

# USM GUIDELINES for the PLA GRADUATE ACADEMIC PORTFOLIO

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Students considering the graduate academic portfolio process:

First, read through the following instructions.

Then, put together pertinent information.

Last, call 207-780-4663 for an appointment, or contact:

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## *To create the graduate academic portfolio:*

1. Students may work independently, first meeting with Ashley Collins, then using this guide to write the portfolio, and finally meeting with the appropriate professor who will mentor your portfolio process.
2. When you have completed the graduate portfolio, meet once more with your portfolio professor before submitting it for final evaluation.



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## USM GUIDELINES for the PLA GRADUATE ACADEMIC PORTFOLIO

A *graduate-level* academic portfolio submitted to the Office for Prior Learning at the University of Southern Maine is a collection of evidence: "a formal communication presented by the student to the university as a part of a petition requesting credit or recognition for learning outside the college classroom. The [academic] portfolio makes its case by identifying [*graduate-level*] learning clearly and succinctly, so that faculty can use it, alone or in combination with other evidence, as the basis for their evaluation"<sup>1</sup> for course-equivalency toward a degree.

Construction of a graduate academic portfolio is not simply an account of your prior learning. It is in and of itself, a learning process. As John Dewey long argued, meaningful learning involves both active and reflective processes. The process of building a graduate academic portfolio offers the student an opportunity to recapitulate key experiences, analyze and interpret them, and articulate and critique how these experiences contributed to what they have learned. The portfolio process has the potential to significantly deepen understanding of our experiences and their influence on who we are and how we live our lives.

The challenge of a *graduate* academic portfolio is to bring experiences together with applicable theories and concepts from the academic disciplines, while tailoring it appropriately to the graduate level. In doing so, students can become ever keener observers of their own experiences, while also synthesizing more conceptually abstract material. Well-written *graduate* academic portfolios provide ample evidence of a student's prior knowledge and learning competencies, for which they intend to receive graduate credit.

Learning competencies for a graduate academic portfolio are knowledge, abilities, and/or skills that students have acquired through their prior learning that relate to *graduate-level* content. In the portfolio process, graduate students must provide convincing documentation, which is the evidence, written or performed, substantiating that knowledge, skills, and abilities have indeed been learned from their prior experience(s).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the written content of the portfolio must meet *graduate-level* standards, as articulated on the following pages, including the following components, and addressing the following issues:

- 1) **TITLE SHEET.** Include your name, address, date of submission, phone number, and e-mail address.
- 2) **TABLE OF CONTENTS.** Include a one-page reference to all subsequent sections of your portfolio by page

number.

- 3) **LETTER OF INTENT.** Write a letter (to be placed in the beginning of the portfolio) to the Office of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) which explicitly states the reasons for submitting your portfolio and the *graduate-level* outcomes which you expect to emerge. The letter of intent will include the following:
  - Learning outcomes you intend to prove
  - Area(s) of expertise you intend to demonstrate
  - Number of credits you are hoping to earn
  - Your starting date
  - Name of your graduate academic portfolio mentor/evaluator
  - Type of credit you will be pursuing
- 4) **CURRENT RÉSUMÉ.** Update your résumé of one or two pages, to include a synopsis of your educational background and work history. Include relevant professional memberships, awards, commendations, publications, and supplemental experience or achievements (i.e. Speak Fluent French; or Certificate in Court Mediation).
- 5) **UNOFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT.** Submit an unofficial USM transcript along with transcripts from other institutions you have attended -- both graduate and undergraduate.
- 6) **SYLLABUS FOR COURSE(S).** Your portfolio is course-specific and therefore must include a syllabus for each course pertaining to your portfolio content. A syllabus will serve as the basis for your *graduate* academic portfolio goals.
- 7) **COMPETENCIES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES.** The learning outcomes and competencies are the heart of your presentation. *Graduate* portfolios will reflect the syllabus of the targeted graduate course. This section will most directly influence the credit your academic portfolio will earn. The competencies and learning outcomes also constitute the most challenging part of your academic portfolio to write. Your competencies will reflect the natural, logical, and expected outcomes of your experiences.

