

COMMISSION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Friday, May 13, 2011

DISCUSSION ITEM A: **Presentation on Prior Learning Assessments by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)**

Staff Recommendation

For information only.

Background

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning describes itself as “a national, non-profit organization whose mission is to expand learning opportunities for adults. CAEL works to remove policy and organizational barriers to learning opportunities, identifies and disseminates effective practices, and delivers value-added services. Since its founding in 1974 under the auspices of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey, CAEL has been providing colleges and universities, companies, labor organizations and state and local governments with the tools and strategies they need for creating practical, effective lifelong learning solutions.” A major study conducted by CAEL with support from the Lumina Foundation – *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* – focused on prior learning assessment and its impact on student success, as reflected in persistence and graduation rates (see attachment).

LearningCounts.org (see attachment), with its tag line “College credit for what you know[®]“, is a major national service of CAEL that was launched in July 2010 in partnership with the College Board and the American Council on Education’s College Credit Recommendation Service (ACE CREDIT). Among other activities, LearningCounts.org offers a prior learning portfolio development course and maintains a national roster of expert faculty evaluators. Students can utilize LearningCounts.org to build and submit their completed portfolios, which documents prior learning. The portfolios are then matched with faculty members on the LearningCounts.org roster for assessment. More than 75 pilot institutions – including Ivy Tech Community College and the Indiana University School of Continuing Studies – are participating in LearningCounts.org.

The Commission for Higher Education has assisted CAEL in conducting a survey of prior learning assessment formats utilized on the public four- and two-year campuses (see attached survey instrument). The Commission has also enlisted the assistance of the Independent Colleges of Indiana in conducting the survey among its member institutions. Survey results will be distributed at the Commission meeting.

Supporting Document

- (1) *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* (Executive Summary), CAEL, February 2010
- (2) LearningCounts.org, CAEL
- (3) CAEL Prior Learning Assessment Survey Instrument

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Who is CAEL

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a national non-profit organization that has created and managed effective learning strategies for working adults since 1974. CAEL uses its knowledge of adult and employee learning practices to be an effective intermediary and partner, leveraging the strengths and capabilities of its constituencies: adult learners, higher education, business, labor and government. Our mission is to expand lifelong learning opportunities for adults.

A National Problem

Based on analysis conducted by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, a much larger proportion of jobs in the U.S. will require higher education. This analysis, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018*, shows that 60 percent of jobs in the U.S. will require postsecondary education by 2018. Additionally, President Obama has set a goal of putting the U.S. first in the world by 2020 in the proportion of residents with college degrees and certificates. But the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) has recently calculated that, based on current levels of production, we would need to add 13,132,522 degrees and certificates by 2020. We cannot reach this number of degrees through educating a greater number of youth alone. Helping adults complete degrees is essential to reaching the goal.

CAEL's Solution: LearningCounts.org

As CAEL has demonstrated since the mid-1970s, the process of prior learning assessment (PLA) – the opportunity to earn academic credit for college-level learning acquired outside a traditional academic environment – is a boon for adult learners seeking to advance in their undergraduate studies, their careers, or their professional or occupational credentialing. This lifelong learning may be acquired through work, employer training programs, military service, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, and open source courseware. Earning credits through PLA helps adult learners accelerate degree completion while saving them both time and money. Our study, *Fueling the Race Toward Postsecondary Success*, funded by Lumina Foundation, found that PLA students earn degrees faster and are more likely to graduate than non-PLA students. but there are not enough institutions granting credit for prior learning and there is a need for consistent standards. To make Prior Learning Assessment more accessible and able to reach scale, CAEL decided to launch a national on-line assessment service. We launched LearningCounts.org in early 2011.

LearningCounts.org serves as a comprehensive PLA resource to adult learners, postsecondary institutions, employers and workforce organizations. LearningCounts.org offers a prior learning

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portfolio development course (CAEL 100: Prior Learning Assessment Theory and Practice), a national roster of expert faculty evaluators, and a host of other ancillary services.

LearningCounts.org is also where students can build and submit their completed portfolios which demonstrate their prior learning. These portfolios are matched to a *LearningCounts.org* faculty roster so that the individual is assured that their learning is measured by a subject area expert.

