



## **Credit for Previous Learning**

If you have already earned units at an accredited institution, you may transfer up to 8 units into Grace Communion Seminary. Free. For that, you need to use the Form for Transfer of Credit.

This document is about a different program, a way that you can be given credit for things you have learned in life experience. It is not free, but it costs a lot less than regular classes.

Since we strive to serve people who are already involved in ministry, many of our students already have some relevant experience.<sup>1</sup> Most people learn something from their experiences. Often, they have learned as much through experience as they would through a formal class, and there is no need to make them go through a class in something they already know. Many students come to GCS with previous experiences and studies that are equivalent to a seminary-level course, and we want to give credit where credit is due. We therefore offer a way for students to be given credit for things they have already learned.

The focus is on what people have *learned* – not what they have experienced. As any pastor can testify, people don't always learn from their experiences. But if you have learned facts, skills and concepts appropriate to graduate-level seminary education, we would like to give you credit for it. But we can't just take your word for it – the learning must be *documented* and verified.

Let's begin by addressing some basic questions:

### **1. What are the advantages of getting credit in this way?**

For the student, the advantages are *time* and *money*. You won't have to take as many courses, so you can complete your degree sooner. It can save money,

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<sup>1</sup> We welcome students who don't have any ministry experience, but our program is structured to serve the needs of those who are already in ministry, and do not want to leave their ministries in order to attend a residential seminary. Others can benefit from this structure, too.

because the cost can be only a third of what the tuition would be.

The cost is determined by how much credit you ask for, not by how much you are given. We have to charge for this assessment because it takes both time and training (which involves expense) for us to properly evaluate and document what you have learned.

For the seminary, the advantages are: we can attract better students when those students know that they won't have to sit through a lot of classes in which they already know the things that are being taught. It also helps students finish the program, which makes us look better.

## **2. What types of experiences can I get credit for?**

We cannot give credit for experience – we can give credit only for what you have learned.<sup>2</sup> That learning can come in several ways:

- Employment
- Volunteer work in churches, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies
- Conferences and seminars
- Employer training programs and other unaccredited classes
- Independent study
- Travel or mission work
- Study at an accredited seminary or graduate school.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Experience alone is not considered an adequate yardstick for assessment: in addition, you must make meaning out of your experience. Learning from experience is an intentional process, and intentional learning cycles through phases of doing, reflecting, connecting, and applying your experience” (Janet Colvin, *Earn College Credit for What You Know* [5th edition; Chicago: Council for Adult & Experiential Learning and Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012], 48). We describe the four phases in more detail on page 8.

<sup>3</sup> This type of prior learning is usually handled under our transfer credit policy. Transfer credit may be given for courses taken up to eight years before you became a GCS student. Courses older than that can be addressed by the procedure outlined in this document. No matter how long ago the learning occurred, if you are still able to write a description of what you learned, then you know the material and do not need to repeat the course.

### **3. I went to a marriage seminar last year. Could I get credit for that?**

Probably not. There are two reasons: level and length. Most marriage seminars are presented at a high-school or undergraduate level – they are designed to help you with your own marriage, not to counsel others. Further, they don't require much time. A typical marriage seminar occurs on the weekend – perhaps 12 hours in the seminar and perhaps a few hours in practical application. No one verifies that you have learned anything.

A typical seminary course, in contrast, requires about 140 hours. Length of time does not always indicate the amount that's been learned, and some people are fast learners. However, there is a *correlation* between length and learning,<sup>4</sup> and it is highly unlikely that you can learn as much in 12 hours as others learn in 140. You might be the exception on that, but you'd have to work to convince us.

However, if you went to a seminar (or took an unaccredited course) on marriage *counseling*, and you combined that with experience in premarital and marital counseling, and further reading on the subject, you might be able to given credit for that. For example, you could 1) find an accredited seminary course on marriage counseling, 2) from the syllabus of that course, note what the seminary expects students to learn from that course, and 3) show us that you have achieved something comparable to the student learning outcomes of that course.

### **4. I went to a week-long denominational conference. Could I be given credit for that?**

We love denominational conferences, and we go to them ourselves. Many of them involve a significant amount of time, and are quite educational. But most of them are not focused on academic topics, and a large part of the value of such conferences comes from informal social connections.

