credit threshold.
4. Credit requests on areas of study are based on the complexity and extent of your learning.

Learning Components:

Learning components describe the content of the area of study. Generally they are equivalent or similar to, but not necessarily the same as, the content of a traditional college course. Each area of study should have a unique set of learning components. Most importantly, each learning component should be logically related to the area of study under which it is included.

Examine the components in the sample portfolio, then ask yourself the following questions:

- Are any of the components repeated?
- Do all the components describe learning, or do some of them refer to experience?
- Is it reasonable and appropriate to include these components under these areas of study?
- Are any of the components too specific or too vague?
- Would there be a better way to organize the components?

Your assessors will ask questions similar to these in determining how much credit to award for your prior experiential learning.

Source of Learning:

After creating your learning components, you should examine them to determine the source of the learning—i.e. the experiences that have brought about or contributed to your knowledge of the area. A good way to determine your sources is by examining your original experience list. Each item on the original list is a potential source of learning for your portfolio. The most common sources include

jobs, training programs, volunteer work, and independent study or reading.

For each source of learning, you will need to provide two pieces of information in the left column: source of the learning and the approximate dates of when your learning occurred. By giving dates, you help the assessors understand the order, progression and development of your knowledge. Dates also help explain why certain items may be included in or omitted from your components. This is especially true in areas like computer science, where the content changes drastically in just a few years.

Each area of study must have at least one source of learning and may have more. It is usually helpful if you list all sources of learning for an area of study, even if you do not plan to request documentation from those sources. Also, you may list the same source of learning for a number of areas of study. In fact, this may be quite common. When using the same source for more than one area of study, you should repeat all of the information outlined above for each.

Electronic templates for your use have been prepared by PLA staff and are available on your FPD course site in Canvas.

Documentation:

The documentation column is used to cross-reference your portfolio documentation with your areas of study. Documentation is covered in detail in Chapter 6. While you will not be able to fill in this column until you have requested and received most of your documentation, you should be aware of the following points:

1. The numbers shown in the documentation column refer to actual page numbers of that documentation in your portfolio, which you will assign as you go along.
2. A letter of documentation may support several different areas of study, so it can be referred to several times in different areas of study.
3. It is recommended that each area of study have three to four pieces of documentation.

Documentation: Evidence That You Know What You Know

Documentation is the key to receiving credit through the FPD process. *You must document the learning in your portfolio to receive credit for it.* Credit will not be awarded for undocumented learning even if it is adequately, and even brilliantly, described in your areas of study, or credibly referred to in the essay. The rule is simple: **No Documentation — No Credit.** You should, therefore, begin thinking about documentation early in the process and have a strategy ready to implement by the third session. You cannot begin requesting documentation, however, until you describe your learning and organize it into the area of study format.

Good documentation proves that your statements about your learning are reliable and valid. It is helpful to emphasize quality over quantity, and to following the steps outlined below. People who document your learning will verify and measure it. The assessors will evaluate this evidence to determine how much credit they can award you.

The Steps to Documentation

In one sense documenting is easier, and in another sense more difficult, than describing your prior experiential learning. Documenting is easier because it requires less painstaking introspection and detail. Documenting is more difficult because you must rely on other people for it. Most portfolio documentation consists of letters written on your behalf by qualified individuals. All of the learning in your portfolio must be addressed in one or more of these letters. In most cases this means you must obtain letters from a number of people to adequately document your prior experiential learning. One letter may address a single learning component or many areas of study. It is important, therefore, for you to know who will document what before you request documentation letters. You must also clearly understand what is required of documenters, and what makes good documentation. The following steps will help you do this.

1. Know What You Know

Of course, you cannot begin to ask for others to document your learning until you have completely described it. Before requesting any documentation, you should completely organize your knowledge into learning components and areas of study.

2. Make a List of Possible Documenters

Once you have decided on your areas of study and learning components, make a list of all the people who could potentially document them. Be thorough. If you operated a small business, you might initially think only of your partner. Other sources of documentation, however, might include your lawyer, your tax accountant, a satisfied customer, and even competitors. Often two or three letters (from different sources) for the same prior experiential learning prove complementary to each other. One writer may emphasize in a paragraph what another one glosses over in a sentence. Common sources of good documentation include:

1. Employers and supervisors
2. Co-workers
3. Business partners
4. Business consultants
5. Members of your community
6. Educators, faculty members

Weak sources of documentation (which should be avoided because they might have a conflict of interest or cannot be objective) are:

1. Your family members
2. Your students or clients
3. Your employees

The advice here may seem contradictory. At first it is suggested that a “satisfied customer” may be a good documenter, and later under the “weak documenter” category “clients” are listed. If you are a business owner and looking for good documentation, a satisfied customer could be used as a documenter but should be supplemented by other documenters who have more knowledge of overall business principles and skills.

3. Develop a Matrix (see below)

After you have described your learning and have determined who your documenters will be, make a matrix. One documenter may address more than one area of study. Conversely, one area of study usually has two or more documenters. This matrix will guide you in planning your strategy and will be a handy place to record your received letters.

By scanning down any vertical column of the matrix you get a quick list of all the documenters for an area of study. By scanning horizontally, you have a list of all the areas of study that a single documenter should address. This is important when a single documenter will address more than one area of study. You will notice on the matrix that John Miller is documenting the student's learning in both Workplace Communication and Supervision. All this documentation will appear in the same letter.