Funders

LearningCounts.org has received funding from the following foundations:

- Lumina Foundation
- The Kresge Foundation
- The Joyce Foundation
- The Walmart Foundation
- State Street Foundation
- Google

Walmart Foundation's Learning Assessment Stipends ensures that services available through *LearningCounts.org* are available to 115 students with the greatest financial need. Providing such need-based direct funding to students will increase access and expand the impact of *LearningCounts.org* among under-served populations pursuing undergraduate degrees. The stipend will cover the cost of **CAEL 100** and the evaluation of one portfolio, up to six credits. LearningCounts.org is working closely with our partner institutions, Veterans Upward Bound and the Cara Program to help distribute these stipends.

National Partner Organizations

The [College Board](#), which offers the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), has agreed to partner with CAEL in promoting LearningCounts.org to its population of adults, and to work with CAEL on needed policy change at the state level. LearningCounts.org is already referring students to CLEP testing and CLEP is including LearningCounts.org information on its website.

The [American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service \(ACE CREDIT\)](#), has also agreed to partner with CAEL in promoting LearningCounts.org to the users of ACE Credit, both employers that have had their courses evaluated for college credit and the adults who use ACE Credit transcripts of military and corporate training. In addition, ACE will transcript the credit

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recommendations from LearningCounts.org faculty and send the transcript to the college of the student's choice.

Services of LearningCounts.org

- Educational advising to students
- Online course to prepare the portfolio of prior learning
- Access to a broad faculty roster, trained according to the recognized CAEL standards
- Review of learning experiences by faculty experts for college-level equivalency
- Direct links to the College Board's CLEP testing options and American Council on Education (ACE CREDIT) evaluations of workplace and military training
- Archived electronic record of students' history of prior learning
- Credit recommendations recorded on an American Council on Education (ACE CREDIT) transcript

PLA Options for Students

Prepare a Portfolio

Students can prepare a portfolio by writing about their learning, making a video of themselves performing a task, providing a product of their work, or having a third party verify their knowledge. **The documentation—or portfolio—they present is then evaluated by a college faculty member.** If what the student has submitted is at the same level as what a successful student in a college-level traditional course could produce, a college faculty member recommends that the student be awarded college credit. Credit recommendations are then registered on an ACE CREDIT transcript. ACE CREDIT recommendations are routinely accepted by almost two thousand degree granting colleges and universities. LearningCounts.org offers a six week online class to teach students how to document and present their learning.

College Board tests

CLEP exams help students save money, save time, and achieve their college goals. Developed by the College Board, CLEP is the most widely accepted credit-by-examination program, available at more than 2,900 colleges and universities. By earning passing scores on CLEP exams, students can earn college credit, accelerating their education and placing into the right classes. CLEP exams are offered in 33 introductory-level college subjects.



ACE CREDIT evaluations

If students have had training at work or in the military, they could already have college credit. [The American Council on Education \(ACE CREDIT\)](http://www.acecredit.org) evaluates training offered by the military, employers, government agencies, and professional associations to see if the training is at the college level. ACE CREDIT also evaluates registered apprenticeships, professional certifications, and exams.

The Process for Students

1) Talk to a LearningCounts.org Advisor - Free

Students will have the opportunity to speak one-on-one with an advisor to find out which LearningCounts.org PLA option is right for them. Advising sessions are typically conducted over the phone and can last up to 30 minutes.

2) Enroll in CAEL 100: Prior Learning Assessment Theory a Practice - \$500

Course Description

The course guides students through the preparation and compilation of all components required for the evaluation of a portfolio or prior learning through LearningCounts.org. Students learn critical reflection skills to rethink the value of their learning and its implications for future learning. Adult learning theory, models, and concepts are discussed and applied to case studies. CAEL 100 is facilitated by an instructor who provides guidance for the student in preparing his or her portfolio-based request for credit. Successful completion of CAEL 100 results in a credit recommendation of three lower-level credits.

Course Objectives

As a result of this course, learners will be able to:

- Identify and reflect on areas of their own learning from both formal and informal settings;
- Use critical reflection skills to rethink the nature and value of learning from experience;
- Approach learning with an appropriate balance of practical and theoretical understanding;
- Discuss and apply experiential learning theory, models, and concepts to case studies;
- Generate college-level writing that demonstrates learning; and,
- Identify, organize, and gather documentation in order to build portfolios of prior learning.

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Course Materials

The textbook for the course is *Earn College Credit for What You Know* by Janet Colvin (2006). Additional web-based academic readings on learning theory and practice are assigned in each unit.

