

PLA Portfolio Assessment “Down and Dirty”

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Introduction

New Jersey’s Thomas Edison State College was created with the purpose of providing educational opportunities for adults who frequently possess college-level knowledge, competencies and skills acquired outside the classroom. As one of the pioneers in the field of portfolio assessment, Thomas Edison developed a process to assess and credential this knowledge. Since that time, PLA has become more widely accepted and many other institutions have adopted it in one form or another.

However, having worked in this field for many years, I know that the concept of awarding college credit for prior learning, regardless of the source, is unfamiliar to most adult students. While I’ve always attempted to answer the two most often asked questions – “What is PLA?” and “Can I really earn college credit for my life experience?” – with clarity and precision, it seems that the response to the questions elicits as many questions as it answers! So, I thought I might try a different approach to help clarify the nature of PLA from the perspective of “Is PLA right for you?” rather than provide a list of steps. I wrote the text below for anyone considering the pursuit of credit toward a college degree based on a knowledge gained through life experience.

Attention Writers, Salespeople and Creative Types

I may have a method of earning college credit that fits your personality and skill set.

Portfolio assessment is perhaps the most “nontraditional” method of earning credit, even at the most nontraditional institutions. So, what makes someone a good candidate for portfolio assessment? My response to that question is based on years of observation. I’ve probably read in excess of 100,000 portfolios in my years at Thomas Edison State College, and as a result, I have some thoughts about the characteristics of students who are most successful utilizing the college’s portfolio assessment process in earning college credits. These include:

- **Writers** – The written word, the narrative, is a critical part of a PLA portfolio assessment when breaking down and articulating the details of your college-level knowledge. This includes detailing how, when, where and why you acquired the knowledge, how it was applied to a real-life setting, and what documentation you can provide to prove and support your narrative. Writers tend to find the PLA process to be within their grasp.
- **Savers and pack rats** – The PLA portfolio process can be ideal for those who save everything. You need a copy of a certificate you’ve earned. It’s in the 2nd drawer from the bottom in that old metal file cabinet hidden at the back of your attic behind the coat racks. Whether it’s in an old file cabinet in your attic, a shoebox in your garage or an old, musty box of paperwork in the basement, you know exactly where it is, because you keep things like that for that someday when they’re needed! And because of this, you’ll be able to provide documentation of your accomplishments.
- **Paper trailers** – PLA portfolio assessment can be wonderful for those who love the challenge of definitively proving a point by using documentation to make their case. If you’re accustomed to providing copies

or inserting these into a detailed report of some kind, then you know how to present evidence in a PLA portfolio.

- **Law enforcement professionals** – Portfolio assessment is perfectly suited for most people in law enforcement because they know that ANYTHING can be viewed as evidence as long as you can show how it helps to prove your case. Training in writing detailed and descriptive reports also positions law enforcement professionals well for developing portfolios.
- **Recognized or self-proclaimed experts** – Are you the person in your office or organization who is the in-house “expert” on something? It can be anything from Microsoft Excel or digital photography to proof-reading or event planning. Portfolio assessment can be a good option for people who have a body of knowledge that everyone else seems to recognize, and can be equated to a college-level course.
- **Salespeople** – You know this type. Always selling something whether it’s a hot, new product or an idea. Are you the determined type who expresses yourself well and persuades others to share your perspective? Perhaps we just have to get you sold on portfolio assessment before you try to sell something to someone else!
- **Storytellers** – At least a portion of the narrative you write in your PLA portfolio assessment is a story about something you’ve done or experienced. A good storyteller doesn’t leave out the details and can go through the events in order, select the truly salient information and tell it in a way that is captivating and informative.
- **Excuse makers** – People who are proficient at making excuses always come up with a million reasons for why something didn’t unfold as it should have. Their brains aren’t as orderly as a proficient storyteller but they can “spin a yarn” rather well. If we can convince you that the effort put into making excuses could be better placed into creating a portfolio, there is often opportunity here.
- **Creative types** – Portfolio assessment is especially well-suited to those in the creative or performing arts because people in those areas often tend to be somewhat egotistical. They hold on to their work and continue to show it off (whether it’s on film, video, CD, DVD, MP3 or written review). Artists keep their paintings, finished or not. Theater people save playbills and reviews. Musicians save reviews, video and audio recordings of performances.
- **Conceptualizers** – If you can envision a relatively complex process from start to finish or are especially adept at anticipating outcomes, you may be a good match for portfolio assessment.
- **Parents of newborn babies** – The months following the birth of a new baby (assuming that the baby has settled into a schedule) may be a good time to tackle portfolio assessment credit. This method of earning credit may be ideal for this chapter of your life because it allows you to work on the portfolio in five- or 10-minute intervals, especially when your time and attention are torn between the baby and the course work. And what an ideal task to have, in total silence, while the baby is sleeping!
- **People with applied skills** – Although much of the information about portfolio assessment tends to accentuate “the knowledge” you have, those who have concrete, real-world expertise and experience using or applying that knowledge are often successful with portfolio assessment.
- **People looking to build self-esteem and professional confidence while validating personal accomplishments** – One of the very best ways to develop a stronger sense of self-worth is to earn credit for the knowledge you have accumulated in your lifetime outside the traditional classroom!

Do any of these characteristics sound familiar? If so, perhaps there’s credit in your head that has yet to be documented, validated and put on paper. The best way to find out is to talk to the office responsible for PLA at your college or university. At Thomas Edison State College, contact me at tsiben@tesc.edu if you have questions.