THE OFFICE OF EXTERNAL PROGRAMS (OEP)
Vermont State Colleges

It's not about what you did. It's about what you learned.

• The History of Assessment of Prior Learning at the Vermont State Colleges

The Vermont State Colleges consider learning as an ongoing, lifelong activity. We believe that the source of learning is secondary to the learning itself, and that education should be an empowering experience that helps students to gain more control over their life. As the result of prior learning assessment, adult students are integrated into the college community at a level commensurate with their knowledge and ability.

The Vermont State Colleges (VSC) is a statewide system of five colleges. Four are campus-based institutions, including a technical college. The fifth and largest college is the non-residential Community College of Vermont (CCV) with twelve locations and an online center.

The Assessment of Prior Learning Program (APL) started in 1975, as increasing numbers of adults returned to, or started, college. College advisors and faculty soon realized that adult students enter college with skills and knowledge far beyond that of traditional-age college students, and that this learning is often deeper and broader.

Because the VSC believes that learning can occur in many places other than a formal classroom, a system was needed to assess and evaluate college-level learning gained through professional experience, independent study, workplace training, community involvement, and the military. In order to assess such learning, the VSC established the Office of External Programs (OEP) in 1976, housed at the Community College of Vermont because most adult students enter college here. Its services, however, are available to all students throughout the VSC. Over the years, several assessment options have been developed.

• Assessment Options Provided by OEP

1. CLEP/DSST testing
2. Individual “Course Challenges” of CCV courses
3. Evaluation of organizational training programs for college credit equivalency (ETES)
4. The “Assessment of Prior Learning” (APL) portfolio preparation course and evaluation process
5. In Development: A “Focused Portfolio” process to request limited credits (12)

During the past 36 years, OEP has assessed over 7,000 portfolios prepared by students in the APL classes, administered scores of CLEP/DSST tests, evaluated hundreds of students through Course Challenges, and evaluated over 30 organizational training programs.

Students entering the VSC system are usually made aware of the assessment options through an advisor, a registrar’s office, or an admissions department. Information is also available at the CCV website, through public announcements of information sessions, via workshops for faculty and students, VSC/CCV publications, and often through word of mouth. Interested students often call OEP directly to discuss their individual situation and background with the Assessment Coordinator.

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• Assessment Options in Greater Detail

1. CLEP/DSST testing occurs via a designated computer located at OEP. Students are scheduled for these proctored tests on bi-monthly testing days or as needed, resulting in transfer credit.

2. The “Course Challenge” process is selected when a student and his/her advisor determine that the student has equivalent knowledge to a specific course. The process is a course match. OEP administers the evaluation and its results. Students are evaluated by faculty hired through OEP, and are awarded CCV institutional credit.

3. The Education and Training Evaluation Service (ETES) is administered and chaired by OEP which contracts with faculty from all five colleges to assist in evaluating institutional training programs. Organizations requesting such a review must pay an evaluation fee for this service. Awarded credit becomes VSC transfer credit.

4. The “Assessment of Prior Learning” (APL) portfolio process, OEP’s most extensive program, is a semester-long endeavor. APL Candidates are usually identified by advisors or faculty. Please see specific details below.

• The “APL” Process

Students enroll in the 3-credit “Assessment of Prior Learning” course, offered through CCV each semester in six to eight locations, enrolling between 50 and 80 students per semester. College-level writing skills are a prerequisite for course registration as writing is a very important part of the process. In the course, students are guided to prepare a portfolio that identifies, articulates, and documents their prior, experience-based college-level learning.

Students explore past learning experiences and learn to translate experience into educational objectives. Working in small or large groups and individually with the instructor, students develop a portfolio in which they may request credit for specific areas of learning, e.g., computers, business, studio art, education, or criminal justice. There is no limit to the amount of credit a student may request. Students also explore educational options and define future educational goals. The average length of a portfolio is 75 pages.

All APL faculty are trained, supported and supervised by OEP. In the fifth week of the semester, the Assessment Coordinator visits all classes to answer questions, discuss documentation requirements, and to explain the portfolio evaluation process.

At the last class, students submit their completed portfolio to OEP. After reading and researching all portfolios, the Assessment Coordinator assembles a team of three or four appropriate faculty and usually one ‘generalist’ from colleges around Vermont (and occasionally a credentialed practitioner). Team members will read six to eight portfolios in their area of expertise and later convene as an “Advanced Standing Committee” (ASC), chaired by the Assessment Coordinator, to jointly deliberate on and award/refuse requested credits. Decisions are based on how well students articulated and documented their learning.

Almost all students request advanced credit to puruse or complete a degree. Once credit awards are determined, students receive a transcript from OEP stating awarded credits and titles of courses. OEP credit is considered VSC transfer credit. Students then transfer these credits to a degree granting institution that accepts experience-based college credit. Recognition of prior learning credit is governed by receiving institutions.

Most colleges in Vermont accept prior learning credit, and the APL process is occasionally offered at other colleges by request. Additionally, other colleges send their adult students to CCV to go through the APL process and transfer awarded credits back into their degree programs. Within the VSC, credits are easily transferred, of course subject to the school’s decision about fit and applicability to degree programs.

The average award through APL is 29 credits, with a request to award ratio of 70%. Average student age is 42.

