



Getting College Credit for Military Learning through PLA

The military provided you with top-notch training and unequalled learning experiences. Through something called **Prior Learning Assessment**, or **PLA**, that knowledge can translate into college credit. Prior learning is a term educators use to describe the learning you gain outside of school—such as the learning you’ve gained through formalized military training and other life experiences (including employment, travel, hobbies, civic activities, and volunteer service). PLA takes that knowledge and determines whether it can be converted into college credit. This helps expedite your degree—saving you tuition dollars and helping you get on your way more quickly.

No matter why you want to pursue a postsecondary education, selecting a school that recognizes the value of your military service and/or training through PLA can make a big difference as you work toward your educational goals. Even if you have earned GI Bill® educational benefits to help you, those benefits are limited and you need to use them wisely. PLA helps you make the most of your benefits!

Here’s an example: a research study showed earning 15 credits from PLA can save \$1,605 to \$6,000 on tuition costs! If you’re working toward a Bachelor’s degree, those PLA credits could save you between two months and ten months.

It’s important to keep in mind that PLA isn’t just one method or tool. Schools may offer some types of PLA and not others. It’s always worth talking to your school’s registrar at the outset to find out your school’s PLA offerings and guidelines for granting credit. To help familiarize you with how PLA works, we’ll walk through the following types of PLA:

- ★ **Transfer Guides for Military Training and Transcripts**
- ★ **Portfolio Assessments**
- ★ **Program Evaluations**
- ★ **Customized Exams and Standardized Testing**

In addition to relevant examples of veterans who have used PLA and important Action Steps for each type of PLA, at the end of the document, you’ll also find a handy PLA Checklist.

Transfer Guides for Military Training and Transcripts

Many schools have transfer guides that detail how your military training will transfer to their institutions. To determine transfer eligibility, the first thing you’ll need to do is provide the school an official transcript of your formal military training.

Many schools rely on recommendations developed by the American Council of Education (ACE) to determine which military training/occupations have learning outcomes equivalent to college level courses and can transfer to their institution for credit. The ACE Military Guide is a terrific resource for finding out (1) which military occupations and training courses should equate to postsecondary credit and (2) how many credits should be awarded for each. You can find ACE recommendations on official transcripts, or you can manually search.

Ryan Burkhart joined the Marines after high school, and served in the elite Marine Security Guard, where he was stationed in Austria and Canada. After leaving the Marines, he went back home to Kentucky, and enrolled at Northern Kentucky University (NKU), where the university’s faculty and staff helped Ryan figure out how he could turn what he learned from his military experience into academic credit. NKU reviewed Ryan’s military transcript using American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations and accepted 30 credits toward graduation. It helped him earn his degree in organizational leadership that much faster.

Action Steps:

- Order your transcripts. If you served in the Army, Navy, Marine or Coast Guard, your transcript is provided through the Joint Services Transcript and may be obtained at: <https://jst.doded.mil/official.html>. If you served in the Air Force you may order your transcript through the following link: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/barnes/ccaf/transcripts.asp>.
- Search the ACE Military Guide at <http://www2.acenet.edu/militaryguide/CourseSearch.cfm>. The following link may help you better understand the ACE credit recommendations: <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/Transfer-Guide-Understanding-Your-Military-Transcript-and-ACE-Credit-Recommendations.aspx>.

Portfolio Assessments

A portfolio is a written document you prepare that describes the knowledge and experiences you want assessed for college credit. Portfolio assessment is especially important for veterans who find that credit recommendations and standardized exams do not adequately capture all of their college-level learning.

Some schools offer portfolio assessment themselves, while others outsource this service. CAEL's PLA service is LearningCounts.org. LearningCounts™ is an easy-to-use online portfolio assessment service that helps you develop your PLA portfolio. It guides you through the process of identifying, documenting, and demonstrating your prior learning achieved through professional training, military service, and self-initiated experiences. The GI Bill® will reimburse for the assessment of the portfolios when you use LearningCounts.org.

Jason Wolfe joined the U.S. Navy right out of high school at age 18. He worked as an Aviation Boatswain Mate (ABE), launching aircraft on ship flight decks. After his military discharge, Jason began working on his college degree. He learned from his advisor at Indiana Tech that he could use CAEL's prior learning assessment service, LearningCounts.org, to get credit towards both an A.A. and a B.A. in Industrial and Manufacturing Engineering. Jason earned 24 credits, the equivalent of eight college-level courses, through portfolio assessment. For each class for which he earned credit, he wrote a five- to ten-page paper and attached additional evidence such as supporting documentation, certificates he had earned, and reference letters from peers. Each paper demonstrated his grasp of the subject matter, its theoretical principles, and how he applied those principles to resolving real-life engineering issues. As soon as the credits came through, he received his Associate's degree, and two months later, he earned his Bachelor's.

