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THE PLA **BOOST**

**Results from a 72-Institution
Targeted Study of
Prior Learning Assessment
and Adult Student Outcomes**

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Revised December 2020

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) received funding from Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network from 2018-2020 to partner with several organizations to conduct original research and a broad landscape analysis focused on policy and practice issues related to the recognition of prior learning. The landscape analysis focuses on issues arising in the practice of the recognition of prior learning, policies that encourage or limit its adoption, and key research needs and future directions for the field. One of the research projects was conducted in partnership with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), examining the use and impact of prior learning assessment (PLA) on adult student outcomes at 72 postsecondary institutions. This work resulted in this report.

The entire landscape initiative produced a series of briefs, reports, and actionable toolkits that can be found here: wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning.

This Executive Summary, the full report, the appendices and various auxilliary documents can also be found at cael.org/pla-impact.

Revised 12/1/2020: This report has been revised from the original due to the discovery of an error in the dataset (some PLA event records were duplicated due to a data matching error).

The revisions affect findings in this executive summary related to: average number of PLA credits earned, cost savings for the adult students, and time savings for adult students with PLA credits. A detailed errata sheet is available at www.cael.org/pla-impact as well as at the end of the main report.

All other findings in this executive summary related to completion rates and take-up rates remain unchanged from the original. The implications and recommendations from our findings also remain unchanged.

■ Executive Summary

Postsecondary institutions that have focused on adult learners have developed a number of strategies and programs to help put learning and credentials within reach. One important strategy is ensuring that adults are not wasting time and money by taking courses in subjects that they have already learned. Adult students—whether just starting college or returning after stopping or dropping out—often have significant college-level learning they have acquired outside of academia. Postsecondary institutions have the option to evaluate that learning for the purpose of awarding credit or otherwise recognizing the learning so that it can count toward a postsecondary degree or other credential. The methods that colleges use to evaluate this learning are typically referred to with terms like *prior learning assessment* (PLA), *credit for prior learning (CPL)*, or *recognition of learning*. (See box for specific PLA methods used by postsecondary institutions.) An important question is whether earning credit through PLA makes a difference for the adult student in terms of their ability to complete a postsecondary credential.

In theory, a combination of benefits from PLA—cost savings, time savings, credit accumulation, improved motivation and validation—help propel these students toward graduation. CAEL and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) jointly embarked on this new study funded by Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network to examine the impact of PLA on adult student educational outcomes. A primary focus of the analysis was credential completion; examined credentials included bachelor's degrees, associate degrees and certificates.

This study examined data provided by 72 postsecondary institutions about the enrollment, credit-earning, and degree-earning of more than 465,000 students of all ages, focusing in particular on more than 232,000 adult learners (defined as students age 25 and older) from 69 of the participating institutions that were able to provide the most detailed data on PLA credit-earning. Academic record data was provided for the period between the academic year 2011-2012 and the end of 2018, a seven-and-a-half-year period. Because adults students with credit for military training make up a large percentage of the PLA credit-earners in the sample, the findings for all PLA credit-earners including military credit (group name: PLA) are frequently presented alongside results for students earning PLA from methods other than American Council on Education (ACE) credit recommendations for military training and occupations (group name: PLA-non-military). (See box for specific methods of PLA included in the analysis.)

Methods of PLA

- Standardized exams (e.g., CLEP exams through the College Board, DSST military exams through Prometric, UExcel exams through Excelsior College)

- Challenge or departmental exams

- Portfolio assessment

- Credit for military training (typically through American Council on Education, or ACE, credit recommendations)

- Credit for corporate or other external training (typically through ACE or National College Credit Recommendation Service, or NCCRS, credit recommendations)

- Institutional review of external training, licenses, or certifications.

High school exams (Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate, "AP/IB") are another alternative credit-earning tool. They are sometimes included in the larger definition of PLA but, because they are not available to most returning adult students, are not the focus of this report.

Key Findings[i]

About one in ten (11%) of the entering adult students in the study's sample earned PLA credit. The number was dominated by students with credit earned through ACE credit recommendation for military training and occupations. The average number of PLA credits earned per student equaled nearly a semester of full-time study.

- PLA take-up (the share of students who earned PLA credit) for adult students at the participating study institutions was 11%, dropping to 4% among adult students with PLA credit from any source other than ACE credit recommendations for military training and occupations. Although there are no official benchmarks or standards, the overall take-up rate for our sample was much lower than the 25% take-up rate found at the institutions participating in CAEL's 2010 *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* study.[ii]

- Adult students enrolled at two-year public institutions (community and technical colleges) had the lowest take-up rates: 4% for PLA and 2% for PLA-non-military.