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ASSESSING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR COLLEGE CREDIT

Evaluator Guidelines for Assessing Portfolios and Awarding Credit for Prior Experiential Learning

Prepared and written by the staff of the Office of External Programs

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VERMONT STATE COLLEGES

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Parts of the Portfolio

1. **The Committee Worksheet**: The first page(s) of the portfolio; here committee members make notes and comments in preparation for the Advanced Standing Committee Meeting.
2. **Cover Sheet**: Student information and birth date.
3. **Table of Contents**: Clearly marked sections with page numbers for easy reference.
4. **The Areas of Study**: The first substantial part of the portfolio. Varies in length from 5 to 50 pages. Defines the student’s learning and knowledge in detail through descriptive phrases called “learning components.” Specifies titles and credit requests.
5. **The Degree Plan**: Tentative outline of a student’s intended plan of study.
6. **The Essay**: The second considerable part of the portfolio, this is a first person narrative prepared by student. Varies in length from 8 to 15 pages.
7. **The Resume**: Chronology of professional and community based experiences covered in the portfolio.
8. **Primary and Secondary Documentation**: The third significant part of the portfolio. Verification of the knowledge claimed by the student. Primary documentation consists of transcripts of previous learning (official records of all the credits a student has earned or attempted to earn up to the time of assessment) and letters written by qualified third parties. Secondary documentation is considered certificates, licenses, in-service training, job evaluations, and the like. Secondary documentation alone cannot be used to verify learning -- it is meant to supplement primary documentation.
9. **The Bibliography**: Students are not required to complete a bibliography, but instructors and OEP staff strongly suggest they do. A bibliography, especially an annotated one, will give demonstrate the variety and extent of theory the student has read, and confirms that the student knows the standard texts in the disciplines.

The Assessment of Prior Learning Program at the Vermont State Colleges

College-equivalent learning can take place anywhere -- on the job, in the community, in the military, and as a result of independent study in personal and special interest areas.

Since 1975, through Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), over 5,000 Vermonters have been awarded college credits for learning acquired outside the classroom and have transferred these credits to complete degree programs at CCV, other VSC schools, and many other colleges in and outside of Vermont.

APL “graduates” can be found in colleges, work places and communities all over the state of Vermont and beyond. Students have used their credit awards for promotions, the attainment of degrees, certificates and personal goals, and to demonstrate that college level learning also occurs outside the classroom. The Vermont State Colleges’ prior learning assessment process is one of the oldest and most respected programs in the country.

> “Every time I serve on a committee I continue to be impressed with the quality and dedication of its members, and one thing we all seem to agree on is that it is a privilege to help these amazing individuals get the college credit they deserve.”
> G. Richard Eisele, Committee Member

To the Advanced Standing Committee Member:

Thank you for agreeing to serve on one of the Office of External Programs’ (OEP) “Advanced Standing Committees.” Your participation helps assure that our adult students have a fair and equitable opportunity to earn the maximum appropriate college credit for their articulated and documented prior learning. If you have served before, you know that work on an Advanced Standing Committee (ASC) can be personally rewarding and intellectually challenging. Reading about the lives of adult students and evaluating their knowledge and skills without the benefit of empirical measures often provides committee members with an experience that is refreshingly different from classroom teaching.

If you have never served before, you may feel somewhat overwhelmed at the number and size of the portfolios. Do not be too alarmed. We have prepared these guidelines to help you evaluate each portfolio in the most efficient and expedient manner possible. We also structure each committee so that it has a mix of new and experienced assessors. You will be working with experienced people who know how straightforward the process actually can be.

OEP does not expect you to be an expert on portfolio assessment. We do, however, need you to be well prepared. Please read each of your portfolios and these guidelines in their entirety before coming to the meeting. Then, use your best professional judgment in evaluating the validity of the students’ credit requests, and to record your observations and preliminary decisions on the worksheet at the front of each portfolio. Please don’t write on the pages of the portfolios themselves. When we convene, we will compare observations to arrive at a conclusion as a group.

During the meeting, the committee will decide whether to award credit or not. The group can change credit amounts, re-title areas of study, and combine and rearrange areas of study. The committee meeting will be facilitated by an OEP Coordinator of Assessment Services. The key to an effective meeting is convening committee members who have read their portfolios. The rest happens almost - but not exactly - like magic.

> “Serving on a committee gives you a window into the lives of some remarkable people and allows you the opportunity to give them recognition for the tremendous experience and knowledge they have gained.”
> Lori Stroutsos, Committee Member
The Concept of College-Level Learning

A good way to start an argument is to ask a group of educators what makes learning college level. The responses can range from "What I teach in my classes," to a laundry list of courses and disciplines. Many educators disagree on the criteria one should use in determining if learning is college level. Others agree on criteria, but disagree on how to apply these criteria to specific areas. Nonetheless, one's perception of "college-level learning" is central to the process of evaluating portfolios, which describe and document a student's prior and often experiential learning. Thus it may be helpful, to consider some of the OEP guidelines below.

Our approach to establishing standards for college-level learning is historical and conceptual. In defining college-level learning we look historically at what has been taught by colleges. In this way, we are able to isolate bodies of knowledge (or disciplines) common to the college curriculum. The humanities, the foreign languages, the social sciences and the arts are examples of disciplines in which Advanced Standing Committees regularly award credit.

From a historical perspective, we are also able to isolate various programs of professional preparation -- for example: business, education, social work, computer science -- in which colleges regularly offer courses, and for which our students are able to earn credit. Advanced Standing Committees often must consider credit requests with specific titles such as accounting, microcomputer applications, teaching methods, management and the like. In fact, more than forty percent of our students request credits in business-related areas. This makes sense when one considers that a major source of experiential learning is professional employment.