There may be plenary sessions and workshops that are presented at a

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<sup>4</sup> “Experience is the best teacher,” the old adage goes, but experience is not always the fastest teacher, because *experiences are often repetitive*. Sometimes it takes several years for a person to learn through experience what they might have learned in the classroom in a few months. Traditional courses are usually designed to teach at the fastest possible pace for the average student in the class.

graduate level, but this usually means three hours of lecture on one topic, three hours on another, and three hours on a third. None of the topics are explored in enough depth to make the experience equivalent to a seminary course. We usually listen and take notes for a few hours, learn something, and perhaps discuss the content with our local congregational leaders.

However, if the conference piqued your interest in a topic and you devoted quite a bit of time to further study on it, and presented your findings in the form of a class for people in your church, or the community, then you may well have learned enough to be given credit. If so, the denominational conference would be part of your supporting material, though it could not be the sum total of it.

**5. I attended a three-day conference focused on a specific topic, such as planting new churches, and I learned a lot. Can I get credit for that?**

Perhaps. Again, you should consider level, length, and learning.

- a. Level: Is what you learned comparable to graduate-level seminary courses? One way to judge that is to search the internet for a syllabus of an accredited graduate-level course on church planting, and see if you have learned what the course is designed to teach, or if you feel that you could write the final paper for the course.
- b. Length: Consider the amount of time you invested in the topic – not just time spent at the conference, but also the time you spent reading about the topic before and after the conference, and time you spent in *doing* what the conference was about. Perhaps you went to a denominational conference *and* an inter-denominational conference, read some books recommended at the conferences, and served as mentor for a church planter. Chances are good that you have a creditable amount of learning.
- c. Learning: You may feel that you have learned a great deal, but we can't take your word for it. You have to give us some evidence before we can give you credit. You need to be able to put down into words the things you have learned, which includes basic facts, principles, and ways in which those principles might be applied in new situations. "The learning should be theoretical as well as practical.... You should be able to

identify the principles involved in doing what you are able to do.”<sup>5</sup>

## **6. I went on a ten-day tour of the Holy Land. Can I get credit?**

It depends on what you learned. For some people, a tour of the Holy Land is a wonderful cultural experience, about the same as they would get by touring France or China. That experience is valuable, but we cannot give credit it.

But others – it may depend a lot on the type of tour guide – learn a great deal about the history and geography of Judea. They become fascinated with the land and its history, and invest more time in the topic, and they even give presentations to tell others what they have learned about the land of the Bible. They could write a meaningful essay on “How seeing the land of Israel deepened my understanding of the Bible.”

There’s been a significant investment of time. There’s been tangible evidence that they have learned something relevant to a seminary education. Some seminaries do give graduate credit in conjunction with tours of the Holy Land, and you may be able show that what you learned is comparable to what they expect from their students.<sup>6</sup> You might note what textbooks they recommend.

## **7. I’m going on a tour of the Holy Land next year. Can I get “credit for previous learning” for something that’s in the future?**

Since most GCS students are part-time students already involved in ministry, most students take five to seven years to complete their degree. It is reasonable to expect that some of our students will have significant learning opportunities in that time period. If you attain graduate-level learning, it does not matter to us whether it was before you became a GCS student or after you became a student. What’s

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<sup>5</sup> “A Student Guide: Credit for Prior College-level Learning” (Saratoga Springs, NY: State University of New York Empire State College, 2012), page 2, accessed 4 Jan. 2013 at <http://www.esc.edu/media/academicaffairs/ocar/CreditforCollege-levelLearning3-22-2012.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> This does not make your trip a tax-deductible educational expense. The expenses directly related to education (textbooks and assessment fee) might be deductible, but the travel expenses usually are not. We cannot give you advice about taxes.

important is that you give us evidence that you learned something at a graduate level.

If you know ahead of time that you are going to have a significant experience, you can prepare for that experience in a way that might give you credit. To give a different example, let's suppose that you plan to attend two conferences on evangelism in the coming year. Find out what an accredited seminary-level evangelism course includes, and imitate it. You might read the textbooks, write a paper, or give a series of sermons, teach a class, or conduct an evangelistic outreach event. You will then have documentation to prove that you have learned, and earned the credit.

As another example, suppose that you are planning to participate in a short-term mission trip to another nation. You might be able to turn that experience into credit by

- a) seeing what seminary courses on this topic include,
- b) reading what you can about cross-cultural mission principles,
- c) keeping a day-by-day journal during the mission trip describing what you are experiencing and learning, and
- d) after you return home, writing a paper about the experience. Don't forget that you may learn just as much about yourself as about the other culture.