- Hispanic and White adult students were both more likely to have PLA than Black and American Indian/Alaska Native adult students; Asian students were also more likely to have PLA than Black students (among the 53% of the adult students for which race/ethnicity was reported).[iii]

- Female adult students were less likely to earn PLA credits than male adult students, but the differences narrowed considerably when looking at PLA-non-military credits.

- Adult students with relatively higher socioeconomic levels (non-Pell Grant recipients and students living in neighborhoods with lower concentrations of low-income individuals) were more likely to have PLA credit than adult students with lower socioeconomic status (SES).

- The average number of PLA credits earned at the participating institutions was 14.8 credits, dropping to 11.7 credits when excluding ACE credit recommendations for military. Across most student subgroups and institutional categories, the average number of PLA credits earned was equal to or greater than a half-year of full-time study.

PLA is indeed associated with better student outcomes. These included higher credential completion, cost savings, and time savings.

PLA students were more likely to complete college credentials than non-PLA students—this was true for adult students of all races, ethnicities, and income levels. The 24,512 adult students who earned PLA credits had a credential completion rate of 49% over the seven-and-a-half-year observation period, compared to 27% among adult students with no PLA credits. Credential completion was even higher (73%) for adult students with PLA credit from methods other than ACE credit recommendations for military (Figure A). The completion rate includes completion of bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificates.

QUICK DATA

11%

of entering adult students earned credit for college-level learning acquired outside of the classroom through PLA.

Adult students earned:

14.8 PLA Credits

11.7 Non-military PLA Credits

or nearly a semester of full-time study

Adult students credential completion rates:

49%
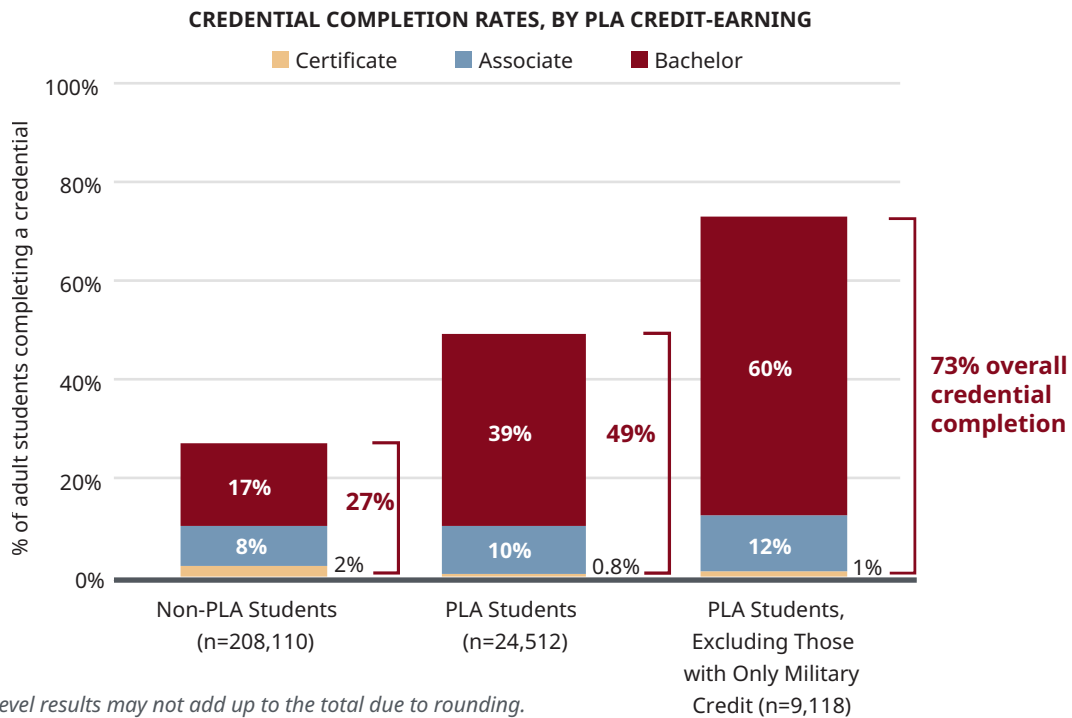With PLA

27%
Without PLA

The PLA boost for adult student completion when controlling for other factors (PSM effect size):