The historical perspective is an important one, but it is not the only approach to defining college-level learning. Our other approach is conceptual -- an attempt to isolate principles which define college-level quality and content. They help establish how theoretical or applied, how general or specific, and how process- or product-oriented college-level learning should be. They also help establish criteria to use in assessing college-level learning. A summary of five such principles is presented next.

Principles Which Help Define College-Level Learning

1. College-level learning should have a subject matter or knowledge base. This means that a student's knowledge must be associated (either directly or indirectly) with an academically recognized discipline or profession. The learning need not correspond with an already existing course; however, it should fit within the disciplines or professions which comprise the higher education curriculum.

2. College-level learning should have general applicability outside of the context in which it was acquired.

3. College-level learning should be describable and verifiable. Students should be able to demonstrate that they possess the knowledge they claim. In the context of a portfolio, this means students must describe and organize their learning into a logical area of study, and then document it through letters from qualified third parties.

4. College-level learning should be "above and beyond" the learning which is acquired through the experiences of day-to-day living. This makes some general learning not acceptable for the award of college credit. Students may only earn credit for knowledge acquired from, for example, marriage, parenting and certain other special interests if they can demonstrate that they have augmented it through analytical thinking, independent reading, the knowledge of general principles or theories, or other related learning experiences.

5. College-level learning ought to have both a theoretical and an applied dimension. Students need to know theories and principles: the why's and how's of knowledge. But we also want them to be able to relate these in a practical or applied way to their experiences at home, work or the community. Theory and application, therefore, are the complementary dimensions of college-level learning. When we meet as a committee, we will address these two dimensions by critically selecting the titles of areas of study for which we award credit. We will use qualifiers such as "Theory of," "Introduction to," and "Principles of" to describe more theoretical learning; we will reserve qualifiers such as "Practicum in," or "Applications of" for more applied learning outcomes.

Awarding Credit for College-Level Learning

As a member of the Advanced Standing Committee, you will be evaluating a student's experiential learning. When we use the phrase "experiential learning," we mean a method of learning as much as a type of learning. Let's take a moment to distinguish experiential learning from classroom instruction.

As a method of learning, classroom instruction has a number of important characteristics. First, classroom instruction takes place in a controlled environment. Second, it is generally preplanned and occurs with the benefit of pre-selected textbooks, web resources and reading materials. And third, the learning which results from it is immediately measured through quizzes, tests, and a variety of written papers and projects. To a limited extent, therefore, you have constant feedback on the quality of a student's learning when you teach a course in a classroom or on-line. These advantages allow you to effectively cover a wide range of subjects -- both theoretical and applied -- in the classroom. You may use textbooks and journal articles to address theories and principles, and use class discussions and case studies to help students understand the applications of their knowledge.

Experiential learning, on the other hand, does not always share these characteristics. Experiential learning is generally not pre-planned. It is not acquired in an educationally controlled setting, and cannot be measured easily in clock hours or Carnegie Units.
Moreover, when students learn experientially they do so without the direction and guidance of a faculty person, although a supervisor or mentor could have filled that role. Experiential learning comes also without the immediate feedback provided by tests and quizzes, but is likely to be measured or acknowledged through job evaluations, promotions, awards, and so on. Considering these differences, experiential learning is a valid way to learn. It occurs most often in conjunction with jobs, community work and the student’s avocational interests, and is the source of a broad range of knowledge.

Usually, before students of most subject areas can receive a degree, they are asked to prove, apply and test their knowledge through a practicum or field experience. Experiential learners often gain their education the other way around: gathering principles and theories deductively from application.

In evaluating portfolios, you should keep in mind that classroom instruction and experiential learning often result in the same or similar knowledge. Both are methods of learning which an individual may use to achieve an understanding of a subject area. Knowledge acquired from experiential learning or classroom instruction may be applied, hands-on or skill-based. It may also be very theoretical and abstract. For example, a student who has owned and operated a small business may have a sound understanding of the principles of accounting and small business management. This student may also have the savvy and common sense to apply these principles in a productive and profitable way. What the student knows, therefore, is generally of more significance than where this learning was acquired.

As a committee member, your challenge is to award the maximum appropriate credit without regard to the source of the student’s knowledge. In formulating your credit recommendations, you should analyze the content of the student’s learning, the student’s approach to organizing that content, and the legitimacy of the student’s documentation. Only secondarily will you be concerned with whether students acquired their knowledge through employment, non-credit coursework or some other source. Often, an APL student’s learning in a specific area will come from more than just one source of learning; for example, students might request credits in the area of “Leadership” for learning experiences gained through their job as a supervisor, their experience running a small business or non-profit agency, and their volunteer work as a boy scout troop leader. This also demonstrates the applicability of the student’s learning in a variety of situations -- a learning outcome that college faculty hope ‘traditional’ students will gain from learning in the classroom environment.

“Every time I read student portfolios I am in awe of the process and how well it works to accurately assess experiential learning.”
M. Donovan, APL Instructor and Committee Member

Some Guidelines
In formulating your credit recommendations, you may find it helpful to follow these guidelines:

A. Focus on the student’s description and organization of his/her learning as it appears on the Area of Study pages. Take into account the student's depth of knowledge and his/her complexity of understanding as demonstrated in the description and organization of the learning components.

B. Evaluate the student’s credit requests in light of the documentation in the portfolio. You may find some variation between the credit requested by the student and that supported by the documentation. Part of the committee process is to correct these discrepancies so that the final credit award is appropriate and valid.

