Loyalist College Guide to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
Revised February 2014

Acknowledgments:
The information contained within has been drawn from a variety of sources but most significantly from the work of Paul Zakos who has developed many PLAR training manuals including *A Guide to Assist in The Preparation of a Portfolio for Educational, Vocational and Career Planning*. It is from this text and the experiences of Mark Gallupe and Rose Marie Reid with PLAR that much of this guidebook was written.

Contact: PLAR Advisor, Sandy Novroski

Introduction:

There are many ways in which to assess the prior learning of an adult learner, for example by portfolio, challenge test, skills demonstration, interview and so on. The most commonly used method is portfolio-assisted assessment. This guidebook has been prepared to assist those who choose to use this particular method of assessing and recognizing, for credit, an adult's prior learning.

This guide was intended primarily for situations where a PLAR candidate would like to seek course credit for a single course (or two) after they have determined (possibly in their first class of the semester) that they have acquired most or all of the learning outcomes of the course from experiences elsewhere. This guide will give the candidate, faculty and staff a tool to prepare for the PLAR process.

For situations where a candidate is seeking several course credits or a large portion of an entire program (or simply want to develop a more comprehensive portfolio), it is recommended that they take a portfolio development course to prepare adequately for the assessment and formal recognition of their prior learning.
NB: A portfolio development course is offered online every semester through the Continuing Education department.

What is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)?

PLAR is a process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning acquired through informal means. This may include work and life experience, informal education and training, independent study, volunteering, travel, hobbies, and family experiences.

PLAR Assumptions:

1. Significant learning can and does take place outside of the classroom.
2. Adults acquire important knowledge, skills and abilities through working, training, reading, traveling, television, parenting, community involvement, etc.
3. Such learning can and should be evaluated for credit by educational institutions.
4. Evaluation policies and procedures should be documented, clearly articulated and available to the public.
5. Practices which force adults to repeat learning which they have already mastered are inefficient, costly and unnecessary.
6. Adults who qualify for PLAR credits must be provided with sufficient information to enable them to make informed choices about whether to pursue the PLAR option.
7. Sufficient opportunity and resources must be made available to candidates to demonstrate and document their learning.
8. PLAR assessors must be given the resources and training to assess the PLAR documents authentically.
9. If successful, a candidate must reasonably be able to achieve their educational goals.

<u>Overview of the PLAR process:</u>

1. The PLAR candidate contacts the PLAR advisor. The candidate will identify the course or courses they wish to PLAR.
2. The advisor downloads the appropriate course outline(s) which will identify the method or methods by which the course may be challenged: challenge exam, portfolio, interview, or other. If the course requires a portfolio, then the learner will be given a copy of the current *Loyalist College Learner's Guide to PLAR: Developing a Mini-Portfolio*.
3. Before engaging in the PLAR process, the candidate will meet with the faculty member who will be the assessor to make sure that the course outline is current.
4. If the candidate decides to proceed, then they will complete the appropriate form available from the registrar's office and pay the current fee.
5. The candidate, with the support of the PLAR advisor, will complete the portfolio or other work required and submit it to the faculty assessor by a specified date to insure that they can continue their studies if unsuccessful in the challenge.
6. The faculty member assigns a grade and enters it on the "Prior Learning Assessment: Portfolio/Challenge Evaluation Form" and submits it to the registrar's office so that the candidate's transcript can be updated. For transcript purposes, the college makes no distinction between credit awarded through PLAR or by having taken the course.
7. The faculty member will inform the learner of status of the challenge and the grade awarded in a timely manner.

<u>What are the components of a Mini-Portfolio?</u>

Although the portfolio is in many ways a highly individualized product, there is a suggested format to be followed.

The Mini-Portfolio consists of:

1. A cover letter, which states your request for post-secondary credit and the course(s) for which you are seeking credit.
2. An up-to-date, detailed resume.
3. Course outline(s).
4. A course match document, which provides concise statements of experience and of the resulting learning, as it relates to all or most of the outcomes listed in the course outline.
5. Documentation of the learning experience supporting each outcome matched.

<u>Documentation:</u>

Documentation plays a critical role in the PLAR Portfolio-assisted assessment process.
There are two main forms of documentation: direct and indirect.

Direct documentation is evidence produced by the candidate and is generally the strongest type of evidence. Examples include: articles/ books written, manuals developed, reports, proposals, team submissions, artwork, skills video, audio recordings, plans, drawings, products, performances and so on.

Indirect documentation is evidence provided from a third party who is attesting to something that has been done or learned. Examples include: awards, performance appraisals, letters of reference or validation, appreciation notes, newspaper/magazine articles, job description, and so on. These are acceptable forms of documentation.