17%
All PLA methods

30%
Methods that were not ACE credit recommendations for military

Using propensity score matching to isolate the impact on credential completion from PLA alone, we found that PLA increased the likelihood of an adult student's completion by more than 17% (30% for adult students using PLA methods other than ACE credit recommendations for military).[iv] The impact of PLA on credential completion was also significant for students who were Hispanic (24% improvement in completion with PLA, and 32% with PLA-non-military), Black (14% improvement with PLA and 28% from PLA-non-military), community college students (25% improvement with PLA and 36% with PLA-non-military), students at minority-serving institutions (MSIs) (33% improvement with PLA and 42% improvement with PLA-non-military), and Pell Grant recipients (19% improvement with PLA and 33% with PLA-non-military) (Table A). *Note that these effect sizes are quite large relative to standards established by the Institute of Education Sciences; an explanation of the relative strength of the PLA effect sizes can be found in Appendix A.*

Across all of the major student subgroups analyzed, there were significantly higher rates of completing any credential for adult PLA students compared with adult non-PLA students. The subgroups studied included gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic performance, and types of institutions.

Figure A. Adult students with PLA credits had higher overall credential completion, compared to adult students without PLA, from 2011-2012 academic year to end of 2018.

CREDENTIAL COMPLETION RATES, BY PLA CREDIT-EARNING

Credential level results may not add up to the total due to rounding.

[iv] The propensity score methodology, which is designed to remove concerns about selection bias in examining PLA outcomes, is described in the main report and discussed in greater detail in Appendix A.

Table A. Propensity score matching analysis shows that there was strong positive PLA effect on credential completion for all student and institutional subgroups at the participating institutions, and that effect increased when examining credit from PLA-non-military methods

	PLA effect size (SE)	PLA-non-military effect size (SE)
Overall	.17 (.005)	0.30 (.007)
Student-Level Categories		
Student had received one or more Pell Grants	.19 (.007)	.33 (.010)
Student had not received a Pell Grant	.13 (.007)	.26 (.011)
Black	.14 (.018)	.28 (.027)
White	.18 (.012)	.23 (.015)
Hispanic	.24 (.021)	.32 (.026)
Institutional Categories		
2-Year Public	.25 (.014)	.36 (.019)
4-Year Public	.14 (.010)	.20 (.016)
4-Year Private	.18 (.033)	.18 (.031)
For-profit	.16 (.006)	Results not significant
Minority-serving institution (MSI)	.33 (.022)	.42 (.025)
Not MSI	.16 (.005)	.30 (.008)

SE=Standard error, which is an indication of the reliability of the mean (measure). A small SE (relative to the reported effect size) is an indication that the mean effect size is a more accurate reflection of the actual population mean. A larger sample size will normally result in a smaller SE.

Additional PSM analysis results can be found in Appendix D.

PLA has strong potential to be a tool for closing equity gaps in postsecondary achievement, provided PLA is made more accessible to students who could benefit the most.

As we face an economic crisis that has dislocated many millions of workers, and that has disproportionately affected low-income Hispanic, Black, and Native Americans, one possible response is for the country to invest in reskilling and upskilling of unemployed workers, and preparing those workers for high-demand jobs in growing industries through postsecondary learning and credentials. Our findings suggest that PLA can be an important tool for helping more adult students complete credentials—whether associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, or certificates—by leveraging what they already know from work and life experiences. We are mindful, however, of the fact that inequality in educational

PLA boosted completion rates for adult students of color, low income adult students, and adult students across the academic performance spectrum.

Credit through certain methods of PLA may help close equity gaps, provided that access to these methods is also equitable.

However, in this study, Black and lower income adult students were less likely to have PLA credit than other adult students.

attainment is a pervasive challenge in the U.S., with attainment rates varying significantly for different racial and ethnic groups, income levels, and educational histories. Investigating the equitability of PLA usage and impact was, therefore, an important focus of this study.

We found that credit through certain methods of PLA may help close equity gaps, *provided that access to these methods is also equitable.* Among the adult students with reported race/ethnicity, PLA adult students of each of the examined race/ethnicity groups had higher completion rates compared to their non-PLA counterparts, with the largest PLA boost to completion for Hispanic students and Black students (Figure B). For example, 40% of Black adult students with PLA credit completed a credential, compared to only 17% of Black adult students without PLA. Overall completion rates were higher for White and Hispanic adult students compared to Black adult students, but those differences narrowed when looking at students with credit from non-military PLA methods.

Lower-income adult students with PLA were also significantly more likely to complete credentials, compared to similar students without PLA. For example, 55% of adult Pell Grant recipients with PLA credit completed a credential, compared to only 27% of adult Pell Grant recipients without PLA.