C. Rely on your own experiences within higher education -- as a teacher, student and/or administrator -- in formulating your credit recommendations. Rely, too, on your knowledge of your profession and any avocational interests that can be helpful in the evaluation. ASC members are sometimes required to make judgments in areas in which they do not regularly teach. This is a necessary part of portfolio assessment because each portfolio contains credit requests in a wide range of areas. In composing each committee, OEP staff matches the backgrounds of four committee members to the requests in a group of usually six to eight portfolios. Typically, a committee can evaluate most -- if not all -- of these credit requests. Only rarely will a committee require outside assistance to complete the review process. This is possible because faculty members have the requisite knowledge to evaluate learning in a wider range of areas than they normally teach. As a rule, one of the committee members will be a generalist who has broad knowledge of a variety of curricular areas.

D. Use the standard of C level work (numerically equivalent to 70/100) or better in deciding whether or not to award credit to the student. Credit awarded by Advanced Standing Committees is assumed to be at a passing level. Or, ask yourself if the student would benefit from taking this course? Would the content of the course be repetitive learning for the student?

E. Consider a student’s previous credit awards when evaluating areas of study and learning components. Each student’s portfolio contains official transcripts indicating all the credits the student has earned or attempted to earn up to the time of assessment. You should examine these transcripts. The committee will not award credit in areas where credit has already been awarded (either through successfully completed courses, or other means). Credit for college-level learning, whether originating in the classroom or experientially, can only be granted once.

F. Modify, reorganize or regroup the student’s credit requests. Advanced Standing Committees may make any appropriate structural, organizational and/or language changes to the student’s areas of study. Committees may increase or decrease credit requests, re-title areas of study, eliminate or create areas of study, and regroup learning components. This is, in fact, the major activity of a committee meeting. Committee members do this to increase the accuracy and legitimacy of the final credit award. OEP, of course, advises students to anticipate these changes.

G. Record your recommendations on the worksheet on top of each portfolio. Do not write on the portfolio pages.
The Structure of Portfolios

Although the content of all portfolios is different, their structure is the same. OEP specifies this structure to ensure consistency among portfolios, and to be certain that Advanced Standing Committees have enough information to make judgments on credit awards. Students learn how to structure and assemble a portfolio while enrolled in a college course called "Assessment of Prior Learning." Students must pass this course to submit a portfolio to OEP. OEP monitors the curriculum of the course, and trains and supervises the instructors who teach it.

Despite these safeguards, some students still choose to structure portfolios in ways which are different from those we specify. This is, ultimately, the student's prerogative. If a portfolio is clearly deficient when you receive it, you should evaluate it nonetheless. We will present more specific guidelines for dealing with these situations when we convene the committee meeting.

The following is a description of some of the key parts of the portfolio:

1. **The Areas of Study** describe the student's learning using specific titles, credit requests, and **Learning Components**. Students use the **Learning Components** to communicate information about the breadth and depth of their knowledge to the committee. As a result, you will be able to assess the students' level of competency by analyzing these **Learning Components**. Be certain to consider both the content of the learning and the students' approach to organizing that content. After reviewing these components, you should have a better sense of how much credit to award and in which areas to award it.

2. **Learning Components** are written in the form of learning outcome statements which are similar to those prepared by instructors for courses. OEP encourages students to begin each learning component with a descriptive verb (e.g., a verb listed in Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives). We also encourage students to organize their learning components into three credit groups. This is done for your convenience; you may alter these credit requests as part of the review process.

3. The **Areas of Study** also reference each area to its source (e.g., employment, military training, community service), as well as to the appropriate documentation in the portfolio. You will work from the **Areas of Study** pages during the committee meeting. OEP records the committee's comments and final awards on the individual pages and returns these notes to the student.

4. The **Degree Plan** in the portfolio is a proposed plan of study, not an actual plan of study. OEP requires students to prepare a **Degree Plan** because we want them to gain a sense of how their credit might be applied at the associate or baccalaureate level. However, this plan has not been officially approved. It just shows that the student has determined, usually with his or her advisor, how their potential credit might fit into their future plan of study. When you review the portfolios, we advise you to pay little attention to the individual plans. They might change when the student receives his or her actual credit award. If you find a student's knowledge to be college level and documented as such, then you should award credit for it -- even if you perceive no direct relationship between the credit award and any future degree.

5. The **Portfolio Essay** is our students' opportunity to present their learning in the context of their other life experiences. While the **Areas of Study** represent a breaking down into components, the essay is a putting together. In it, students tell you the relevant stories behind what they learned: why they made the choices they made, whom they found to be effective teachers and motivators, how they reacted to new situations they found or created for themselves. OEP intends the essay to communicate a sense of the students' competency, personality and credibility -- in the words of the student. There is a considerable range to both the content and the quality of **Portfolio Essays**. We advise students to keep their essays from 7 to 15 pages in length and to omit extremely personal material from the essay. Students prepare several drafts of their essay in the assessment class. These drafts are critiqued by fellow students and the class instructor, but each student is free to decide what to ultimately include in the final version.

6. **Documentation** generally means letters written specifically for inclusion in the portfolio by qualified third parties. These letters must address the learning components and areas of study as outlined by the student. Students may request these letters from employers, co-workers, educators, con-sultants, members of their community, extension agents and anyone else who can provide a qualified, written verification of their knowledge. Documentors forward their letters directly to OEP. We then keep these originals in the student's file and send a photocopy to the student for inclusion in the portfolio. OEP staff regularly does background checks on the authenticity of documentation. Students must have acceptable Documentation for the Advanced Standing Committee to award credit. If there is no qualified Documentation, credit can not be awarded. When reading a portfolio, you may find it helpful to evaluate documentation against three criteria:

- a. The documentor's qualifications to verify the learning.
- b. The documentor's opportunity to have evaluated or observed the student's knowledge or skills.
- c. The documentor's actual evaluation of the learning, often based on specific learning components.

