



RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Recognizing Prior Learning in the 21st Century: A Synthesis Brief

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This brief is part of a broad landscape analysis focused on policy and practice issues related to the recognition of prior learning and is published by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, with funding from Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network. 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. To see the full series of briefs, as well as original research completed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning on the outcomes of PLA recipients, please visit wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning/.

Key Highlights of this Brief

- ▶ The project produced strong evidence that receiving credit for prior learning improves student outcomes including higher completion rates (receiving PLA credit increased the likelihood of an adult student's completion by more than 17 percent) and shorter time to degree (adult students saved on average 9-14 months of time).
- ▶ The equity implications of receiving credit for prior learning are complex but important.
 - ▶ All student groups receive a completion "boost" from PLA, but the impact varies by race/ethnicity and income level, with Black students seeing a smaller increase than their peers, while low-income students see a higher increase
 - ▶ Black students, low-income students, and community college students have relatively lower access to PLA than other groups.

- ▶ The cost of PLA can be prohibitive to some students.
- ▶ Lack of information about PLA limits access and lessens the effectiveness of strong policies and programs.
- ▶ Workers in low-skill jobs, often signaled by low wages, are excluded from PLA opportunities except in rare partnerships between large corporations and institutions.
- ▶ The percentage of institutions that use student-level PLA data for analysis is small.
- ▶ There are significant opportunities to scale use of prior learning assessment across campuses, but challenges remain.
 - ▶ Few students seem to take advantage of PLA opportunities.
 - ▶ Institutional policies appear significant.
 - ▶ Institutions communicate PLA opportunities to students in a variety of ways; some are better than others.
 - ▶ Collaboration across campus is important to build buy-in and scale.
 - ▶ Proactive student advising is necessary to support students in learning about and earning credit through PLA.
 - ▶ The type and breadth of technology used to support PLA matters.
- ▶ The "business case" for improved PLA at institutions is strong (across all institutions, the average number of additional residential credits earned by adult PLA students was 17.6), but myths about PLA cutting into institutional revenue remain.

“Sally”, a 60-year-old widow, cares for her disabled sister in a small town in West Virginia. After high school, she enrolled in a local community college with the goal of becoming a nurse. She was working full-time to earn enough for school, and as she put it, “after the first year I was just tired. I was very tired and so you know, life got in the way. I ended up getting married, and I had a daughter and I went back to work.” Sherry continued to work for the same pharmacy store chain for 35 years, beginning as a cashier in high school and working her way up to regional office management and logistics. When the company closed in 2018, she hoped to find a job in distribution or logistics at the regional level for another company. But she soon realized, that unless you “grow up” in a company as she had or have a college degree, few, if any, companies would hire at the manager level. When her company closed, the local workforce board offered employees the opportunity to take a few classes for free at the local community college, one of which was a course that introduced portfolios. Sherry soon enrolled at the college where she completed 6 portfolios in IT and management based on her experiences on the job (faculty reviewed these portfolios and awarded her a total of 18 credits) and earned her associates degree less than 18 months later.

Introduction

Thousands of adults without college degrees, but who have years of college-level learning gained through life and work experiences, have found themselves in similar positions as Sally. With a large number of displaced workers due to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, re-skilling and up-skilling must be part of the solution, and policies and practices that can help these workers efficiently earn new credentials of value will be a crucial part of the recovery. Policies and practices in which institutions, employers, and students themselves can recognize and validate learning that takes place outside of the institution, such as prior learning assessment (PLA), can and should be one focus of efforts to accelerate the recovery and bring about racial justice in higher education.

Long before Spring 2020, with funding from Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) began partnering with numerous higher education organizations and PLA experts to develop a landscape analysis that examines the issue of

PLA from diverse perspectives within the higher education ecosystem, identifying policy and practices challenges and successes. Additionally, WICHE joined the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to conduct an impact study examining how receipt of credit for prior learning benefits students.¹ Seventy-two institutions shared deidentified, student-level data on students including both those who received credit for prior learning and those who did not. The complete sample from the 72 institutions held the academic records of 465,102 undergraduate, degree-seeking students, of which 238,760 (51 percent) were age 25 or older.

This work, known as *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century*, is meant to help policymakers, practitioners, and others better understand the current state of the field for the recognition of prior learning, opportunities for scaling the practice, current challenges, and recommendations. WICHE and its partners have fielded membership surveys, analyzed other rich datasets to provide quantitative data related to credit for prior learning, and reported qualitative data in preparing a series of briefs and actionable resources that have been released over the past six months. Throughout the project, WICHE, CAEL, and other partners sought out student perspectives on PLA opportunities, challenges, and recommendations through surveys and interviews.

