

Sneak Peek: Prior Learning Assessment – Current Policy and Practice in the U.S.

By Becky Klein-Collins

Over the past 30 years, hundreds of postsecondary education institutions have developed systems to award college credit for what people learn outside the classroom through corporate training, work experience, civic activity, and independent study. Through a process called Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), colleges and universities evaluate and award credit for this learning when they determine it to be similar in content, depth, and breadth to what they consider college-level learning.

Since 1974, CAEL has devoted time, effort, and funds to establishing and disseminating standards for the awarding of credit through assessment, training faculty evaluators, and implementing research on the outcomes of these efforts—with special emphasis on the portfolio method of assessment. We have done this with many college and university partners because we see PLA as an important way to reduce barriers to higher education, and to save adults time and money by not requiring them to repeat college-level learning they have already mastered.

As part of our PLA efforts, CAEL periodically scans the field to learn more about trends in PLA practice and in institutional policy, and we share our findings with the adult learning community so that they will have a better sense of what other institutions are doing and where the field is headed, generally.

This past year, we requested information from colleges and universities nationwide on how they are administering PLA and what may have changed since we last surveyed the field in 1996 and 1991. (FUND Consulting has assisted CAEL with the administration of the survey and the analysis of the data.) We have supplemented this scan with additional research on state public policies for Prior Learning Assessment, and we are learning from this work – still in progress – which states are showing leadership in supporting and promoting the use of PLA in their college and university systems. We are expecting to issue a full report on our survey findings later this fall.

This article provides a sneak peek at what we have learned from the survey respondents about institutional PLA practice and policy as well as what we are beginning to learn from state governments about public policies that support PLA.

Defining PLA

Prior Learning Assessment is not just one method or tool. PLA is often very broadly defined, including methods such as:

- Individualized student portfolios or interviews, or **Experiential Learning Assessments**.
- 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**.

- ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, or the **ACE Guides**. For program information see <http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CCRS>
- Some colleges develop local tests 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**.
- The College Board offers 34 tests in 19 subject areas through the Advanced Placement (AP) Examination Program, or **AP Exams**. For program details, see <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com>
- The College Board also offers tests of basic entry-level college material through its College Level Examination Program (CLEP), or **CLEP Exams**. For program details, see <http://www.collegeboard.com/highered/clep/index.html>
- The Excelsior College Examination Program (formerly, Regents College Exams or ACT/PEP Exams) is conducted by the Excelsior College, or **Excelsior College Exams**. For program details, see http://www.excelsior.edu/pls/portal/url/page/Excelsior_College/Excelsior_College_Examinations
- The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) Program is conducted by the Chauncey Group International, a division of Thomson Prometric, offers tests of basic entry-level college material through 37 exams in the DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), or **DSST Exams**. For program details, see <http://www.getcollegecredit.com>

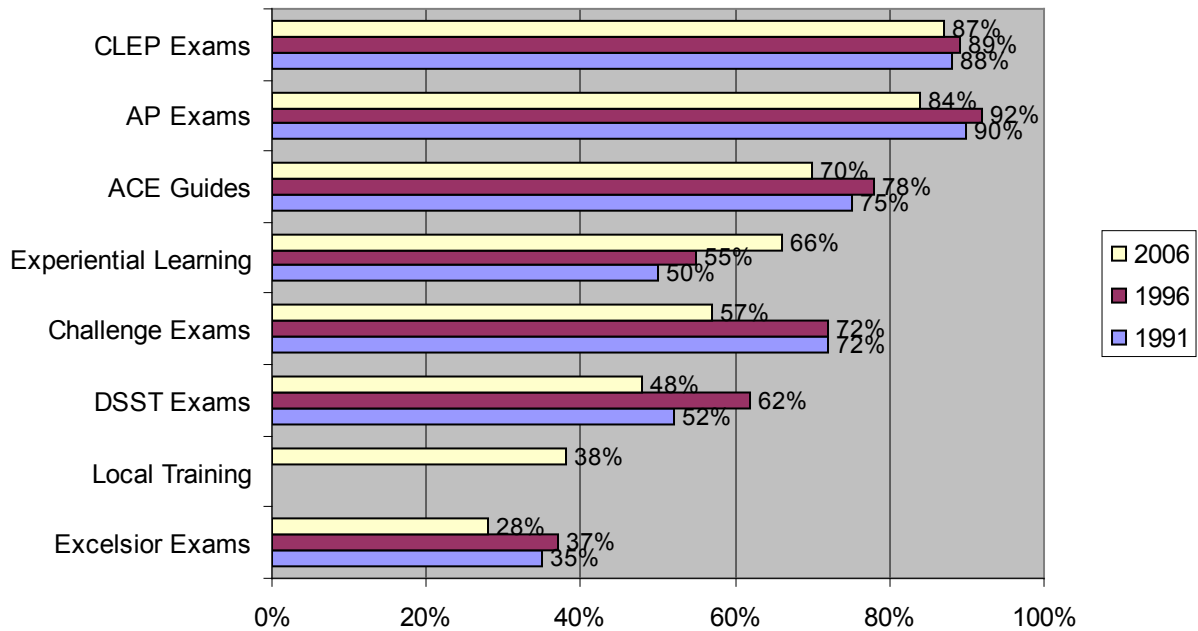
Institutional Practice: Lessons from CAEL's Survey of Registrars

