

# Montana University System

## Prior Learning Assessment

Submitted by Susan K. Jones, Chair of the MUS PLA Taskforce

**What is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)?** Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is the process of earning college credit for college-level learning acquired from other sources, such as independent intellectual pursuits, training and education programs from work, and through life experience. PLA is not college credit for experience, it is an avenue to demonstrate college-level learning in a rigorous, validated way.

**Background:** Montana will soon be in dire need for more workers with a higher education credential. Having the nation's highest number of workers that are age 65 and older, Montana's available workforce is expected to undergo a significant reduction as these older citizens retire. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 69% of Montana's jobs in 2020 will require some postsecondary education. The skills and knowledge of a state's residents are important to the state's economy and jobs, just as completion of a meaningful educational credential is key to an individual's success and social mobility. The Montana University System (MUS) has taken steps to increase higher education access and affordability options for our citizens. However, we need to further develop our strategies to meet the impending workforce needs.

One area that deserves more attention is the expansion of educational pathways for adults to earn a credential. Statistics reflect that nearly 138,000 adults (25-64 years of age) in Montana have had some college, but have earned no degree. They represent over a quarter of the state's adult population. How can our colleges and universities better connect with these and many other adults who may wish to earn a college credential?

Since 2011, two-year colleges within the MUS have worked on strategies to engage more adults in higher education. Through College!NOW, campuses have piloted various ways to reach out to serve adult learners. In January 2014, to get a better sense of current PLA policies and practices, a system wide survey was taken to gather information on PLA from MUS campuses. Fourteen of the MUS two- and four-year campuses completed the survey. The survey responses confirmed that several forms of PLA are currently available throughout Montana, with the most common method being military PLA through the American Council on Education (ACE). However, the survey also revealed variation in how PLA is treated in credit application and that many colleges and universities were not tracking or reviewing their PLA policies regularly.

With the goal of promoting more consistency and transparency around PLA in Montana, Commissioner Christian solicited nominations from MUS campuses from which he appointed a 30 member PLA Taskforce\* in the spring of 2014. With representation from MUS faculty, staff, students, the Montana Department of Labor and the Governor's Office, the taskforce is charged to review best practices, gain a deeper understanding of PLA and its implications for Montana, and develop recommendations for statewide PLA policy. The intent is to create policy and bring forth a proposed policy statement that makes sense for the MUS while holding PLA to the same standards of academic rigor as other assessment

methods utilized on our college and university campuses. The Taskforce's PLA efforts also will build on previous initiatives endorsed by the MUS to support our returning Veterans.

The Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education received grant support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to carry out these efforts to scale up Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) system wide so there is better understanding and awareness of the opportunities available for adults. Along with policy considerations, accompanying activities\*\* include faculty and staff training via webinars, an advisor workshop and a PLA Summit. The PLA Summit featured national leaders, educational leaders from the Ohio and Tennessee, and representatives from Montana's systems and schools.

It is important to remember that Prior Learning Assessment is an avenue to assess learning that has already taken place. Recent studies (over a seven year span) have shown that students with PLA credits have had higher persistence rates and a shorter time-to-degree than those students without PLA credits. Two of the biggest barriers for adults for returning to college are time and money. PLA addresses both barriers by not requiring adult learners to take courses for subjects that they have already mastered. In short, Prior Learning Assessment can help our fellow Montanans achieve their educational and career goals while creating a stronger workforce and a better life for our citizens.

**\*Montana University System  
Prior Learning Assessment Taskforce**

<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>
<b>Bitterroot College</b>	Kathleen O'Leary	Advising and Enrollment Services Coordinator
<b>CAEL</b>	Dr. Chari Leader-Kelley	Senior Fellow
<b>CAEL</b>	Amy Sherman	Associate VP for Policy and Strategic Alliance
<b>City College MSU Billings</b>	Dr. Rita Kratky	Interim Dean, City College
<b>City College MSU Billings</b>	Dr. Florence Garcia	Associate Dean, City College
<b>Flathead Valley Community College</b>	Marlene Stoltz	Registrar
<b>Governor's Office</b>	Dr. Shannon O' Brien	Governor's Education Policy Advisor
<b>Great Falls College</b>	Dena Wagner-Fossen	Registrar
<b>Great Falls College</b>	Dr. Bruce Gottwig	Division Director for Business, Trades, and Technology
<b>Great Falls College MSU</b>	Jerelyn Blackwell	ASGFC MSU Vice President
<b>Helena College</b>	Elizabeth Stearns-Sims	Assistant Dean of Student Services
<b>Helena College</b>	Tammy Burke	General Education/Science Instructor
<b>Miles Community College</b>	Dr. Kirk Lacy	Associate Dean for Workforce Development
<b>Missoula College</b>	Lynn Stocking	Associate Dean
<b>Missoula College</b>	Tammy Freimund	Director, Advising
<b>Montana Dept of Labor and Industry;</b>	Pam Watson	Bureau Chief
<b>Montana Tech</b>	Dr. John Garic	Dean, Highlands College
<b>Montana Tech</b>	Janet Friesz	Admissions Evaluator, Enrollment

		Services
<b>MSU Billings</b>	Dr. Mark Nook	Chancellor
<b>MSU Billings</b>	Dr. Matt Redinger	Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
<b>MSU Bozeman</b>	Dr. Ron Larsen	Associate Provost
<b>MSU Northern</b>	Dr. Michael DiBrizzi	Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice
<b>OCHE</b>	Susan K. Jones	Director, Two Year Mission Integration
<b>OCHE</b>	Dr. John E. Cech	Deputy Commissioner for Two Year & Community College Education
<b>OCHE</b>	Dr. Neil Moisey	Deputy Commissioner for Academic, Research and Student Affairs
<b>OCHE</b>	Katie Spalinger	Administrative Associate
<b>UM Missoula</b>	Dr. Beth Howard	Interim Executive Director, Office for Student Success
<b>UM Missoula</b>	Lou Laakso	Admissions Evaluator, Enrollment Services
<b>UM Missoula</b>	Dr. J. Stephen Lodmell	Professor, Division of Biological Sciences and Chair, Faculty Senate
<b>UM Missoula</b>	Shawn Grove	VETS Office Director
<b>UM Western</b>	Dr. Laura Straus	Interim Director of Outreach/Chair of Education Dept

**\*\*PLA Activities Calendar (2014)**

January 15 PLA Survey of MUS Policies/Practices Sent Out  
February 15 Survey Results Available  
June 23 Task Force Introductory Webinar  
July 23 Task Force Kickoff Meeting  
August 6 PLA Expert Webinar: Understanding Standardized Testing  
August 13 PLA Expert Webinar: Understanding Credit Recommendations ACE/NCCRS  
August 20 Recognizing Military Education  
September 10 Demystifying Portfolio Assessment  
September 29 PLA Statewide Summit  
September 30 PLA Task Force Meeting  
October 21, 22 PLA Task Force Meeting  
November 19 PLA Task Force Meeting  
December 3 Systems Wrap Up/Sharing/Questions  
December 10 PLA Advisor Training  
Spring 2015 Policy Recommendations to the BOR