A synthesis of the key takeaways, recommendations, and suggested future directions from this body of work is shown on page 3.

Findings

On the following pages, we present four key findings drawn from across the *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* project.

TAKEAWAY #1: Receiving credit for prior learning improves student outcomes.

- **Rigorous analyses strengthen evidence showing improved student outcomes from receipt of PLA credit.** Using propensity score matching to isolate the impact on credential completion from receiving PLA credit in their 72-institution study, *The PLA Boost*, CAEL and WICHE found that receiving PLA credit increased the likelihood of an adult student’s completion by more than 17 percent.² The impact from PLA on credential completion was also significant for Hispanic students (24 percent improvement in completion from PLA), African American

Types of Prior Learning Assessment

Many students – as well as potential students – have acquired a great deal of college-level knowledge and skills through their day-to-day lives outside of academia: from work experience, on-the-job training, formal corporate training, military training, volunteer work, self-study, and myriad other extra-institutional learning opportunities available through low-cost or no-cost online sources.

The process for recognizing and awarding credit for college-level learning acquired outside of the classroom is often referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). There are several ways students can demonstrate this learning and earn credit for it in college. The various partners involved in creating this series of briefs are examining different types of PLA and using the following general descriptions of the different methods.

- **Standardized examination:** Students complete exams such as Advanced Placement (AP), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Excelsior (UExcel), DANES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), and others.
- **Faculty-developed challenge exam:** Students take a comprehensive exam developed by campus faculty to earn credit for a specific course.
- **Portfolio-based and other individualized assessment:** Students prepare a portfolio or demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and non-credit activities. Faculty then evaluate the student's portfolio and award credit as appropriate.
- **Evaluation of non-college programs:** Students can earn credit based on recommendations provided by the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) that conduct evaluations of training that is offered by employers or the military. Institutions also conduct their own review of programs, including coordinating with workforce development agencies and other training providers to develop crosswalks that map between external training/credentials and existing degree programs.

students (14 percent improvement), community college students (25 percent improvement), and Pell recipients (19 percent improvement).³ Although the study included a broad sample across two- and four-year institutions, the findings are not necessarily generalizable across “higher education” broadly speaking (nor should it be), but this work moves the evidence base surrounding credit for prior learning forward substantially.⁴ In their brief, *Recognizing Prior Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Helping Displaced Workers and Students One Credit at a Time*, WICHE and CAEL discuss these findings and what they mean against the backdrop of COVID-19 and its accompanying recession.⁵

- **Higher credential completion for PLA students.** This includes completion of bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and certificates.⁶ In their brief, *Credit for Prior Learning in the Community College: A Case from Colorado*, Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center researched the impact grants such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program can have on PLA program implementation. The researchers found that receipt of PLA credit is associated with a higher probability of earning at least one of the credential types.⁷ However, the associations are stronger for models predicting associate's degree completion (6-7 percentage points) or any credential (7-8 percentage points) than for those predicting certificate completion (about 2 percentage points).⁸
- **Reduced time to degree.** When controlling for an adult student's transfer credits and enrollment intensity (average number of courses they take at a time) in the CAEL and WICHE study, adult completers with PLA have a shorter time to degree compared to similar students without PLA, saving on average 9-14 months of time.⁹
- **Potentially higher earnings.** The brief, *Credit by Examination: Recognizing Learning and Supporting Adult Learners*, summarizes existing research on two distinct set of exams, College Board's College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and ACT's WorkKeys assessment, and suggests that PLA can impact earnings. A robust evaluation of the CLEP program found those scoring above a 50 to have higher post-credential earnings. An evaluation WorkKeys found those individuals completing the assessment and obtaining a

National Career Readiness Certificate have seen positive workforce outcomes including higher earnings and higher rates of employment.¹⁰

TAKEAWAY #2: The equity implications of receiving credit for prior learning are complex but important.