Course Structure

This is an instructor-led online course. It is not self-paced. The units span six weeks. Students should expect to dedicate 6-10 hours per unit. Depending on the student's portfolio petition, an additional 10 hours or more may be required for the learning narratives.

3) Create and Submit Portfolio - \$250 for 1-6 credits requested in the same discipline

Once a student has passed the CAEL 100 course, they will have acquired the necessary skills to build and submit a portfolio. For requests across multiple disciplines, students may submit additional portfolios. Each portfolio will be reviewed and evaluated by a trained faculty expert in the subject area. Credit recommendations will then be recorded on an American Council on Education (ACE CREDIT) transcript.

Partner Institutions

Hundreds of colleges and universities seek assistance from CAEL each year in training faculty and administrators to implement or improve programs of Prior Learning Assessment. Unfortunately, many do not have the resources to launch or maintain their programs, and do not have faculty with the expertise to evaluate portfolios. Colleges and universities can choose to use LearningCounts.org as either a supplement to their on-campus PLA program, or as the primary vehicle for evaluating portfolios for their students.

Eighty institutions, including Ivy Tech, have become partner institutions, agreeing to send a small number of students for assessment, to accept the credit recommendations made by LearningCounts.org, and to give us feedback and data about their students' response to LearningCounts.org. We hope to expand the number of partner institutions in Indiana, and to find ways for all students to afford the services of Prior Learning Assessment.



Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success:

A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes

Executive Summary



CAEL

The Council For Adult & Experiential Learning

Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success:

A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes

Executive Summary

February 2010

In order for the nation to maintain its competitive edge and economic success, we must educate greater numbers of our citizens to higher levels than we have in the past. But what can be done to fuel our educational “race to the top” among adults who are already in the labor market and out of reach of K-12 improvement efforts? Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, is an important and often overlooked strategy for helping adults progress towards a degree. PLA is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom, including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service. Institutions may use several different PLA methods in order to award credit for prior learning (see box).

PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives, and may make education more affordable and take less time. PLA advocates have long argued that by helping students earn credits faster and at a lower cost, PLA can significantly contribute to students’ ongoing progress – or persistence – towards a degree. Yet, to date, there has not been a large, multi-institutional study on this topic.

With support from Lumina Foundation for Education, which works to ensure that 60 percent of Americans are college-educated by 2025, CAEL conducted a multi-institutional study on PLA and adult student outcomes, using the records of 62,475 students at 48 colleges and universities. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- ▶ Do adults who earn PLA credit have better graduation rates, compared with those who do not earn PLA credit?
- ▶ Do they have better persistence?
- ▶ Do they earn their degrees in a shorter period of time?

PLA Methods

Prior Learning Assessment is not just one method or tool. It includes methods such as:

- ▶ Individualized student portfolios or Portfolio Assessments.
- ▶ Evaluation of corporate and military training by the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, or the ACE Guides.
- ▶ Program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies, or the Evaluation of Local Training.
- ▶ Customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement; these may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill, or Challenge Exams.
- ▶ Standardized exams such as:
 - ▶ Advanced Placement (AP) Examination Program
 - ▶ College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams
 - ▶ Excelsior College Exams
 - ▶ The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams

Summary of Findings

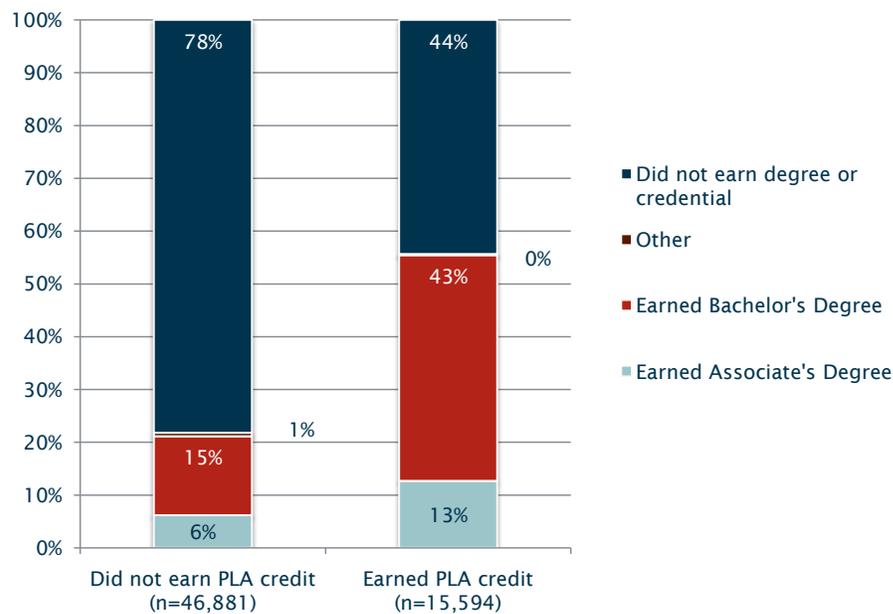
The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned.