> " For us, PLA is a huge component of accessibility and equity. It is an equitable practice that does not discriminate on the basis of how the knowledge and skills were acquired: college-level learning does not necessarily mean college-classroom learning only. Work-related learning and industry expertise can equal college-level learning and providing adults with an opportunity to petition for credit based on these types of learning experiences. It is a practice that removes barriers to higher education."
>
> *Administrator, 2-year public institution*

Figure B. Hispanic, Asian, Black and White adult students had higher overall credential completion with PLA credit compared to similar students without such credit; Hispanic, Black and White adult students had still higher completion with PLA-non-military credit, compared to similar students without such credit†

COMPLETION BY RACE/ETHNICITY
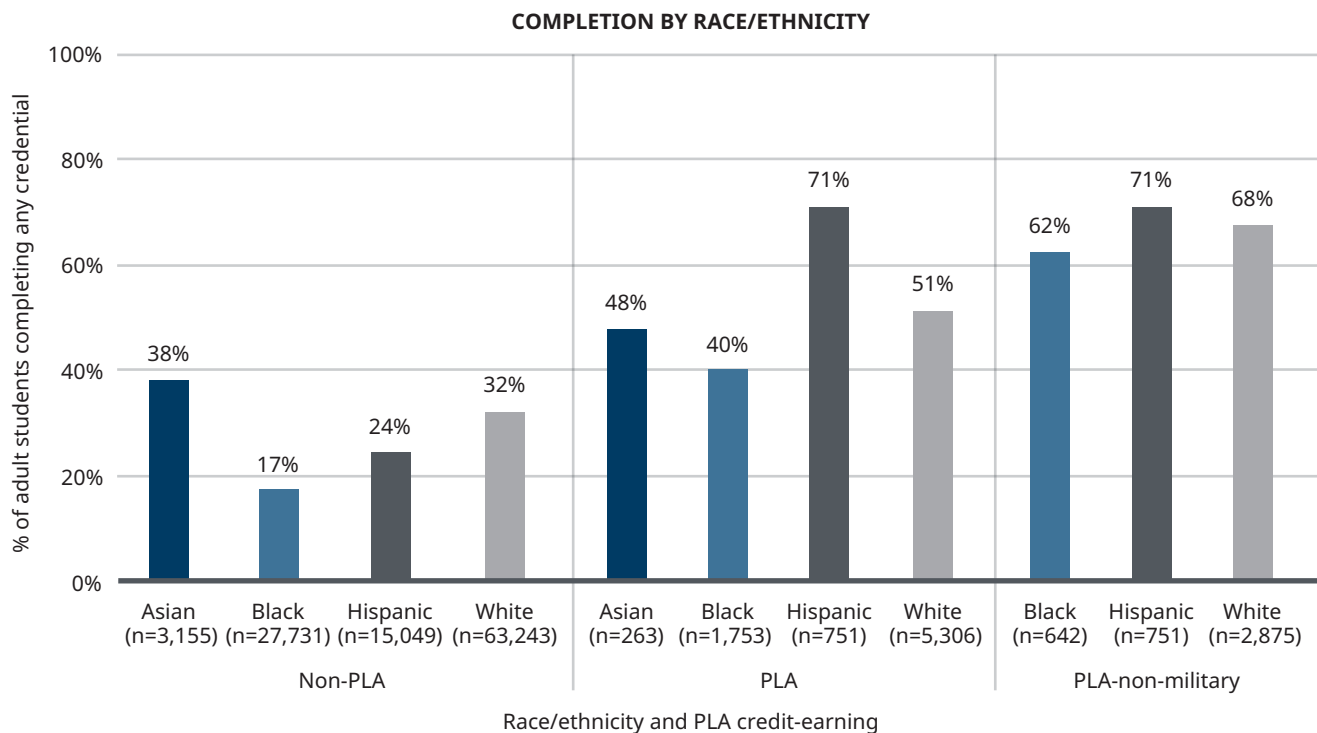
†*Analysis of non-AP/IB and non-military PLA methods for Asian students was not possible due to small sample sizes.*

Access to PLA, however, may not be equitable: Black and lower-income adult students in our sample were less likely to have credit from PLA compared to other groups (Table B), suggesting that institutions may need to focus more intentionally on improving PLA usage among Black and lower-income adult students.

Overall, the findings suggest that key adult student populations like Hispanic, Black, and low-income adult students, and adults with relatively less (or less recent) college preparation, could benefit from PLA for improved completion outcomes. However, PLA cannot be a tool for improving equity unless and until measures are carefully put into place to ensure all students have the same access, which would likely require special attention to messaging, outreach, advising, and supports.