- **The equity implications of PLA are complex.** The quasi-experimental work in the CAEL and WICHE study shows that all racial/ethnic groups benefit from receiving credit for prior learning. However, as noted above, the benefits differ across groups. The differences across groups also vary with the outcome variable chosen (completion or persistence at initial institution, completion anywhere, or completion anywhere or transferred). Generally Black students see smaller benefits from PLA credit receipt than their peers. Other research shows similar results. Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center found that among both men and women, and for both younger and somewhat older students, White and Latino students' probabilities of credential completion are significantly improved by their status (approximately 20-23 percent), while there is no statistically significant correlation between completion probabilities and receipt of credit for prior learning for Black and Asian students.¹¹
- **Access to PLA credit is another crucial component of equity.** With the mixed impacts by race/ethnicity noted above, a second crucial element is the equity of access to PLA credit. Ten percent of the students in the CAEL and WICHE study received PLA credit, a number that drops to 7.6 percent when excluding AP/IB credit. Compared to White students, Hispanic students had greater access to PLA credit (with numerous control variables added) while all other race/ethnicities were less likely to receive credit.¹² In their brief, *HBCUs and Prior Learning Assessment*, Thurgood Marshall College Funds details the lack of access Black students have to AP/IB opportunities in high school.
- **The cost of PLA can be prohibitive to some students.** Currently, fees associated with PLA are not eligible for federal financial aid, which means that most students must shoulder the cost of credit for PLA.¹³ In their brief, *An Examination of Prior Learning Assessment Policy and Practice as*

Experienced by Academic Records Professionals and Students, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) administered a survey to its membership. AACRAO found that over 20 percent of the 330 respondents agreed that institutional fees associated with PLA are a barrier for some students. This group of respondents indicated that students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and/or Pell recipients are more likely to be negatively impacted.¹⁴ In the research study conducted by CAEL and WICHE, 16 percent of adults who were not Pell recipients earned PLA credit, compared to only 7 percent of adult students who were Pell recipients. Yet, Pell recipients see a greater impact from PLA, with their completion "boost" when receiving credit being eight percentage points higher than those who did not receive Pell grants.¹⁵ In their brief, *The Current State of Prior Learning Policies*, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and WICHE investigate the critical role states, accrediting bodies, and the federal government can play in making credit for prior learning more accessible and affordable for students with low incomes, students of color, immigrants, and adult learners.¹⁶

- **Lack of information about PLA limits the effectiveness of strong policies and programs.** In their brief, *Advising and Prior Learning Assessment for Degree Completion*, NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) conducted a survey on institution advising practices as they relate to PLA. One respondent to NASPA's membership survey compared their institution's limited access to PLA to being like "a secret club," adding that more could be done to make the process of learning about PLA and receiving credit more welcoming for students.¹⁷ Thurgood Marshall College Fund corroborates this finding by suggesting that the lack of access to a PLA pipeline (AP and IB courses in secondary education, in particular) leaves Black students unfamiliar with the concept of credit for prior learning. Hispanic students often are advised to take some type of assessment to receive credit for their Spanish language skills – and this opens up the concept of PLA for them – but no parallel pathway exists for African American or non-Hispanic low-income students.¹⁸

- **Workers in low-skill jobs, often signaled by low wages, are excluded from PLA opportunities except in rare partnerships between large corporations and institutions.**

In their brief, *Recent Developments in Prior Learning*, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and WCET – the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies – conducted a case study analysis of several forms of employer-postsecondary partnerships. UPCEA and WCET found that management, leadership, and business acumen seem to be prevailing PLA opportunities, but are often difficult to demonstrate for low-skill, low wage workers. Fifty-two percent of these workers are White, 25 percent are Latino/Hispanic, 15 percent are Black, and 5 percent are Asian American. When compared to the racial composition of the overall workforce, Latino/Hispanic and Black workers are over-represented and White and Asian American workers are under-represented.¹⁹

- **The percentage of institutions that have access to student-level PLA data for analysis is small.**

Only 34 (of 400+) respondents to AACRAO's survey answered the question about whether or not the PLA data is tracked in a way to support student demographic level reporting; of these, 56 percent responded yes. Even fewer answered detailed questions about how well different student populations are served (or are under-served). This suggests that that collection and/or analysis of data must be a priority to understand equity impacts.²⁰ In their brief, *Recognition of Learning Across Military and Corporate Settings*, the American Council for Education suggests that leveraging artificial intelligence and data analysis, while embracing open data standards and common definitions, might reduce costs and automate review of PLA.²¹

TAKEAWAY #3: There are significant opportunities to scale use of prior learning assessment across campuses, but challenges remain.