CAEL's 2006 survey elicited responses from 272 college and university administrators, primarily registrars. We asked these individuals about PLA at their institution – what kinds of PLA credit is accepted at their institution, how students learn about PLA, when credit can be requested, and whether there are fees for PLA credit.

Types of PLA Accepted

The 2006 responses show that most institutions accept PLA methods such as CLEP Exams (87%) and AP Exams (84%), similar to acceptance patterns from previous years. The least used methods were Excelsior Exams (28%) and Local Training (38%). Looking at data from 1996 and 1991, we see some evidence that acceptance of Experiential Learning Assessments is becoming slightly more common (66% in 2006 compared with 55% in 1996 and 50% in 1991) while acceptance of Challenge Exams may be becoming less common (56% in 2006, compared with 72% in previous years). The table below shows the trends from the data.

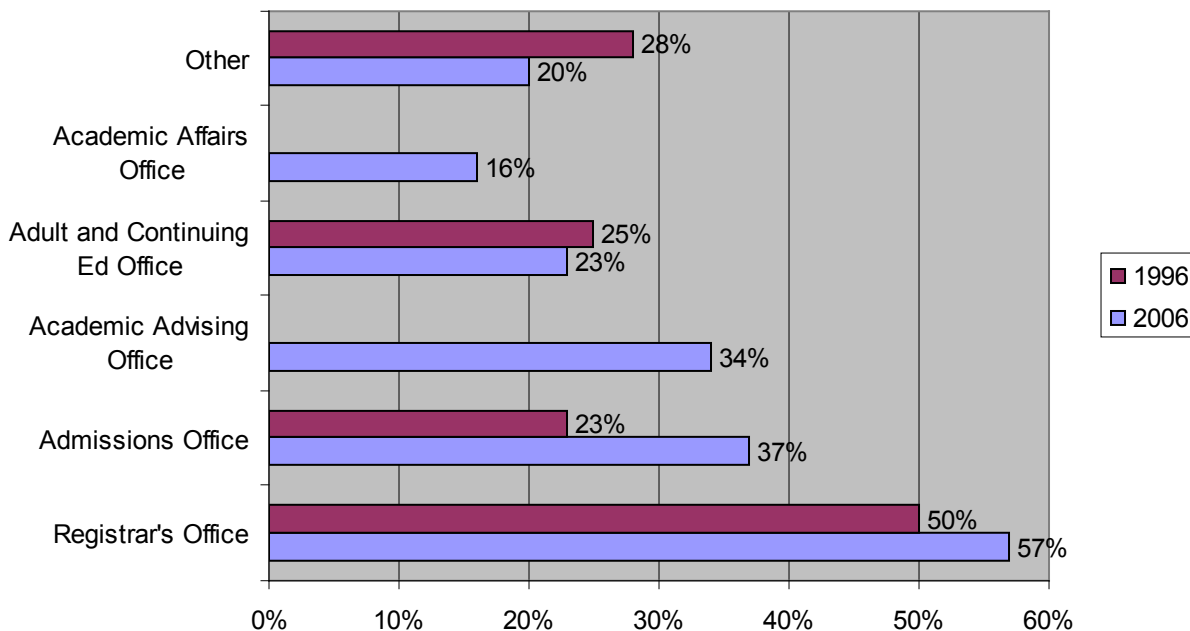
PLA Methods Accepted



How Students Learn About PLA

In 2006, more institutions (compared with 1996 data) provide information on PLA options in their Admissions and Registrar's Offices than did in 1996. We are also seeing a slight decrease in the percentage of institutions housing the information with the Adult and Continuing Education office.