In this section, you will give a description (with documentation) of the context in which your knowledge was gained. You will analyze, trace, and document your previous experiences, relating them to the knowledge and skills required by the target *graduate* discipline or course of your portfolio. This section will include specific details and insight from your past experiences and make systematic, logical connections to the theories and concepts of the *graduate-level* discipline/course in which you seek credit.

To repeat in different words: this section of the portfolio requires critical reflection. It asks you to use your ability to synthesize the meaning and impact of your previous experience. At the same time you are being asked to connect that meaning and impact to the requirements and criteria of the

*graduate* course which credit you seek. You will need an awareness and understanding that it is *you* who is responsible for presenting your learning outcomes and competencies to the university in a narrative with documentation so strong and compelling that there is no doubt about the *graduate* credit you will earn in the academic portfolio.

### ***Length***

The length of this section may vary from five to fifteen pages, depending on the type and number of credits you are seeking. Factors which may affect length include: subject area, quantity and type of documentation, and the theoretical complexity of your knowledge on the subject. Using specific detail and personal insight in this section is likely to develop a stronger case and earn you a maximum number of credits.

### ***To Process Knowledge***

You must know how to:

- o Analyze the components,
- o Distinguish crucial information from the trivial,
- o Associate new information with stored facts,
- o Integrate information from many sources to solve problems,
- o Gain new awareness,
- o Reflect on the applicability of your learned outcomes and competencies not only to self, but also to the world.

### ***To Relate your Graduate-level Learning***

Describe your graduate-level learning as a synergistic interplay of your post-secondary experiences with your narrative of the learning and problem-solving that has occurred. These synergies act as springboards for:

- o A conceptualization process to intuitively happen. This conceptualization leads to ....
- o ...a reflection process, internalized and churned into...
- o ...conscious *graduate-level* knowledge, which through thorough analysis and critical thinking, can be...
- o generalized to new learning situations, and ...
- o ...the cycle starts again. <sup>3</sup>

In what context did you acquire your college-level knowledge? How will you relate it to the discipline in which you seek credit? Tell us *how* you learned rather than *what*. Which skills, abilities, behaviors, values, and attitudes (intentional or not) did you use to discover core competencies embedded in your experiences?

**To Express Learning Competencies** (See also page 65)

Cognitive skills which will aid in expressing your learning competencies are:

- o The ability to see patterns and connections in diverse information.
- o The ability to organize and communicate these relationships.
- o The ability to conceptualize many sides of a controversial issue, to understand the underlying issues and differing perspectives, and to effectively resolve informational conflict.
- o The ability to learn from your experiences – you should be able to generate behavioral alternatives, to analyze a particular behavior in the context of another's behavior, to determine the complexity and multi-dimensionality of intellect, to change or open your mind.

**To Write a Successful Portfolio Narrative**

Your narrative, to be successful and to earn the maximum credit, may describe your learning competencies as those which:

- o Describe your knowledge of the subject;
- o Specify when, where, and how you acquired the knowledge;
- o Reflect your own strengths and weaknesses in context of these experiences;
- o Relate your experiences to specific course expectations and theories which have specific learning outcomes (which may offer equivalency credits);
- o Have specific documentation;
- o Elaborate upon the relationships between your documentation and the learning competencies you introduce and identify;
- o Connect to present experience and future goals.

**The Office for Prior Learning Assessment encourages students to submit a rough draft of Section 7, Competencies and Learning Outcomes, so that the academic portfolio evaluator can provide useful feedback and comments prior to the final portfolio submission.**

8) **DOCUMENTATION.** The material which you submit to prove your claims of *graduate-level* learning outcomes and competencies is called documentation. Documentation is the skeleton, the supporting foundation of your *graduate* academic portfolio and must specifically be identified with each learning and outcome competency.