- **Few students seem to take advantage of PLA opportunities.** Among the 72 institutions participating in the CAEL and WICHE study, only about 10 percent of the adult students earned credit from PLA.²² In the Rutgers study of the

Colorado Community College System, less than 2 percent of the total population had received PLA credits from 2007 to 2010.²³ Interestingly, both studies saw a decrease in credits awarded for the evaluation of non-college programs between 2015 and 2018, which could be related to decreases in military population.²⁴ The difference in uptake rates between the two studies is noteworthy as it seems likely that the sample for the CAEL/WICHE study selected institutions with a greater focus on PLA (although most institutions from the Colorado Community College System participated) and that there is likely significant room for improvement at many institutions. Although uptake rates for the two-year sector in the CAEL and WICHE dataset were lower than other institutions, they averaged more than 4 percent with several large two-year institutions achieving over 7 percent uptake.

- **Institutional policies appear significant.** The single greatest factor predicting PLA access in the CAEL and WICHE study was attendance at institutions that are supportive of adults, as judged by the adoption of several adult-friendly policies. The effect size for this variable far outpaced any of the other variables (by at least a factor of three). This suggests a strong opportunity for scaling PLA by focusing on institutional policies and practices. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the results are not generalizable of the full U.S. higher education landscape and that there is a need for replication. In their brief, *Learning Recognition and the Future of Higher Education – A Vision for a Post-Pandemic Learning Ecosystem*, SUNY Empire State College and CAEL conducted conversations with several leaders of change within the higher education landscape. Drawing on these conversations, the authors suggest what a future higher education model and related policies could – and should – look like in order to reflect the realities of the changing world of work post-COVID while taking advantage of advances in technology-based tools and our growing understanding of how people learn.²⁵
- **Institutions communicate PLA opportunities to students in a variety of ways; some are better than others.** Regional accreditors, new federal regulations, and many state policies require institutions to clearly communicate information about PLA opportunities to students. Multiple briefs suggest, however, that students

are not effectively receiving information about PLA opportunities.²⁶ In the brief, *PLA from the Student's Perspective: Lessons Learned from Survey and Interview Data*, WICHE analyzes data from a survey administered to 1,184 current college students and from interviews with six college students. Students cited conversations with individuals (such as high school college counselors, academic advisors on the college campus, other students, or family members) as the main sources of knowledge about PLA.²⁷ Improving communication opportunities about PLA (through student advising, using technology, incorporating at all touch points, etc.) is one major potential lever for scaling existing PLA programs.

- **Collaboration across campus is important to build buy-in and scale.** Creating policy alone does not lead to strong improvements in uptake and use of PLA.²⁸ One respondent to NASPA's membership survey suggested that achieving an effective PLA experience for students can hinge on the extent to which advisors, faculty and staff across the institution regularly coordinate and share information. Another interviewee emphasized the importance of having an advisor who can serve as a liaison with faculty and facilitate routine discussions about updates to curricular formats while another spoke to the need for support from the registrar.²⁹ Several briefs across the *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* project pointed to the success of PLA programs due to a single champion on campus or at the system level, but without buy-in this could lead to difficulties if that staff member left.³⁰
- **Proactive student advising is necessary to support students in learning about and earning credit through PLA.** Student voices gathered across the *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* project through interviews and surveys often reported learning about PLA from their advisor.³¹ Institutional perspectives also pointed to advising as being one of the main, if not the most, important avenues for students to connect to PLA opportunities.³² In the CAEL and WICHE study, although most (74 percent) of the participating institutions reported that they provide "a great deal" or "a lot" of one-on-one coaching to students who inquire about PLA, only 32 percent of the participating institutions provided "a great deal" or "a lot" of direction to

coaches and advisors to ask about PLA any time they meet with students.³³

- **The type and breadth of technology used to support PLA matters.** Across the *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* project, we saw innovative ways in which institutions are using technology to support PLA. Some institutions automate the process of credit review through websites and online tools to conduct crosswalks³⁴ while other institutions use flexible, routinely updated, degree audit systems to help advisors help students assess the impact of prior credit on possible pathways to completion.³⁵ The majority of registrars surveyed by AACRAO reported using their student information system (SIS) to support PLA but less than one-quarter used other technology as a reporting system or data warehouse.³⁶

TAKEAWAY #4: The "business case" for improved PLA at institutions is strong, but myths about PLA cutting into institutional revenue remain.