## **8. Can I earn credit for independent study?**

Yes. Some people attend seminars in person; others attend the seminars by reading books written by the seminar presenters. Reading takes more self-discipline. If you achieve a substantial amount of learning on a particular topic through reading, then you may apply for credit. This is comparable to the "directed readings" courses that some graduate schools offer.

Simply reading the books does not automatically qualify you for credit – we need evidence that you have understood the material and know how to *apply* what you learned. You need to show that you can integrate the facts, principles and diverse contexts.

For example, find an accredited graduate-level course in the topic, read the assigned textbooks, read an additional textbook to make up for the lack of lectures, and write the papers assigned in the course. In some cases you can find free audio

lectures of actual seminary classes to help you learn.<sup>7</sup> You don't need to pay for teaching or for infrastructure – only for assessment and documentation.

To be comparable to a 3-unit GCS course, you might need to read 1000 pages, write three book review papers, and one or two essay papers. Ideally, you should discuss your plan with the GCS faculty ahead of time.

## **9. Is there a limit to how much I can earn?**

Yes. The California Bureau of Private Postsecondary Education guidelines indicate that we can award no more than six graduate units for prior experiential learning out of the first 30 units, and only three more after that.<sup>8</sup> That means that for our 42-unit master's degree, up to nine units may be awarded for prior learning.

Further, we cannot grant credit for the same topic twice. We cannot give you credit for experiential learning in church planting if you also want transfer credit for a course in church planting. We cannot give you credit for independent study in Christology if you also take the GCS course in the nature of Jesus Christ.

## **10. How much work will this take?**

It takes a substantial amount of work, and we recognize that it is in addition to the time you have already invested. However, most college classes are like that – there is learning, and after that, there is demonstration of learning. No one can give you credit without requiring that you produce tangible evidence of learning.

In most college courses, the assignments are also learning activities – students are not just demonstrating what they already know, but they learn more during the process of writing the papers. The same is true when you document your prior learning – as part of the documentation, you will be asked to think about what

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<sup>7</sup> Many seminary courses are available at [biblicaltraining.org](http://biblicaltraining.org); iTunes U also has some.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bppe.ca.gov/lawsregs.shtml>. If we grant you more than six hours of credit for previous learning, at first only six hours can be posted on your transcript; any units more than six can be posted only after you have amassed 30 units. Up to 20 percent of those units may be transfer credits. That is, there may be six units of transfer credit, six units of credit for prior learning, and 18 units of GCS classes. After that point, up to three units of additional experiential learning may be added to your transcript.

you have learned, and how to apply those principles to new situations. The process will refresh your memory, and help you think more about the topic. You not only have to learn the content, but you also have to learn how to present it.

The nature of PLA [prior learning assessment] is to ask—even expect—students to become agents of their own education in ways in which they probably lack experience. The mining of learning from experience requires patient exploration of possibilities.... An applicant for credit is expected to invest significant time and effort in making the case that experience has, in fact, resulted in creditable learning.<sup>9</sup>

Many schools offer undergraduate classes in how to evaluate your past experiences for what you've learned. They charge tuition for these courses, and they give credit. We can't give graduate credit for an activity that is at an undergraduate level, but the fact that other schools give credit for this shows that a significant amount of learning (and time) is involved just in the process. We do not have a formal class to teach you how to do it – we offer these written instructions, and a limited amount of consultation.<sup>10</sup>

The good news is that since there is no class, there is also no tuition – we offer these instructions for free. But it takes more self-discipline from the student in order to complete the process.<sup>11</sup> It saves you money, and it will help you get a degree sooner. We encourage you to do it.

## **11. How do people learn from their experiences?**

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<sup>9</sup> Morry Fiddler, Catherine Marienau, and Urban Whitaker, *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures* (2nd ed.; Chicago: The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning; and Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2006), 49, 82.

“The process of unpacking learning is hard work because it requires recalling events. It also requires learners to carefully reflect on experiences and assess how the learning relates to college courses” (Colvin, 87).

<sup>10</sup> If you'd like to discuss your situation, email the Dean of Faculty, dean@gcs.edu.