**Effective documentation:**

- o Provides direct evidence and a coherent account of your competencies and *graduate-level* learning outcomes;
- o Supports your narrative, specifically including learning outcomes and their contexts;
- o Accounts for the significance of your learning in terms of life goals and disciplinary knowledge.

Evidence may include audio or video cassettes, CD's, DVD's, candidate-created websites, photographs, and written evidence, such as licenses, certificates, and other examples (see next page). Your documentation should be specifically noted in your text as you discuss each learning competency and

outcome. Organize and edit your documentation carefully to that request.

**Examples of documentation include, but are not limited to:**

- o Job descriptions
- o Awards, certificates, letters, references, or job verifications
- o Diplomas for previous degrees
- o Licenses granted by state or national agencies
- o Scores on licensing exams
- o Personnel evaluations
- o Evidence of promotion
- o Memberships in professional trade organizations (showing also their requirements for membership)
- o Newspaper or magazine clippings demonstrating evidence of your experiences, or relating directly to you or your company
- o Examples of written or artistic work
- o Demonstration of dance, artistic or oral performance, or instruction on audio or video cassette, CD, DVD, candidate-created website, or photographs
- o Evidence of adopted suggestions or outcomes
- o Verification of completed course, workshops, seminars, and other educational events

9) ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY. At the conclusion of your academic portfolio, include a list and brief description of all the books, articles, pamphlets, and other sources, electronic or in print, to which you referred. Use standard MLA, Chicago Style, or APA format and conventions. This list will strengthen the theoretical foundation of your learning and make your presentation more compelling.

**Please note: Course-specific graduate academic portfolios will usually require section 9. Check with your graduate academic portfolio evaluator before writing section 9 to be sure it is needed.**

10) EVALUATION.

**Criteria by Which You May be Evaluated**

Your *graduate* academic portfolio evaluator may consider the following criteria:

- o Your ability to state and explain learning competencies, as you also include specific details and insights;
- o Your facility to trace and document meaning in performance and behavior;
- o Your ability to describe and analyze the context in which your *graduate-level* learning competencies and outcomes were developed;
- o Your ability to interpret, analyze, and transfer knowledge, learning competencies, outcomes, and personal attributes into leadership roles;
- o Your ability to synthesize data and experiential situations for use in problem-solving and decision-making areas;
- o Your ability to relate professional knowledge and/or core competencies embedded in your experiences to concepts, theories, and research pertaining to the relevant *graduate* discipline of your academic portfolio.
- o Your ability to document each competency and learning outcome.
- o Your ability to demonstrate *graduate-level* competency in writing.

**Personal Qualities Which May Indicate Measurable Abilities**

Several personal qualities, generally more subtly present among the competencies, may also indicate measurable abilities:

- o Personal and professional maturity
- o Interpersonal communication
- o Problem-solving abilities
- o Motivation
- o Organizational skills
- o Leadership abilities
- o Role-modeling for new learning
- o Teaching or facilitation skills
- o Empathy
- o Judgment about and/or discrimination of options

11) Procedural Steps Which May Help in Your Academic Portfolio Preparation.

**a) Discover.**

- Make an appointment with Joyce Lapping (207- 780- 4663) prior to starting any graduate-level academic portfolio to sort the details and procedures for the process, and to establish a graduate professor for your portfolio.
- List the competencies and graduate-level outcomes you believe you can support with documentation.
- List the course(s) which may best match your *graduate-level* learning competencies and experience.

**b) Pre-write.**

- Write a narrative (unless directed not to do so) to remind you and to explain to your evaluator the sources of your *graduate-level* competencies and learning outcomes.
- Gather supporting documentation which you will specifically key to each outcome.
- Key each learning outcome and competency directly to the outcomes of the syllabus (syllabi) you submit.