When assessing a portfolio for credit, it is important that a learner has provided three (3) pieces of documentation to support their claim of learning for credit. It can be a combination of direct and indirect evidence. An example of this would be:

Demonstrate the ability to take a client's health and social history. A PLAR candidate in the health care field might present the following evidence:

EVIDENCE

Letters of validation, e.g. colleagues, nursing supervisors and various clients.
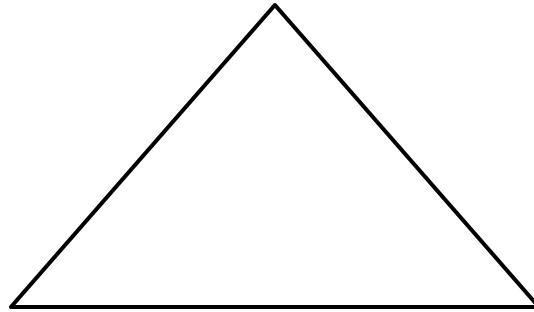
EVIDENCE
Learning diaries e.g. reflections
work records and products
on the process of taking several
and varied client social histories.

EVIDENCE
e.g. copy of nursing records for
several and varied clients
(with their consent).

Assessing a Portfolio for Credit:

Since they are subject matter experts, faculty members are the assessors of PLAR course challenges. In addition to being knowledgeable about their subject, college faculty members know about assessment and evaluation of learning. Assessing the prior learning of adult learners is not much different than assessing the learning of in-class learners. In other words, assessing learning is assessing learning regardless of where and how it was acquired.

Faculty know what to look for in both the theoretical and practical elements and can easily recognize if significant college level learning has taken place. They can also determine if there are any critical gaps in learning that must be filled and suggest the best ways in which this learning can be acquired (i.e. by learning contract or other means).

There are five (5) key principles when assessing a portfolio and it is the adherence to these principles that ensures credibility and rigor in PLAR.

1. **Validity**: The assessment should be based upon the required outcomes and their associated criteria. Does the documentation in the portfolio relate to the learning outcomes for which credit is being sought? Does it match part of or all of the outcomes for the course?
2. **Reliability**: Would an assessor's opinion match that of another assessor in the same situation, with a similar adult learner using the same criteria?
3. **Sufficiency**: Adult learners must be able to demonstrate that most of or all of the specified learning outcomes have been met. Can the documentation serve as conclusive proof for one or more of the courses being assessed? What else might be required?
4. **Currency**: The documentation/learning acquired is relevant and reasonably up-to-date.
5. **Authenticity**: Do the direct and indirect evidence give an accurate picture to support the learner's claim for credit?

Term	Definition
Assessment	A systematic process by which a faculty subject matter expert reviews and evaluates evidence of learning to determine its level and appropriateness to a program of study.
Assessor	The faculty subject matter expert who advises the student and, reviews and evaluates a student's evidence of learning, using a predetermined assessment tool (i.e. portfolio, skills demonstration, interview). The assessor makes credit decisions, assigns a grade, completes the PLAR forms and submits the form to the PLAR Advisor.
Challenge Assessment	A method of assessment other than portfolio, developed and evaluated by faculty subject matter experts to measure an individual's learning achievements against subject learning outcomes.
Challenge Process	The process that measures demonstrated prior learning through a variety of written and non-written evaluation methods, for the purpose of awarding credit without requiring enrollment in a subject. Prior learning can be evaluated by using challenge assessments and/or portfolio-assisted assessment.
College-level Learning	Learning accomplishments, which reflect the knowledge, skill and outcomes expected from a college subject, which contain a theory and a practical base and are applicable in more than one context.
Documentation	Evidence or proof of learning.
Experiential Learning	The skills, knowledge and values that are acquired through life and work experience other than through formal, recognized educational programs.
Learning Outcomes	Knowledge, skills and/or values which a student is expected to demonstrate at completion of a course and which serve as the criterion standards for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).
PLAR Candidate	A learner who may or may not have been admitted to a college program, but who is formally requesting assessment of their prior learning for college credit.
Portfolio	A dossier or collection of material that identifies an individual's achievements, documents their experiences, and analyzes and organizes the knowledge and skills acquired. It is developed by a learner (usually by taking a portfolio development course and with the assistance of a PLA advisor). The portfolio can be used for college credit recognition; workplace learning recognition; career mobility; or job search.
PLAR Advisor	The person responsible for supplying a PLAR candidate with all relevant documents attached to their PLAR application as well as the name and contact information of their faculty assessor. The advisor is also responsible for entering the candidate's information into the central data base at the initial meeting and for entering the final marks granted by the assessor into the transcript system, where applicable, upon completion of the process.