<sup>11</sup> Students who would like to learn more about the process may read Janet Colvin's book (see footnote 2 on page 2). An online course in portfolio development is available at <http://www.learningcounts.org/dyp/>. The course costs \$129, but the first two modules are free.

Not many students ask this question, but it's an important one, because you can describe your learning better, in an academically respectable way, if you know how experiential learning typically occurs. Most educational theorists accept the description given by David Kolb.<sup>12</sup> Here's a summary of what he observed:

1. We have an experience.
2. After (or during) the experience, we think about it.
3. We see principles involved in it, and we can draw tentative conclusions about the way the topic works. These principles might apply to other people in different situations.
4. Whenever we are in a similar situation, we make use of those principles, adapting our actions if the details of the circumstance are different.
5. This becomes a new experience, and a new opportunity for us to think about what we have done, how the topic works, and whether our conclusions need to be modified. This cycle can be repeated many times, leading us closer to a comprehensive understanding of the topic.<sup>13</sup>

In this model of experiential learning, it is important that students be able to

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<sup>12</sup> David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Here is another summary: "According to Kolb, experiential learning occurs like this: We have an experience (CE). Then, we move out of the experience, 'step back,' observe the experience in retrospect, and make observations about that experience (RO). The observations we make cause us to draw conclusions, formulating principles (AC) about what we observed. These principles are general in that they might apply to anyone who has had a similar experience. Having identified those principles, we then apply them the next time we are in a similar situation (AE) to see if these principles hold true. This application leads to a new experience, which causes new reflective observations, which cause us to formulate new principles that we then apply. And so it goes, really more in a spiral than in a circle, as new knowledge is gained each time you move "around the circle" in the learning process" (Jan Hultman, "Writing a Life-learning Paper" (unpublished document from Spring Arbor University, 2008, used by permission), 10. The abbreviations refer to Kolb's names for the steps: CE = Concrete Experience, RO = Reflective Observation, AC = Abstract Concepts, and AE = Active Experimentation.)

look back on their experiences to be able to *generalize*, and to *apply* concepts to new situations. This indicates that the students have learned not just at a practical level (which is important in itself), but also at a more theoretical level (which is important for graduate-level learning). The better you are able to fit what you have learned into the Kolb cycle of experiential learning, the easier it is for us to see that you have learned something at a graduate level.

## **12. What kind of documentation is needed?**

The documentation portfolio should be typed, proofread, organized and labeled. Please use letter-size pages with 1 inch margins all around. Use Times New Roman size 12, with paragraphs double spaced and the first line indented.<sup>14</sup> Pages should be numbered in the upper right corner.

Different topics need different types of evidence. What you give as evidence for experiential learning in homiletics will be different than what you give for Christology or travel to Israel. However, there are some basic commonalities:

- a. A one-page cover letter, explaining how much credit you are requesting, for what topics, and whether you want these credits to be counted as electives or as requirements in biblical studies, theology, history, or Christian ministry.<sup>15</sup> This letter should also include a statement of authenticity, stating that the work is your own, and that you have not fabricated any of the history.<sup>16</sup>
- b. A table of contents, giving evaluators an overview of what they will see. Since we may submit different topics to different evaluators, we would like for each topic to be in a separate part of your portfolio. For example,

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<sup>14</sup> For a template with these settings already embedded in the document, use the Academic Paper Template posted on the Public Information section of the GCS website: <http://www.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=23>.

<sup>15</sup> For example, if you have already taken three GCS classes in biblical studies, and transferred two courses in from another seminary, then you have already met the biblical studies requirements for the master's degree, and already filled your two electives. There is no need to request credit for more biblical studies.

<sup>16</sup> The description of what you learned must be written by *you*, not by anyone else.

all materials relevant to homiletics will be in one section, and all materials relevant to biblical studies will be in another section.

- c. An autobiographical description of your experiences, organized chronologically for each topic. This would include a description of the sources of your knowledge: books, seminars, experiences, with names, dates, and other details, with references to your supporting documentation. This might be two or three pages for each topic.<sup>17</sup>

Often, the most challenging situations offer us the most significant learning experiences. Our failures can be springboards to more effective learning; our most satisfying achievements may also indicate significant learning moments. Students should include both high points and low points in their histories because it will help them focus on incidents that are likely to be moments of greatest learning.<sup>18</sup>

- d. An essay about what you learned. Graduate-level learning normally includes:
  - i. facts relevant to the topic,
  - ii. an *analysis* of those facts,<sup>19</sup>
  - iii. *principles* that can be used in a variety of situations,
  - iv. an understanding of major *theories* about the topic,<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This corresponds to the first step in experiential learning. Common verbs in this description are action words: “worked, created, prepared, implemented, conducted, produced” (Colvin, 95).