Students with PLA Credit Had Higher Graduation Rates

PLA students in this study had much higher degree-earning rates than non-PLA students. More than half (56%) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so (Figure 1). In terms of the specific degrees earned:

- ▶ 43 percent of PLA students earned a bachelor's degree, compared to only 15 percent of non-PLA students
- ▶ 13 percent of PLA students earned an associate's degree, compared to 6 percent of non-PLA students

Figure 1. Degree Completion by PLA Credit-earning for All Students



Noteworthy is that PLA students in this study had better graduation rates than non-PLA students:

- ▶ regardless of institutional size, level (two-year or four-year) or control (private for-profit, non-profit, or public)
- ▶ regardless of the individual student's academic ability or grade point average
- ▶ regardless of the individual student's age, gender, or race/ethnicity
- ▶ regardless of whether or not the individual student received financial aid

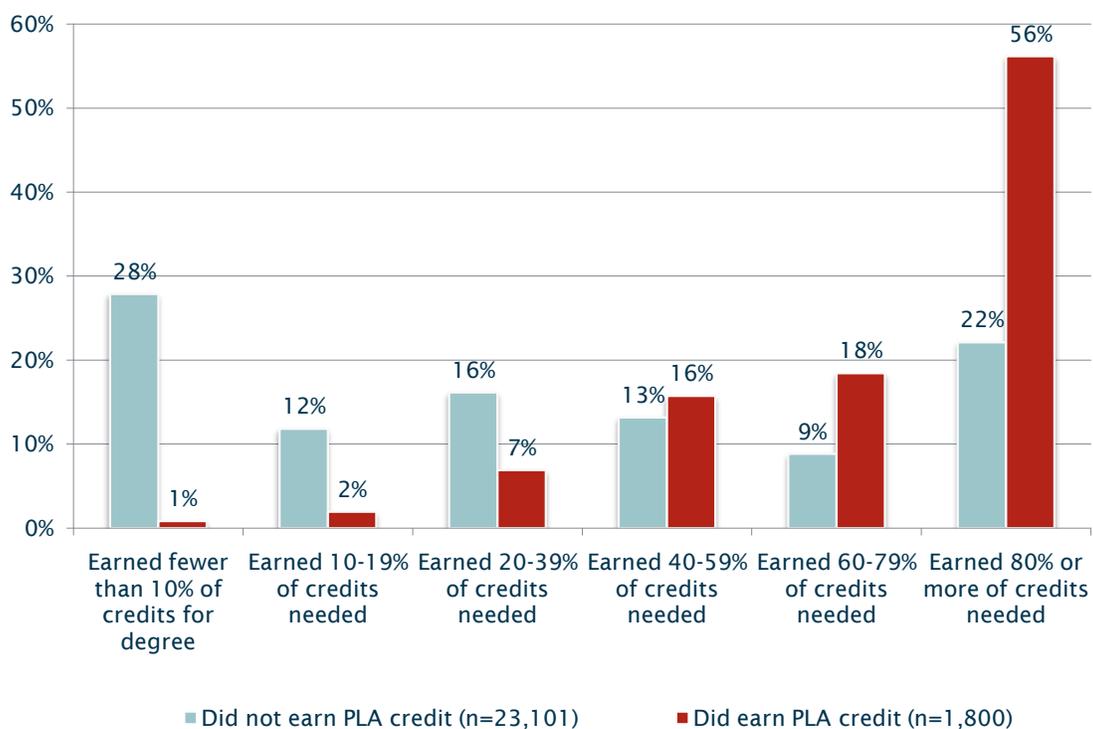
Students with PLA Credit Showed Greater Persistence

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This study also examined what happened to the students who did not earn a postsecondary credential within seven years. We care about these non-degree-earning students because they are the ones for whom institutions are designing and implementing new interventions to help those students be successful and earn degrees. We explored the topic of persistence by comparing the credit accumulation and annual credit-earning of the PLA students and non-PLA students who did not earn degrees.