Name, Documentation Source	Effective Workplace Communication		Working in a professional Environment		Principles of Supervision		Business Ethics		Business Practicum	
	Sent	Rec'd	Sent	Rec'd	Sent	Rec'd	Sent	Rec'd	Sent	Rec'd
John Miller <i>BusyNess Solutions</i>	3/12	4/10			3/12	4/10			3/12	4/10
Linda Green <i>Martin Real Estate</i>	3/10	3/18					3/10	3/18		
Jeff Doe <i>The Big Corporation</i>			3/8				3/8		3/8	
Professor William Williams, J.S.C. <i>Business Dept.</i>			3/12		3/12					
Minna Miller <i>Star Health Club</i>			3/14	3/25					3/14	3/25
Dr. Andrea O'Toole <i>C.C.V. Faculty</i>					3/13	4/2	3/13	4/2		

4. Contact Your Documenters

Request documentation by contacting each documenter twice—first by phone or in person, and then in writing, using the letter and materials PLA has prepared for you. Be certain to explain why you need documentation, mention the focused portfolio program by name, and discuss how documentation will help you.

You will give a copy of your learning components to documenters to help them focus their remarks. Stress to your documenters that they are verifying *learning*, as opposed to writing letters of recommendation. (It is very important to explain the difference as this is a distinction most documenters are not familiar with).

5. Use the Correct Format for Requesting Documentation

Be sure you give the documenter:

1. A personal cover letter with a deadline date.
2. The current "Dear Friend" letter written by PLA.
3. The Sample Documentation Letter format handout.
4. Copies of the areas of study with learning components you want the documenter to confirm.

Only documentation that verifies learning will be acceptable documentation for the award of credit. Note below how a good letter of documentation compares with a letter of recommendation. The letter of documentation addresses a student's *learning* in business, while the letter of recommendation evaluates the employee as punctual and trustworthy. While the letter of recommendation might help the student obtain a job, it would do little to help the student earn college credit.

Letter of Documentation vs. Letter of Reference

Dear PLA Director:

I am writing you in response to a request I received from Phoebe Henderson. She has asked me to provide evidence of her computerized accounting skills.

I worked with Phoebe several years ago (in 2013) when I was performing an audit of the town of West Snowsleet, Vermont. At the time, I was an audit manager with the firm of Pickle & Salt in Montpelier and I was responsible for the field work on the West Snowsleet audit. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting, my CPA license, and have fourteen years of experience in the accounting field.

Phoebe, at the time, was the accountant for the town. In that capacity, she performed essentially the entire accounting function there. Her responsibilities included:

Complete responsibility for all municipal accounting functions and tasks as well as financial management.
Complete responsibility for maintaining the computerized records of the town.
Managing the town's financial database and all computerized accounting functions.
Solving any technical and software issues.
Coordinating the audit I performed, preparing all accounting schedules, bank statements and reconciliations, schedules, and all other accounting documents necessary for this type of task, creating and using a variety of computer generated materials.

In summary, it was obvious to me that Phoebe performed all of the responsibilities of her position as town accountant exceptionally well. She was very competent in her position and clearly had the accounting and computer skills necessary for the job.

I believe that Phoebe has demonstrated skills in the computerized accounting area which are far beyond those expected of someone without a college degree. They are skills more comparable to that of a person with an Associate Degree in Accounting. I recommend credit in the area of computerized accounting.

Please do not hesitate to call me for further information.
Joseph Taxerman, C.P.A.
114 Easy Street
Montpelier, Vt. 05602

Dear PLA Director:

I am writing this letter on behalf of Phoebe Henderson who worked for the town of West Snowsleet as the town accountant for the past six years. I have been town manager for the past 26 years here. Mrs. Henderson reported directly to me during the years she worked for the town.

Mrs. Henderson performed her work as an accountant in a timely and thorough manner. She was prompt in completing assignments and was willing to take on extra assignments when necessary. One example of this was the financial work she took on for the town elementary school.

Mrs. Henderson was always very pleasant and professional.

I am certain that she will succeed in whatever work she attempts. If she weren't moving to Florida, we would certainly have kept her on with the town. In my opinion, the town of West Snowsleet lost a valuable asset when Phoebe left.

Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any further questions about Mrs. Henderson.

Sincerely,

Ash Alder,
Town Manager
West Snowsleet, VT. 05999
802-789-1011

Note: While this is a nice letter of recommendation, it will do nothing for Phoebe in terms of documentation of her specific learning. It is not sufficient for the awarding of credit. As such, this letter is ineffective and of no use to her in the portfolio process.

In addition to supplying your documenters with areas of study and learning components, also give them a copy of the "Dear Friend" letter and the Sample Documentation Letter Format handout. In these handouts, PLA covers all the detailed information the documenter should include to write a good letter. It

explains to your documenters that they need to do things like 1) use letterhead stationery, where available, and 2) to evaluate your knowledge as average or above average. It also informs your documenters that you will have access to their letters.

6. Request Documentation Early

You should request documentation soon after you complete your areas of study. When you make the request, give documenters a deadline seven to ten days ahead of when you actually want it. Our experience tells us that it often takes two to three weeks to obtain documentation from the time it is requested. Because it is important to review documentation before including it in the portfolio, you need to receive most of your documentation by session 5.

7. Have Documenters Send Letters to the Office of Prior Learning Assessment

Documenters must send their letters directly to PLA. **Documentation sent to you first cannot be included in the portfolio.** All documentation received by PLA will be placed in your student file for safe keeping, and stamped copies will be sent to you. Use these stamped copies in your portfolio.

8. Conduct Regular Follow-Up

You should call documenters about four to five days after your initial request to ask if they need any assistance. Most people are willing and happy to provide documentation, but that does not make the task an easy one. For most people, writing a good letter of documentation requires considerable effort. Your well-timed call is usually important in setting them to the task promptly.