Table B. The lowest PLA take-up rates were among adult students who are Black and lower income

	PLA take-up rates	PLA-non-military take-up rates
All adult students (age 25+)	11%	4%
Race/ethnicity - U.S. Department of Education method for categorizing†		
Asian	8%	4%
Black	6%	2%
Hispanic	8%	5%
White	8%	4%
Other/Multiracial (includes all NH/OPI- and AI/AN-identifying students)	7%	2%
Race categories with too few students to be analyzed according to U.S. Dept of Ed method†		
Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander	7%	2%
American Indian/Alaska Native	6%	3%
Pell Status		
Student had received one or more Pell Grants	7%	3%
Student had not received a Pell Grant	16%	6%
Share of individuals in residential area at or below 200% poverty level		
Less than 15% of residential area at or below 200% poverty level (Proxy for high SES)	14%	7%
Between 15 and 30% of residential area	12%	5%
Between 30 and 45% of residential area	10%	3%
Between 45 and 60% of residential area	8%	3%
More than 60% of residential area is at or below 200% poverty level (Proxy for low SES)	7%	3%

† Based on the 53% of the adult students in the sample whose race/ethnicity was reported. The PLA take-up rates by race-ethnicity therefore are different from the PLA take-up rates for the entire sample. For an explanation of how students were categorized by race/ethnicity, please see note to Table 3 in the main report, or Appendix A.

Adult students saved time and money from earning PLA credit.

Cost Savings: The adult students in our sample saved an estimated average cost of:

- $1,481 at 2-year public institutions
- $3,794 at 4-year publics
- $10,220 at 4-year private nonprofits, and
- $6,090 at for-profits

For comparison, The College Board estimated the average annual tuition and fees in 2018 to be $3,700 at 2-year public institutions, $10,390 at 4-year public institutions, and more than $36,000 at 4-year private nonprofit institutions.

PLA SAVES MONEY

$1,500 to $10,200

Estimated adult student savings through PLA, depending on sector

PLA SAVES TIME

9 to 14 Months

Estimated adult student time savings in earning degrees, with 12 or more PLA credits

Time Savings: When earning at least 12 PLA credits, associate degree earners at 2-year public institutions saved an average of 14 months in earning their degrees; and bachelor's degree earners saved more than 9 months, compared to similar students with no PLA credit.

Because PLA students were more likely to persist and complete, they earned more credits through regular course-taking at their institutions than non-PLA students.

Adult students with PLA earned, on average, 17.6 more traditional course credits than the adult students without PLA credit. In other words, on average, institutions earned roughly a full-time semester's worth of additional tuition revenue from adult students with PLA compared to adult students without PLA.

Adult students with PLA credit had higher completion rates, for any PLA method used

For the adult PLA credit-earners in our sample, the most common PLA methods were credits through ACE credit recommendations for military (68%), standardized exams (22%), and credit for certifications and licenses (7.5%). Credential completion rates for adult students for all non-military PLA methods ranged from 65% to 80%. Credential completion for those with PLA military credits were higher than for non-PLA students (35% and 27%, respectively), but not as high as for the other PLA methods.

Veterans and other service members had high PLA use, along with a significant completion benefit.

PLA shows great promise as a completion tool for veterans and other service members. The service members in our sample had very high PLA take-up rates (43%), compared to 3% of non-service members, and service members with PLA credit had higher credential completion (35%) compared to service members without PLA credit (21%). Compared with non-service member PLA-earners, service members with PLA credit had higher average numbers of PLA credits and lower completion rates.

INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS

17.6
More Credits

Institutions also benefitted from PLA—on average, PLA students took 17.6 more course credits than non-PLA students.

Our sample cohort matriculated in 2011-2012, when there were mass discharges from the military, a lack of available jobs that spurred many veterans (and many others) to go to college, large numbers of veterans enrolling with new GI Bill benefits, a lack of guidance for the newly-discharged on where to enroll and what to study, and institutions that may not yet have fully understood how to support students transitioning from the military. In this context, the veterans in our sample may have had expanded access to PLA, possibly because at that time public officials were encouraging colleges and universities to recognize the learning from—and award credit for—military training and occupations (two states had legislation to that effect by early 2012).

The high PLA take-up rates for service members suggest that when adult students know about PLA opportunities, when institutions have an interest in encouraging the awarding of PLA credits, and when the awarding of credit for prior learning has a simple process (like ACE credit recommendations for military), more students can earn credit through PLA. In other words, the overall average take-up rate of 11% in our sample may be a lot lower than what should ultimately be possible.

What Has Changed in Ten Years?