PLA students in this study who did not earn degrees were more persistent in terms of credit accumulation than the non-PLA students. More than half of all PLA students who had not yet earned a degree by the end of 2008 (56%) had accumulated 80 percent or more of the credits towards a degree between 2001-2002 and the end of 2008; only 22 percent of non-PLA students with no degree had made similar progress towards their degrees (Figure 2).

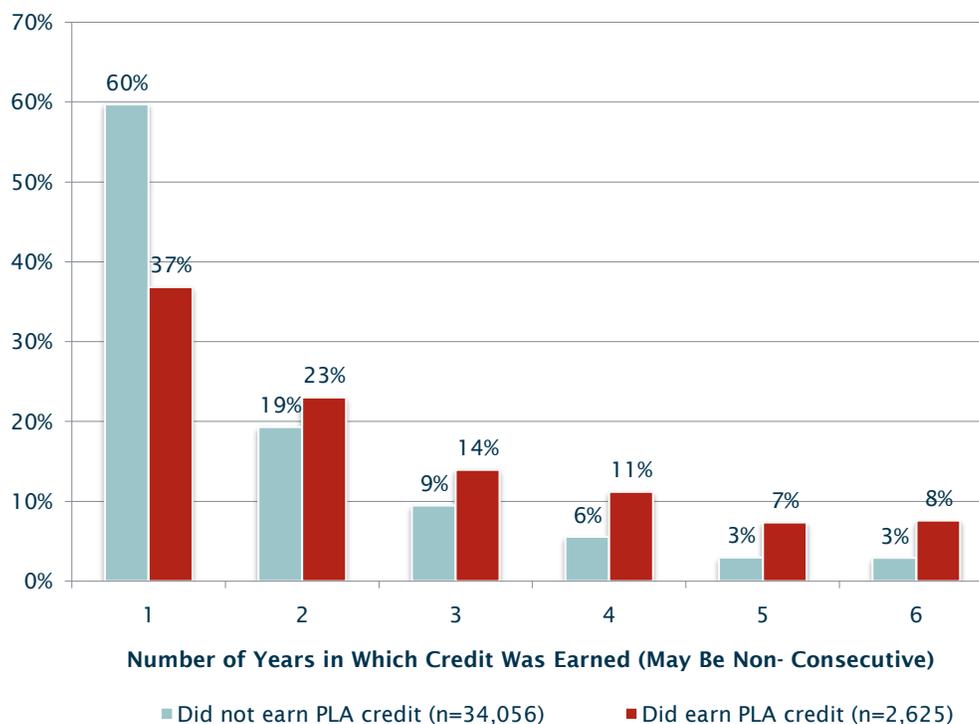
Figure 2. PLA and Persistence by Total Credit Accumulation, No Degree Earners



PLA students in our sample earned more institutional course credits, on average, than non-PLA students. PLA students (both degree-earners and non-degree earners) earned an average of 53.7 credits in institutional coursework (as opposed to credit accumulation from PLA credits or transfer credits), compared to an average of 43.8 credits by non-PLA students.

PLA students in this study who did not earn degrees had stronger patterns of annual enrollment and credit-earning than non-PLA students who did not earn degrees. Sixty percent (60%) of non-PLA students without degrees did not earn credit beyond one year of study, while higher percentages of PLA students without degrees re-enrolled and earned credits in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth years (Figure 3).