9. Select Documentation for Your Portfolio

After you have received all of your documentation, you should decide which letters will become part of your final portfolio. You are **not** required to include all documentation you receive, even though the originals remain in your student file. The assessors will review your portfolio as you submit it; they do not have access to your file. While you will probably want to include most all of the letters you receive, you may want to exclude one or two for either of the following reasons:

1. **Redundant Letters:** Sometimes letters of documentation duplicate each other. If three or

more letters clearly cover the same material, the least effective may be eliminated in the interest of conciseness.

2. **Negative Documentation:** On rare occasions, you may receive a negative or incomplete letter. If the letter is negative, you may choose to discard it and make no reference to it in the portfolio. If the letter is incomplete, you may wish to have the documenter rewrite it. This approach is acceptable as long as the documenter forwards the revision directly to PLA. If the documenter writes an addendum to the first letter, insert it in the appropriate place behind the first letter.

Again, here are the steps in the documentation process:

1. Student sends request for documentation to documenter.
2. Documenter sends letter to PLA, directly.
3. PLA staff logs, dates, and verifies (if necessary) the documentation and places the original letter in the student's file.
4. PLA sends a copy to the student, either via the instructor or directly to the student via e-mail.
5. Student places the letter in their portfolio in the documentation section.

Types of Documentation

There are two types of documentation: primary and secondary.

PRIMARY DOCUMENTATION includes letters of documentation and special evaluations written specifically for your portfolio. People writing primary documentation must send it directly to PLA before it can become part of your portfolio. Your assessors will award credit for prior experiential learning only in areas with adequate primary documentation. Primary documentation also includes your transcripts from previous college-level experiences at accredited colleges or universities. These transcripts must come first, before your letters and possible special evaluations.

There are two forms of primary documentation:

1. Transcripts from any previous colleges you have attended. You will need to request that the colleges send an official transcript directly to CCV or Vermont State University.

2. Letters of Documentation. The most common approach for a letter of documentation is when someone who has directly observed your learning skills writes the letter. Common sources of letters of documentation include employers, co-workers, colleagues, supervisors and members of your local community.

When you request letters of documentation, be certain that the people who write them have had the opportunity to directly observe you demonstrate your learning. Also, be certain that the credentials of these individuals match the experiential learning they will address. If, for example, you worked in an elementary school, you might choose the head custodian, the third grade teacher, or the principal to write you a letter, depending on whether you wanted to verify your skills in carpentry, language arts or administration. The best letters of verification are from individuals who have had direct occasion to observe your learning and who are qualified and credentialed in the areas they are addressing.

Make sure your letters of documentation include these three parts:

- Your documenters clearly state who they are, their credentials, and why they are able to document your learning.
- They clearly state which area of study they are documenting.
- They clearly state if they recommend credit.

See the sample portfolio and course resources for examples.

3. Special Evaluations. Special evaluations can be arranged for *any* area of study. If you cannot find a person who knows you to verify your learning, you can locate a local expert. Ask this person if they are willing to spend time with you evaluating your knowledge and skills. You cannot pay this evaluator. It must be a volunteer, so be sure to mention this when you contact the evaluator. Make sure you give this person the “Dear Special Evaluator” letter from PLA

as soon as possible. This letter explains the program and the process. Also, when the documenter has agreed to evaluate your learning, submit all the materials that you would give a ‘regular’ documenter, including the “Dear Friend” letter. If the special documenter needs more guidance, they may call PLA.

SECONDARY DOCUMENTATION refers to materials you include directly in your portfolio to supplement or support primary documentation (which is always required). The most common examples include certificates, licenses, job descriptions, in-service training reports and records of successfully completed courses or workshops for which college credit was **not** awarded, newspaper articles written about you or by you, etc. Secondary documentation is an important part of the portfolio, but is never sufficient by itself for the award of credit.

A logical supplement to a letter of documentation in computer skills is, for example, a photocopy of your Microsoft certification. A useful supplement for child development is a certificate of school-sponsored in-service training you have received in this area.

Common sources of secondary documentation include:

1. Certificates and licenses (for example, business and communications licenses, or computer skills certificates.)
2. Diplomas, transcripts and continuing education/adult education courses for which credit has not been awarded previously.
3. In-service training records from employers.
4. Newspaper articles written by or about you.
5. Art, photography, or digital coding samples.
6. Letters of recommendation and/or performance evaluations.
7. Subject bibliographies of selected books you have read.

Be judicious in your selection of secondary documentation. One or two of your best newspaper articles included in your portfolio can reinforce your primary documentation of news writing. Ten such articles, however, do not provide any additional information, and may indicate to the assessors your inability to be critical of your own work.

Edit the Areas of Study Based on Documentation

As stated earlier, only documented learning will be considered for the award of credit. When preparing the final draft of the portfolio, you should eliminate areas of study and learning components for which primary documentation is clearly not anticipated. Your portfolio will be evaluated on the basis of the documentation that is included at the time of the review. **No documentation will be considered after 15 days of the last class date. After that date, portfolios with missing documentation will be sent to evaluators; missing documentation will probably affect your evaluation and your results.**

If your letters are not all received by the time of your last class, please include a brightly colored “Slip Sheet” in the place where the letter will be sorted into once it arrives. Please page number the slip sheet and include the future letter in your index.

Your teacher will explain the slip sheet option at greater length in class. Again, the last date at which PLA will accept a later letter is fifteen days after the end of your class.

The Bibliography

The bibliography is used to indicate books, articles, manuals or other important sources of learning for you. It is considered optional, but highly recommended in the portfolio process. It is a powerful source of secondary documentation if you have done a significant amount of reading in your field of study. The bibliography is strongly suggested if you have listed “Independent Study” or “Self-Taught” as sources of learning in your areas of study.