Compared to the results from ten years ago, the findings from this study of a broader spectrum of institutions still show a significant PLA "boost" to credential completion, evident for all student subgroups, including race, ethnicity, income level, institutional sector, and many other categories. Building on this finding, this more recent examination of PLA provides even stronger evidence by incorporating a statistical modeling approach that isolates the impact of PLA, while controlling for many demographic and academic characteristics as well as various institutional environments. Where this study's results differ from the one from ten years ago is in PLA take-up rates. The participating institutions in this study had lower PLA take-up rates, with only 11% of all adult students in the sample earning credit through PLA, compared to 25% of the adult students at the participating institutions in the 2010 sample. Taken together, both of these studies provide consistently positive evidence about PLA, and they provide information about PLA deployed within a range of contexts, even if in research terms neither study is generalizable to the universe of postsecondary education.

Recommendations

The findings from this study point to a number of recommendations for higher education, workforce development, public policy, and future research.

To Promote Equity

The findings from this research study show strong effects from PLA on completion for every student sub-group. PLA has great potential to be a tool for improving equity in educational attainment, but it cannot fulfill that promise if key student subgroups—particularly Black adult students and low-income students—are not utilizing it to a sufficient degree. In this study, both Black and lower-income adult students had significantly higher rates of credential completion when they had earned PLA credit. Yet, these students also had lower PLA take-up rates than other adult student groups. To ensure that PLA programs close opportunity gaps among students, institutions should:

- **Ensure institutional data systems can and do link PLA credit, student demographics, and student outcomes, so that institutions can better understand how well PLA is serving key student populations—whether students of color, student parents, or student veterans.** Not all institutions have established systems for tracking and reporting on PLA usage, even though existing data systems can be employed to do so (Klein-Collins, 2016). Institutions must establish systems and processes for tracking information on PLA credit-earning, and they must regularly analyze programs to assess the equitability of student access to PLA as well as student outcomes. If key populations, such as Black adult students, are not using PLA, the institution should investigate why and make changes to reach those students better. Similarly, if key populations, such as service members, have lower completion rates—whether with or without PLA credit—institutions should address how the success of those student groups might be improved.

- **Target PLA marketing and advising efforts to student populations with completion and opportunity gaps.** Institutions need to ensure their marketing and outreach strategies are not merely inclusive of all students, but also intentional in their focus on reaching those from underrepresented backgrounds, as part of an overall strategy to improve PLA usage by these groups. Institutions need to make PLA a mandatory component of adult student advising, with special strategies for encouraging key populations to pursue PLA options. For example, previous research has found that PLA administrators often encourage Spanish-speakers to pursue Spanish CLEP credit (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014), which could be one reason why Hispanic adult students in our sample had higher PLA take-up rates, compared with the Black or American Indian/Alaska Native adult students. More proactive advising to discover work-related skills and knowledge for other groups could have a positive effect on PLA usage by other groups.

- **Assess the institutional business case for scaled PLA offerings at low or no cost to the student.** The data presented here show that students who earn PLA credit also take and complete more courses at their institution. The data also show that students receiving Pell Grants were less likely to receive PLA, suggesting that one barrier to PLA usage could be the additional cost to the student from PLA fees. Institutions might consider developing creative funding strategies to provide PLA opportunities to low-income students with an expectation that the institution could recoup costs through better retention and higher completion.

To Scale PLA Usage through Institutional Policies, Practices, and Partnerships

Given the strong, positive impact from PLA for students and institutions, scaling PLA usage should be a priority. To scale PLA usage, institutions should:

- **Make sure that PLA options are available and promoted as a key part of all credential programs.** Institutions should make sure PLA is able to be applied across all programs of study (e.g., degrees, certificates) and part of their overall adult learner marketing strategies. They can leverage data analytics to ensure their website is successful promoting PLA and provide information about the benefits of PLA during recruitment events.

> " If a college doesn't have someone like the team that [I had] to help walk them through [PLA], they certainly need it. There are so many people out there who just need that little extra boost and this is the thing that helps it out."
>
> *Adult learner*

- **Embed PLA into all aspects of the student lifecycle, with faculty as key partners.** Students should hear about PLA early in their enrollment and multiple times thereafter. Advisors and faculty (who also have an important advisory role) who are aware of PLA and what the options and benefits are can help students take advantage of it.

- **Ensure availability of multiple methods of PLA and expand the range of coursework for which it can be applied**. The vast majority of the PLA credit-earners in our sample used only one method of PLA. Students are possibly leaving credits on the table if they are not encouraged to explore whether other methods of PLA credit-earning could help them get closer to completion. When advising adult students about PLA, institutions should consider helping students use a combination of PLA methods. Institutions should also examine their internal policies to determine if they need to implement additional methods of PLA and to see whether PLA can be used for a broader set of courses and programs.