7. **A Bibliography** is optional, but strongly encouraged by OEP. OEP advises students to consider including a list of the important books, magazine articles, web sources or unpublished materials they have studied which relate directly to their credit requests.
Despite our efforts at creating a standard portfolio format, you might experience variation among individual portfolios. Please evaluate each portfolio you receive, even if it does not exactly follow the form described above. Once you’ve read a few portfolios, you will realize that the entire document is greater than the sum of its parts. It is possible to do an effective evaluation of a portfolio even if it varies a bit from our prescribed format.

"The portfolio works as a whole – all the individual parts combine to an impressive document that reflects students’ college-level learning."

Valerie Edwards, Committee Member

Questions
If you have specific questions while reading a portfolio, you should contact OEP directly. At no time should you attempt to contact the student. OEP wants students to know the consensus opinion of the Advanced Standing Committee, not the individual judgments of committee members. This eliminates any confusion on the part of students, and affords you the maximum opportunity to objectively evaluate the portfolio. If you need additional information, OEP will make every effort to obtain it for you prior to the committee meeting.

Confidentiality of Portfolios
APL portfolios are confidential. While they are in your possession, please do not share them with anyone in a way that would reveal the identity of the student or the student’s documentors. If you know one of the students, a potential conflict of interest might occur. Please be in touch with the OEP office immediately if this is the case. After the committee meeting, please do not reveal students’ names or details of their portfolios that could identify them, or details of the discussion about a specific student’s request.

A Few Final Thoughts
Our best advice to you is to read each portfolio only once. During and after your reading, record your comments on the worksheet at the front of the portfolio, and then come to the committee meeting ready to discuss and negotiate your recommendations. There is no best part of the portfolio to start with, nor one definitive approach to evaluation. Evaluate each portfolio in a manner that seems right for you, and rely, foremost, on your best professional judgment in making credit recommendations. We will work out the rest at the committee meeting.

The Advanced Standing Committee Meeting
OEP has specified the meeting time and location in the cover letter included with your portfolios. An ASC meeting usually lasts from four to five hours, although some can be shorter or longer. Usually, meetings start at 9:30 a.m. and are held in Montpelier at the OEP Office. They can last until about 3:00 p.m. (though often they end earlier than that.) We ask that you do not make other appointments that might interfere with the ASC meeting. Each evaluator’s presence is a crucial factor in the appropriate evaluation of a student’s credit requests.

If you cannot attend the meeting due to an emergency or a conflict, please let the OEP staff know immediately so another committee member might be found. If you know one of the students and perceive a potential conflict of interest, please call the OEP coordinator right away.

A representative from OEP will chair the meeting and assume responsibility for communicating the results to students. The chair will not participate in the final decision making but will guide the discussion, answer questions, and take notes for the student. ASC members’ names will be printed on the student’s transcript.

Again, thank you for your involvement. If you have any questions about the process, give us a call. We look forward to working with you and we thank you in advance for the time and effort you are extending on behalf of our students.

"Serving as a member of an Advanced Standing Committee is a wonderful chance to connect with colleagues from all over Vermont who share my interest in assessment for adult learners. Also, since I tell my APL students throughout the semester to “trust the process,” sitting on a committee is a way for me to confirm the genuine quality and validity of OEP's process.”

Mary Hulette, APL Instructor and Committee Member
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING</th>
<th>CLASSROOM LEARNING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starts with application, learning is for a special reason to meet a need</td>
<td>Starts with theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-paced, self-motivated</td>
<td>Instructor-paced, based on a syllabus and course outline or texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-structured (or structure is developed by the learner)</td>
<td>Structured (by instructor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on need or aspiration, interest</td>
<td>Might lack specific purpose for the individual student; could be a degree requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation specific</td>
<td>Broader view of the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More independence</td>
<td>More interaction (with other students, instructor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less threatening, usually does not include evaluation</td>
<td>Can be risky and intimidating because usually there is an evaluative component, tests, grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learned content fills need (on-the-job, personal interest)</td>
<td>Learned content might not fill personal need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is usually immediately applicable</td>
<td>Learning might become applicable in different circumstances or much later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally self-motivated</td>
<td>Often motivated by institutional educational requirements</td>
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Based on a discussion at the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning™
COURSE CHALLENGE THROUGH THE OFFICE OF EXTERNAL PROGRAMS

Course Challenge is an expanded service of the Office of External Programs (OEP). It allows CCV to assess the college level equivalent learning of students who wish to challenge specific courses in their degree programs. The process outlined below assesses a student's competence in a specific course area.

- The **Course Challenge** option is offered to CCV degree students who believe their prior experiential learning duplicates that of a specific CCV course for which essential objectives have been approved by the college.

- OEP created the course challenge review process to aid those students who have a limited amount of prior learning, and who need the results in a shorter period of time than is possible using the portfolio assessment (APL) approach. Course Challenge is not designed to replace portfolio assessment. The restrictions that apply to this special evaluation review process make it a good option for many, but not all students.

- Generally, students who have a significant amount of prior experiential learning or who are uncertain about their choice of degree should be advised into the regular assessment program.

- Students who are challenging courses in their degree programs and who are reasonably comfortable in the college environment are appropriate candidates for the course challenge review process.