The bibliography itself is an alphabetical listing containing the following information: author, title, place of publication, publisher, and date of publication. You may use a standard bibliographical form found in any style manual. We recommend that you do go a step further and prepare what is called an “annotated” bibliography, which contains all of the above information as well as a brief summary of the contents of each book. Provide enough information in about three sentences to convey a clear

statement of the book’s purpose, content and special value to you. Assessors again and again state how useful an annotated bibliography is when considering credit awards.

Credit for Evaluated Training Programs

In certain instances, you may be able to earn credit directly for non-collegiate sponsored training programs. These are educational programs offered by institutions whose **primary** mission is other than education. Courses offered by corporations to improve or upgrade the skills of employees are examples of non-collegiate sponsored instruction. You may earn credit for these programs if they have been formally evaluated by one of these sources: American Council on Education (ACE), National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), Excelsior University, or Vermont State Colleges System via the Education and Training Evaluation Service (ETES). A list of ETES-evaluated training is included in your electronic student materials. Transcripts from accredited military service schools and military training evaluated by ACE should also be included as primary documentation.

If you believe you might be eligible for this type of credit, contact your instructor, the director of your training program(s), the evaluation organizations or schools listed above (ACE, ETES, Excelsior), or reach out to the PLA Office.

Evaluating and Critiquing Documentation

Documentation establishes the validity of your credit requests. The assessors will award credit only for learning that has primary documentation. As a result, students commonly ask, “How much documentation is enough?” While there is no simple answer to this question, use the following guidelines to review your documentation to determine if you have sufficiently covered all of your prior experiential learning.

1. Quality over Quantity

Remember, one or two good letters of documentation from a qualified documenter are better evidence than three or four letters from unqualified individuals who have not directly observed your skills.

2. New Information

Each piece of documentation should provide the assessors with new information about your learning. Two to four letters of documentation from separate documenters for the same area often complement and confirm each other. Five or six such letters, however, may detract from the overall effectiveness of your portfolio by being redundant. Assessors will be influenced not only by the content of your learning, but by your approach to organizing and verifying it as well.

3. Other Voices

The best documentation restates a student's learning in the words of the documenter. The words of the documenter supplement and enhance the student's description of their learning. As a general rule, documenters should address your learning in short paragraphs which may address one or more learning components. Avoid having them use check lists or a mere repetition of your learning components with checkmarks on them.

4. Cover All Components

All of the learning components in your areas of study should be stated in or implied by your primary documentation. You will know you have completed documentation when you have succeeded in doing this.

A Final Word

Because of the importance of documentation, PLA does everything possible to support you in obtaining it. PLA provides you with a "Dear Friend" letter, a "Dear Special Evaluator" letter, the Sample Documentation Letter Format handout and other essential materials and samples. PLA will also forward all your documentation to you very quickly. In addition, you should encourage documenters having difficulty composing their letters to contact us. We will answer any questions they have regarding the program or the process.

Before completing this chapter on documentation, review the terms listed next. If you are not familiar with all of them, you should reread the appropriate sections of this chapter or consult with your instructor.

- **Verification**
- **Accredited college or university**
- **College transcript**
- **Special evaluation**
- **Documentation**
- **"Dear Friend" letter**
- **Documentation strategy**
- **Evaluation**
- **Primary documentation**
- **Secondary documentation**
- **Letter of documentation**
- **Sponsored instruction (non-college)**
- **American Council on Education (ACE)**

And since documentation is such an important part of your portfolio, let's review these points:

- *No documentation, no credit.*
- *Start early with getting documentation, and follow up with your documenters in a timely fashion if your letters have not come in.*
- *Documentation letters must be sent directly to PLA.*
- *Primary documentation includes: college transcripts and letters from documenters and special evaluators.*
- *Secondary documentation includes everything else that supports your requests.*
- *If you have any specific documentation questions, ask your instructor, who may refer you to PLA.*
- *If your documenters have any questions, refer them to PLA.*

CHAPTER 7

Degree Planning: Integrating Credit for Prior Experiential Learning into a College Format

Now that you have described and documented your prior experiential learning, you should consider how this learning will contribute to your college degree. In preparing the degree plan, you will integrate the areas of study in your portfolio with the college courses necessary to realize your educational goals.

Many colleges require students to prepare a degree plan. Usually these plans are lists of courses and other credit-bearing activities that make up a particular program. The content of the plan is determined by your personal goals and the requirements of the college you attend. At some colleges the degree plan includes a statement of goals and a description of how various planned learning experience will contribute to these goals.

Degree plans and degree requirements vary among colleges. Because of this variability, a general framework for degree planning is presented in this chapter.

An Unofficial Plan

The degree plan you include in your portfolio is an unofficial plan – a draft of your final degree plan. In your plan you describe as accurately as possible the college program you will complete.

In preparing your plan, assume you will earn credit for all the areas of study in your portfolio. While the assessors will not base their credit award on your plan, they will use this plan as an aide in the review process, by gaining insight into your goals and how your prior experiential learning might contribute to these goals, they will be better able to award you the maximum appropriate credit.

The College Framework

In order to prepare a useful degree plan, you must understand the general framework in which a degree is organized. Typically, courses in a degree contribute to a major area of learning (sometimes called a “Concentration” or a “Major”), satisfy general education requirements, or are selected by you as electives. The amount of credit required/allowed in these categories varies among colleges.

The Major

Courses in your major provide you with an in-depth, working knowledge of a particular field or discipline. When students say, “I have a degree in business,” this usually means the **major** of their class work was in business.

Colleges often determine the courses in a major and state the sequence in which you take them. Colleges do this to ensure that all students with the same major acquire a similar set of skills.