<sup>18</sup> “A detailed description of a critical incident, and your response to it, is a powerful testimony to your learning” (Colvin, 96). Colvin encourages students to “describe how this incident influenced your future decision making or behavior.” And looking back, “How did future experiences help you more completely understand this incident?” (97).

<sup>19</sup> This corresponds to the second step described by Kolb: “What did you notice and observe about that experience? Common verbs: observed, watched, noticed, saw, thought, discovered” (Colvin, 95). Reflection turns an experience into a learning opportunity. “Learning happens only when there is reflective thought and internal ‘processing’ by the learner, in a way that actively makes sense out of an experience and links it to previous learning” (Tara Fenwick and Mark Tennant, “Understanding Adult Learners,” in *Dimensions of Adult Learning*, ed. Griff Foley [Berkshire, England: McGraw-Hill Education, 2004], 60).

<sup>20</sup> The third step in the experiential learning cycle is “Abstract Conceptualization.” The student needs to ask, “What rules, theories, and concepts apply to this situation? Common verbs:

- v. an analysis of those theories<sup>21</sup> and *selection* of a theory that seems to you to offer the best explanation, and
- vi. a way to *apply* that understanding, especially in different situations.<sup>22</sup> This helps show that you have a graduate-level understanding of the topic. It involves the articulation of general *principles* and an awareness of how different circumstances require different applications.<sup>23</sup>

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concluded, theorized, found, realized, deduced, learned” (95).

Experiential learning is often weakest in its awareness of theories (Colvin, 89-90). It is unlikely that anyone can learn theories, and the appropriate terminology, by personal experience alone – this requires some reading to see how others have analyzed the issues. You cannot merely *claim* to understand those theories – you must give some evidence that you do. This does not mean that you have to summarize every theory. Sometimes a simple reference will do – for example, “The primary weakness in Jones’ theory of expansion, as Higgins pointed out, is that it does not explain the speed of expansion.”

If you include a few short quotes from relevant books, you must use quote marks for all quotes and footnote all your sources with standard bibliographic information. Quotes should not comprise more than 10 percent of what you write. Any plagiarism, or any fabrication of evidence, will result in an immediate rejection of your application, with no refund of fees.

<sup>21</sup> *Analysis* is crucial for a graduate-level course. We want to see how you have used information to solve problems, to judge between alternatives, to make recommendations, to create something new, to innovate or modify for new situations, not just follow a formula.

<sup>22</sup> This corresponds to the fourth step in the cycle: “Active Experimentation.” This answers the question: “How did you apply your learning to [later] situations? Common verbs: used, updated, applied, tried, implemented, changed” (95).

“The candidate’s learning should be transferable to another setting. For example, a student’s skills as a supervisor and recruiter were proven to be transferable when he accepted a position with another company” (Colvin, 13). Or for volunteer work, perhaps the learning was used in several different settings. “Learning needs to exhibit a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application” (ibid., 49).

<sup>23</sup> “The common observation about experiential learners is that often they can *do* (in a particular setting) but can’t explain—because they haven’t really mastered the general principles that would allow them to apply their learning in new settings” (Fiddler et al., 17). However, in the process of preparing the portfolio, students can retroactively analyze what they have done and thereby see the general principles that have enabled them to successfully adapt to new situations.

Again, this will look considerably different from one field of study to another. The way that you apply a theory of the atonement is going to be considerably different than the way that you apply the sociology of marriage and the family. The manner of presentation must be tailored for the topic. One approach you might take is to imagine that you have to teach an introductory class in the topic, and share with some students what you have learned about the topic.

It can be helpful if you find the syllabus of an accredited graduate-level course in this topic, to show that what you learned is at a graduate level, and comparable to a real course. However, you should write your learning essay *before* you look at the syllabus. Start with a blank page and write as much as you can about what you have learned, thinking especially about principles and applications. *Then* look at the syllabus for additional ideas, and revise your essay. You may have learned concepts that aren't specifically mentioned in the course syllabus, but are nevertheless worthy of mention. However, if you start with the course syllabus, you will probably limit yourself to only those things that are mentioned in it, and overlook some legitimate learning.

