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## Guide for Portfolio Preparation

## Liberal Studies Program

The Liberal Studies Program, established over 40 years ago at Framingham State University, acknowledges implicitly that learning of an academic nature can take place outside the traditional classroom and that college credit can be awarded for prior learning if that learning can be demonstrated by means of careful documentation.

Students considering preparation of a Prior Learning Assessment Portfolio should first consult with their appropriate Liberal Studies advisor to discuss their plans.

Each student should begin his or her Portfolio with an essay of approximately 750-1,000 words giving examples of subjects and skills learned as a result of the experiences documented.

Students should address these two key questions:

- What knowledge did you gain through this experience?
- What skills did you learn that you did not possess prior to this experience? Alternatively, what skills did you develop over the course of this experience?

As much as possible, students should use the current FSU course catalog to link their prior learning experiences to material covered in specific academic courses. For example, a self-taught artist might possess the skills learned in ARTS 200, Drawing Fundamentals. A business owner might well have learned by experience much of the material covered in BADM 215, Legal Environment of Business.

The documented prior learning experiences must be presented in an organized portfolio that will then be assessed by members of the Liberal Studies committee. Documents must be placed in a three-ring binder(s) arranged by prior experience area and follow chronological order. Applicants should use the templates provided on this website for proper organization of requisite third party documentation. Personal statements, while often explanatory and useful to the committee, cannot be accepted as proof unless properly supported by unbiased third parties. Because of the serious nature of awarding college credit for prior learning, it is absolutely essential that all evidence presented be able to withstand intense scrutiny. Please be aware that we may contact references to verify your documentation.

Applicants should use transparent plastic sleeves to insure protection of their documents and are advised to retain copies of all materials submitted. After the conclusion of the evaluation process applicants should retrieve their respective portfolios. The Office of Continuing Education will not retain evaluated portfolios.

There are six (6) prior learning experience areas, each of which involves certain special considerations with respect to documentation. These should be arranged in the following order:

1. Employment
2. Community Service
3. Independent Study
4. Noncredit Experiences
5. Educational Travel
6. Military Training

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## 1. Employment

Employment is paid work experience. We are especially interested in full-time experiences of at least one year in duration. The longer one is employed at a particular job the greater the chances for learning, advancement, and increasing levels of responsibility. Part-time work and jobs of less than one year normally do not provide sufficient time for significant professional growth. In evaluating your portfolio we will be looking at years of employment, the scope of responsibilities, the number of advancements, and your level of professionalism. We are interested in whether you supervise others, work independently with little or no direction, or whether you are carefully supervised.

For most applicants documentation of employment is the easiest part of portfolio preparation. The best type of evidence is a letter from a present or past employer verifying employment and providing evidence of advancements and levels of professional responsibility. Such letters should be on official letterhead and must be typed, dated, and signed by the employer. Copies of signed and dated reports evaluating your performance are also an excellent form of documentation.

Sometimes problems can arise. Businesses change hands or cease operations and employment records can be lost or destroyed. In such cases W-2 forms and other tax records can provide evidence of employment. Such records do not however illustrate advancements or the nature of one's responsibilities. Under such circumstances, letters from former supervisors can provide documentation. Although less desirable, letters from former co-workers or customers may also be submitted.

Self-employment is also a special case, as is employment in a family business. In such situations, tax records, letters of incorporation, and typed, dated and signed statement(s) from a firm's lawyer and/or accountant can provide useful documentation. Letters from present or former customers can further substantiate the nature of self-employment. Please note, letters written by a spouse or close

relatives on one's behalf do not, for obvious reasons, by themselves provide sufficient and reliable evidence. A resume might be included at the beginning of the employment section to provide a coherent picture of one's career path, but a resume by itself is not an acceptable form of documentation.

## 2. Community Service

Community service, unlike employment, refers to voluntary activity for which there is no monetary compensation. Such activities, however, often "pay off" by providing a significant learning experience. As with employment, the value of the experience depends on duration and level of involvement in a program, and demonstration of the sort of learning that took place. We are interested in the experience which broadened your understanding as well as your quantitative and qualitative commitment to community service organizations. Clearly, there is an extraordinary difference between a few hours of service and chairing a state or regional committee. Examples of experiences acceptable as community service are numerous and include participation in religious, cultural, political, professional, charitable, and civic organizations. Documentation regarding the nature of the program and the extent of your commitment normally requires letters from organization officers or other persons working closely with the program who can testify to your participation. A political candidate could write about your assistance during a campaign; a clergyman could testify regarding your teaching a religious education class; the director of volunteers might report on your help at a hospital. Newspaper clippings and in-house publications which document your participation can also be included. Please note, purely passive membership in groups (i.e. the National Geographic Society) which elicit no response on your part or membership in commercial organizations (like health clubs) which aim solely at personal physical well-being are not considered community service and should not be included in your portfolio.