**Eligibility Requirements**

To participate in the process, students must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Be enrolled as a degree/certificate student at CCV (or as a non-degree student who has obtained a waiver from the appropriate academic officer).
- Be challenging an existing CCV course with essential objectives.
- Be challenging courses that contribute toward their degree program.
- Have the prior approval of their advisor.

**Graduating Students**

- OEP recommends completing a Course Challenge before the final semester prior to graduation. This gives the student time to take the course should they fail the Course Challenge. The completion time for a Course Challenge is 60 days from the time an evaluator is hired by OEP.

- The absolute deadline to request a Course Challenge is February 1st prior to an expected June graduation.

**Cost To Students**

The cost to students is $175 for each course to be evaluated. This fee is based on the cost of evaluation, and is therefore, not refundable once OEP has contracted with an evaluator. The cost of the evaluation process is not dependent on the award of credit or advanced standing.

**The Course Challenge Process**

1) The student meets with his or her advisor to discuss if a Course Challenge is the best and appropriate option for the student. If this is the case, the advisor will fill out the necessary paperwork with the student and forward the information and the request to the Office of External Programs (OEP). A separate form must be completed, and
fee paid, for each course to be challenged. OEP does not restrict the number of courses that may be challenged through this process.

2) Advisors may recommend evaluators, but the final evaluator hiring decision is made by OEP staff. The advisor must approve and sign the Course Challenge request. The completed form and fee is then forwarded to the Office of External Programs.

3) If a third party agrees to pay the fee, and a check is not enclosed, the Request Form must be accompanied by a letter of commitment from the agency or employer responsible for paying the fee. OEP will bill the agency. Allow extra time in this case, as payment must be received before OEP hires an evaluator.

4) Students planning to pay for the Course Challenge out of their student accounts must use the “Authorization to Transfer Student Funds to OEP” form found in the Content Collection. Send the form to OEP (not CCVI).

5) Within four weeks OEP identifies and contracts with an evaluator to assess the student’s competence in a specified course area. OEP will inform this evaluator that he/she must (at a minimum) assess the student’s competency in the essential objectives of the course. OEP will notify the student of the name, address and phone number(s) of the evaluator(s). It is then the student’s responsibility to contact the evaluator and to arrange for the evaluation.

6) The student and the evaluator have sixty (60) days from the date of initial notification to complete the evaluation process. Extending the deadline must be negotiated with OEP. OEP will be available during that period to provide guidance and support to the evaluator. OEP will not, however, assist the student in preparing for any tests, papers or oral examination required as part of the evaluation process.

7) After completing the evaluation, the evaluator sends a report to OEP. This report states the name of the evaluator, describes his/her relevant qualification, summarizes the evaluation methodology used, and lists findings. The report compares the student’s knowledge with the essential competencies of the course being challenged, and notes any significant variation from them. The report also lists any other significant findings about the student’s general knowledge in the area being assessed. OEP examines the evaluator’s report to be sure it complies with all the requirements of OEP and the college. OEP will return unsatisfactory reports to evaluators for additional work. The information provided to OEP by the evaluator is used to determine whether the student’s demonstrated learning is equivalent to the objectives of the challenged course; credit is awarded if standards are met to the satisfaction of OEP.

8) OEP notifies the student, the student’s advisor and the College Registrar of its decision; related paperwork becomes a part of the student’s CCV academic record. This step will conclude OEP’s regular involvement in the process. The college (not OEP) is responsible for making the changes or notations on the student’s official record.

9) When the student uses the challenged course in his/her degree program or as a transfer course, the course is designated as a CCV course with the appropriate course number. The transcript will show the credit (but no grade) and will have a designated reference, such as, “Course Challenge.”

Student Appeals

Students who are not satisfied with the evaluation process may appeal the process to the Coordinator of Assessment Services at OEP. Students who are dissatisfied with the amount of credit awarded/not awarded based on the evaluation may appeal to the Academic Dean’s Office.

Participation by Other Colleges

Other Colleges may indicate any interest to participate in the process by sending a letter of intent to the Office of External Programs, with a copy of the letter sent to the Registrar of the participating college. The letter should designate an official at the college who will have primary responsibility for approving all Course Challenge requests. Colleges should send their letters of intent to Gabrielle Dietzel, Coordinator of Assessment Services, Office of External Programs, 32 College Street, Suite 201, Montpelier, Vermont 05602, or call the OEP office (802-828-4064) for more information.

Revised 8/2010
Our Guiding Principles for the Assessment of Prior Learning

A good way to start an argument is to ask a group of educators what makes learning college level. The responses can range from "What I teach in my classes!" to a laundry list of courses and disciplines. Many educators disagree on the criteria used to determine if learning is college level. Others agree on criteria, but disagree on how to apply these criteria to specific areas. Nonetheless, one's perception of "college-level learning" is central to the process of evaluating prior learning portfolios, which describe and document a student's prior and often experiential learning. As a basis for discussion, it may be helpful to consider some of the guidelines and methods used by OEP.

Our approach to establishing standards for college-level learning is historical and conceptual. We look at what has been taught by colleges, historically. In this way, we are able to isolate bodies of knowledge (or academic disciplines) common to the college curriculum. The humanities, technology, the social sciences and the visual arts are examples of disciplines in which we regularly award credit.

From this perspective, we are also able to isolate various programs of professional preparation -- for example: business, education, social work, computer science -- in which colleges regularly offer courses, and for which our students are also able to earn credit. We often consider credit requests with specific titles such as accounting, microcomputer applications, teaching methods, management, and the like. In fact, more than forty percent of our students request credits in business-related areas. This makes sense when one considers that a major and common source of experiential learning is professional employment.