- Students who receive credit through PLA take more courses overall. The CAEL and WICHE study not only found that adult students who received credit for prior learning were more likely to persist to a degree, but that these students also earned more residential credit from the institution, compared to non-PLA adult students. Across all institutions, the average number of additional residential credits earned by adult PLA students was 17.6.³⁷ This suggests that strong PLA offerings should be a key part of institutional outreach, especially during periods of fiscal constraint.
- **Myths still exist that strong PLA programs will hurt institutional revenue streams.** During an expert focus group, multiple participants from membership organizations noted that there is still a strong perception among institutions that giving students credit for prior learning limits revenue because those students will not take those classes.³⁸

Recommendations

The PLA Boost as well as the series of briefs in WICHE's *Recognition of Learning* initiative offer detailed and granular recommendations to scale PLA usage. Below, we have attempted to distill the plethora of recommendations across the *Recognizing*

Learning in the 21st Century project into a handful of recommendations that we believe, based on the quantitative and qualitative data available, can best serve students. We recognize that these priorities must be undertaken in a completely new national context compared to when the project began, with a new learning context, severe budget constraints, and greater attention to how such policies can promote racial equity. Importantly, we believe that these priorities are consistent with and complementary to other efforts to recognize and credential diverse types of learning.

1. Build institutional, state, and system support of and commitment to effective PLA policies.

There has been considerable success in gaining acceptance of military credit recommendations in higher education. Yet the acceptance of corporate training, which is evaluated using the same transparent methodology, lags far behind. Additionally, according to survey data, 80 percent of institutions provide credit for prior learning through at least one method.³⁹ It appears that there is general acceptance of the concept of granting credit for prior learning, yet the data show low levels of uptake and resistance to recognizing all types of learning. This effort likely should involve parallel strategies to engage state leadership with data showing the benefits to completion, reduced time to degree; institutional leadership with data supporting the strong business case for PLA; and faculty with data about subsequent course performance for PLA recipients. Further, these efforts should leverage well-supported methodologies of evaluating and granting credit for prior learning to expand offerings to recognize diverse pathways of learning. The goal is to engender consistent and high-level conceptual support for PLA, which can be followed with detailed policy and practice improvement.

2. Adopt and evaluate PLA programs and policies with a strong equity lens. The research produced by CAEL and WICHE is compelling in that it shows strong effects for most racial/ethnic groups, but there are important differences, particularly when focusing on completion as the key outcome variable. The differences in effect size for Hispanic and Black students in completion is 10 percentage points, yet when the outcome is completion, still being enrolled, or transferring, that difference

decreases to 5 percentage points, with Black students receiving a similar benefit to White students. Identifying and documenting these equity implications of PLA are an important first step, the field must work to identify why these gaps exist and how policy and practice can address them. Institutions should improve the data tracking of PLA (while almost all of the institutions in the CAEL and WICHE study could report on outcomes and race/ethnicity, other surveys show many institutions cannot effectively use data to understand its impact on outcomes). Like other higher education policies, PLA and the research community bear the responsibility of affirmatively showing that this process can improve equity in postsecondary education.

3. Improve communication to students about PLA.

A consistent refrain throughout this project is that too often, students do not fully understand PLA opportunities that may be available to them. Federal- and accreditor-driven notification requirements seem unlikely to address the issue. Instead, case studies of institutions with high PLA usage could identify promising outreach strategies. With substantial research into decision-making being improved by “nudges” and other lessons from behavioral economics,⁴⁰ campuses with existing PLA programs can test and evaluate different approaches to reaching students. Institutions must incorporate PLA messaging into multiple touch points. Further, evaluation of outreach strategies would be fairly straightforward and could help prove which strategies are most likely to reach students.

4. Address gaps between access to PLA in the two-year and four-year sectors. Data show strong completion benefits in the two-year sector for students who receive credit for prior learning, yet the uptake rate in the two-year sector lags far behind the four-year sector.⁴¹ Given the student demographics of these institutions, this raises substantial equity concerns. Recognizing further that two-year institutions are likely to face greater resource constraints this will not be easy, but case studies from high-performing institutions in the sector can likely benefit the field and demonstrate effective policies and practices.