- **Establish policies to accept PLA credits awarded by other accredited institutions**. When students move between and among different postsecondary institutions, there is often risk of students not having all of their previous course credits accepted by the receiving institution. This can be particularly problematic for PLA credits that are listed on a student's transcript. Institutions should ensure that their transfer credit policies have clear guidelines for how to evaluate credits awarded by other institutions through PLA methods, and these guidelines should not treat PLA credits as "lesser" in value, compared to other transcripted learning.

- **Engage employers in the PLA enterprise**. An institution's partnerships with employers could help to expand uses for PLA. Employers will find it appealing to know that the skills their workers have developed on the job could count towards postsecondary credential programs, helping to save on tuition costs and time spent in the classroom. This speaks directly to employers' bottom line if that employer is providing tuition assistance or is needing for employees to accelerate their completion of certain credentials.

- **Invest in making their PLA programs robust.** Institutions need to train faculty and staff and provide appropriate staffing support and other tools to help in the advisement of students on PLA and to provide oversight and improvements to PLA programs.

- **Institutions should join with other postsecondary institutions and workforce development boards to build partnerships to scale PLA options and capacity.** Institutions should collaborate with each other, connect with national organizations such as CAEL and WICHE that have produced best practice research, and seek out new models and practices from others writing or speaking about their lessons from and successes with PLA. Peer learning options include CAEL's membership community and the Prior Learning Assessment Network (PLAN), facilitated by SUNY-Empire State College.

To Build Support for PLA at the Institutional Level

To build buy-in for PLA programs across the institution (administration, staff, and faculty), institutions should:

- **Include PLA as part of the strategic planning at the institution.** By including PLA in the strategic plan, it becomes part of the institution's culture and shared priority. Institutional leadership, faculty, and staff will also have benchmarks to work toward. Provide evidence such as the results from this study of the student and institutional benefit, for building the business and academic learning case for PLA.

- **Collaborate with other departments across campus to develop and implement PLA programs.** Even prior to Spring 2020, institutions in this study reported that their PLA offices were not likely to have many FTE and were often constrained by small budgets and minimal staff support. By collaborating across the campus, PLA administrators can expand support for PLA by making it a shared priority.

> " I was very excited when I saw that the information that I had was credible and that it was noted as college material. And I think that it boosts anybody's self-esteem if you know that you've done a job and, yes, you have learned aspects that can be utilized as college credential."
>
> *Adult learner*

- **Work with faculty to garner buy-in.** PLA staff can educate and engage faculty through trainings, professional development, and discussions. PLA programs can gain buy-in from faculty by highlighting student successes and providing evidence such as from this study. Effective data systems that track PLA and student outcomes can help address faculty questions and concerns.

- **Ensure quality assurance.** It is essential that an institution's PLA program be grounded in high-quality practices for learning evaluations and assessments. For example, CAEL's standards for assessing learning stipulate that college credits should never be awarded based on a student's description of their work experiences alone, and assessments of learning need to be conducted by experts in the particular field for which credit is to be granted (Younger & Marienau, 2017). Institutions need to establish and adhere to clear processes, procedures, and oversight, as would be required for any other academic process.

- **Conduct ongoing, systematic program evaluations.** PLA coordinators can connect with institutional researchers to evaluate effectiveness of advising and outreach in promoting PLA usage, as well as student outcomes for individuals with PLA credits. In addition to analyzing data from institutional research shops, institutions should get feedback from students themselves on the ease of access to PLA as well as the value of PLA for understanding their own learning and for their overall academic success.

To Improve System, State, and Federal Policies

There are several potential policy and practice adjustments that can also boost usage of PLA:

- **System leaders should encourage consistent PLA policies across all institutions.** Students should not be faced with different PLA policies and practices within the same system. Leaders should work with institutions to encourage a range of PLA offerings and a harmonization of their policies and practices. In particular, leaders should encourage institutions within the same system should honor and accept each other's PLA credit awards to ensure that no PLA credits are lost due to student transfer.

- **Policymakers at the state and federal levels should adjust financial aid models to cover expenses related to the assessment of prior learning.** Costs associated with earning PLA credits are not currently covered by federal Title IV financial aid programs or most state financial aid policies (GI Bill benefits do cover the costs of many standardized assessments). This can be a barrier for students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

- **State and federal policymakers should incent and invest in both colleges and workforce development organizations to expand PLA offerings across all of their programs.** Given the current economic impact of COVID-19, there are millions of unemployed Americans who will be looking to reskill and upskill as they navigate a changing economy—while also bringing with them years of skills and knowledge they have acquired from their work experiences. In workforce development and training investments that are designed to address dislocated workers during this recession, PLA needs to be an important component to use public resources more efficiently and to help workers complete their training more quickly.