After expanding your essay and revising it, this may be six or ten pages for each topic.<sup>24</sup> (This is in addition to the pages you used to describe what you did.)

- e. Documentation to support what you have given in the previous section:
  - i. Evidence that you had the experience – for example, that you were pastor of a church in that time period, that you attended the seminar, that you went on a trip, etc. This may be employment records, payment receipts, certificates, or a letter from your supervisor verifying that you had the experience, created the products, etc.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> If it is longer than ten pages, it is probably because you are trying to include too many details, or else you are not focused enough. If you wish to include more detail, move it to an appendix; you must decide what the most important 10 pages are.

<sup>25</sup> There is no need to provide multiple documentation for the same event – for example, receipts, itineraries, hotel records, photos *and* a letter from the tour guide all to show that you went on a trip. If no verification can be presented, the absence should be noted and explained.

- ii. Evidence of learning: products you created relevant to the topic. This could be sermon notes, slide shows, instruction manuals you have written, audio or video recordings, or letters from people who attended the workshop sessions you facilitated. If you have ever taught others what you've learned, that is good evidence that you have learned the material yourself. Depending on the product, this could be up to 50 pages of previously produced materials.
- iii. Evidence that this learning is at the graduate level. For example, include a seminary-level syllabus for the topic(s) and comment on how your learning meets, or is roughly equivalent to, the student learning outcomes of the course.<sup>26</sup> If you cannot find a seminary course in this subject, this might be an indication that the topic is not appropriate for a seminary. However, it is also possible that your experiential learning is more specialized than most seminaries can offer, and still worthy of credit as an elective.<sup>27</sup>
- iv. New evidence created just for this application. Most of your new writing would be in the learning essay (section d above), but in some cases longer products could be included as an appendix.
- v. The documentation section of your portfolio could range from a

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A letter of verification should include the verifier's credentials, the basic circumstances of the experience, dates, and a brief summary of the student's responsibilities and competencies. This is only supplementary evidence; the student must still provide direct evidence of learning in section d of the portfolio. The letters may comment on what the student learned, or how the student compares to people who have taken courses for credit, but should not make any direct recommendations as to whether credit should be given.

<sup>26</sup> The student learning outcomes may vary considerably from one seminary to another, even for a course in the same subject. That is because different seminaries emphasize different aspects of the topic, and sometimes describe the same thing in different ways. These variations show that there is no one right way to structure a course, and the learning that you obtained through experience may be different in the details, but still worthy of graduate credit. "Experiential learning is often idiosyncratic and usually defies a straightforward connection to a course catalog" (Fiddler et al., 21). The amount and depth of learning should be *equivalent* to a graduate-level course; it does not have to be identical to a specific course.

<sup>27</sup> Contact the Dean of Faculty for questions on these topics.

few dozen to a hundred pages.

- f. **Payment must be included;** it may be made by check, or by credit card. Arrange this with the Registrar.
- g. By submitting the application, you give GCS the right to check on the accuracy of any details. This may include a phone interview with you. We may also submit the materials to turnitin.com to check for plagiarism.

### **13. In what format should I send this information?**

We accept either printed materials or electronic documents.

If you submit paper documents, they must be organized in a three-ring binder, with the student's name on the spine and on the cover. Use tabs to separate major sections of your portfolio, and include a table of contents to help us know what to expect. The submission should be of a quality appropriate for graduate-level work. Documents and photos should be printed on ordinary office-quality paper.<sup>28</sup> Supplementary audio and video materials may be included on disks included in the binder.<sup>29</sup> Tapes are not acceptable. If you send us a three-ring binder, keep a copy of your materials, in case they are lost in the mail. *We do not return the materials* – we need them for our records.

You may also submit your materials in an electronic format, such as email (suitable for the simplest applications), CD-ROM, or flash drive. However, organization is crucial. You cannot send us 42 documents with inconsistent names and expect us to make sense out of them. Here is the organization we prefer:

- a. All document names should start with your last name.

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<sup>28</sup> Although glossy paper makes nicer-looking photos, ordinary office paper works better in our sheet-fed scanner, which we may use to make an electronic archive of your submission. Do not put your pages in plastic sheet protectors.