General Education Requirements

In addition to specifying courses which are part of your major, many colleges also specify that some of the courses in your degree must satisfy general education requirements. Colleges may have general education requirements in areas such as social sciences, the humanities, or the arts. Colleges may also require that you demonstrate competency in English or mathematics by successfully completing one or more courses in these areas. All of these are part of the college’s general education requirements.

Electives

Courses in your degree that are not part of your major, and which do not specifically satisfy general education requirements, are called electives. The elective category allows you to choose from a number

of areas of personal interest to complete your degree. In choosing elective courses, you usually can select from the full range of courses offered by an institution.

Additional Requirements

In addition to the three categories listed above, colleges also classify courses in other ways. One common distinction colleges make is between courses that are from the “lower division” as opposed to “upper division”. **Lower division** courses are usually introductory or survey courses like Principles of Accounting, Introduction to Psychology, or Survey of Western History and often have course numbers on the 100/1000 or 200/2000 level (first year, second year). The content of these courses is usually geared toward students who are becoming newly acquainted with these areas.

Upper division courses, on the other hand (300/3000 to 400/4000 numbers indicating third year/ fourth year), are more advanced, and often require prerequisite college-level learning. Courses with the qualifying titles “Advanced,” “Special Topic,” “Readings & Research” and “Seminar” are generally considered upper division.

Your assessors do not classify your areas of study as upper or lower division. You will negotiate this with the college to which you transfer your FPD credit. However, “advanced” or “intermediate” in the title of an area of study might suggest to a registrar that the learning is on the upper level. On the other hand, assessors might change your area of study title from “advanced” to “introductory” if they decide that the learning does not warrant an upper-level title.

Registrars sometimes use the assessors’ notes as part of their transfer evaluation, which is another reason to store the results of your assessment in a safe place.

Methods for Writing a Degree Plan

Once you understand how colleges structure degrees, you will want to polish your own degree plan. Meeting with your advisor is important at this time. The most common approach to the portfolio degree plan is the **list format** -- simply **a list of all the courses you need to take to earn a degree**, broken down along categories similar to those outlined above

Follow these guidelines:

1. Make a list of all the credits you have earned or will earn, and note the areas or titles of each.
2. Distribute these courses to meet the categories of the school you will attend. Usually this means listing courses in the major, general education and elective areas.
3. Make sure you have the appropriate number of credits in each category.
4. Include extra areas of study and courses in the elective category or under the heading **other educational experiences**.
5. Check that your total number of credits equals the total required for a degree.

Summary

The ultimate purpose of degree planning is to develop a link between what you already know and what you need to know to reach your goals. Preparing a degree plan will make you a better advocate for your prior experiential learning. Although PLA awards you prior experiential learning credit, we do not determine its applicability to a degree. That is negotiated by you and the college you attend. A good first step in this negotiation process is to meet with an academic advisor, if you have not already done so.

CHAPTER 8

Writing the Essay

Purpose and Importance

The essay is the one place in your portfolio where you have the opportunity to present your learning as a whole and in the context of your life experiences since high school. In it, you communicate to assessors your own view of the extent and value of your learning. You tell them the relevant stories behind what you learned: why you made the choices you did; whom you found to be effective teachers or motivators; how you reacted to the new situations you found yourself in or created for yourself. The essay gives you ample chance to have your say. For the Focused Portfolio, essays are usually 3 to 5 pages long (double-spaced). You can reasonably assume that if your essay is shorter than this you have not adequately described your learning, and if it is longer you are in danger of wearing down your reader.

How important is the essay as part of your portfolio? Many people who have served as assessors report that they turn to the essay of each portfolio first, so they can quickly get a sense of “who the person is.” **The essay communicates an impression of your personality, competence, and credibility.** Although this impression is necessarily subjective and its influence cannot be measured, it is undoubtedly a factor in decisions. There are several steps you can take to ensure that this impression is positive.

Suggestions for Developing the Essay

- **Begin in a straightforward manner**, with either:
 - a) a goal statement which will help your readers understand why you put the portfolio together; or
 - b) a brief description of what you did in the years immediately following high school, including, perhaps, some mention of why you did not go on to college or why you dropped out of college back then.

The following are examples of a goal statement beginning:

“Earning a college degree has always been a dream of mine. The busiest years of my life are now behind me and I welcome the chance to go back to school. When I learned of the Focused Portfolio Development option, I realized it was the ideal way to start. I hope with the credits awarded me for prior learning, I will have enough of a start to enable me to graduate with an A.A.S. in Digital Marketing in two years. I hope to obtain this degree through Community College of Vermont.”

The next opening, on the other hand, stresses past uncertainties rather than goals:

“After graduation from high school, I went off to college with some vague ideas about more learning and meeting new challenges and people: going mostly from a sense of obligation to my supposed academic potential rather than from any focused direction. I left college after little more than a year because I could not say, to my own satisfaction, what it meant to be there or what good it was doing anyone ... I thought that somehow I would find or make the opportunity to study further when the need and desire appeared more clearly.”

And this one plunges right into the narrative proper:

“While I was in high school, the recurring question was “what college do you want to attend?” I was never asked whether or not college was in my plans. Well, at the time I knew that furthering my education in a formal way was not an immediate goal. I saw plenty of opportunity in the working world and was eager to participate in it. So I spent the first few years out of school working in odd jobs around Lyndonville, Vermont.”

Whichever approach you choose, the beginning should be clear and definite, so that the reader will immediately get a sense of the person whose portfolio they hold in their hands, and so that you, the writer, will feel confident about proceeding with the rest of your narrative.