Location of PLA Advising Function



In addition to offering PLA information in the various offices on campus, 82% of respondent institutions provide info on PLA in the college catalogue, 45% have information on the website, and 28% have a dedicated PLA brochure or handout.

Restrictions on PLA

Just over one-third (35%) of institutions responding said that they have some restrictions on when students can participate in the PLA process. The most common restriction was requiring the student to wait until after completing a specific number of semesters or credits. Credit was also commonly restricted to a period prior to the student's final semester or year. One college, for example, said that the final 32 hours of credit must be earned in residence.

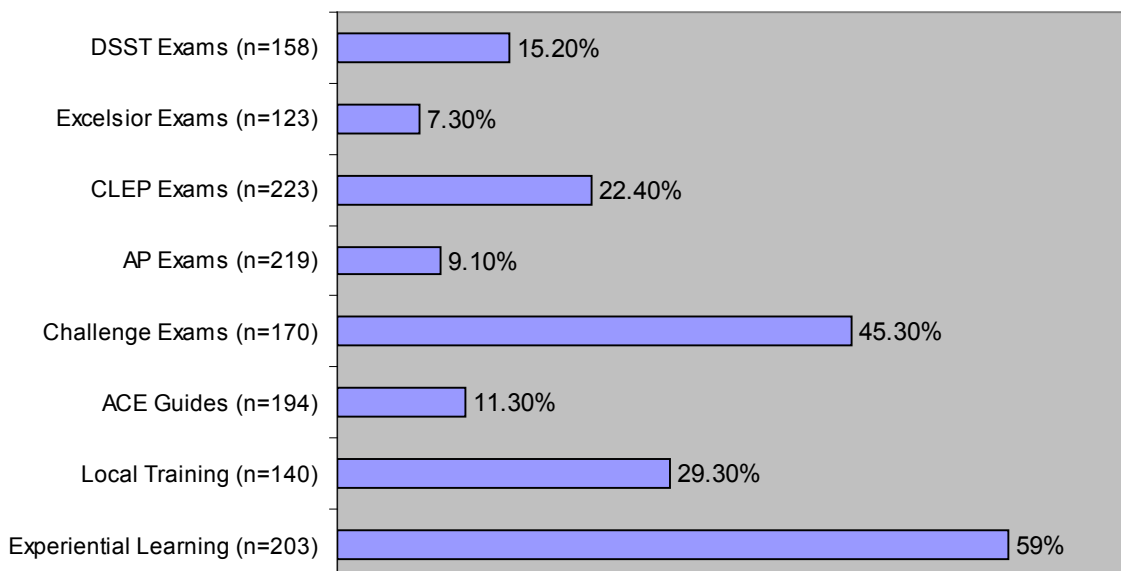
Respondents across the board indicated that PLA is most often applied to lower division courses and least often applied to graduate level courses (less than 5% of respondents indicated that any PLA credit was awarded at the graduate level during the 2003-2004 academic year).

The average maximum number of credits that could be earned ranged from 30 credits from Experiential Learning to 42 credits from ACE Guides.

