GRADUATE CREDIT FOR PREMATRICULATION EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT: Although undergraduates often earn academic credit for prior learning acquired through experience, graduate students are rarely afforded that opportunity. Central Michigan University and The University of Northern Colorado are examples of the very few institutions that do accept prior experiential learning toward graduate degrees. The Council of Graduate Schools in the United States adamantly opposes graduate credit for prematriculation experiences; however, the American Council on Education favors the assessment of extraninstitutional learning which has occurred prior to a student's enrollment. Further, the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning recently formed a task force to promote experiential learning in the graduate sector. The future for the assessment of experiential learning for graduate credit is indeed favorable.

While it has become increasingly common for undergraduate students, especially adults, to be awarded academic credit for learning acquired prior to enrollment, the acceptance of prior learning in graduate programs rarely occurs. Powerful forces in graduate education have declared the granting of credit for prematriculation experiences anathema. Many professors and graduate deans have spoken out against the assessment of learning experiences which have occurred prior to a student's formal enrollment, and a strong proscription of the practice is contained in the policy statement, Graduate Credit: Its Recognition and Transfer, of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States (CGS). The CGS insists that "no graduate credit should be granted for experiential learning that occurs prior to the student's matriculation in the graduate program," because, the statement continues, graduate credit should be awarded "... only

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when a graduate faculty and dean of an accredited institution have had the opportunity to plan the experience, to establish its goals, and to monitor the time, effort and the learning that has taken place” (1977, p. 6).

SOME PROMINENT PROONENTS OF GRADUATE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CREDIT

Clearly the CGS does not object to the concept of experiential learning credit awarded under its aegis and subject to its conditions; however, the Council’s position excludes consideration of credit for the large and important area of learning that has occurred outside the sponsorship of an accredited graduate institution. Keeton and Tate, who are identified with the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL), recognize two main categories of experiential learning—sponsored and unsponsored—and distinguish between the two by pointing out that the former ”... occurs in the context of an institution of higher education where the learner is officially registered and the activity an accepted part of the student’s program of study;” the latter occurs if a learning experience fails “to meet any element of this set of conditions” (1978, p. 4).

The American Council on Education (ACE) acceptance of the concept of experiential learning at the graduate level is demonstrated by its Guide to Educational Experiences in the Armed Services and the companion National Guide to Credit Recommendations for Non Collegiate Courses. These guides evaluate what ACE calls in another publication, “extrainstitutional learning.” Although ACE does not use the term “experiential learning,” its definition of extrainstitutional learning is synonymous with the concept referred to as experiential learning throughout this paper. For ACE, extrainstitutional learning is “learning that is attained outside the sponsorship of legally authorized and accredited postsecondary institutions. The term applies to learning acquired from work and life experiences, independent reading and study, the mass media, and participation in formal courses sponsored by associations, business, government, industry, the military, unions, and other social institutions such as hospitals” (Recommendations, 1978, p. xi).

Courses successfully completed by members of the armed forces have been evaluated by ACE appointed subject-matter teams for academic credit since 1945. Although in almost every case courses or programs of