Action step:

- To start figuring out the areas of your knowledge and expertise that may align with college courses and could be evaluated for college credit, visit the Learning Counts College Credit Predictor tool: <http://www.learningcounts.org/predictor/>.

Program Evaluations

If you already have licenses or certifications, or you've completed non-collegiate instructional programs that are occupational specific, you can request an evaluation of the associated coursework and career activities for academic credit. Even if you are pursuing education in a different field, those experiences and credentials could possibly count toward your education and be very important to your future career.

Veterans who received specialized training in the military are often frustrated to discover that

Michelle Mondia has worked as a medic in the Air Force National Guard for the past 18 years. Although she received advanced level medic training in the military, it didn't equate to a civilian degree. Michelle found a new program at Joliet Junior College. The first of a larger statewide initiative, JJC's program allows veterans who have completed the Medical Education and Training Campus (METC) Basic Medical Technician Corpsman Program within the last five years to earn certificates as licensed practical nurses (LPNs)—and to do so in as little as eight weeks. Upon successful completion of the certificate, veterans will be prepared to sit for the NCLEX-PN examination to become an LPN.

in order to perform the same job in the civilian sector, they must get additional licensure or certification, or even a college degree. This is why program evaluations are so important for veterans. The state of Illinois has realized that many state occupational requirements are out-of-sync with military training. Illinois has begun reviewing occupations that require licensure or certification in the civilian world, with an eye toward how those requirements correspond to military training and experience. Ask if your school has an accelerated program based on these evaluations.

Action steps:

- To find more information about the state of Illinois' ongoing process of certification review, and possible outcomes for your military specialty, please visit: <http://www2.illinois.gov/veterans/programs/Pages/StateLicensesMilitaryTraining.aspx>.
- To verify your military certifications, look on the Verification of Military Experience and Training (VMET) DD2586, which was provided to you at time of your separation (<https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/tgps/>).

Customized Exams and Standardized Testing

Some schools offer customized exams to verify college-level learning achievement. These may be final exams of current courses, or "Challenge Exams," which schools develop to assess the general disciplinary knowledge and skill of an incoming student with prior learning.

Your school also may require you to take standardized tests as part of PLA. The idea is that these tests can assess general knowledge and skills that equate to college level learning. Testing can be costly, so the Department of Veterans Affairs approves certain "National Tests" under the GI Bill® and will reimburse for certain testing fees. The specific tests you have to take depends upon the school. Some examples of the more widely accepted standardized exams are:

- College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams <http://clep.collegeboard.org/>
- UExcel – Excelsior College Exams <http://www.excelsior.edu/exams/uexcel-home>
- The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST Exams) http://getcollegecredit.com/test_takers

Action Step:

- After you find out which tests your school requires, see if you can get reimbursed through the GI Bill. The following link provides more information on the eligible tests: http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/national_testing.asp.

A Note About PLA Credits:

All schools do not determine PLA credits the same. Even if your top choices in schools offer the same types of PLA, their policies and procedures for awarding college credit for prior learning may be vastly different. Each school also has its own procedures and restrictions. For example, they may limit the amount of institutional credit you can get from PLA, or credit may be restricted for use toward program electives. Some schools will only review transcripts for credit after you have enrolled, or even after you have successfully completed one full term of study.

You should take time to understand the policies in place at your school of choice and how they impact your educational path. The more you know and understand about PLA and your school's policies on PLA, the better able you are to maximize your military training and skills.

A Note About GI Bill® Eligibility:

In order to certify college courses for the GI Bill® funding, schools must ensure that a student veteran does not already have that course on their official transcripts. As well, the VA will only pay for courses that are required for your current degree plan. Show your transcripts to your college academic advisor and ask which courses are required to complete your degree so that you maintain GI Bill® entitlement and eligibility.

Here is a quick PLA Checklist to help you become a better-informed consumer.

Steps to Earn Academic Credit for your Military Learning

- Ask at your school's *Registrar's Office* or *Assessment and Testing Office* what types of PLA methods are accepted and obtain a list of the school's required action steps to obtain credit and their policies on PLA.
- Order your records to be delivered to your new school.
- Schedule an appointment and meet with your academic advisor. Bring copies of all your prior learning records, including your Joint Services Transcript, so that they can help you determine the degree or program of study and course schedule that corresponds with your intended career path.
- Take ownership of your academic path. Remember to review the school's degree plan and course descriptions, as well as your previous learning records. Request that the institution help you get academic credit for your previous learning.

SOURCE: GI Bill® is a registered trademark of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More information about education benefits offered by VA is available at the official U.S. government web site at <http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill>.



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