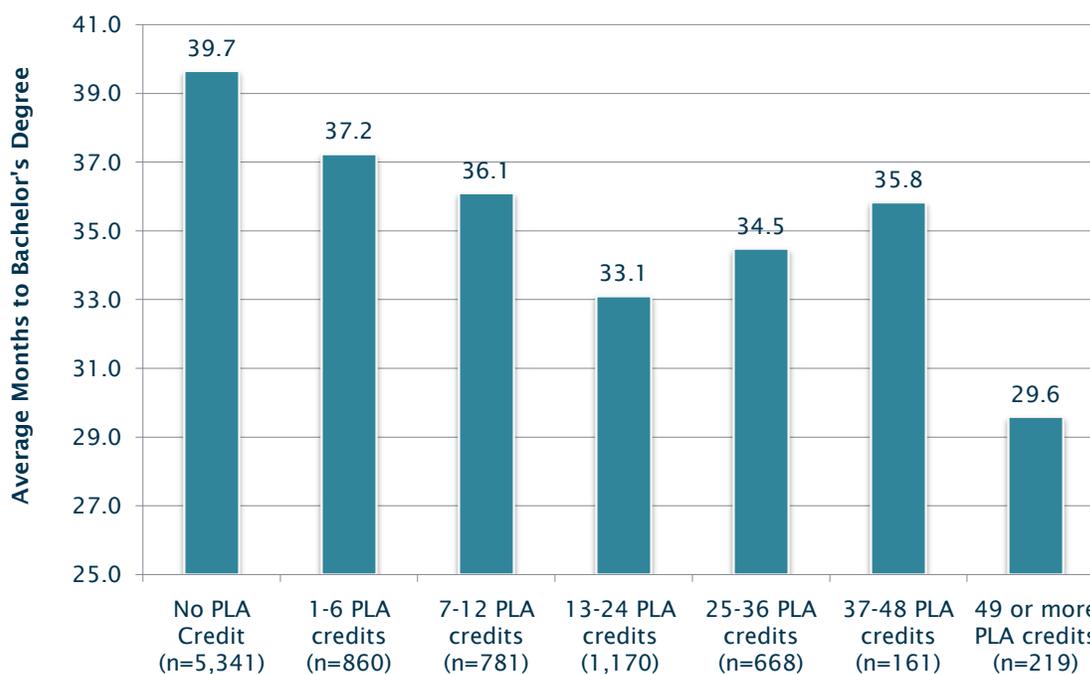
Figure 3. PLA and Persistence by Years of Credit Earning, No Degree Earners



Students with PLA Credit Needed Less Time to Earn Degrees

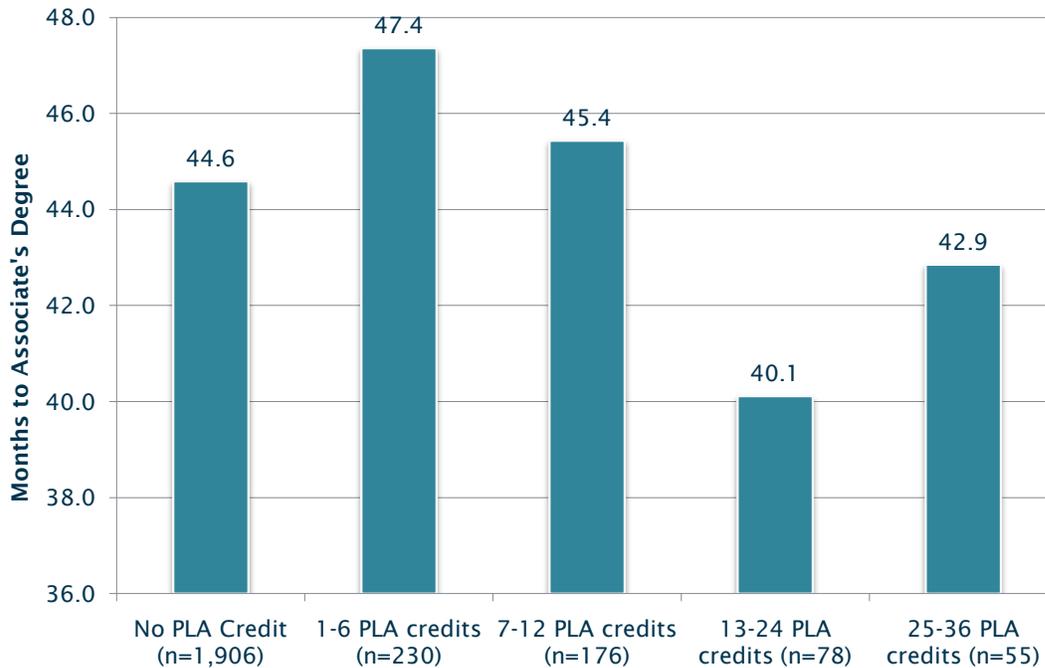
PLA students earning bachelor's degrees saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning degrees. PLA students earning 13-24 PLA credits saved an average of 6.6 months, and those earning 49 or more PLA credits saved an average of 10.1 months (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Average Months to Degree by Number of PLA Credits, Bachelor's Degree Earners



PLA earners with associate's degrees saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning associate's degrees (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Months to Degree by Number of PLA Credits, Associate's Degree Earners



Institutional Policies on Applying PLA Credit Matter

An important question is whether PLA students' academic outcomes differ depending upon an institution's PLA policies and practices. For example, a student may be able to earn 30 PLA credits from an institution, yet only be able to use a portion of those credits for elective courses and none of them for fulfilling requirements for the major.