- **Use a tone which is self-confident and assertive**, though not inflated. Your essay is the appropriate place to make strong, positive statements about what you have learned. You should not be modest or shrink from using first-person pronouns. You are the star of this narrative! Try to present your learning and accomplishments in as direct and convincing a way as possible. Notice how in the following passage a student stresses his self-motivation in a way that is entirely believable:

“When I started the Focal Point [his photography studio], I had no formal photographic education, nor had I ever seen a professional photographer work. Yet the thirst for knowledge was present, so I spent many hours reading about and practicing technique. When I encountered a problem that was not covered in any of the volumes in my personal photographic library, I would consult technical representatives, colleagues or anyone I thought could help. My knowledge increased rapidly because I have never been ashamed to admit that I didn’t understand a certain procedure.”

- **Use an overall organization for your essay which feels comfortable and sensible to you.** Chronological order has been most frequently chosen by past assessment students. Typically, their narratives have begun with graduation from high school and followed the course of their learning experiences through the years.
- **Be sure to cover every important learning experience in your essay.** You do not, however, need to cover every learning component because you should be able to depend on your documentation to do this. After you have decided which experiences you want to amplify, the following questions will help you check whether your descriptions are on target.

1. Have you indicated the various learning activities that have contributed to this particular knowledge, skill/competency?
2. When did this experience take place?
3. How long were you involved in this activity?
4. Where did this/these experiences take place?

5. How were you personally involved in these experiences?
6. Were you responsible for others? How many?
7. What was the title of the person who supervised you?
8. Have you shown that you learned and changed from the past experience(s)?
9. Have you described what you learned—the learning outcome of your experience?
10. Have you used specific examples to demonstrate what you have learned?
11. Have you indicated that you can apply what you know?

- **The conclusion of your essay should seem to grow naturally out of the style and content which preceded it.** There is no formula for the perfect conclusion. But an ending which is consistent with the rest of your essay, and which contains some reflection about the worth and purpose of the self-evaluation process you have gone through in order to produce the portfolio, will certainly be appropriate.

- **Proofread, proofread, proofread.** There is no better way to arouse skepticism about your competence than to hand in a portfolio containing an essay full of mechanical and grammatical errors. Simply put, such an essay reflects badly on you. It diminishes your effort in putting together the entire portfolio, and makes you look less professional and serious in the eyes of a reader.

As you know, good writing skills are a prerequisite for taking the FPD class. One of the reasons for this prerequisite is the need for you to be able to write a good essay.

Especially if you are asking for writing credits, such as “Business and Professional Writing”, the essay will give the assessors a much clearer indication of your skills than your letters of documentation. As a matter of fact, if your essay has many writing problems, and your documenters say that you are a good writer, it makes your documentation questionable.

Please take the time to proofread your essay very, very carefully. If you are unsure, seek help through your CCV center and online tutoring services. And ask

one or two friends who have writing experience to proofread your essay as a second or third reader.

The best time to proofread is several hours or days after you have completed your writing; at that time you should feel detached enough from your work to recognize the errors. If you feel unsure about your proofreading skills, discuss this matter with your instructor.

One Other Consideration

The essay is an opportunity as well as a necessity. It is the one place in the portfolio where you have a chance to present yourself directly, and it is up to you to decide how much you wish to present. There is considerable room for individual variation. Certainly an intimacy that feels awkward is ill-advised; however, if you wish to communicate your style and voice, the texture of your learning and life—and can do so clearly and comfortably—you will probably find a receptive audience in your assessors. On the first page of her essay, one student describes unforgettably how it feels to be an ambitious woman juggling many different responsibilities:

“Being able to concentrate on textbooks during the day is somewhat limited as I am a licensed day care provider. It’s difficult to be studious when you’re wearing chicken noodle soup, standing in egg salad, and watching carrot sticks being inserted into every open area above the neck except the mouth. I should have disposable furniture and self-cleaning teenagers who don’t periodically cause the septic system to self-destruct.”

After reading that and laughing, who could fail to have a sense of who this student is?

Clarity is the common denominator of all good writing. Individual style gives writing flavor and distinction.

CHAPTER 9

The Interrelationship of Portfolio Parts

Most students work very hard and intensely on their portfolios. They are familiar with each page of their portfolio and thoroughly understand how all the parts are related to one another. Your assessors and others who must read your portfolio do not have this advantage. It is important, therefore, that the portfolio be carefully organized so a reader may follow it easily.

Remember, the completed portfolio should contain the following elements in this order:

1. FPD Title Page and Committee Worksheet
2. Areas of Study
3. Degree Plan
4. Essay
5. Resume
6. Index to Documentation
7. Documentation (first primary, then secondary)
8. Bibliography

You must also number all the pages of your portfolio consecutively. Your first area of study is page 1, and the last page of a 26-page portfolio will have page number 26.

Checking the Various Items

Each item in your portfolio communicates specific information to your assessors. Check to see that:

➤ The FPD Title Page and Committee Worksheet is completely filled out and is in exactly the order of the areas of study. It is signed and dated.
➤ Each area of study lists the title, credit request, and learning components. It is correctly cross-referenced to documentation and sources of learning.
➤ The degree plan integrates areas of study with college courses you have taken or plan to take.
➤ The general essay provides insight into how your learning was acquired and gives the reader a picture of "who you are." It has been thoroughly proof read and is free of grammatical mistakes and typographical errors.
➤ The resume provides a chronology of the most significant professional and personal events in your portfolio.
➤ The index to documentation lists all documents, both secondary and primary, and provides the correct page number for each document.
➤ The documentation materials specifically address what you know, with all primary documentation placed ahead of secondary documentation.

Submitting Your Portfolio

By the last day of class, you must submit a pdf of your final portfolio to priorlearning@ccv.edu, once you have faculty final approval to submit. Sending the file from your CCV e-mail account will transmit the file securely.

If you do not have the capability to make a pdf, you may send ONE (faculty approved) copy (single-sided!) via US Mail to:

Office of Prior Learning Assessment
PO Box 489
Montpelier, VT 05601-0489

Hard copies should be secured with a clip. Do not staple the portfolio.