**c) Organize and Submit.**

- Organize the narrative and accompanying documentation.
- Write and edit.
- Complete and submit this preliminary draft to your portfolio professor for suggestions and edits.
- Complete and submit a finalized portfolio (if necessary).

12) PRESENTATION DETAILS. Major sections of the academic portfolio should be separated by tabbed inserts. In order to enable the evaluator to provide you with feedback, please do not put the résumé, personal statement, or learning competency sections in plastic. You may use plastic for the documentation section, especially if you are using original certificates, letters, or similar information that you want to protect.

13) PORTFOLIO FEES. Portfolio candidates pay an evaluation fee of \$75 at the time of registration. Students who do not complete their portfolios within the calendar year from the date of registration will begin the process anew, with new Registration and Evaluation Fee Forms, and another evaluation fee of \$75.

Once portfolio evaluators have completed their process and have notified The Office for Prior Learning Assessment, but before any credits are posted to a USM transcript, students pay a credit fee of \$100 per credit hour.

Fees for the academic portfolio must be accompanied by the appropriate form (see the PLA website at: [www.usm.maine.edu/pla](http://www.usm.maine.edu/pla)), and may be mailed or brought to: Portfolio Assessment, Office for Prior Learning Assessment, 85 Bedford Street, 247 Luther Bonney Hall, P.O. Box 9300, Portland, Maine 04104-9300.

#### 14) Academic Portfolio Timeline.

##### One Calendar-Year Timeline.

Below is a **one-year timeline** for Graduate Academic Portfolio submission dates. Note that the timeline begins with a meeting with the director of PLA, the submission of your Registration Form, and the payment of the \$75 evaluation fee. **All three must occur before the timeline begins.**

The student will have one calendar year from the date on the Registration Form in which to prepare and submit the Graduate Academic Portfolio. If the student fails to submit the portfolio within that one-year period, the student will forfeit the evaluation fee, and will have to resubmit a new Registration Form and an additional evaluation fee to begin the process again.

**Week 1:** **First Meeting.** Meet with either the Director of PLA, or your assigned *graduate* portfolio evaluator. Discuss your plan for completing the Graduate Academic Portfolio process.

**Week 2:** **Registration Form.** The registration form is issued to the student, with copies sent to the advisor, the Director of Prior Learning Assessment, and the chair of the graduate department in which the academic portfolio credit is sought. (No action is required of the chair, though they must be informed.)

With this form, and the payment of the \$75 Evaluation Fee at the time the Registration Form is submitted, the student is officially asked to begin the *graduate* academic portfolio. The one calendar-year timeline for submission starts with the date on this registration.

**Week 4:** **Letter of Intent.** Draft and submit a Letter of Intent, to be placed in the beginning of your graduate academic portfolio, which informs the evaluator (or mentoring professor) about your intention to earn college credit through your academic portfolio and explains your plan to demonstrate your prior knowledge.

**Week 7:** **Résumé, Transcript, and Syllabus.** Submit your current résumé to the evaluator. Include your educational and military background along with the usual employment history. Also submit an unofficial transcript for each educational institution attended. Submit a syllabus (required for course-specific portfolios) for each course covered in your portfolio.

**Week 9:** **Title Page.** Submit a draft of your title page which includes personal data, subject area working title, area of degree plan for which this academic portfolio is being submitted, type of

presentation (performance, art examples, document, *et cetera*), date, and signature of the student.

**Week 27:** Competencies and Outcomes. You are submitting a course-specific portfolio; base your discussion on the syllabus(i) you are submitting, discussing the *graduate-level* competencies and outcomes of your learning achievements, which occurred outside the traditional classroom.