We examined four institutional policies that we would expect to have the greatest impact on a student's progress towards degree completion and a reduced time to degree:

- ▶ PLA credit can be used to obtain advanced standing at the institution
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to waive course prerequisites
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to meet general education requirements
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to meet program/major requirements

We found that, on average, the best student outcomes in terms of both degree-earning and reduced time to degree occurred when all four options for applying PLA credit are available to students. In other words, the greater the flexibility the student has for using the PLA credit, the better the academic outcomes.

Summary and Discussion

The data from the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than non-PLA adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree; the average time to degree decreased as the number of PLA credits earned increased.

Considering the above findings, an important question is why we are seeing better academic outcomes for PLA students compared with non-PLA students? One possible explanation is that students who pursue PLA credit are the students who are already highly motivated or academically successful, and that motivation and academic strength are what are propelling the students forward to a degree. Some of the PLA administrators at the institutions in this study acknowledged that this can often be the case. However, these same administrators also described PLA itself as a powerful motivator, as a booster of self-esteem and self-confidence by validating students' existing skills and knowledge, and as something that enhances student and alumni loyalty to the institution. These observations suggest that the argument of "PLA students are the smart ones to begin with" does not tell the whole story, especially when our data showed that academic ability did not matter. Remedial students with PLA credit had better graduation rates than their non-PLA counterparts, as did PLA students of varying GPA levels.

For this particular study, CAEL did not have access to the kind of data that would allow us to control for some of the factors that have been proven to influence better academic outcomes for adult students. This limitation prevents us from going so far as to say that PLA credit-earning is what determines the better outcomes. However, previous research that has examined the relationship between PLA and student outcomes in single institutions has been able to control for many of those factors. The fact that this larger study shows similar patterns of higher graduation rates and other academic success factors for PLA students is an important complement to that research and suggests that a "PLA effect" exists across a range of institutional contexts and with diverse student populations.

Conclusion

The findings - that PLA students had better academic outcomes than non-PLA students - support claims that PLA is a strategy that will help adults earn degrees and progress more quickly to their goals. These findings are important particularly as the U.S. strives to improve educational attainment and reach Lumina's goal of having 60 percent of the population with a college credential by 2025, as we seek to make better connections between the academy and the larger society, and as educators strive to rethink and reform systems that need to more effectively respond to the personal, academic and professional needs of our citizens. This kind of data, showing the current patterns of academic outcomes among PLA students, has never been collected on this scale before. We hope that it contributes to deeper thinking about the value of PLA, further program development in Prior Learning Assessment, and to the expansion of its availability and offerings across the U.S.

Participating Institutions



This research study was made possible due to funding from Lumina Foundation for Education. Lumina Foundation for Education works to ensure that 60 percent of Americans are college-educated by 2025.

CAEL is grateful to the Foundation for this support and applauds its commitment to helping more adult learners achieve postsecondary success. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation for Education, its officers or employees.

This summary document can be found at:
www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Executive-Summary.pdf

The full report can be downloaded at:
www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf

For more information about this study, or for more information about PLA, contact CAEL at:
cael@cael.org.

Athabasca University (Canada)
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Thomas Edison State College
University of Arkansas - Fort Smith
University of Louisville, College of Education & Human Development
University of Phoenix
University of St. Francis
University of the Fraser Valley (Canada)
University of the Incarnate Word
Vermont State Colleges/Community College of Vermont
Webster University

1

Name of Institution

Which of the following Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) formats are used at your institution?

Please click in the field beside each answer and choose from the drop-down list:

Yes, this is offered

No, this is not offered

I do not know

2

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams

3

The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams

4

Excelsior exams

5

Advanced Placement (AP)

6

American Council on Education (ACE)-evaluated corporate training programs

7

ACE-evaluated military training programs

8

Institutionally-evaluated training programs

9

Institutional challenge exams

10

Portfolio assessments

Is there another form of PLA used at your campus? If so, please specify here:

11

Can you provide the number (or an estimate) of students who earned PLA credit at your institution in 2009-2010?

12

13

How many PLA credits can be applied to a degree at your institution?

14

Do you think your institution will experience increased demand for PLA options in the future?

Please click in the field beside each answer and choose from the drop-down list:

Yes

No

I do not know