Your instructor (or PLA staff) may return your portfolio to you for additional work if it is not organized correctly.

Please keep an original copy of your portfolio: both printed and digital. You might need it later and PLA does not retain copies of the full portfolio, only the final credit award.

Students are eligible to submit a portfolio to PLA by passing the Focused Portfolio Development course. You cannot submit an initial portfolio to PLA until you meet all the objectives of the course. (If you decide to do a supplemental Focused Portfolio at another time, you need not to take the class again. You register with PLA directly and pay only the Portfolio Assessment Fee.)

How the Review Process Works

Besides the PLA director, there are usually two people who review your portfolio and credit requests. PLA hires faculty reviewers qualified to evaluate your requests and familiar with and supportive of the FPD portfolio process. If the two assessors disagree on a credit award, PLA will hire a third evaluator for additional feedback.

During the review process, the reviewers assign official credit awards. The evaluation may result

in changes in area of study titles or credit amounts. The PLA director records notes for the student when credit is denied or credit requests are changed, combined, etc. (Please keep these notes as they might come in handy if your future college requests more information).

In your award packet, you will receive your areas of study with any explanatory notes PLA staff have recorded for you, called marked up areas of study. These annotated areas of study are accompanied by an *unofficial* student copy of your results (a PLA transcript), an award letter, an *official* transcript request form, and important instructions on the safekeeping of the contents of the award packet.

Your prospective college or employer may request to see the marked up areas of study as well as your official transcript. Therefore, ***it is very important that you keep a copy of your credit award and marked up areas of study in a safe place.*** The PLA office cannot keep your portfolio for longer than 30 days after your results have been sent out.

In the event you are dissatisfied with the award, or have specific questions, you should call our office and speak with the PLA director within 30 days of receiving your credit awards. If, after talking with the director, you are still dissatisfied with your award and wish to proceed with an appeal, the process will move on to the CCV Academic Dean to determine if an appeal is warranted. In that case, you need to notify PLA in writing, within one week of your intent to appeal.

If you decide to appeal, do not request that a transcript be sent to a college. Once mailed, a transcript and credit results are official and cannot be altered and you can no longer appeal.

It should be noted, however, that appeals are very rare. Most students are pleased with their awards and understand the rationale for changes made by the assessors.

Finally, College Credit!

PLA will notify you of the final decision after your review has been finalized, normally within 40 days of your final documentation deadline. To have your earned credit considered toward a degree, you must transfer it from PLA to the college you wish to attend. Transcript requests must be made in writing directly to PLA and additional copies of the form are found on the PLA web page. PLA will then, as often as necessary, forward an official copy of your transcript to the institutions that you select. There is no fee for this service.

Congratulations!

On the next four pages, you will find a final memo about putting together your portfolio. It reviews and summarizes all sections; please use it to make sure your final portfolio is correct and properly assembled.

PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR PORTFOLIO

PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR PORTFOLIO

Every semester, PLA staff read between 40-120 APL & FPD portfolios. Faculty reviewers for FPD portfolios read each portfolio submitted to them by PLA and respond in writing. Because we read so many portfolios, it is very, very important that the format of each portfolio is the same. We need to be able to predict where each section of the portfolio is located.

Below is a detailed outline that you should use as a guide when putting together your portfolio. While some of the guidelines may seem particular or odd, please remember that we have a good reason for each of them.

To begin with, please remember that while each portfolio will differ in **content**, the **format** should be **exactly** the same.

A. OVERVIEW

- A. Your portfolio should be **neat, well organized and easy to read.**
- B. **You need to submit a pdf of your final faculty-approved portfolio to PLA at priorlearning@ccv.edu.** Keep a hard copy and digital copy for yourself.
- C. **If you are unable to produce a pdf**, you may submit ONE clipped (not stapled!), single-sided copy to the Office of Prior Learning Assessment (PO Box 489, Montpelier, VT 05601-0489) via US Mail. Be sure the printer made a readable copy (dark enough) and that no pages were missed during printing.

B. FPD TITLE PAGE AND COMMITTEE WORKSHEET

A. Name

- B. **Area of Request** This does **not** mean the area in which you intend to get a degree in. What we would like you to list here is the **area of the curriculum in which you are requesting the most credit**, e.g., “Business,” “Education,” etc. For FPD students, this will be the one area you request credit in.

- C. **List credit requests in logical order** - Group areas of study by discipline starting with your introductory level courses and progressing to your more advanced courses.

List your areas of study on the Committee Worksheet in the EXACT SAME ORDER as you present them in your portfolio! This is really important.

C. AREAS OF STUDY

- A. **Templates** - Use the “Area of Study” templates provided in your Canvas site. Be sure that your name appears on every page. If an Area of Study has two pages, put your name on both pages, and write “cont.” at the bottom of the first page. ***Include the credit request only on the first page of each subject area.***
- B. **Learning Components** - Present your components in logical order. Single space within each learning component; double space between components.
- C. **Source of Learning** column - In this column, list every experience that helped you gain the knowledge for that particular area of study. Be sure to list dates. If the learning was self-taught, you can write “Self-Taught” or “Independent Study” and the dates.
- D. **Documentation** column - Fill this out last after you’ve numbered your pages. Cite specific

page numbers. (For example, if someone wrote a four page letter for you that documents three different areas, be sure to reference the exact page that documents a specific area of study.) Only list those pages that support that particular area of study. Do cite your bibliography in this column.