## 3. Independent Study

Independent study is self-instruction in a subject or skill where there is either very little or no direction from an instructor – other than yourself. Although you might have consulted a number of books and periodicals or occasional advice from an expert, you were the primary teacher. Examples of independent study might include learning to draw, paint or play a musical instrument. Another example might be knowledge gained from in-depth reading in a particular subject area, such as Renaissance Art. Developing fluency in a language other than your own (after the age of 18) by means of self-study and/or emergence in another culture would also qualify as independent study.

Those seeking life experience credit for independent study **must** include in their portfolio expert evaluation in writing that identifies their level of expertise. An expert is an instructor in the subject area and/or a recognized authority in the field. Photos illustrating your skill in quilting or woodworking as well as personal statements are **not** considered adequate documentation. Those who have read and

studied a particular subject area in-depth should prepare an essay on the subject along with an annotated bibliography for submission to an expert for evaluation. Standardized examinations are available to test for foreign language competence. Please note, after presentation of your portfolio, the assessment committee may request that you obtain an evaluation of your independent study expertise by a member of the university faculty. If you have questions regarding independent study and expert evaluation, consult with the Program Coordinator.

#### **4. Non-credit experience**

Non-credit experiences normally are programs that result in the awarding of a certificate or a diploma, but not the award of academic credit. These generally fall into three categories.

- a) Job related courses or seminars. These are usually offered through or required by your employer or a professional accrediting agency. Voluntary programs in which you participate to improve your job skills or to prepare yourself for a new job are likewise considered job-related.
- b) Personal Enrichment. This includes noncredit courses, programs, and seminars taken for personal growth and enrichment. Examples could include an art course, a real estate course, or a modern dance course. Regardless of the reason behind the experience, these are programs which normally result in a certificate of completion.
- c) Non-accredited institutions. This would include courses you may have taken from post-secondary vocational schools that are not accredited by the regional accrediting agency for colleges and universities. Although such courses cannot be directly transferred, they may be considered for the program depending on their academic content.

You should include in your portfolio copies of all certificates or diplomas awarded and transcripts, as appropriate. Note that each document should include the following information: your name, the date(s) of the experience, and the number of hours (or CEUs) involved. It is vital that you demonstrate completion of the experience, when the experience occurred, and the duration of the experience. If the document does not provide that information, an explanatory letter from your employer or the agency offering the program must be included in the portfolio.

#### **5. Educational Travel**

It has long been recognized that travel is a broadening experience. A century ago a well planned visit to "the Continent," lasting from 6 months to a year was considered the mark of a liberal education. Unfortunately modern travel, while more common, is also more hurried and often undertaken solely for "rest and recreation." The Liberal Studies Program normally awards credit for qualitative and quantitative travel outside the continental United States which has a serious educational component and is adequately documented. If sufficiently unique, travel within certain portions of the United States may also be considered. Note however, travel which is basically recreational is not acceptable. A total of thirty days (30) of travel experience is generally considered the minimum for the program.

The educational nature of travel can be demonstrated in a number of ways: evidence of pre-tour reading and other educational preparation, printed materials explaining the educational nature of the tour provided by the organizer, or a daily journal kept during the tour. Noncredit tours offered by colleges, alumni organizations, and agencies specializing in educational tours present the least problems regarding documentation. Airplane tickets and notarized copies of visas should also be included in the portfolio. Photographs, unless particularly significant, should not be included.

## 6. Military Service

Military service is employment of a special kind and is considered under a separate category. The Liberal Studies Program considers length of service, advancements, and training provided by specialized schools. The Department of Defense is one of the largest educational institutions in the world and many of the courses provided can be considered for credit. Courses taken from accredited American colleges such as the University of Maryland should be submitted for transfer credit and are not included under military service. Your military experience is readily documented by the Form DD-214. This is issued at the completion of military service and must be included in your portfolio. In addition, official letters of commendation may also be presented.

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## Submission of the Portfolio

The above guidelines for the preparation of the portfolio are exactly that. They are offered (1) as suggestions as to the sorts of experiences which have in the past qualified for the awarding of credit under the Liberal Studies Program and (2) how those experiences should be documented. Students having specific questions regarding portfolio preparation should consult with the appropriate Program Coordinator.

Once the portfolio is completed and ready for submission, a student **must** make an appointment with the Program Coordinator for initial screening. Without an initial screening the portfolio will not be accepted for assessment. Students with inadequate documentation will be advised to obtain additional materials. Once approved by the Program Coordinator, the student can then submit his/her portfolio along with the \$650 assessment fee. The portfolio will then be examined by the Liberal Studies assessment committee. Please note, the committee may request further documentation. The committee may also contact you or your references for further information. Once the assessment committee completes its evaluation of your portfolio, you will be informed of its decision in writing. Life experiences credits, up to a maximum of 32 credits, will be awarded in multiples of 4 credits, the equivalent of one course at Framingham State University. Once you receive the results of your assessment you should arrange an appointment with the Program Coordinator to plan for the completion of your college degree.

Should you have any questions regarding the assembly of your portfolio, please contact:

Day Coordinator: Dr. Kelly Matthews  
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Evening Coordinator: Dr. P. Bradley Nutting  
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\*\*Click here for the Prior Learning Assessment Portfolio template.