To Support Future Directions and Research Needs for the Field

While this research has provided strong evidence of the positive connection between PLA credit-earning and adult student success, the analysis raises many questions for researchers to explore. For example, further study is needed on: past and current experiences of military service members, PLA credit productivity (the extent to which PLA credits that are awarded actually count toward a student's credential), time-savings from PLA using multivariate analysis, effective practices for using PLA as an equity tool, and effective strategies for increasing adult student awareness and usage of PLA, especially for dislocated workers in the pandemic recession who will be bringing learning acquired from the world of work.

> **" I could only apply for certain amounts of loans, [so] throughout the last two years, I was actually paying some money out of pocket. That was already weighing heavily on me. It was already a struggle throughout the two years trying to pay for tuition. But being able to radically reduce it [with PLA] definitely helped me."**
>
> *Adult learner*

Conclusion

While this report provides clear and compelling evidence that PLA can be an important tool to support adult student credential completion, there is still much work to do. For PLA to have a real impact, PLA can no longer be a best kept secret that adult students hear about through happenstance or word of mouth. Of critical importance is to make sure there is better access to PLA among adult students who have not traditionally had strong access to these programs. Institutions must make concerted efforts to encourage low-income adult students and adult students of color—particularly Black adult students—to take advantage of PLA offerings and to understand why their benefit from PLA appears to be lower than that of other students.

At the time of this writing, regions and states are facing tremendous economic challenges in the months and years ahead as they rebuild labor market opportunities for workers dislocated during the pandemic recession. Workforce strategies could be more effective at helping workers reach their goals—and do so quicker and at a lower cost—by incorporating methods that recognize and value what these workers already know and can do.

By assessing learning, recognizing learning, and valuing learning, our postsecondary institutions and workforce agencies will help more learners and workers earn the credentials they need to reach their goals.

List of Participating Institutions

Arapahoe Community College
Atlanta Metropolitan State College
Capella University
Charter Oak State College
Community College of Allegheny County
Community College of Aurora
Community College of Denver
Community College of Vermont/
    Vermont State Colleges System
CUNY School of Professional Studies
D'Youville College
Dakota County Technical College
Dallas College Eastfield Campus
Endicott College
Ferris State University
Florida International University
Franklin Pierce University
Front Range Community College
George Fox University
Goddard College
Gordon State College
Governors State University
Hawai'i Community College
Inver Hills Community College
James Madison University
Kapi'olani Community College
Leeward Community College
Lewis University
Metropolitan State University of Denver
Metropolitan State University-MN
Miami Dade College
Mid-America Christian University
Montana State University Billings
Montgomery County Community College
Mountwest Community & Technical College
Mt Hood Community College
National Louis University
North Shore Community College

Northcentral Technical College
Northeast Wisconsin Technical College
Northeastern Illinois University
Northeastern Junior College
Peirce College
Penn State
Pikes Peak Community College
Pueblo Community College
Purdue University Global
Red Rocks Community College
Rio Salado College
Sacramento State
Sinclair Community College
Southern Oregon University
Southwestern Oregon Community College
Stark State College
The New School
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Tidewater Community College
Union Institute & University
University of Alaska Anchorage
University of Hawai'i - West O'ahu
University of Hawai'i at Hilo
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
University of Louisville
University of Maryland Global Campus
University of Memphis
University of Phoenix
University of Southern Maine
University of West Georgia
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
Walden University
West Hills Community College District—
    Coalinga College
West Hills Community College District—
    Lemoore College
Western Governors University

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About the Organizations

Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers, postsecondary educators, and employers, industry groups, foundations, and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. Established in 1974, CAEL, a Strada Education Network affiliate, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization. Visit *www.cael.org* to learn more.

For more than 65 years, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has been strengthening higher education, workforce development, and behavioral health throughout the region. As an interstate compact, WICHE partners with states, territories, and postsecondary institutions to share knowledge, create resources, and develop innovative solutions that address some of our society's most pressing needs. From promoting high-quality, affordable postsecondary education to helping states get the most from their technology investments and addressing behavioral health challenges, WICHE improves lives across the West through innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy. Visit *www.wiche.edu* to learn more.

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Lumina's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy. Learn more at *luminafoundation.org*.

Strada Education Network is a national nonprofit dedicated to improving lives by catalyzing more direct and promising pathways between education and employment. Strada engages partners across education, nonprofits, business, and government to focus relentlessly on students' success throughout all phases of their working lives. With these partners they address critical college-to-career challenges through strategic philanthropy, research and insights, and mission-aligned affiliates, all focused on advancing the universal right to realized potential. Learn more at *stradaeducation.org*.