**Remember that credit is given for the learning and not the experience.**

**Week 30:** Documentation. Collect and label your documentation for your competencies and outcomes.

**Week 32:** Annotated Bibliography. Add an annotated bibliography to your *graduate* portfolio.

**Week 34:** Completed Copy. The completed copy is submitted for evaluation. Please expect at least four weeks before the evaluation is complete. Your evaluator will complete evaluation and transcription forms and submit them to PLA. Upon successful completion of the portfolio evaluation, you will be assessed per *graduate* credit hour for your credits to be posted to your USM academic transcript.

#### *One-semester timeline.*

Below is a one-semester timeline for the Graduate Academic Portfolio submission dates. Note that the timeline begins with a meeting with your evaluator, or the director of PLA, the submission of your Registration Form, and the payment of the \$75 evaluation fee. ***All three must occur before the timeline begins.***

The student will have one semester from the date on the Registration Form in which to prepare and submit the Graduate Academic Portfolio. If the student fails to submit the portfolio within that one-semester period, the student will forfeit the evaluation fee, and will have to resubmit a new Registration Form and an additional evaluation fee to begin the process again.

**Week 1:** First Meeting. Meet with either the Director of PLA, or your assigned *graduate* portfolio evaluator. Discuss your plan for completing the Graduate Academic Portfolio process.

**A Registration Form** is issued to the student, with copies sent to the advisor, the Director of Prior Learning Assessment, and the chair of the graduate department in which the academic portfolio credit is sought. (No action is required of the chair, though they must be informed.)

With this form, and the payment of the \$75 Evaluation Fee at the time the Registration Form is submitted, the student is officially asked to begin the *graduate* academic portfolio. The one-semester timeline for submission starts with the date on this registration.

**Week 2:** Letter of Intent. Draft and submit a Letter of Intent, to be placed in the beginning of your *graduate* academic portfolio, which informs the evaluator (or mentoring professor) about your intention to earn college credit through your academic portfolio and explains your plan to demonstrate your prior knowledge.

- Week 4:** **Résumé, Transcript, and Syllabus.** Submit your current résumé to your evaluator. Include your educational and military background along with the usual employment history. Also submit an unofficial transcript for each educational institution attended. Submit a syllabus (required for course-specific portfolios) for each course covered in your portfolio.
- Week 5:** **Title Page.** Submit a draft of your title page which includes personal data, subject area working title, area of degree plan for which this academic portfolio is being submitted, type of presentation (performance, art examples, document, *et cetera*), date, and signature of the student.
- Week 12:** **Competencies and Outcomes.** You are submitting a course-specific portfolio; base your discussion on the syllabus(i) you are submitting, discussing the *graduate-level* competencies and outcomes of your learning achievements, which occurred outside the traditional classroom.
- Remember that credit is given for the learning and not the experience.***
- Week 14:** **Documentation.** Collect and label your documentation for your competencies and outcomes.
- Week 15:** **Annotated Bibliography.** Add an annotated bibliography to your *graduate* portfolio.
- Week 16:** **Completed Copy.** The completed copy is submitted for evaluation. Please expect at least four weeks before the evaluation is complete. Your evaluator will complete evaluation and transcription forms and submit them to PLA. Upon successful completion of the portfolio evaluation, you will be assessed per *graduate* credit hour for your credits to be posted to your USM transcript.

Once the draft has been submitted to your graduate evaluator, and you have received comments, you have one semester to hand in a final copy for evaluation. If more time is needed, please put your intentions in writing.

## Competence-Based Academic Portfolios

PLA evaluators use a competence-based method to assess academic portfolio credits. According to Judith Wertheim, Vice President of Higher Education Services, The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), competence-based learning differs from course-based learning as follows:

- *Course-based assessment* measures what a student knows or is able to do within a classroom and under the guideline of a professor, in alignment with an existing course.<sup>4</sup>
- *Competence-based assessment* measures what a student is able to do based on specific knowledge within a certain context.<sup>4</sup>

“Competencies” are personal characteristics or knowledge that an individual may develop through life experiences. Students are expected to demonstrate and verify these competencies and learning outcomes in academic disciplines in order to earn academic credit. *It is the context in which the competency is used rather than the competency itself which creates college credit.* The following list may help you identify various categories of competencies.