The historical academic perspective is an important one, but it is not the only approach to defining college-level learning. Our second approach is conceptual - an attempt to isolate principles which define college-level quality and content. These principles help establish how theoretical or applied, how general or specific, and how process- or product-oriented college-level learning should be. Criteria to use in assessing such learning are established by using these principles. Consequently, we believe that college-level learning means that the learning is:

1. Describable (articulation)
2. Verifiable (documentation)
3. Applicable outside of the context in which it was learned (interdisciplinary)
4. Within the realm of a recognizable academic discipline
5. Inclusive of both theoretical and applied understanding of a subject area
6. And, finally: more than common knowledge

We also need to look at other standards and criteria in our consideration of student requests. We divide these into academic and administrative standards. We find the assessment standards put forth by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) particularly useful. These standards were articulated by Urban Whitaker in his book Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles & Procedures (1989) and were updated in the 2006 edition by Whitaker, Fiedler, and Marineau (see below). Both sets of standards are included here.

Academic Standards:

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject area, between theory and practical application.
4. Appropriate subject matter professional and academic experts must make the determination of competence levels and of credit awards.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.
2006 additions/updates: Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public. It should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.

**Administrative Standards:**

1. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
2. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provisions for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
3. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not be determined by the amount of credit awarded.
4. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
5. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

2006 additions/updates: For credit awards, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized.

Keeping these concepts in mind, we believe that we may award experiential learning credit if the student can demonstrate that his/her prior learning experiences are:

- equivalent to college-level learning
- a balance between theory and practice
- directly related to the degree program and requirements he/she is pursuing
- measurable

It is important for us to keep in mind what issues may arise for the registrar’s office, the student, and the advisor when dealing with experientially based transfer credit (which is what OEP provides). This means a consideration for standard course titles (appropriate for the level of the described learning) and credit units so that the experiential learning can be successfully transcribed and transferred. We value our close and collegial relationship with the registrar’s office.

When we begin our Advanced Standing Committee work, we review the fundamental tenets of our deliberations:

- Is the learning college level?
- Is it a duplication of previously awarded credit?
- Is it well articulated in the portfolio?
- Is it well documented in the portfolio?
- Does this area of study reflect a grade of “C” or better at the freshmen level? Or, in other words, would the student benefit from taking the class?

The committee may award or not award credit, re-title requested “Areas of Study”, change credit amounts, and combine and re-arrange Areas of Study. The committee is aware that awarded credit will have to be accepted by a receiving institution and that it has not ‘jurisdiction’ over acceptance policies of other schools. Also, OEP committees do not determine upper or lower levels (although “intermediate” or “advanced” in the course title may suggest upper level to a registrar) and does not assign course numbers; this will be determined by the receiving institution.

Committees work by consensus and are facilitated by a non-voting academic staff member, usually the Coordinator of Assessment Services (unless there is clear conflict of interest). The facilitator will take notes for the student on any credit award not given. Students will receive these notes as well as their transcripts (unofficial copies) within a week after the committee meeting.

An appeals process is in place and students are made aware of it during the Assessment of Prior Learning course.

Reference:

# Assessment of Prior Learning Options at the Vermont State Colleges

In 1975, the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) established the Office of External Programs (OEP) as an addition to its five-college system in order to conduct and facilitate the assessment of students’ prior, experiential college-level learning. OEP’s mission is to offer various assessment options, such as a portfolio process or course challenge, and to provide CLEP and DANTES testing. OEP is available to assist students enrolled at any of the state colleges as well as new students who might not yet have decided which college they will attend. OEP is located at and administratively linked with the Community College of Vermont and serves all five state colleges and their students.