Fees for PLA

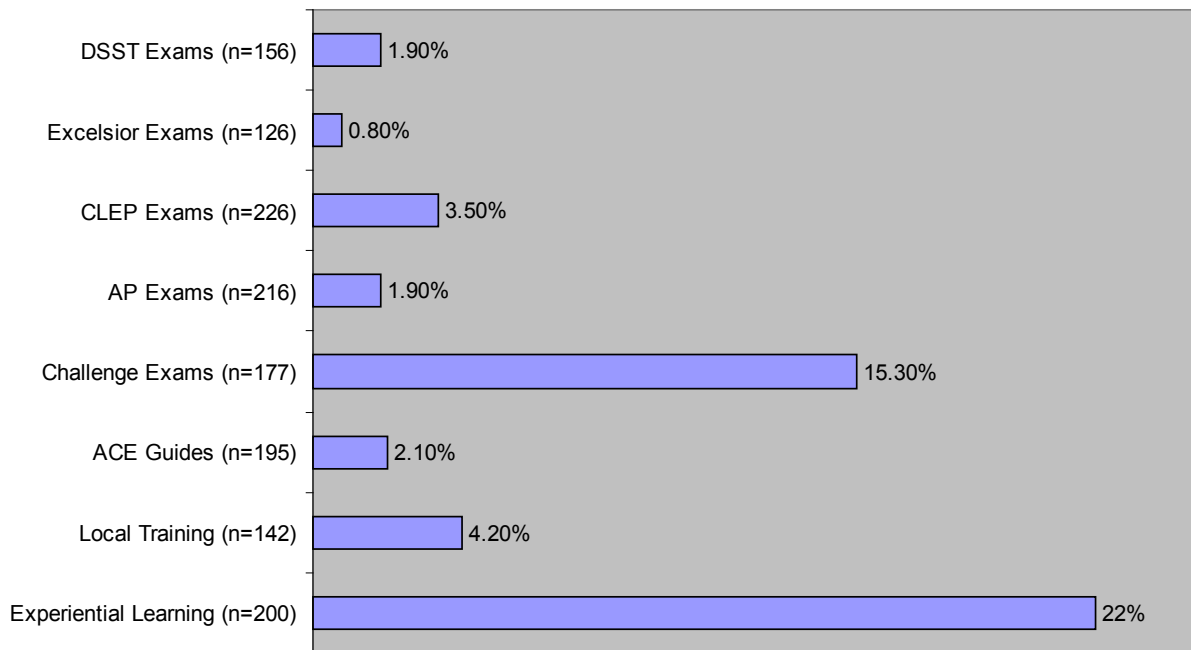
Responding colleges and universities were more likely to charge submission/evaluation fees from students applying for credit through PLA methods like Challenge Exams (45% of those accepting Challenge Exams) and Experiential Learning (59% of those accepting Experiential Learning credits). They were less likely to charge students applying for credit through Excelsior Exams (7% of those accepting those exams), AP Exams (9%), and ACE Guides (11%).

**Percent of Institutions Charging Submission/Evaluation Fees
for Type of PLA Method Accepted**



The colleges were even less likely to charge tuition fees for those credits. Again, colleges accepting credits from Challenge Exams and Experiential Learning were more likely to charge tuition fees for awarding those credits.

Percent of Institutions Charging Tuition Fees (Separate from Any Assessment Fees) for Each Type of PLA Method Accepted