5. Fund PLA as though it is a legitimate approach to earning a credential...because it is. With the advent of competency-based models that are covered by federal and state financial aid, there is little justification for continuing current federal policy preventing financial aid being used to cover PLA expenses. Virtually all states (except Indiana) also prevent state financial aid from being used. This raises significant equity concerns as low-income individuals receive larger benefits from PLA but have less access. The U.S. Department of Education and Congress might consider allowing students to use federal financial aid to cover PLA expenses, while also providing necessary guardrails against waste, fraud, and abuse. In addition, with the eventual reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, policymakers should reconsider how federal financial aid can support alternative forms of credit-earning that recognize learning in all its forms. State leaders should examine Indiana's results with providing modest support for PLA.⁴² These changes would have important direct benefits for students and potentially help normalize PLA and result in stronger buy-in from institutional leadership as well as faculty.

6. Develop consensus on policy and practice actions to support PLA. Across the *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* project, WICHE's partners have identified numerous actions and policy recommendations to support PLA scaling. Examples include not differentiating PLA on transcripts; providing professional development to support PLA; improving data infrastructure; using technology efficiently; developing systemic processes to assess who may be eligible for credit from PLA; expanding the established work of NCRC, apprenticeships, and industry credentials to provide PLA credit to students with work experience; and, above all, including student perspectives in research related to PLA. This is just a sampling of potential policy and practice improvements but developing consistent messaging around key approaches could build support within postsecondary education.

Future Directions

Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century represents one of the broadest and most comprehensive studies of student outcomes and PLA, yet there are many areas that have been identified for future research. The series of briefs, as well as the report produced by CAEL and WICHE, offer detailed recommendations for future directions; several have been summarized here:

- Expand the available dataset from the CAEL and WICHE study to better understand implications for underserved students, particularly American Indian/Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders, and multi-racial students. Small sample sizes made disaggregating by these groupings difficult.
- Identify the contribution of various methods of PLA to increases in student completion rates, including how different methods may impact different racial/ethnic and SES groups.
- Examine outcomes and equity implications of PLA credit for younger students (ages 17-24). Much of the CAEL/WICHE report intentionally focuses on adult students, but we recognize that PLA is an important completion tool for younger students as well.
- Carry out more robust analyses of time to degree implications of PLA credit receipt. The available data show strong associations, but future research can examine how multiple variables impact time to degree and attempt to control for selection bias.
- Conduct course-level research showing student outcomes in subsequent courses after being awarded PLA credit.
- Quantify how different credits for PLA may be awarded as elective credit or credits fulfilling major requirements for credential programs.
- Evaluate institutional communication strategies to identify what works (and what doesn't) for effectively informing students about PLA opportunities.
- Conduct further research on PLA usage by veterans, focusing on more recent enrollment cohorts that have supposedly benefitted from better guidance to colleges on how to award credits using the JST and ACE credit recommendations as well as deeper

investigation of how PLA is specifically relevant to students with military experience compared to other methods/students.

- Conduct research on policies and best practices for incorporating PLA into credentials required for high-demand occupations, particularly those that appear high-demand in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Develop research examining connection between state/system policies and PLA usage rates.

Conclusion

Leaving 2020 behind, the U.S. recovered just 12 million of the 22 million jobs that were lost during the early stages of the pandemic and many signs suggest recovering the remaining jobs will take significant time. Additionally, economists and researchers suggest that many of these jobs may never return as the roles are replaced by automation. We are currently seeing millions of displaced workers needing new and different skills to reengage in the economy. These workers have experience and expertise in the workforce and in many cases have college-level learning. Accelerating their pathways to credentials through PLA must be part of the pandemic recovery strategy. This may require thinking outside the box as postsecondary institutions will need to implement robust PLA programs quickly, backed by strong and supportive state and/or system policies. There are certainly models to draw from with innovative partnerships to scale PLA and we know other new and exciting approaches are on the horizon. The various research briefs and reports that make up *Recognizing Learning in the 21st Century* can help policymakers, practitioners, and others design, improve, and scale PLA opportunities for students.

Endnotes

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³ Klein-Collins, Taylor, Bishop, Bransberger, Lane, and Leibrandt, *The PLA Boost*.

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¹³ Leibrandt, Klein-Collins, and Lane, *Recognizing Prior Learning in the COVID-19 Era*.

¹⁴ Wendy Kilgore, *An Examination of Prior Learning Assessment Policy and Practice as Experienced by Academic Records Professionals and Students* (Boulder, CO: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, July 2020), accessed on November 24, 2020 at <https://www.wiche.edu/key-initiatives/recognition-of-learning/pla-academic-records-professionals/>.

¹⁵ Klein-Collins, Taylor, Bishop, Bransberger, Lane, and Leibrandt, *The PLA Boost*.

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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.



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