<sup>29</sup> Disks should be labeled with your name and the role they play in your portfolio. They should be in holders designed for disks; they should not fall out if the binder is turned upside down. Audio and video are only for supplementary materials; they cannot be used for your cover letter or description of what you have learned. There is rarely a need for more than one disk. If you are requesting credit for homiletics, for example, you do not need to submit 50 sermons – only two or three of your best. We are more interested in the quality of your learning than in the quantity of your experience.

b. The document name should then indicate where it fits into the submission package. For example:

- i. Smith A cover letter.doc
- ii. Smith B table of contents.doc  
-- section on homiletics --
- iii. Smith 1C my history with homiletics.doc
- iv. Smith 1D what I have learned about homiletics.doc
- v. Smith 1E, part 1 – supporting documentation, homiletics.doc
- vi. Smith 1E, part 2 – more documentation about homiletics.pdf
- vii. Smith 1E, part 3 – audio documentation about homiletics.mp3  
-- section on missions --
- viii. Smith 2C my history with missions.doc
- ix. Smith 2D what I have learned about missions.doc
- x. Smith 2E, part 1 – supporting documentation about missions.doc
- xi. Smith 2E, part 2 – photo documentation about missions.jpg

With document names organized like this, it is easy for us to see, in an alphabetical list of files, how each document fits into the application.

Documents may be submitted as Word documents (doc or docx), with PDF or JPG image files for some of the supporting documentation. Audio and video recordings must be digital, and can be included on a CD-ROM.<sup>30</sup>

#### **14. How long does it take for the application to be evaluated, and for me to be informed of whether I will receive credit?**

It will take up to one month for your materials to be evaluated – this depends on faculty workload and availability. Your materials will go to a faculty member who has been trained in the principles of prior learning assessment<sup>31</sup>; they may also

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<sup>30</sup> Internet sites are not acceptable as documentation sources, since they are not permanent, and we need to keep permanent records of your submissions. You can download the materials onto a disk.

<sup>31</sup> At least one evaluator is trained through courses sponsored by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning.

be given to a GCS faculty member familiar with the topics you are requesting credit for. The evaluator(s) will see whether you

- a. are conversant with the terminology expected for this topic,
- b. show awareness of major questions that would be covered in an introductory seminary course in the topic,
- c. show an ability to evaluate the theories and make a reasoned choice,
- d. seem competent to apply this knowledge in new situations, and
- e. have supplied appropriate supporting documentation.

You will receive credit if, in the judgment of these faculty members, you have already attained learning that would be given a grade of B or better in an actual course.<sup>32</sup> The faculty will comment on the contents of your application and email these comments to you within one month of when we received it. The comments may include recommendations for what you should study next to compensate for minor deficiencies in your experiential learning.

### **15. How will the portfolio be graded? What will the evaluators look for?**

See Appendix A for a copy of the grading guide. Evaluators will look for evidence of graduate-level learning, a balance of theory and practice, with appropriate supporting documentation, all presented in a way that is appropriate for graduate students.

### **16.If I do not receive the credits I asked for, can I appeal?**

If you are denied credit, reasons will be given. You may then respond to these reasons, perhaps by adding more materials to your application.<sup>33</sup> In some

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<sup>32</sup> This is a higher standard than is required in an actual course, in which students receive credit for a grade of C. But we feel that a higher standard is necessary for granting graduate-level credit for experiential learning, in order to ensure the integrity of the program and to assure to outside parties that any grant of experiential learning credit is legitimate. This also compensates for the fact that what you learned, although credit-worthy, may not be exactly what our course syllabi describe as our student learning outcomes.

<sup>33</sup> We do not want you to *revise* your essays; we do not want to read it all again. We want to see only new materials, and new writing. If there is a significant amount of new material, then

cases we may *encourage* you to submit additional materials that would support your case for credit. You must do this within one month of receiving our response. Your appeal will then be evaluated by the same faculty members, with the addition of another person with more experience in your particular topic. We will respond to you within one month. No further appeal is possible.

### **17. How does experiential learning appear on the transcript?**

It is identified both as experiential learning *and* as the relevant topic. For example: Experiential Learning (3 units): Counseling in Hospitals and Convalescent Homes. Experiential learning credits will not appear on your transcript until you have taken at least one GCS course; we cannot issue a transcript that does not include an actual GCS course. If the unit total is 30 or less, we cannot include more than six experiential learning credits. If the total is more than 30, we can include up to nine units.