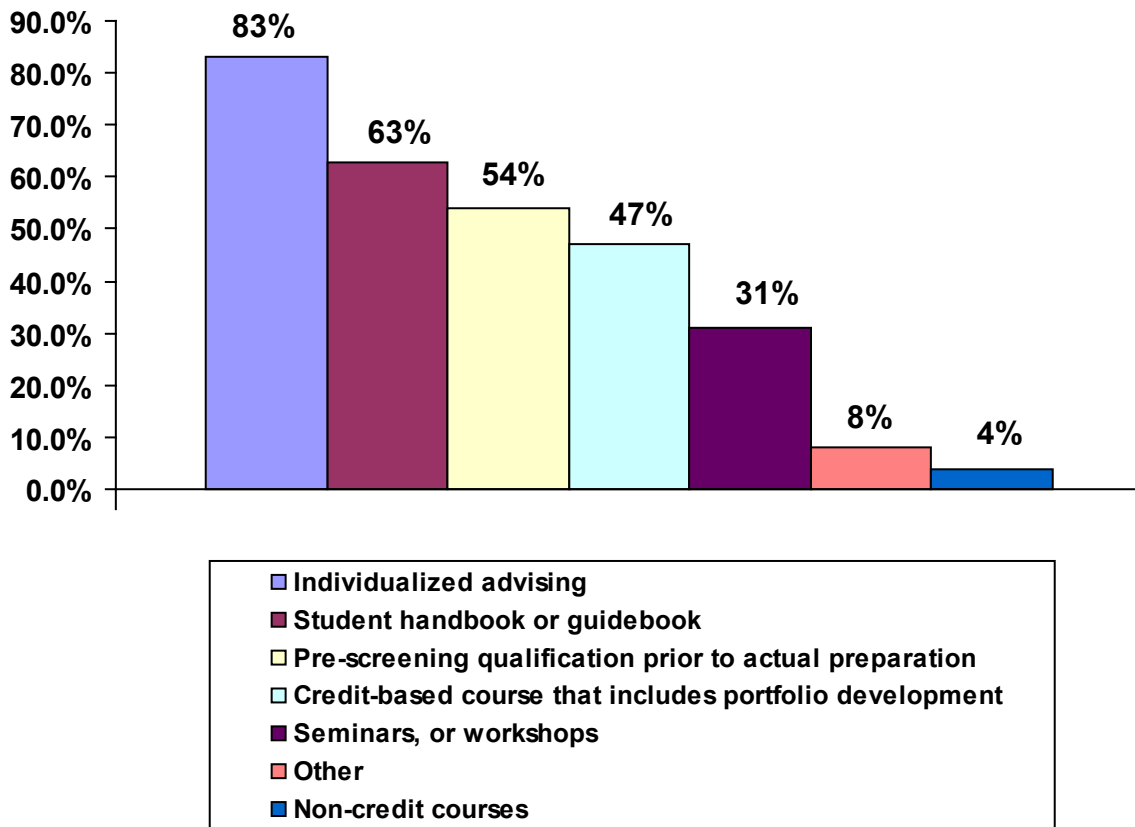


Use of Experiential Learning Assessments

Although sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents said that they accept credit from experiential learning assessments, forty-two percent (42%) of the respondents reported that they conduct those assessments themselves.

As shown in the following chart, the most common way that institutions helped prepare students for experiential learning assessments was through individualized advising, student handbook or guidebook, and pre-screening qualification (N=119).

Experiential Learning Assessment Preparation

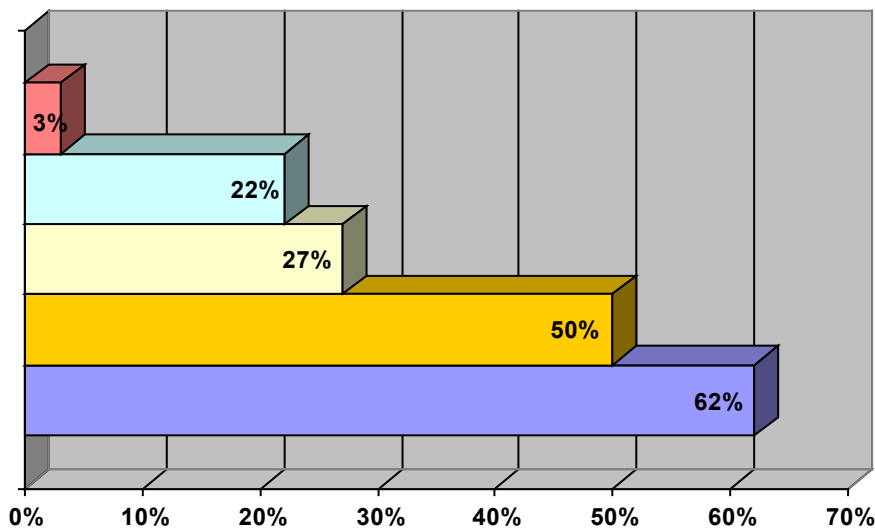


The most commonly cited evaluative criteria used by an institution to determine credit during an experiential learning assessment was course matching of learning outcomes followed closely by knowledge that the institution had faculty on hand with expertise in the requested credit area, and also that there was an appropriate balance between theory and practical learning (N=119).

87.4%	Course matching of learning outcomes
79.8%	The presence within the institution's current faculty ranks of those with subject matter expertise in the area for which credit is sought
79.0%	The balance between theoretical and practical learning
76.5%	Formal definitions of college-level learning outcomes
65.5%	Time spent by the student in the learning process
59.7%	Credit already earned by the student for the same learning outcomes
55.5%	Effort put forward by the student to achieve learning
48.7%	Credit gaps needing to be filled to complete the program of study
43.7%	Credit assessed by subject matter experts outside the institution

The majority of respondent institutions that conduct experiential learning assessments provide student advising online or via email and allow electronic submission of portfolios.