E. The areas of study should be presented in the portfolio in the exact same order as on your committee worksheet.

D. DEGREE PLAN - The degree plan is for your portfolio and is not binding; however, it is very useful and important to sit down with an academic advisor to help you come up with a good working document. We require a degree plan for the following reasons:

- A. It gives the evaluators a sense of your educational past, present, and future;
- B. It shows that you have an understanding of college systems and expectations;
- C. It clearly lists past courses, PLA requests, and courses still to be taken.

V. ESSAY

A. Format – for APL: eight to twelve pages, for FPD: three to five pages, double spaced, neat. Please **proofread** carefully so that there are **no errors** in grammar or spelling. (Many evaluators read your essay first. Do make a good impression by having a professionally put together and well written essay.)

B. Purpose

- 1. The essay ties your portfolio together; it puts your learning into a context for the committee. It is your opportunity to “speak” to the evaluator and to introduce yourself.
- 2. The essay is also an opportunity for you to expand on your learning components and explain the experiences that form the foundation of your knowledge. You can also use the essay to demonstrate how you have applied your learning. Be sure that your essay relates to your credit requests.

C. Tone

- 1. The tone of your essay should be personal but not intimate. Leave out unnecessary details, e.g., you might want to mention a divorce, but skip all the nasty details.
- 2. Significant life events - Although the focus of the essay is on your education and experience, you may want to briefly mention significant events in your life: marriage, children, passing of loved ones. Don't dwell on things that are irrelevant to your request.

**PROOFREAD,
PRROFREAD,
PROOFREAD!**

VI. RESUME

- A. Purpose** - The resume provides us with a concise chronology of your professional life.
- B. Format** - Any format will do as long as it's easy to read. Be sure to include jobs, education, volunteering, etc. List your jobs starting with the most current and work your way backward.

VII. INDEX TO DOCUMENTATION - You will create this last after you have numbered your pages. On this page, list, (in order) the names of your documenters, their titles, and the page number. For secondary documentation, list what the documentation is and the page number. Don't forget to number the Index page, too!

VIII. DOCUMENTATION

- A. Primary Documentation goes first** - transcripts from accredited colleges first (in chronological order), followed by letters of documentation. Try to put the letters of documentation in the same order as your areas of study. If a documenter submitted

a hand-written letter, you need to type a facsimile. Include both. Type the word FACSIMILE at the top of your typed copy. The facsimile should go in front of the original letter.

B. Secondary Documentation - This is all other documentation: certificates, licenses, letters of recommendation, unaccredited transcripts, etc. The purpose of this section is to enhance primary documentation.

C. Slip Sheets - If you are missing documentation when it is time to type your *Index to Documentation* and hand in your portfolio, use a slip sheet. A slip sheet is **brightly colored** page or piece of paper. **Use one slip sheet per letter.** Type the name of the person you expect the letter from in the center of the page, mention the areas of study the letter will cover, and give the sheet **one** page number at the bottom right.

D. Here's a very important detail: Sometimes you are missing documentation when your portfolio is submitted. In most cases, it is just a letter or two and we are happy to insert that into your portfolio for you. However, if you are missing a significant amount of documentation when you submit your portfolio, be sure to be in touch with PLA. You may be asked to work on your portfolio, or pay PLA per page for the extra work involved.

- **It is the student's responsibility to submit a 'ready for assessment' portfolio.**
- **Evaluation/transcripting cannot occur unless official copies of all previous transcripts are received within the VSCS.**
- **Incomplete documentation will delay your review and may also decrease credits granted.**
- **FPD portfolios must be submitted to PLA, on the last date of class via e-mail or postmarked on that date for hard copy submissions.**

- **Final, absolute deadline for documentation accepted by PLA for FPD portfolios: fifteen days after the class ends. No exceptions.**

IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY - This is a very good enhancer. We strongly encourage you to include a bibliography if you have indeed done some reading. List books by area of study and alphabetize by author. If you wish to make your bibliography even stronger, include an annotated bibliography. In an annotated bibliography, in addition to listing the titles and authors, you write a short paragraph (2-3 sentences) about the book.

X. FINALIZING YOUR PORTFOLIO

- A. Page Numbers - Never repeat or skip a page number!** Put them at the bottom right corner (not too close to the edge of the paper, please, as copying will cut them off!). The Committee Worksheet(s) or Focused Portfolio Cover Sheets, Cover Page and Table of Contents are not numbered. The first page of your Areas of Study is page 1. Your last page will be the end of your bibliography or other secondary documentation.
- B. Finishing up** - After you numbered your pages, be sure to go back and fill out the "Index to Documentation" and the documentation column in each Area of Study.
- C. Binding the Portfolio** – If submitting a hard copy, use a clip to hold the portfolio together and print the portfolio single-sided.

XI. RESULTS

- A. Time Frame** – FPD portfolios will be submitted for review when all documentation has been received or after the 15 day deadline has passed, whichever comes first.

- B. **What You Will Receive** - PLA will return to you a cover letter signed by the PLA director who facilitated the committee or hired the evaluators that reviewed your portfolio. You will also receive an unofficial student transcript and your Areas of Study with the director's notes.
- C. **Notes** - The Areas of Study will include notes written by the PLA director who facilitated your committee/review. The notes are usually brief. You may call PLA with questions regarding your results. We are happy to spend time on the phone with you explaining the committee's decisions.

A VERY IMPORTANT NOTE:

You will not receive your entire portfolio back, only the annotated Areas of Study. It is important to keep the award packet and your original portfolio in a safe place! Because of the unique nature of this course, registrars, advisors, educational licensing entities or employers often ask to review parts of your portfolio, especially the comments of the evaluators. We maintain a permanent record of your transcript but not of your portfolio, or the annotated areas of study sent to you in your award packet. Your portfolio and annotated areas of study will only be kept at PLA for about 4-6 week after PLA sends you the award packet.