OEP’s approach is based on the belief that learning is an ongoing, lifelong activity, that education is an empowering experience enabling adult students to acquire more control over their lives and that the source of learning is less important than the learning itself. For most adult students, prior learning assessment plays an important role in creating academic degree plans as well as clarifying educational options and professional goals. OEP also believes that students who were awarded prior learning credits gain confidence and confirmation as learners. The VSC designed OEP as a “one-stop” central place where adult students can choose several assessment options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTION</th>
<th>Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) Portfolio/Course</th>
<th>Course Challenge</th>
<th>CLEP &amp; DANTES Testing</th>
<th>ETES Evaluations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How it works</td>
<td>Students enroll in a semester-long 3 credit course, usually offered through the Community College of Vermont (due to its advantageous geographic locations). However, the course could be offered by any of the VSC schools as well as other organizations as an ‘in-house’ course. Students prepare a portfolio in which they articulate and document their college-level learning. Portfolios are then evaluated by faculty groups. Students pay 3-credit tuition for the course and an assessment fee.</td>
<td>Students may apply for a “challenge” of a specific course offered at their college. Student and advisor request the administration of this challenge to be handled by OEP staff. OEP hires a faculty evaluator who teaches the “challenged” course; faculty determines if the student demonstrates passing knowledge and recommends the award of credit.</td>
<td>Requested tests are provided, scheduled and administered at the OEP office in Montpelier. CLEP tests are available for about 40 academic subjects.</td>
<td>Organizations which provide in-house training (both non-profit and private) may request evaluation of such training. Teams of VSC faculty evaluate these programs for college-level equivalency and recommend credit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who should choose this option?</td>
<td>Students who have a great deal of professional/community experience; students who have a wide variety of college-level prior learning; students who might have attended or completed a non-accredited school which offered college-level learning; students who feel quite sure that they can gain at least 12–15 credits through the process.</td>
<td>Students in degree programs that include one or two specific courses for which a student believes s/he has prior, equivalent learning. (This option is best for students with no more than 3 such requests. Otherwise, APL might be a better option.)</td>
<td>Students with specific knowledge in an area where tests are offered.</td>
<td>Employees and professionals who might later transfer the recommended credit into degree programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special considerations</td>
<td>Knowledgeable and careful advising required by advisors, admissions counselors and other college staff as the process is very involved and labor-intensive. Students must have college-level writing skills in order to enroll in the APL course. OEP offers public APL information sessions and continuously communicates with student advisors.</td>
<td>Careful advising – advisors recommend and must sign off on the “challenge” request. Students pay $175 for each challenge; fee must be paid regardless of outcome.</td>
<td>Least expensive option, generally immediate results (other than the “English Composition with Essay” test).</td>
<td>Students should check with their employers – some students might not be aware that training they have participated in has already been evaluated for credit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Transfer credit awarded via a VSC transcript from OEP. Transcripts are sent to the school of the student’s choice. Students are not charged a separate fee for any awarded credit.</td>
<td>Institutional credit awarded by the college requesting the evaluation. Any VSC college may contract with OEP to administer course challenges.</td>
<td>Transfer credit from CLEP/DANTES is sent to the college specified by the student.</td>
<td>Transfer credit on a transcript from OEP.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Timeline: Thirty-Five Years of Prior Learning Assessment: 1973 to 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity/Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1973 (and earlier) | ♦ Commission on Non-Traditional Study  
♦ Office of External Degree Programs (ETS)  
♦ Preliminary meeting of Carnegie Corporation/ETS to discuss need for standardized process to assess non-classroom learning |
| 1974            | ♦ Ten task force institutions* and ETS launch CAEL Project (CAEL I) with Carnegie funding  
♦ Field research begins—54 institutions  
♦ 182 Institutions join CAEL in the first year  
♦ First CAEL National Conference to disseminate early research findings (214 attendees) |
| 1974 to 1977    | ♦ ETS-based CAEL Project (CAEL I)  
♦ Produced 27 publications (handbooks and guides for students and faculty; annotated bibliographies, *Principles of Good Practice in Experiential Learning* (Willingham) and 50+ working papers, institutional reports, and special project reports  
♦ Conducted 6 national conferences to disseminate research findings among the members  
♦ Conducted operational (implementation) models research (12 institutions)  
♦ Conducted Faculty Development Program (12 institutions)  
♦ 270 institutional members at end of CAEL I |
| 1977            | ♦ CAEL II operates independently of ETS  
♦ Incorporates as 501(c)(3) and relocates to Maryland with Morris Keeton as Executive Director |
| 1979            | ♦ American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), American Council on Education (ACE), and Council for Higher Education Accreditation endorse PLA and CAEL principles |
| 1978            | ♦ Kellogg-funded Institutional Development Program (IDP) launched by CAEL |
| 1981            | ♦ National PLA Survey conducted by CAEL resulting in the publication of *Wherever You Learned It: A Directory of Opportunities for Educational Credit* (McIntyre)—five regional volumes containing data from 530 institutions that had portfolio programs |
| 1982            | ♦ A collection of institutional models of student portfolios—*Creditable Portfolios: Dimensions in Diversity* (Rydeill) published by CAEL |
| 1984            | ♦ National PLA Survey conducted by CAEL; 1,493 institutions responded—552 (37 percent) indicated use of portfolio assessment method |
| 1985            | ♦ First edition of *Earn College Credit for What You Know* (Simosko) published by CAEL |

(continues)
Timeline: Thirty-Five Years of Prior Learning Assessment: 1973 to 2008 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity/Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1990 | ♦ Pamela Tate assumes presidency of CAEL; CAEL headquarters relocate to Chicago, Illinois  
♦ PLA remains at the core of CAEL's agenda while the organization expands outreach to, and services for, adult learners through workforce development programs |
| 1991 | ♦ National PLA survey conducted by CAEL resulting in the publication of *Prior Learning Assessment: Results of a Nationwide Institutional Survey* (Fugate and Chapman); 1,735 institutions responded  
♦ Second edition of *Earn College Credit for What You Know* (Lamdin) published by CAEL |
| 1996 | ♦ National PLA survey conducted by CAEL resulting in the publication of *Prior Learning Assessment: A Guidebook to American Institutional Practices* (Zucker, Johnson, and Flint); 1,181 institutions responded and indicated some PLA practices were in place at their institutions  
♦ Third edition of *Earn College Credit for What You Know* (Lamdin) published by CAEL |
| 2000 | ♦ CAEL launched on-line PLA verification program in collaboration with DePaul University |
| 2001 | ♦ The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, American Council on Education, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation reissued endorsement of PLA and CAEL standards |
| 2006 | ♦ Fourth edition of *Earn College Credit for What You Know* (Colvin) published by CAEL  
♦ Second edition of *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures* (Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker) published by CAEL  
♦ National survey of PLA policies and practices conducted by CAEL |

*The following ten task forces institutions together with ETS formed the first CAEL project. (Those shown in italics have portfolio samples in this book.)*

♦ Antioch College (now University)  
♦ Community College of Vermont  
♦ El Paso Community College  
♦ Empire State College  
♦ Florida International University  
♦ Framingham State College  
♦ Minnesota Metropolitan State College  
♦ New College, University of Alabama  
♦ San Francisco State College  
♦ Thomas A. Edison College