Technological Support of Experiential Learning Assessments
(N=119)



- Students are required to submit all assessed materials electronically (e-portfolio)
- Student portfolio development courses are available on the Web
- Assessor training or support is available on-line or by e-mail
- Student may electronically submit all or part of the documentation of their learning via audio or videotapes, computer disks or CD's
- Student advising is available on-line or by e-mail

State Policy Practice

Acceptance of PLA is not only interesting to observe at the institutional level, but also within policy arenas. From CAEL's work with states and the federal government, we have noticed a growing interest from policy leaders in the concept of prior learning assessment. These leaders are recognizing what U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao has also said publicly: that in this new global marketplace, America will need to compete on quality, not price. Policy leaders are therefore working to build the skills and credentials of the workforce in order to encourage innovation, increase productivity and improve the states' and the nation's ability to compete in the global economy.

PLA is appealing because it can help workers advance to higher levels of learning and to gain the necessary credentials much faster. State leaders are beginning to ask us, "What can we as states do to get more of our colleges and universities to accept PLA credits and conduct experiential learning assessments?" To answer this question, we are contacting the states themselves, one by one.

From our initial data gathering, we have learned that more than half of all states have at least one agency or entity that has instituted policies that support or encourage the adoption and use of prior learning assessment methods in higher education. The types of policies that we are seeing in the various states include the following:

- General support statements indicating that the student's experience outside the college classroom can be evaluated for college credit
- State postsecondary education agencies specifying which PLA methods are accepted and how many credits can be accepted through PLA methods
- Portfolio review policies and procedures
- Regular reporting of PLA credit awarded through the various methods
- The degree to which different campuses/institutions can establish their own PLA policies
- Joint articulation agreements between statewide community colleges and universities detailing PLA policies
- Reference to PLA policies developed by CAEL or the national accrediting agency

Some examples of the state level policies we are learning about include:

- In Pennsylvania, CAEL is working with the Department of Labor and Industry and is developing recommendations for statewide PLA policy guidelines. As a result, approximately 600 educators from across the state have been asked by the state departments of Education and Labor & Industry to comply with a PLA program and a master credit transfer agreement table that would enable adult students to assess the transferability of their credits from one Pennsylvania institution to another. See the CAEL website for several pieces about our work with Pennsylvania: www.cael.org/news.htm .
- Vermont State Colleges Office of External Programs has a long standing Assessment of Prior Learning program offered at all twelve Community College of Vermont locations as well as Castleton State College, Johnson State College, and Lyndon State College. Over 6,000 adults have gone through the program.
- The Community College of Rhode Island, the University of Rhode Island, and Rhode Island College have a formal agreement, accepting as transfer credits those credits awarded by either institution through the assessment of a student's military experience or through the assessment of other prior learning experiences as documented in a student's portfolio.
- The Oregon University System's Joint Boards Articulation Commission recommends that compliance with the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) and CAEL standards related to proficiency-based assessment be required for credits granted for prior experiential learning or other options.
- In Connecticut, both the Board of Governors for Higher Education, and the Board of Trustees of Community-Technical Colleges have PLA policies requiring that the institutions proposing to award credit for prior experiential learning develop written policies and procedures in accordance with their standards.

Future Release of Report on PLA Practice and Policy

The full report on CAEL's 2006 PLA survey will include additional information on PLA policy and practice, in particular on the evaluation of local training as well as the practices of different institutional

subgroups (e.g., public versus private, two year versus four year institutions, etc.). We expect that this publication will be available later this fall.

The research on the public policies, meanwhile, will initially be shared with the U.S. Department of Labor and its WIRED (Workforce Innovations in Regional Economic Development) initiative also this fall. We expect to share our complete findings on this topic with our membership and the field as a whole shortly thereafter.

If you have any questions about the 2006 PLA policies and practices survey, please contact Diana Bamford-Rees, dbamford-rees@cael.org. For additional information on the state policy research, please contact Kathleen Glancey, kglancey@cael.org.