**Communication:** Effectively listen, send, and respond to messages from a variety of audiences.

- SPEAK – Effectively articulate your thoughts orally
- WRITE – Form clear and concise written thoughts
- LISTEN – Hear with thoughtful and objective attention, listen actively, and paraphrase

**Critical Thinking:** Effectively analyze problems, ideas, and situations.

- MAKE DECISIONS – Arrive at solutions that end uncertainty and dispute
- PROBLEM SOLVE – Develop solutions
- THINK CRITICALLY- Think outside the box, use your mind to theorize, analyze, intend, reflect, reconsider, and remember
- THINK FORWARD – Anticipate, assess needs
- REASON – Form conclusions, inferences, and judgments
- IDENTIFY ISSUES – Apply criteria, analyze, and interpret

**Flexibility and Creativity:** Effectively produce innovative ideas, design, and methods for new and/or existing situations, events, and procedures as well as artistic expression.

- CREATE – Be original and expressive
- INNOVATE – Solve problems in unique ways
- ADAPT – Accommodate multiple demands and see alternative courses of action
- CONCEPTUALIZE – Derive ideas from inferences

**Information Management:** Effectively command the barrage of information and data that presents itself daily.

- SYNTHESIZE – Organize facts, concepts, and principles
- CATALOG - Compile, rank, and itemize information
- MANIPULATE INFORMATION – Evaluate against appropriate standards
- E-KNOWLEDGE – Understand and implement electronic and computerized concepts
- SORT – Classify and categorize data and objectives

**Interpersonal and Human Relations:** Effectively interact with others.

- NETWORK – Develop interactions with peers, supervisors, and subordinates
- BE A TEAM PLAYER – Encourage and appreciate contributions of others
- USE DIPLOMACY – Negotiate without arousing hostility as you deal with others

**Management and Administration:** Effectively manage, handle, and direct places, units, events, and/or situations.

- LEAD – Effectively oversee and direct people
- MOTIVATE – inspire others
- DELEGATE – Identify and select people for tasks
- BUDGET – Allocate assets
- CONDUCT MEETINGS – Lead, negotiate, and mediate
- PRESENT – Consider learning styles; use various media

**Personal Development:** Effectively invent and mature self with the following characteristics:

- MOTIVATED – Go beyond the expected
- COMMITTED - Decide for the common good
- INDEPENDENT - Work without guidance
- CONFIDENT – Have a positive personal attitude
- ENERGETIC – Display enthusiasm
- KNOWLEDGEABLE – Proficient in a field of study

**Planning and Organization:** Effectively manage time, energy, and resources.

- VISUALIZE – Predict future trends and patterns
- INITIATE – Implement projects and ideas
- SCHEDULE – Set and reach goals
- PRIORITIZE - Arrange according to importance
- ACCOUNT FOR AND ASSESS - Evaluate plans or decisions, and follow through
- DIMENSIONAL INSIGHT – Illustrate, display, and create

**Research and investigation:** Effectively seek and utilize information.

- IDENTIFY – Pinpoint problems, needs, and solutions
- DESIGN EXPERIMENTS – Test and validate data

- USE TECHNOLOGY – Know and use a variety of appropriate resources
- EVALUATE – Develop questionnaires and models

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, 2006, 191 and page 84, Lamdin, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Wood, Diane R. Former Associate Professor of Leadership, Lewiston-Auburn College.

<sup>3</sup> Based on “Career Services and Professional Life Development Transferrable Skills,” USM and the work of Alverno College, Wisconsin.

<sup>4</sup> Wertheim, Judith, Catherine Marienau, and Gretchen Wilbur. “Inroads to Quality and Accountability in Competence-based Assessment,” *CAEL: The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*. Podcast. 6 February 2013.