### **18. Do I have to be a GCS student to apply?**

In some cases students are trying to decide which seminary to go to, and their choice might depend in part on whether the school will give them credit for things they already know. So yes, we are willing to evaluate materials to see if they are credit-worthy even if you are not a GCS student. However, there are important limitations to this:

- a. You must have an accredited degree, bachelor's or higher, with a GPA of at least 3.0 out of 4.
- b. You must pay the fee, and acknowledge that it is not refundable even if you are not given any credit or you are denied admission to GCS.
- c. The credits will not go on a transcript unless and until you have also taken a GCS class. We cannot issue a transcript with nothing but prior learning credits.

Due to these significant limitations, we encourage you to first apply for admission to GCS. The application fee is less than the assessment fee for one class.

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it essentially becomes a new application, and should be accompanied by a new fee.

**19. Some of my learning experiences occurred because someone else failed to do what they were supposed to do. My experiential essay will reflect badly on that person. Will you keep what I write confidential?**

Yes. In keeping with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, we will not disclose anything in your application without your permission. You may also “black out” or change names of counselees and other details to protect confidential or proprietary information.

**20. Can you give me an example of a successful application for experiential credit?**

To honor the confidentiality of our student records, we won't give you an actual application. However, we have created a fictitious application. See the Public Information section of our website, [www.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=23](http://www.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=23). This should provide you with a useful example.

**21. How much does this cost?**

See our *Academic Catalog*, section III, for the exact amount. The cost is about one third of the normal tuition. However, you are paying for assessment, not for credit. If you do not receive credit, the fee is *not* refundable; the work involved in assessment has already been done.

This should be paid in advance by sending a check (payable to Grace Communion Seminary) to the Registrar, Grace Communion Seminary, 3120 Whitehall Park Drive, Charlotte, NC 28273-3335. Or you may phone the registrar at 1-800-851-2611 to pay by credit or debit card.

## Appendix A: Rubric for Assessing Previous Learning

Student name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of assessor: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic for which credit is requested: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of units requested for this topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Rate each component as to whether it is unacceptable, substandard, average, or excellent. At the end you may indicate whether you believe that credit is warranted, that it is likely to be given with additional information, that it is possible but unlikely, or that it is denied.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Ideal</b>	unacceptable	substandard	average	excellent
Cover letter	The credits will not be redundant with other courses that the student has taken or plans to take.				
Table of contents	Shows clear organization.				
Autobiographical description of experiences	Student clearly explains the relevant experiences, with attention given to experiences that led to the most learning; this helps indicate that the student has given thought to <i>how</i> those experiences have helped the student learn. Experiences are cross-referenced with supporting documentation at the end of the portfolio.				
Description of what was learned	Student uses facts and terminology appropriate to a graduate-level discussion, and uses those terms correctly				
	The student seems able to analyze facts to see which are the most important for the topic				
	Student seems aware of principles or generalizations that are transferable to other circumstances				

	Student seems conversant with major thinkers and theories				
	Student is able to comment on the merits of the various theories				
	Evidence is given that the student can apply the understanding in diverse settings				
	Learning seems to be at a graduate level				
Documentation	Evidence that student actually had the experience				
	Direct evidence of learning, such as products or presentations that the student created				
	Evidence that the learning is at a graduate level, such as a copy of a syllabus a seminary				
	Supplementary documentation, such as an essay or term paper written for this application				
Quality	Good organization, spelling, grammar, citations, bibliography, etc.				

Based on the above criteria, I judge that:

- \_\_\_ The student should be awarded the requested credits; the student has already learned at least as much as a B student in this topic, and it would be a waste of the student's time to have to sit through an introductory class on this topic.
- \_\_\_ The student has demonstrated significant learning on this topic, but not for as many units as requested. Number of units warranted: \_\_\_
- \_\_\_ The student probably has attained graduate-level learning, but I think the student needs to submit some additional evidence or essays to further substantiate any award of credit.
- \_\_\_ The student is unlikely to receive credit, but I am suggesting the type of evidence the student could submit in order to appeal this.
- \_\_\_ I am pretty sure that the student has not attained a graduate-level understanding of this topic, and that the student would learn a lot from taking a real class in this topic.

Faculty signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments: