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PLA IS YOUR BUSINESS

Pricing and Other Considerations for the PLA Business Model

Findings from a National Survey of PLA Program Leaders

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This report was made possible by a generous gift from the estate of the late Virginia B. Smith.

Virginia B. Smith, an attorney and economist by training, played a number of prominent roles in a career that spanned more than a half century. In addition to leading Vassar College for nearly a decade, she served as one of the first women in the senior leadership of the University of California System, staffed the influential Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, and was the founding director of the federal government's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Smith came out of retirement to lead Mills College as interim president, and she advised a number of national education and policy groups.

Smith received widespread acclaim for her efforts to improve higher education. She received 11 honorary degrees over the course of her career, and was named one of American higher education's most influential leaders by *Change* magazine. Virginia Smith served as a CAEL Trustee and as chair of the Board of Trustees.

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Pricing and Other Considerations for the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Business Model

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for the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Business Model

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prior learning assessment, or PLA, is a term used for the various methods that postsecondary institutions employ to evaluate a student's experiential learning for college credit. As more institutions embrace PLA, two of the questions they frequently have are, ***"What should my organization be charging for the various PLA services we want to offer?" and "What are the costs to my organization?"*** The answers to these questions require institutions to consider the overall PLA Business Model. This report explores: what is meant by *business model*, how decisions about a PLA program's structure or implementation affects the business model, how decisions about the pricing of PLA services are made, and what institutions should keep in mind as they examine their own business models for PLA. Data used in this report were drawn from the results of a 2015 national online survey of 89 colleges and in-depth interviews with 11.

PLA Business Model Considerations

Having a successful PLA program means being just as thoughtful and deliberate in planning and implementation as a business is—or should be—in developing a new product for its market. The various elements or considerations for a PLA Business Model are:

- **PLA Value Proposition:** It is important for an institution to have clarity on why it is offering PLA at all. Most institutions say that the value of PLA is to save students time and money, to help them accelerate their degree completion, and to give them the option of not taking classes in subjects they have already mastered.

- **Key Activities:** Key decision points center around which PLA methods should be offered to students, whether PLA options are to be offered throughout the institution or only for specific degrees or credentials, and how PLA can be offered while providing appropriate oversight and quality assurance.

- **Student Segments:** Institutions need to consider their target market for PLA and whether messages about PLA are reaching those students effectively. Some institutions target messages to students in specific areas of study.

- **Student Relationships:** PLA program administrators need to think about how PLA can help attract more adult students, how information about PLA needs to be shared, how satisfied students are with the PLA process, and whether there is sufficient support for students.

- **Key Resources:** Many of the important PLA program features—providing a range of PLA methods, providing a course or workshop to help students develop a learning portfolio, making information readily available, ensuring that there are good checks and balances for program integrity—require staffing, ongoing professional development, and other resources. Colleges and universities also need to know how well their PLA programs are serving students, which means collecting data on student use of PLA.

- **Key Partners:** It may be important to form partnerships to help carry out some PLA program offerings, or to expand capacity when needed. For example, portfolio assessment will require internal staffing support, and it may also require training internal faculty, developing a network of external (adjunct) faculty assessors with varied expertise, or outsourcing the portfolio assessment function to a third party, such as CAEL's non-profit LearningCounts™ service.

- **Cost Structure:** Offering PLA is not without a cost to the institution. Some costs are more transactional and variable; for example, the cost of instructors of a portfolio development course that may be offered on a schedule dependent upon student interest, or the cost of faculty assessors. Some costs are more fixed, such as having dedicated PLA staff or office space for PLA advising or administrative activities. Other costs may be more difficult

to track as they are more integrated into other parts of the higher education enterprise, including costs related to student recruitment, marketing, advising, technology support, data tracking and analysis, and professional development.

- **Revenue:** When considering the revenue from PLA, institutions typically weigh different goals such as bringing in additional resources to the institution, covering costs/breaking even, or viewing PLA as a kind of "loss leader," meaning that the fees for PLA are set too low to cover all possible costs but greater returns are expected over time that make PLA a worthwhile activity. Besides covering costs, institutions often consider what other colleges are charging and what they think students will be willing—or able—to pay.

Basic Pricing of PLA

Despite the tendency of surveyed institutions to look to other institutions' examples as they set prices for PLA services, there is great variety across institutions in terms of the fee structures and/or tuition charged to students for participation in PLA. There are typically five basic types of fees associated with the different methods of PLA: assessment fee, administration fee, review of transcript/training fee, transcription fee, and course/workshop fee.

The table below provides a summary of the common pricing models and fee ranges.

Table ES-1. Summary of common pricing models and fee ranges

	Most Common Fee Structures (For Institutions Charging Fees)	Common Fee Ranges
Standardized Exams	Onsite testing: assessment fee, optional administration fee Or Offsite testing: no fee, or nominal credit transcription fee	**Assessment:** standard fees to The College Board (CLEP) or Prometric (DSST) **Administration:** median fee per exam $25 (CLEP) or $30 (DSST) Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Challenge Exams	Assessment fee Or No fee	**Assessment:** $10-$252 per assessment (outlier of $600); median $100 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Portfolio Assessment	Course fee plus assessment fee Or No fee	**Course Fee, Tuition-Based:** $200-$2000+ per course; median $720 **Assessment:** $20-$600 per assessment; median $175 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Credit for Military Training and Occupations	No fee	**In less common cases where institutions charge for the review or transcription:** **Review of training/military transcript:** $50-$200 per review; no median Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Review of Non-college Training	No fee	**In less common cases where institutions charge for the review:** **Review of training:** $30-$200 per review; median $100 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common

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PLA Business Model Recommendations

Below are guidelines or recommendations for institutions in their approach to the PLA Business Model and related pricing discussions.

- **If your mission is one of access and you want to serve your adult students well,** weigh the desire to cover costs against the entire PLA value proposition. This may lead the institution to absorb a portion of the cost. Consider some alternatives: PLA fees could be designed the same as other academic fees. Or PLA fees could be integrated into the total cost of "business as usual" at the college rather than separating it out as an "add on" fee.

- **If you have a dedicated PLA office with a coordinator or director**, ensure PLA revenues are credited back to the PLA program, or otherwise make transparent the relationship of the cost and revenue and how these work together.

- **If you want more of your students to use PLA**, build PLA advising into all the stages of the student's enrollment, and provide professional development across all constituents.

- **If you provide portfolio assessment**, require students to take a course (normal tuition costs) or workshop (percentage of tuition costs or fee), ensure students have advising and are appropriate for portfolio, ensure assessors have the qualifications and training before assigning the portfolio, and make sure the business model supports checks and balances to assure academic integrity.

- **If your faculty members are assessing portfolios**, consider how the faculty members are compensated to clearly show the value of the work and its importance to your institution. Make sure the financial reward for doing this work is equivalent to time spent in the classroom or some other measure to show its importance. Make sure that PLA-related work counts toward promotion or is otherwise recognized by academic leadership.

- **If you want to be a best practices PLA provider**, do not treat PLA as an "add on" or an "extra." PLA should be part of your regular institutional offerings and priced accordingly.

- **If you are a traditional institution that is now reaching out to adults**, consider how adult learners and PLA will be viewed in your traditional culture. Ensure that your faculty and staff are all trained in how to talk about PLA with (adult) students. Budget for professional development.

- **If you view PLA as an important strategy for degree completion**, plan to develop your overall business model by showing the return on the institution's investment. Establish data tracking and regular analysis of PLA usage and its relationship to student outcomes.

- **If you do not have the internal resources to provide your own PLA program** but want to provide services, consider expanding your assessment capacity through independent contract employees or by outsourcing the assessment to a third party.

Conclusion

The question seems simple enough: *"What should my organization be charging for the various PLA services we want to offer?"* The answer to that question is not simple at all. There is a strong rationale for institutions to view PLA as a something of a loss leader—a service whose fees may not cover all associated costs but is assumed to have significant returns over time that will benefit the students and the institution alike. And yet, PLA is not free. There are real costs with which institutions need to contend; and no matter what value the administration places on PLA, if the program is not sustainable, it will not be able to grow or thrive. The recommendations in this report are designed to help institutions make sure their overall business model for PLA is solid and that the pricing levels are set appropriately for the institution's overall goals.

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INTRODUCTION

Students who come to higher education with considerable work, military, and other life experiences benefit when the learning that they have acquired from these experiences can be evaluated for college credit. Prior learning assessment, or PLA, is one term used for the various methods that postsecondary institutions use to evaluate a student's experiential learning for college credit. Once relegated primarily to "adult serving" institutions, PLA is now becoming more mainstream. As more adults enroll in college to pursue postsecondary credentials, more colleges are recognizing the need to offer PLA and the value it can offer to students. PLA can save adult students time and money, and CAEL's research has found that adult students with PLA credit also have better degree completion rates (Klein-Collins, 2010).

For more than 40 years, CAEL has been working with postsecondary institutions on their PLA offerings, helping them develop or refine their PLA policies, providing professional development to their faculty and staff, and advising them on how to expand program offerings and reach out to students. In this work, CAEL has seen first-hand how PLA offerings are expanding throughout higher education—and how there are common challenges faced by organizations launching new PLA initiatives or revitalizing and expanding existing operations.

As more institutions embrace PLA, two of the questions they frequently have are, *"What should my organization be charging for the various PLA services we want to offer?"* and *"What are the costs to my organization?"* Each of these is a part of the overall business model for PLA. After all, PLA services involve the time of well-trained administrative staff, advisors, faculty, and assessors, as well as additional supports to the students. Some institutions may also incur marketing and communication expenses in order to ensure that students know what PLA is and how to access it. Others may choose to develop special technology solutions for PLA. To sum it up, PLA is not free!

And yet, the question of what students should pay for PLA is not always as straightforward as it may seem. It involves a lot of different issues such as:

- How an institution structures its PLA services;
- What goals the institution has for students' use of PLA;
- The importance of aligning PLA charges to those at other institutions;
- How the institution views PLA—whether as a strategic investment in the student or as a service requiring a revenue stream to recover costs of delivery.

In business parlance, institutions need to examine the overall business model for PLA. This report explores: what is meant by "business model," how decisions about a PLA program's structure or implementation affects the business model, how decisions about the pricing of PLA services are made, and what institutions should keep in mind as they examine their own business models for PLA. Data used in this report were drawn from the results of a 2015 national online survey of 89 colleges, and in-depth interviews with 11.

What Is Prior Learning Assessment?

Prior learning is a term used by educators to describe learning that a person acquires outside of a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a term used to describe the process by which an individual's experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA and, when properly conducted, all ensure academic quality: (1) national standardized exams in specified disciplines, e.g., Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Excelsior college exams (UExcel), Dantes Subject Standardized Texts (DSST); (2) challenge exams for local courses; (3) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments such as those conducted by colleges and CAEL's LearningCounts.org national on-line service; and (4) evaluated non-college programs, e.g., the National College Credit Recommendations Service (NCCRS) or American Council on Education's ACECREDIT service and evaluations of corporate training and military training.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "PLA BUSINESS MODEL"?

" A business model's great strength as a planning tool is that it focuses attention on how all the elements of the system fit into a working whole."

Joan Magretta, Harvard Business Review

The concept of a "business model" for programs and services is increasingly considered within academia. In this context, it is important to recognize that business models are more than ensuring the bottom line is in the black and that a program is sustainable over time; it is also a road map to the inputs and expected outcomes of a program. Business models also require an organization to carefully articulate all of the underlying assumptions of a particular enterprise.

As Joan Magretta notes in the *Harvard Business Review* (2002), a good business model answers a number of important questions such as, *Who are our customers, and what do they care about? And, What is the "underlying economic logic" that explains how we can deliver value to those customers at an appropriate cost?* Magretta explains that, "A business model's great strength as a planning tool is that it focuses attention on how all the elements of the system fit into a working whole."

Having a successful PLA program means being just as thoughtful and deliberate in planning and implementation as a business is (or should be) in developing a new product for its market. This means paying attention to your students' needs, your market, your partners, your product, your costs, and so on. Figure 1 shows what the various elements or considerations are for a PLA Business Model, using a format adapted from Alexander Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas.[1]

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1   *Alexander Osterwalder's Business Model Canvas; see http://businessmodelgeneration.com/canvas/bmc*

Figure 1. PLA Business Model Canvas
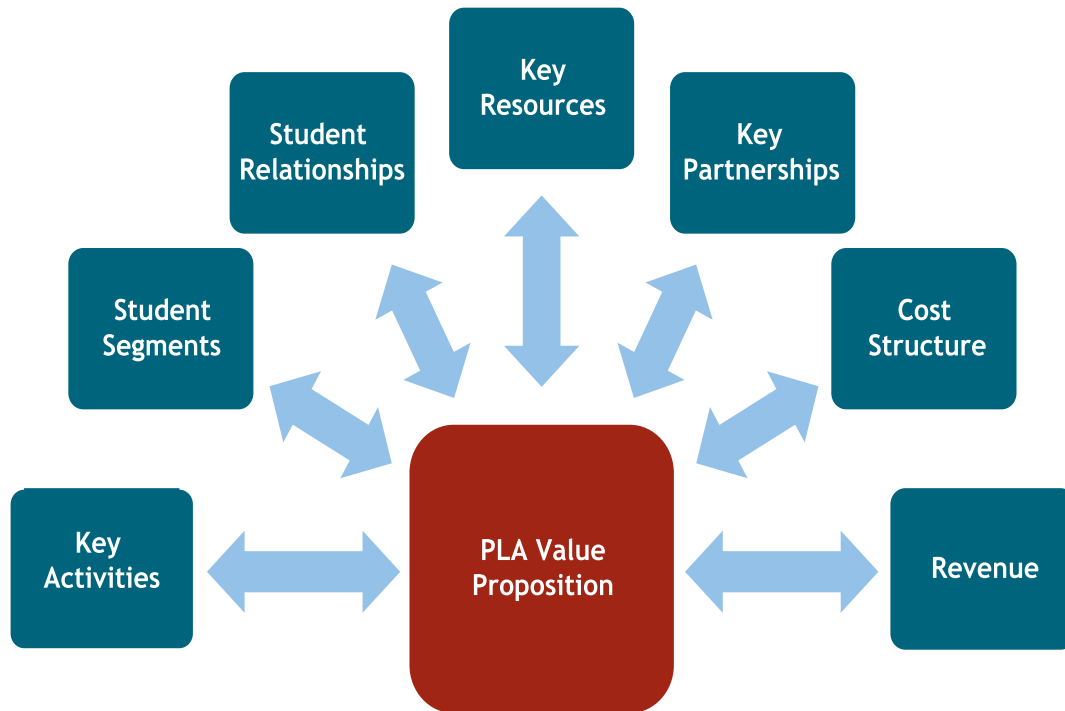
PLA Value Proposition: Central to the business model question is the PLA Value Proposition. It is important for an institution to have clarity on why it is offering PLA at all. Important questions for institutional leaders to answer regarding the value proposition include:

- What value does PLA deliver to the student?
- What student problems is PLA helping to solve?
- What PLA methods are we offering to our students?
- What are our assumptions about what makes for a good PLA program?
- How does PLA strengthen our academic brand?
- How does PLA improve our relationships with our community and employers?

The answers to the questions regarding the value proposition can then help drive how the rest of the PLA Business Model is defined. Key considerations that are interrelated to the value proposition include:

- **Key Activities:** What key activities does our value proposition require?
- **Student Segments:** For whom are we creating value? Do different categories of students value PLA differently? Or have different kinds of PLA needs? How big is the need or the market?
- **Student Relationships:** How do we recruit students to PLA? How do we grow the number of students using PLA? How can we provide superior student support to enhance the PLA experience?
- **Key Resources:** What key resources does our value proposition require?
- **Key Partners:** Who are our key partners in offering PLA? Which key activities do partners perform? How do they bring value to our students?
- **Cost Structure:** What are the most important costs inherent in our business model?
- **Revenue:** What are our sources of revenue? What are our students willing or able to pay? What do other institutions charge for PLA?

Are we looking at our revenue annually or are we looking at it strategically over the life cycle of our students—from prospective students to alumni?

In actual practice, PLA Business Models are as varied as the institutions themselves. This report explores each of the above PLA Business Model considerations within the context of higher education institutions, drawing on the results of a recent CAEL survey of 89 institutions and details from in-depth interviews with 11 institutions.

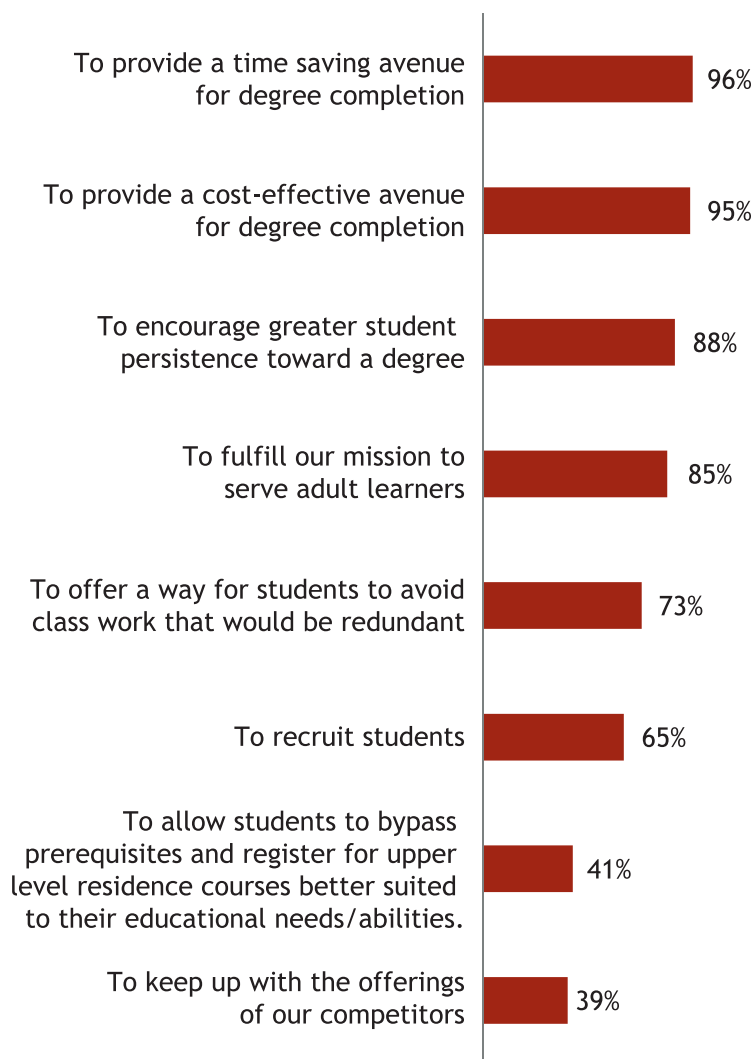# BUSINESS MODEL CONSIDERATIONS

The PLA Value Proposition

Front and center in the PLA Business Model is its value proposition. This element requires an institution to determine why it is important to offer PLA at all. What does the institution believe is the value of PLA to the student? What student problems is the institution hoping to solve through PLA?

The answers to those questions may vary by institution, but institutions typically say that they offer PLA to save students time and money, to help them accelerate their degree completion, and to give them the option of not taking classes in subjects they have already mastered. CAEL's survey of 89 PLA-offering institutions found these explanations to be true for the vast majority of respondents, with 96% saying that they offer PLA to provide time savings to students, 95% to provide a "cost-effective" avenue to degree completion, 88% hope to encourage greater student persistence, and 73% wish to offer a way to avoid redundant class work (Figure 2).

PLA Value Proposition
- What value does PLA deliver to the student?
- What student problems is PLA helping to solve?
- What PLA methods are we offering to our students?
- What are our assumptions about what makes for a good PLA program?
- How does PLA strengthen our academic brand?
- How does PLA improve our relationships with our community and employers?

Figure 2. Reasons why institutions offer PLA

Reason	Percentage
To provide a time saving avenue for degree completion	96%
To provide a cost-effective avenue for degree completion	95%
To encourage greater student persistence toward a degree	88%
To fulfill our mission to serve adult learners	85%
To offer a way for students to avoid class work that would be redundant	73%
To recruit students	65%
To allow students to bypass prerequisites and register for upper level residence courses better suited to their educational needs/abilities.	41%
To keep up with the offerings of our competitors	39%

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In defining PLA's value proposition, institutions also need to consider what kind of PLA program is most appropriate for that particular institution's students. Institutions should articulate what their assumptions are for what constitutes a good PLA program.

Certainly one way to tackle that question is to follow CAEL's Ten Standards for Assessing Learning (see http://www.cael.org/pla.htm), but program designers also need to think about how faculty and staff define quality, value, and equity in a PLA program; how students would define the same; and what kind of a program will meet the various needs of each of these stakeholders.

Guiding principles for what constitutes a "good" PLA program—particularly from the perspective of the student experience—might be that:

- Students have a range of options for PLA and can use those options toward their degrees;
- Information about PLA policies and procedures are transparent to the student;
- PLA is more affordable, compared to taking the class outright;
- Students have support throughout the PLA process; and
- PLA is administered in a way that is academically rigorous, equitable, and trusted.

Each institution will need to define its own guiding principles, which in turn have implications for all of the other parts of the PLA Business Model.

PLA RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE VALUE PROPOSITION

Time Saved

CAEL research of adult learners at 48 colleges and universities found that the average number of credits earned through PLA is 17, which is equivalent to more than a semester, or 4-6 months, for a full-time student (Klein-Collins, 2011).

Money Saved

In terms of money, CAEL research suggests that adult students who earn 15 credits through PLA can save from a low of around $1,605 at a large public university to a high of around $6,000 at other institutions (Klein-Collins, 2010).

A survey of over 3,000 students, conducted by the College Board in 2004, found that among CLEP test takers, 70% reported that the credits they earned made a difference in their ability to finance tuition.

Recruitment

The College Board found that 62% of CLEP test-takers reported that an institution's policy to accept CLEP credit would affect their decision to apply to that institution (The College Board, 2005).

A phone survey of adult students in Kentucky, conducted by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, found that the services that these adult students were most interested in is credit for prior learning and accelerated academic programming (Stamats, 2007).
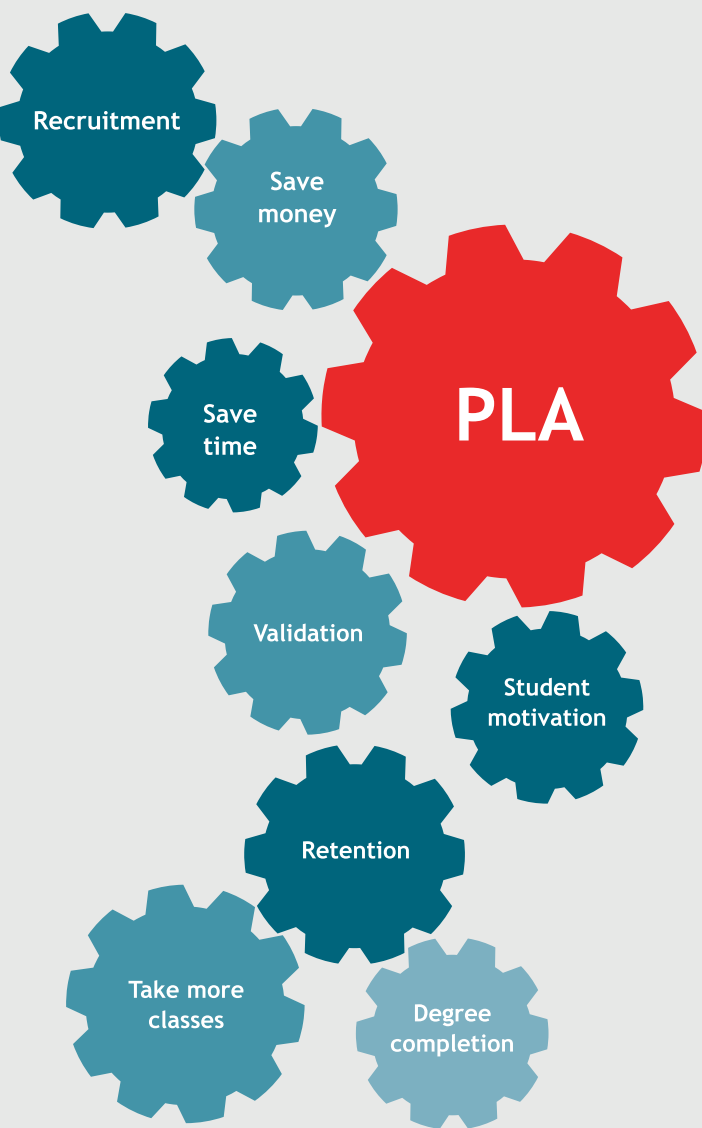
Validation (and implied: Motivation)

Qualitative interviews revealed that both students and institutional representatives found the PLA process to be empowering and validating. Students who earned PLA credit discussed how the act of reflecting on past learning was a positive experience for them and often improved their self-image. After earning credit through PLA, students felt validated in their experiential knowledge (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014).

Completion (and implied: Motivation)

CAEL's 2010 study, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success,* found that adult students with PLA credit were two and a half times more likely to complete their degree than students without PLA credit. This finding was true for students of all ages, genders, and racial/ethnic identities (Klein-Collins, 2010).

In another study which analyzed data from four community colleges, researchers found that the degree completion rate for students with PLA was more than

twice that of students with no PLA credit: 28% compared to 12% (Hayward & Williams, 2015).

Enrollment in More Classes (and implied: Motivation)

CAEL's 2010 study also found that PLA students earned more credits from coursework at the institution, compared to non-PLA students, possibly related to the fact that the PLA students were more persistent in their enrollment (Klein-Collins, 2010).

Figure 3. Institutions with multiple PLA offerings

- No offerings
- 1 approach
- 2 approaches
- 3 approaches
- 4 approaches

3%
3%
7%
52%
35%
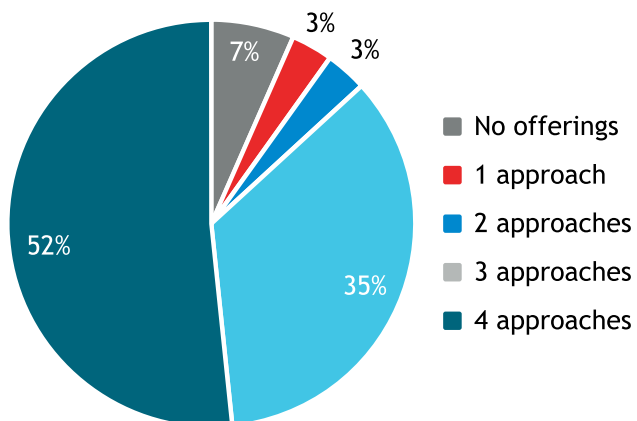
Does your institution offer comprehensive PLA options?

52% of the 89 PLA institutions surveyed by CAEL offer all four main PLA approaches: standardized exams, challenge exams, portfolio assessment, and review of non-college training.

Another 35% offer three of those four approaches.

Key Activities

The institution's value proposition—and its institutionally defined guiding principles—will help to define the scope of the institution's PLA offerings. Key decision points center around which PLA methods should be offered to students, whether PLA options are to be offered throughout the institution or only for specific degrees or credentials, and how PLA can be offered while providing appropriate oversight and quality assurance.

These initial decisions will help to shape other important activities related to the other components of the PLA Business Model such as student recruitment, outreach, advising, and support; oversight and policies to ensure rigor and academic integrity; professional development of faculty and staff; and any partnerships that may be needed to carry out activities. (See sections on Student Segments, Student Relationships, and Key Resources for further discussion of these activities.)

Providing Multiple PLA Methods

One key guiding principle is to offer a range of PLA methods that is appropriate for your students and the programs in which they are enrolled. The vast majority of institutions responding to CAEL's survey (87%) provided at least three of the four overall approaches—standardized exams, portfolio assessment, challenge exams, and review of non-college training (Figure 3). For institutions only offering three of the four methods, challenge exams were most often not available as an option.

Key Activities

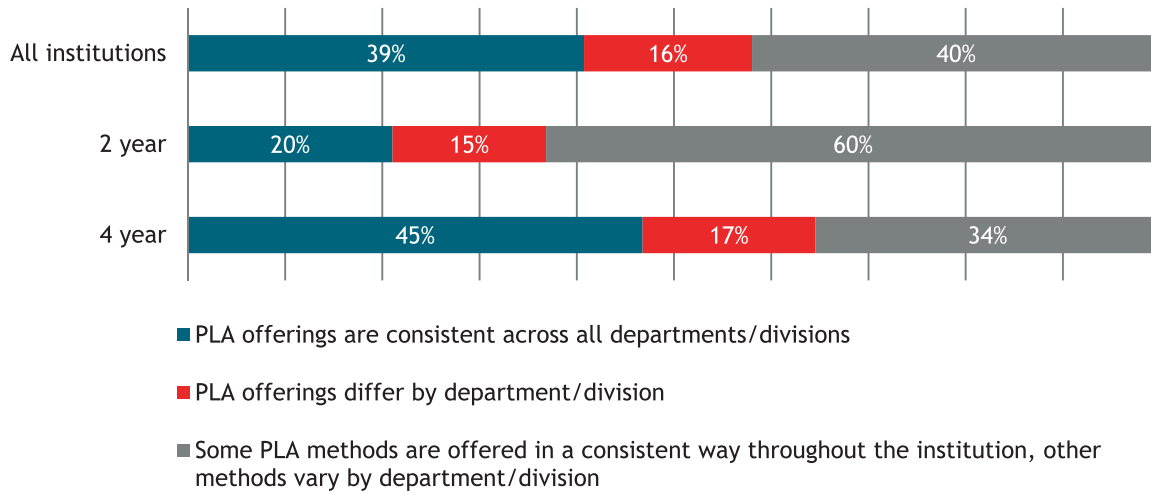What key activities do our value propositions require?

- Appropriate range of PLA options

- Sufficient oversight and policies to ensure rigor and academic integrity

- Student recruitment, outreach, advising, and support (See sections on Student Segments and Student Relationships)

- Professional development of faculty and staff (see section on Cost Structure)

- Partnerships to ensure sufficient capacity (See section on Key Partners)

Offering PLA throughout the Institution

Institutions also need to determine whether PLA is to be made available across all degree offerings or whether some programs will utilize PLA more than others. Institutions vary considerably with respect to the application of PLA credits for all degree programs. Fewer than 40% of responding PLA institutions said that PLA offerings are consistent across all departments of the institution (Figure 4). There can be variation in how different departments offer PLA, or PLA may be significantly limited such as to programs serving nontraditional students.

Figure 4. Variation in offerings

All institutions	39%	16%	40%
2 year	20%	15%	60%
4 year	45%	17%	34%

■ PLA offerings are consistent across all departments/divisions

■ PLA offerings differ by department/division

■ Some PLA methods are offered in a consistent way throughout the institution, other methods vary by department/division

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> **"The business model needs to support the methods of assessment that the students need."**
>
> *An institutional representative*

Even when PLA is available across the institution, there may be some degree programs in which PLA is used more extensively than others. Of our survey respondents, 60% indicated this to be the case at their institutions. Some of the degree programs where PLA usage may be more common are general business, management, IT, criminal justice, and liberal arts. One respondent noted that these variations occur not because there are limits in the other degree programs, but rather "because students are more likely to have gained experiential learning in these areas." Another factor may be the flexibility of degree requirements. For example, representatives of **Argosy University** note that the majority of PLA credits had been awarded to Argosy students pursuing a bachelor's in psychology because that particular program has a high number of free electives; other programs have now been adjusted to allow for more free electives. Another reason why there may be uneven use of PLA within various programs is that some programs with specialized accreditation may be limited in the recognition of prior learning.
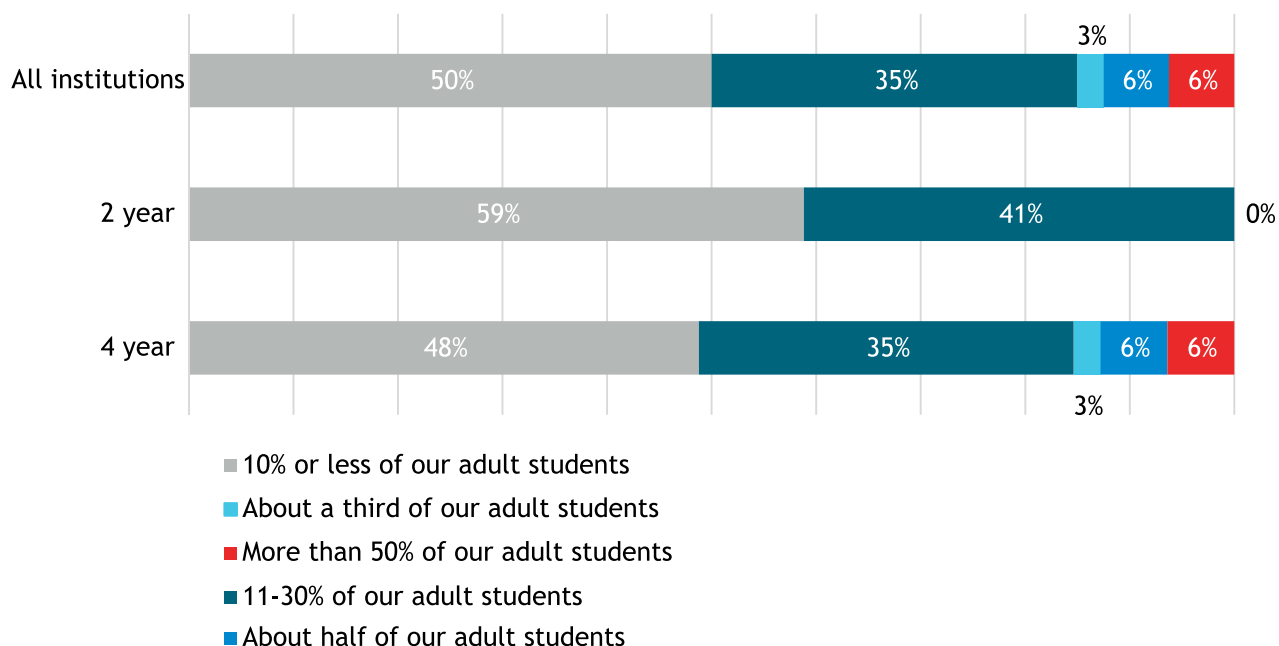
At some institutions, students in specific degree programs have requested that PLA be available to them. For example, at **BridgeValley Community & Technical College**, PLA was until just recently only offered through its Board of Governor's Associate of Applied Science Degree Completion program (BOG AAS); the motivation for developing more robust institutional PLA offerings, and particularly experiential learning portfolios, was primarily due to increased demand from students in degree programs like health and human services. Other programs at BridgeValley that have experienced a significant level of PLA activity include technical fields such as welding and information technology.

PLA might also receive a boost due to an institution wanting to build adult student enrollment in a particular subject area. **North Idaho College,** for example, is in the process of expanding its entire PLA program as part of a Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant that is supporting programs in applied sciences.

Ensuring Rigor and Academic Integrity

Institutions want to ensure that they are offering PLA in a way that is academically rigorous and that is not at risk for awarding college credit inappropriately. Therefore, establishing sound procedures, professional oversight, and a process for checks and

Figure 5. Proportion of adult students with PLA credit

Legend:
- 10% or less of our adult students
- About a third of our adult students
- More than 50% of our adult students
- 11-30% of our adult students
- About half of our adult students

Chart data:
- All institutions: 50%, 35%, 3%, 6%, 6%
- 2 year: 59%, 41%, 0%
- 4 year: 48%, 35%, 3%, 6%, 6%

balances are all important activities. These considerations may require additional staffing resources.

Student Segments

Research shows that PLA use is correlated with better student academic outcomes, such as persistence and degree completion (Klein-Collins, 2010). Yet, rare is the institution that is successful in getting majorities of its students to take advantage of PLA.

In CAEL's recent institutional survey, only 6% of respondents reported that more than half of their adult students used PLA. Far more common were usage rates of 11-30% (35% of institutions) or less than 10% (50% of responding institutions) (Figure 5).

Part of the challenge is that PLA is often an institution's best kept secret, with students often hearing about PLA by accident or through word of mouth. Institutions need to think about how to get the messages out to students more effectively. This effort includes using different communication channels—such as the website—integrating messages into recruitment materials, and providing

Student Segments

- For whom are we creating value?
- Do different categories of students value PLA differently?
- Or have different kinds of PLA needs?
- How big is the need or the market?

PLA overviews at information sessions. For example, **BridgeValley Community & Technical College** acknowledges that most adult students learn about PLA through word of mouth; but the institution is also working on other communication channels, including PLA discussions in the initial advising session and mention of BridgeValley's PLA program in state-administered marketing efforts.

Some institutions may want to examine student record data to see whether there are certain populations that may benefit from targeted PLA marketing messages. For example, if usage data show that PLA credits are most often earned by students

in business administration or IT programs, then PLA messages could be crafted to target students in these programs and provide them with examples of the kind of experiential learning that could lead to PLA credit.

Understanding who the students are and what their needs are also helps to shape the appropriate kinds of student support and program offerings. **Bellevue University**, for example, recognized that a traditional portfolio development course would not serve the needs of its many corporate and military students. The faculty determined that a course in the format of a MOOC—massive, open, online course—might be better, as the MOOC format is free, online, open enrollment, self-paced, and competency-based: students must successfully complete assignments in each module before the next module is available. Administrators believe that the PLA MOOC can be a great way to introduce students to Bellevue since they can experience the institution before having to pay anything.

Goals for student PLA usage should be appropriate to the institution. Institutions need to consider the kind of degree programs that are offered, the common areas of study for students' experiential learning, and their students' specific backgrounds. Institutions offering lots of programs that are not as close a fit for most students' experiential learning, or institutions recruiting students who do not have considerable work or life experience, might set lower targets for PLA, while institutions whose programs are closely aligned with the skills and competencies adult learners are likely to acquire in the workplace, and that tend to recruit students who have 10 or more years of work experience, might set more ambitious goals for PLA usage.

Student Relationships

The PLA Business Model also needs to consider the customer: the student. Many in higher education are uncomfortable with the notion of students as customers, but what is meant here is student-centeredness. PLA program administrators need to think about how PLA can help attract more adult students, how information about PLA needs to be shared, how satisfied students are with the PLA

process, and whether there is sufficient support for students throughout the process.

- **Attracting Adult Students to the Institution.** Some institutions view PLA as a way to recruit different types of students to their programs. PLA can be a recruiting tool for adult students generally, or for specific populations (e.g., veterans). PLA program administrators need to think through the messaging of PLA. Some of the questions that an institution needs to consider are: How is it described? How easy is it for students to understand what PLA is and the various options? What are the potential benefits and outcomes that students will expect from these messages?

- **Transparency/Sharing Information about PLA Policies and Practices.** Once students are enrolled at an institution, there are internal marketing and outreach strategies that need to be considered so that students know what their options are and how to access PLA opportunities. If an institution wants more students to take advantage of PLA, then information about PLA should be easy to find. PLA policies and procedures should be clearly communicated on the website, in print materials, and through interactions with faculty and staff.

- **Comprehensive Outreach and Student Support.** Some institutions take a comprehensive approach to student outreach, making sure that students learn about PLA at the various stages of their academic life cycles and feel supported at all of these stages. Student support may mean providing resources to help students through the PLA process,

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like specially trained advisors or a portfolio development course.

At **DePaul University's School for New Learning**, for example, prospective students learn about PLA through the general information sessions, through their first discussions with admissions advisors, and through the school's website. Once students are admitted, they are assigned an academic advisor who provides more information, and faculty continue these conversations with students about PLA. Once students start in the undergraduate programs, their first course is Foundations of Adult Learning, which describes opportunities for PLA. The instructor of this course becomes their mentor to provide additional guidance (the graduate program also has a comparable course). Students are also encouraged to enroll in an independent learning seminar that is offered at the beginning of the program, often taken simultaneously with the Foundations of Adult Learning course. It is a guided approach for students to identify the learning they have acquired from their experience, and it is designed to help them develop a learning portfolio.

At **SUNY Empire State College**, every undergraduate students takes an Educational Planning course, which explores how to design and plan a degree. Within this course, every student learns about the different PLA opportunities and can choose to begin working on a portfolio.

The **University of Maryland University College** (UMUC) is currently planning to take this one step further. It is working toward establishing PLA as a "default experience" for both prospective and matriculated students.

Having this kind of comprehensive approach to PLA is an important way to emphasize the value of PLA and build it into the DNA of a program or the institution as a whole. This approach may serve to boost overall PLA usage within an institution; and it has business model

implications, including ongoing professional development of all levels of advisement.

- **Student Satisfaction with the PLA Experience.** Institutions need to make sure that students are pleased with the services they are receiving through the PLA program. This means offering a range of options, making information and options easily accessible, providing appropriate support services, and ensuring a quick turn-around time for assessment results. Institutions should solicit student feedback to provide input on how to improve PLA offerings on an ongoing basis.

Key Resources

To develop the kind of PLA program that is used and that serves students well, institutions will need to consider whether they have the right level and mix of resources dedicated to PLA.

Many of the important PLA program features—providing a range of PLA methods, providing a course or workshop to help students develop a learning portfolio, making sure that information is readily available, making sure that there are good checks and balances for program integrity—require staffing, ongoing professional development, and other resources. These key resources also need to be flexible to meet the needs of the students. Programs need to develop their assessment capacity so that it is possible to ramp up assessment services as needed. (Student demand for PLA is not always predictable!)

Key Resources

What key resources do our value propositions require?

- Trained staff
- Appropriate staff structure
- Partners to expand capacity (See section on Key Partners)
- Data tracking and reporting

Colleges and universities also need to know how well their PLA programs are serving students, which means having a systematic process of data collection on student use of PLA.

Trained Staff

PLA activities involve staff performing a number of different roles. Typical personnel involved include:

- **Program Oversight.** Some institutions have a dedicated person for the PLA program—for example, 71% of CAEL's survey respondents said they have a dedicated staff person to coordinate PLA activities. However, in other institutions, the oversight of PLA may be included in the responsibilities of an administrator—such as the chief academic officer—professional staff, or faculty members.

- **Admissions.** Some institutions build conversations about PLA into the in-take conversation so that prior learning credit can be adequately considered in estimates of the cost of the degree and the time to degree.

- **PLA Program Support.** Depending on the size of the PLA program, additional staffing may include support staff in addition to a director of the program.

- **PLA Advising.** Some programs offer dedicated PLA advisors, while others integrate PLA advising with ongoing academic advising.

- **PLA Instruction.** Most institutions offer either a course or a workshop to inform about and prepare students for PLA options. This is especially the case at institutions with a portfolio process—in CAEL's survey, 59% of respondents said that they offer a required portfolio development course, and three-fifths of these are offered for credit. When there is a **course**, there is usually tuition charged and the instructor is paid according to the institution's faculty pay scale. When there are **workshops**, the cost of the instructor might be absorbed as part of the workload of the PLA director, faculty, and/or PLA staff. Some institutions charge a fee for the workshop to help cover the instructor costs.

Does your institution want to support students in developing prior learning portfolios?

If so, consider offering a portfolio development workshop, or a portfolio development course for credit.

59% of surveyed institutions require portfolio students to take a special workshop or for-credit course.

- **Transcript and Academic Document Review.** Often the personnel costs associated with reviewing transcripts and other official academic documents (e.g., a military veteran's Joint Services Transcript) are part of standard operations in admissions or registrar's offices. PLA transcripts and documents may be considered part of the responsibilities of the PLA staff or through department administration and/or faculty. In most cases, these costs are absorbed as part of the normal workload of those involved.

- **Evaluator/Assessor.** The two types of PLA that need an internal assessment are challenge exams and individual assessments (both portfolio and performance assessments).

  - Challenge exams are usually developed and administered within an academic department. Some institutions absorb this cost within the normal workload, while others pay a stipend to the faculty member who creates, administers, and/or assesses the results.

  - Individual portfolio or performance assessment—The two typical models are to use internal faculty or to hire an external evaluator (or third party assessor service) with the equivalent qualifications as adjunct faculty.

While many of the above roles, such as advising and program oversight, are functions that will be needed for any PLA program, some roles are needed only for specific PLA methods. Table 1 lists various activities/staff roles that are associated with specific methods of PLA.

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Appropriate Staff Structure

Institutions develop different structures and provide different staffing models to offer PLA to their students.

In terms of types of staffing structures, the key consideration is whether the institution has centralized or decentralized PLA services. Out of the 89 PLA institutions responding to our survey, 83% said that they had some degree of PLA centralization: 43% indicated in their responses that their programs were "Highly centralized, with all PLA managed by a PLA department with its own dedicated staff," another 36% said that their programs were "Somewhat decentralized, with some PLA offered in a centralized way, while other PLA is offered at the department level," and another 4% centralized services without any dedicated staff (Figure 6). Only a small percentage (16%) reported having highly decentralized programs, with each area of study or division managing PLA separately.

Specific institutional examples help to illustrate the ways in which there can be gradations of centralization of PLA services. For example, one institution said that its PLA activities are coordinated by the registrar but the assessment is conducted by faculty; another has a single coordinator/advisor for all PLA activities; another has its PLA activities

Table 1: Activities/staff roles associated with different methods of PLA

Activity/Role	PLA Method					
	Institutional Transcripts	Military Transcripts	Standardized Exams	Pre-evaluated Professional Learning Evaluations	Challenge Exams	Individual Portfolio Assessment
Student Advisors	•	•	•	•	•	•
Course/ Workshop Instructors						•
Faculty Assessors					•	•
Student Academic Document Review (e.g., ACE or NCCCRS credit recommendations)	•	•	•	•		
Credit Acceptance	•	•	•	•	•	•
Credit Posting	•	•	•	•	•	•
PLA Program Oversight	•	•	•	•	•	•

Source: Nan Travers, SUNY Empire State College, 2015

Figure 6. Overall structure of PLA offerings
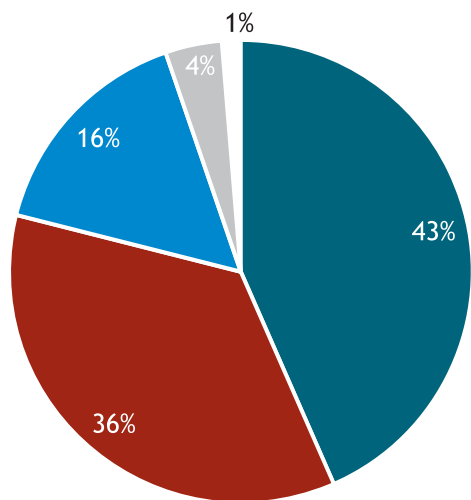
- Highly centralized, with all PLA managed by a PLA department with its own dedicated staff
- Somewhat decentralized, with some PLA offered in a centralized way, while other PLA offered at the department level
- Highly decentralized, with each division/department/area of study managing PLA separately
- Managed centrally, without dedicated staff
- Other

coordinated by the department dedicated to adult learners; and another offers some PLA through a centralized office while other methods are offered through the individual departments.

At **Bellevue University**, each individual method of PLA is centralized: the testing center oversees methods like AP, CLEP, DSST, and other exams; the registrar's office oversees corporate articulation and ACE credit recommendations; and the College of Continuing & Professional Education handles portfolio assessment. These three departments have a lot of interaction, but their policies for PLA differ. The only real centralization is under the president, who determines the fees for PLA.

At **DePaul University's School for New Learning**, PLA is officially managed by an assessment director, yet many other staff and faculty lend support to the PLA program. Some staff help to manage the logistics of PLA, and there is a teaching, learning, and assessment faculty committee helping to set policy, approve major training courses for credit, and assess prior learning for competence. In addition, the entire faculty has responsibility for reviewing their own students' portfolio as well as serving as second readers of students in other courses. This staffing model means that there is no need for an official "office" for PLA. All of the PLA work and conversations happen at the level of the student's academic committee, made up of the academic advisor, mentor, and professional advisor.

Centralized Structures for Large Institutions

Where models can get interesting is in institutions serving large numbers of students. Three large PLA institutions provide very different examples of centralized PLA services:

- At **Miami Dade College**, with seven campuses and two centers serving more than 161,000 students, PLA is centralized and coordinates with the testing center at each location for credit by exams such as CLEP. The Office of PLA facilitates other methods such as portfolio assessment — a relatively new offering — challenge exams, and review of military

and workplace training for credit recommendations. The Office of Assessment, Evaluation and Testing in Institutional Effectiveness and PLA work closely together on data tracking and analysis, and coordinated communication to staff and students. This centralized approach is relatively new. Until a few years ago, information about PLA was provided at each of the individual campuses; with this new centralized approach, there is greater consistency in how PLA is administered throughout the institution. There are also PLA liaisons/advisors at each campus to provide information, options, and resources to students. The Office of Prior Learning Assessment is staffed with a full-time PLA director and a full-time PLA coordinator.

- At **Argosy University**, there are 19 campuses serving 20,000 graduate and undergraduate students. There is some decentralized PLA activity as well as centralized PLA activity. Each of the 19 campuses has admissions or academic representatives who have been trained on basic PLA policies and procedures. Once matriculated, students are referred to a centralized PLA office in Phoenix, Arizona. Staff in the PLA office work with students individually during the intake process to explore the student's academic and work background to determine whether there is prior learning—including transfer credit, credentials, certifications, on-the-job training, or experiential learning—that can be counted toward their degrees. Portfolio assessment is an option, with approximately 200 portfolios assessed each year, and this number is on the rise. The PLA department has three full-time PLA specialists and one director to coordinate assessments with Argosy University faculty across the nation, though some staff balance other responsibilities in addition to PLA. Program leadership notes that having a centralized approach to PLA allows for greater consistency across all campuses and programs,

and it is a more cost effective way to have a trained and expert group of assessors.

- At **SUNY Empire State College**, PLA is offered across its 35 locations to best serve the institution's 19,000 students. There are seven regional PLA offices and a centralized office that provides a high level review of transcripts, PLA credit recommendation, and the portfolio assessment process. All faculty across the college advise students on their PLA options. Each regional office is staffed by a director level person and typically one PLA portfolio assessment specialist (some offices may have more than one). The assessment specialist works with students and faculty to make sure that student portfolios are ready for submission. They also hire the evaluators, review the evaluator's report, and process the submission. The central office houses support staff, academic review specialists, senior academic review specialists, and a director. The awarding of PLA credit intentionally involves several people at various levels of the institution, as a form of checks and balances and for quality assurance. About one-quarter of the college's 19,000 undergraduates pursue the portfolio option, and about half of its recent graduates have at least one type of PLA credit used in their degree.

Regular Tracking—and Use—of PLA Data

Data is a critical resource for PLA program. To support long-term institutional goals for PLA and to understand how to plan for future resource needs, colleges and universities need to have data on program outcomes.

When it comes to data, a rule of thumb is that you should try to measure what you care about. But it is important to remember that the reverse is also true: *you only really care about things you measure*. Institutions that have taken the step to track data on PLA usage are indicating that PLA is something that is worth examining, tracking, and, ultimately, supporting. Of the PLA institutions responding to our survey, 49 percent currently have systems in place to track data on PLA.

Track PLA Data to Understand…

- How many students use PLA
- Which students are using PLA
- Which methods are used more than others
- Which areas of study students are more common for PLA
- How well students perform in subsequent courses
- Whether your PLA students are more likely to persist and graduate

When institutions do track PLA, they can learn a lot that can be helpful for promoting and improving PLA. For example, they can learn how many students use PLA, which methods are used more than others, how well students are performing in subsequent courses, and which areas of study see more PLA students than others. They may also track retention and graduation rates for students who earn PLA credits. Tracking these data can help program administrators understand trends that may point to the need for program redesign, expansion or enhancements, additional marketing, or a hearty "congratulations" to the PLA staff.

Institutions can use the data they collect to better understand how their students are using PLA, as well as how the institution is serving them in the PLA process. **Pennsylvania's College Credit Fast Track** platform, for example, allows administrators to easily request reports on portfolio submission and completion rates, student demographics, and subject areas of PLA engagement. Franklin Pierce uses PLA data to analyze what credentials students are bringing to the institution in order to plan for expanding particular courses or programs. **UMUC**, **Miami Dade** and **Argosy** are also regularly tracking PLA usage as well as the relationship between PLA and student success outcomes like persistence, GPA, and degree completion.

Analysis of PLA data can be used to help institutions answer other questions as well. For example:

- **St. Joseph's College** conducted an analysis of the indirect financial benefit of PLA to the

institution. By examining the number of students at St. Joseph's college who completed the portfolio course over a 10-year period, the college learned that that 88% graduated and 4% were still enrolled (persisting). The college concluded from this data that the college collected more tuition and fees from these PLA students because they were motivated to stay enrolled and persist (Fonte, 2008).

- **Argosy University** analyzed the impact of PLA fees and found that PLA usage by students dramatically increased when fees were eliminated. The college is closely tracking these changes in PLA use, as well as average credits awarded per portfolio, time to complete for faculty assessors, PLA usage by degree program, and other factors that affect student usage of PLA.

- **SUNY Empire State College** finds many uses for PLA data. The institution tracks the number of students who are actively working on a portfolio, where the students are in the process, and which students may be taking too much time for PLA completion and therefore need assistance. The college can track how long assessors take with the evaluation, how many graduates have used some form of PLA, and how PLA credits are applied within the student's degree. In examining student retention patterns, the college found that students with military PLA credit and those earning credit through the evaluation of non-college training had shorter times to degree completion, compared to other students using different forms of PLA. Through this analysis, the college realized that the more successful students were those who were receiving more advising, and so now the college is examining ways to provide more advising to the other groups of students in a more systematic way.

Several years ago, Empire State College also closely examined the cost to deliver PLA compared to the student fees, and it found that, given the volume of PLA users, the institution was losing significant money on PLA.

This analysis spurred staff to conduct predictive modeling that helped identify which kind of pricing models might enable the institution to cover more of its costs and the institution changed its fee structure.

Institutions at which PLA is housed primarily within certain departments or schools—such as an adult learning division—may face challenges in getting the institution's standard reporting system to include metrics related to PLA. Such has been the case at DePaul University's School for New Learning, which relies instead on special reports prepared every two to three years.

Key Partners

In addition to the institution's internal resources, it may be important to form partnerships to help carry out some PLA program offerings, or to expand capacity when needed.

For example, portfolio assessment will require internal staffing support, and it may also require partnerships, whether it is training internal faculty, developing a network of external (adjunct) faculty assessors with varied expertise, or outsourcing the portfolio assessment function to a third party, such as CAEL's non-profit LearningCounts™ service. Of the 89 institutions responding to CAEL's survey, 27% use external contractors or third party evaluators to expand their capacity to provide portfolio assessment.

Below are examples of PLA partnerships that include a LearningCounts partnership, a system's approach to portfolio assessment, and a consortium approach to the review of non-college training programs.

- **Franklin Pierce University's LearningCounts Partnership.** Franklin Pierce University is a small private institution in New Hampshire.

Key Partners
- Who are our key partners in offering PLA?
- Which key activities do partners perform?
- How do they bring value to our students?

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With no staff dedicated solely to PLA, there was little capacity to provide portfolio assessment, and few students took advantage of that option. Wanting to be able to do more, the institution partnered with LearningCounts. There is a main point person for PLA at Franklin Pierce, who refers students to the service and serves as the advisor to students who enroll in LearningCounts. He also trains the enrollment management team to be able to refer students as well. Interested students are referred to the online, three-credit portfolio development course called CAEL 100, which is listed as a course in the Franklin Pierce catalogue. Providing the course this way allows students to use financial aid to pay for it. This partnership does require an annual fee to the institution, but this cost is fully covered in this partnership model if ten or more students enroll in the program. Portfolio is still a relatively small offering at Franklin Pierce. However, this is a model that could be sustainable and has the capacity to grow.

- **Pennsylvania Community College Collaboration: College Credit FastTrack.** Since February 2015, the Pennsylvania Commission of Community Colleges (PACCC), a membership association that represents the state's 14 community colleges, has operated an innovative, system-wide PLA solution called College Credit FastTrack. The participating colleges agreed on common procedures and prices for PLA, and the initiative provides a single, web-based entry portal for all students who are interested in PLA. The portal was developed by AcademyOne, using funding from a $2.5M Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The College Credit FastTrack website guides students through a number of stages in exploring their PLA options. After creating an online account, students select a targeted institution (typically, the institution at which they are currently enrolled) and begin exploring existing courses that may correspond with their learning experiences. Students are connected with a PLA advisor on their individual campus who provides a one-on-one consultation about the various PLA options and offers guidance in submitting an application for the program. Each community college has selected a group of internal advisors for this role, which ensures that the specific degree requirements of the individual institutions are incorporated into the PLA advising process.

Upon approval of a student's application and the completed payment of a $125 assessment fee, the system guides students through a standardized process for developing and submitting an e-portfolio to demonstrate their college-level learning. The portal offers guidelines, tutorials, and other materials to assist students in this process. An assessor is then assigned to evaluate the e-portfolio. Each community college has a designated group of assessors who are tasked with evaluating all portfolios submitted for their institution. Assessors were provided with a system-wide training on portfolio evaluation, and PACCC is currently engaged in efforts to expand the pool of trained assessors. Following the submission and evaluation of each portfolio, assessors make recommendations for potential academic credit. All participating institutions have agreed that the credit recommendations produced through the College Credit FastTrack system are transferable across all community colleges in the state.

- **Consortium for the Assessment of College Equivalency (CACE).** Six east coast institutions joined together in a consortium to develop common review standards for awarding college credit for non-college training. The colleges are Charter Oak State College, Excelsior College, Granite State College, SUNY Empire State College, Thomas Edison State College, and Vermont State Colleges. The goal of the consortium is for each of the colleges to accept each other's' credit recommendations for faculty-evaluated training and certifications. This partnership allows for

greater consistency in awarding credit, and greater efficiencies in that the partner institutions will not be duplicating each other's efforts. Students are able to use one of the partner institution's credit recommendations at their own institution without obtaining the credits first on a transcript.

Cost Structure

Offering a range of PLA methods, outreach and support to students, oversight, data collection, and so on is not without a cost to the institution. Some costs are more transactional and variable; for example, the cost of instructors of a portfolio development course that may be offered on a schedule dependent upon student interest, or the cost of faculty assessors. Some costs are more fixed, such as having dedicated PLA staff or office space for PLA advising or administrative activities. Other costs may be more difficult to track as they are more integrated into other parts of the higher education enterprise, including costs related to student recruitment, marketing, advising, technology support, data tracking and analysis, and professional development.

Variable Costs Examples

- **Portfolio course/workshop instructors.** When offered in-house, the cost can be included as part of regular faculty workload.

- **Portfolio assessors and challenge exam developers/evaluators.** These functions may be included as part of faculty workload, or there can be additional compensation to faculty assessors that creates an added cost to the institution. (See sidebar for discussion of different institutional approaches to faculty assessors.)

- **Resource materials/publications development and printing.** Dedicated publications would focus on PLA opportunities and policies and procedures. Some institutions develop resources specifically for students, advisors, and/or evaluators.
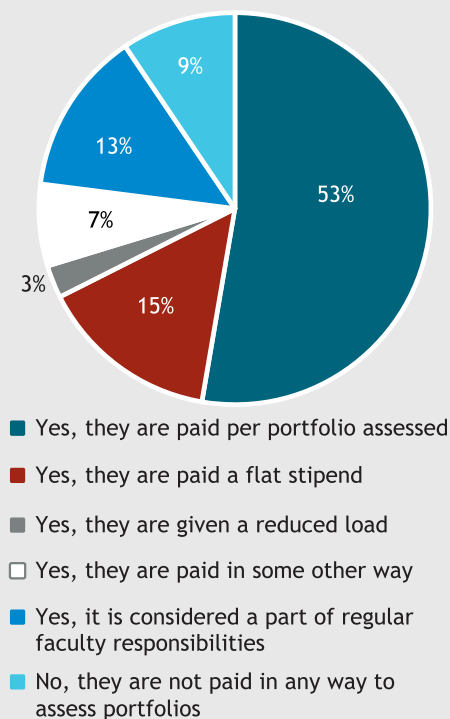
Fixed Costs Examples

- **Dedicated PLA staff.** Staff whose responsibilities for overseeing or supporting PLA activities on a day-to-day basis can be a fixed line item in the institution's overall budget for PLA.

- **Dedicated office space.** Similar to administrative staff, direct costs, such as office space, testing space, or annual fees to technology vendors or other PLA partners, can be fixed in planning for ongoing PLA costs.

Integrated or Indirect Costs Examples

- **Marketing.** Marketing materials directly focused on PLA opportunities may be incorporated into other marketing messages to students.

- **Website development.** Dedicated web pages focused on PLA opportunities and policies and procedures may be one small part of the institution's larger website management costs.

- **Technology.** Some institutions develop technologies to support the submission, review, and approval processes for PLA. Technology-related costs may include software development and updates in the student information system to store and report on PLA credits, systems for archiving portfolios, management systems to track and approve PLA credits (including a management system for the portfolio process), and new platforms or systems, such as e-portfolios, for students to develop their portfolio requests.

- **Institutional research and outcomes assessment.** Increasingly, institutions need to report on the usage and outcomes of PLA programs, including student and program outcomes.

MODELS FOR USE AND COMPENSATION OF FACULTY ASSESSORS

Figure A. Additional faculty compensation for portfolio assessment

- Yes, they are paid per portfolio assessed
- Yes, they are paid a flat stipend
- Yes, they are given a reduced load
- Yes, they are paid in some other way
- Yes, it is considered a part of regular faculty responsibilities
- No, they are not paid in any way to assess portfolios

Figure B. Additional faculty compensation for challenge exam assessment

- Yes, they are paid per exam
- Yes, they are paid a flat stipend
- Yes, they are given a reduced load
- Yes, they are paid in some other way
- Yes, it is considered a part of regular faculty responsibilities
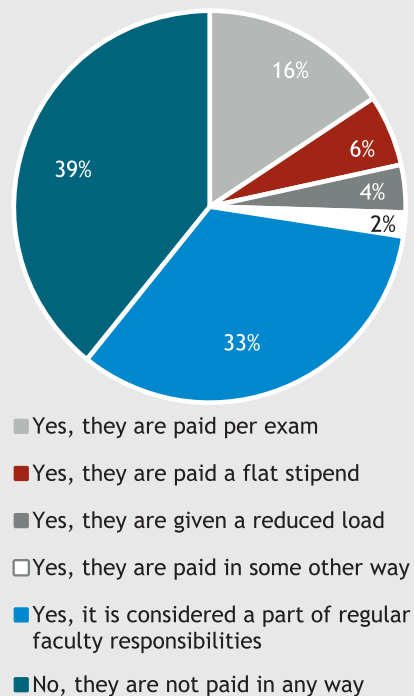- No, they are not paid in any way

Survey responses suggest that faculty compensation is seen differently for portfolio assessment, compared to challenge exams. With portfolio assessment, more than two-thirds of respondents said that there is some additional compensation for faculty who assess portfolios, with 53% saying that faculty are paid an additional sum for each portfolio assessed, and another 15% saying that faculty are given a flat stipend for their assessment duties. Only a small percentage (20%) say that portfolio assessment is either part of the faculty's regular workload or that faculty are not compensated in any way (Figure A). (Nearly two-fifths of respondents, 38%, said that the compensation given to faculty for their assessment responsibilities is not sufficient.)

In comparison, a large majority (72%) of respondents said that the faculty role in challenge exams is not given special compensation—33% consider this part of regular faculty responsibilities, and 39% do not pay faculty in any way (Figure B).

Some institutions use their full-time faculty for a portion of their portfolio assessment needs, and they use adjunct faculty to expand capacity with respect to volume or subject matter expertise. For example, at

St. Joseph's College, full-time faculty members are required to assess eight portfolios per semester as part of their job responsibilities, and additional assessment needs are carried out by adjuncts for a small fee for each portfolio.

How the faculty assessor function is structured and compensated may have implications for the overall business model for PLA. For example, if there is no additional compensation for faculty, then there may not be an internal incentive to increase PLA usage. This discrepancy can have an impact on whether PLA is promoted throughout the institution as an important strategy to meet the needs of learners. On the other hand, if PLA activities are well described as part of the workload and faculty loads are adjusted to compensate the work, faculty will have greater incentives to support PLA.

Institutions may not always have control over how faculty are compensated for their assessor function, especially if contracts are carefully controlled by unions or state mandates. Some faculty contracts may limit PLA programs to one kind of compensation model, or may restrict the use of adjunct faculty even if they are needed to meet assessment needs. These are all important considerations for the overall PLA Business Model.

- **Other staff.** Various additional staff have important roles to play in the administration of a PLA program, yet PLA is just a fraction of their overall responsibilities. It may be difficult to calculate the indirect cost of these supporting players, which include staff in recruitment, marketing, admissions, registrar's office, academic advising, technology, financial aid, bursar's office, institutional research, and student support.
- **Internal personnel training and professional development.** Many of the various supporting roles in PLA need professional development and training regarding PLA policies, purpose, procedures, and advising students.

Recognizing PLA Costs with a Dedicated Budget

Although there are very real costs to offering PLA, it is not common for institutions to have a clear picture of what the comprehensive costs associated with PLA are. Some institutions take the step of recognizing at least some of the more measurable fixed and variable costs by having a dedicated line item in the institution's budget for PLA—but this is not very common. Only 35% of respondents to our survey said that their institution had a budget allocation for PLA, rather than having all PLA-related costs absorbed into the institution's overall budget. How this plays out at different institutions can vary:

- At **SUNY Empire State College**, the PLA budget is essentially the combined budgets of the individual PLA centers and the PLA central office, and it does not include various indirect costs to administer the program, such as research (tracking outcomes), marketing, and the development of a technology platform for PLA; those are absorbed into the overall institutional operating costs. Empire State's PLA budget also does not include the stipends paid to the evaluators; these are paid from the fees collected for portfolio assessment.
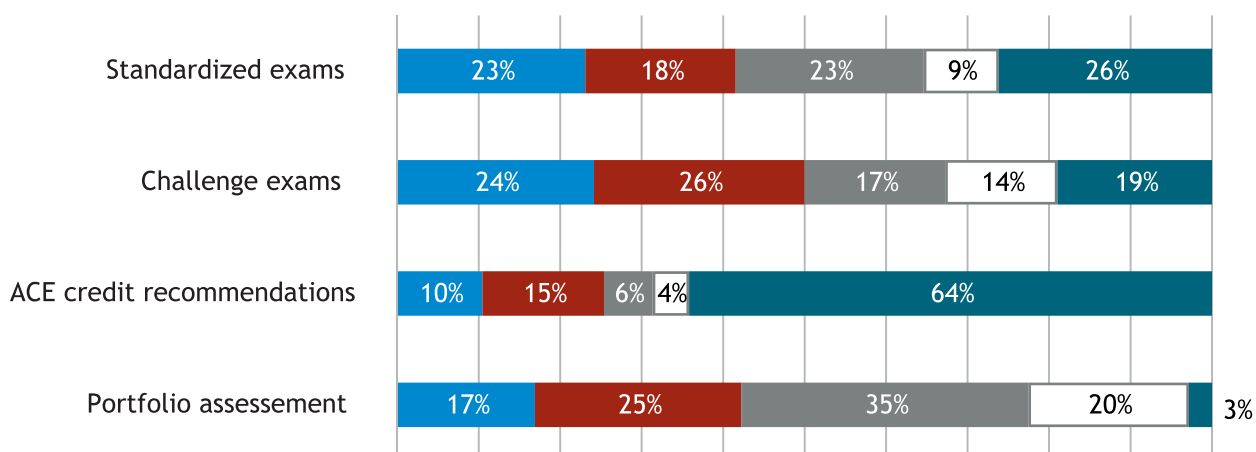
Only 35% of PLA institutions have a budget allocation for PLA.

- At **Miami Dade College**, there has been a dedicated allocation for PLA within the academic affairs budget since 2012, which is mostly used to cover salaries and benefits of the dedicated PLA staff as well as marketing, resources, and materials. The majority of other costs, like technology, and overhead, are covered under the overall institutional operating costs. Credit by exam fees are part of the testing department budget, and challenge exam fees are part of the budget for the respective academic department. The PLA budget does not include the compensation paid to the portfolio evaluators; these are paid from the fees collected from the portfolio development course for assessing the experiential learning for credit.
- **Argosy University's** PLA budget covers the cost of the coordinator salary as well as travel, professional development, and general overhead allocation for shared resources such as space, technology, etc. In addition, the budget includes additional funds for faculty assessments based on submission volume.

On the one hand, having a dedicated PLA budget can be a sign of institutional recognition of the value of PLA by understanding and planning for its costs. But there is another point of view as well: another sign of institutional commitment is offering a comprehensive and integrated approach to PLA in which PLA is made available to all students, with associated costs built into the overall business model of the institution because these costs are seen as an important investment in successful student outcomes.

Figure 7. PLA Financial Strategy

	Aim to cover all direct and indirect costs	Charge only nominal fees	Structure PLA fees to cover direct costs and some administrative costs	Structure PLA fees to cover direct costs only	Do not charge
Standardized exams	23%	18%	23%	9%	26%
Challenge exams	24%	26%	17%	14%	19%
ACE credit recommendations	10%	15%	6%	4%	64%
Portfolio assessement	17%	25%	35%	20%	3%

■ Aim to cover all direct and indirect costs

■ Charge only nominal fees since PLA is a key part of our mission in serving adult learners.

■ Structure PLA fees to cover direct costs of the assessment process and some administrative costs

□ Structure PLA fees to cover direct costs of the assessment process only

■ Do not charge

Revenue

When considering the revenue from PLA, institutions typically weigh different goals such as bringing in additional resources to the institution, covering costs/breaking even, or viewing PLA as a kind of "loss leader," meaning that the fees for PLA are set too low to cover all possible costs but greater returns are expected over time that make PLA a worthwhile activity. These considerations are discussed in greater depth later in this report.

In general, when we talk about PLA revenue, there are several sources that should be considered:

• **Student fees.** Students provide revenue to the PLA program through fees that they pay. Institutions currently set prices in many ways. There can be fees for the assessment itself as well as for posting the credit to the student's transcript.

• **Institutions.** Institutions may provide some revenue in the form of a budget alloca-tion to the PLA program, which may include

Revenue

• What are our sources of revenue?

• What are our students willing or able to pay?

• What do other institutions charge for PLA?

supporting one or more dedicated staff position to the PLA enterprise or using faculty workload to cover some of the PLA activities, such as advising and assessing learning. As noted above, this approach is not very common: only 35% of institutions responding to CAEL's survey said that they have a budget allocation for PLA.

• **Long-term returns from student success: state funding for public institutions, and/or increased tuition income.** As we know from CAEL's previous research on PLA, adult students with PLA credit have higher rates of degree completion than adult students who do not have PLA credit. Institutions whose

funding formulas are based on factors other than enrollment—in particular, on the number of credits earned, retention rates, or graduation rates—may conclude that some of the revenue provided by the state results from the PLA activities of the institution. Similarly, if PLA students persist longer than non-PLA students, that persistence will result in students taking more tuition-based courses from the institution, compared to those who are not as motivated to persist in their enrollment.

Views on the Role of Fees

How the institution's view of PLA's value proposition influences the setting of fees

Institutions surveyed and interviewed for this report shared a range of approaches for setting prices. Before examining the specifics of what these prices look like in practice, it may be useful to discuss how institutions are approaching the question of fees.

In general, few of the institutions responding to our survey seemed to care about covering all costs associated with PLA—10-24%, depending on the method. Respondents cared the least about covering the costs associated with awarding credit based on ACE recommendations; in fact, 64% do not charge anything. Institutions cared the most about covering the costs associated with portfolio assessment—20% aimed to cover the direct cost of the assessment, and another 35% aimed to cover direct costs as well as some administrative costs (Figure 7).

In interviews, most institutions mentioned how important PLA was to their overall mission and how that played a role in their approach to the question of PLA fees. As one institutional representative

Three Common Considerations for Setting PLA Fees:

1. Cover associated costs
2. Match competitor pricing
3. Make affordable for students

Two-thirds of PLA institutions consider PLA research findings — such as higher degree completion for PLA students — in their business models

explained, "We are interested in degree attainment, not making money on peoples' dreams."

Many of the interviewed institutions noted that they saw PLA as a kind of loss leader, meaning that the fees for PLA are set too low to cover all possible costs, and this is partly done to make PLA attractive to current and prospective students. A short term financial loss would be mitigated by greater assumed returns to the institution over time, which ultimately make it a worthwhile activity.

They factored in the indirect—and sometimes longer term—institutional benefits that may come from PLA:

- Students with PLA feel validated and are pleased with the opportunity to accelerate; these experiences further engage the students, resulting in their academic persistence. Therefore, they take more courses—thus paying more tuition—over time (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014; Klein-Collins, 2010).

- Students with PLA become motivated to persist and complete their degrees (Klein-Collins, 2010).

- PLA offerings—and their promise of saving the student time and money—help to recruit more adult students to the institution (The College Board, 2005; Stamats, 2007).

- When more students persist, this lessens the need to recruit new students. When a student drops out, it can cost a private institution as much as $2,433 to recruit a new student to take his or her place (Noel-Levitz, 2013).

Among survey respondents, two-thirds (67%) said that the institution had considered PLA research findings in its business model, particularly research showing the relationship between PLA credit-earning and student persistence and degree completion.

One institutional representative explained, "We assume (no—we know!) that PLA will help the student persist, thus taking more courses from us and ultimately graduating. We aim to cover all direct costs and some indirect costs, but we operate at somewhat of a loss because of these other assumed benefits."

This is not to say that institutions do not care about covering some, if not all, of the costs associated with PLA—they certainly do. And some go to considerable effort to make sure that the institution comes close to breaking even (see example of SUNY Empire State College, in box). But there are other considerations as well.

One consideration for many colleges is to make sure that what they charge is in line with what other colleges are charging. Almost two-thirds of survey respondents (63%) said that they review the PLA fees charged by similar institutions.

Another important consideration is affordability. Since many PLA fees cannot be covered through Title IV funding such as Pell Grants, institutions need to carefully consider what students might be willing to pay for PLA and whether raising or lowering the price of PLA will affect the number of students who are willing to pay for it (in economic terms, this is getting at the concept of the *price elasticity* of PLA). No institution has done a complete analysis of this question although **Argosy University** has found that eliminating PLA fees has significantly increased PLA submission volumes (see box).

Two Outliers: The Cost Coverer and The Cost Ignorer

Most of the institutions CAEL interviewed attempted to cover some costs of PLA, but acknowledged that the institution was likely absorbing some costs in order to offer low-cost PLA as part of the institution's mission. There were, however, two clear exceptions to this approach: SUNY Empire State College and Argosy University.

SUNY Empire State College took a cost covering approach. Analysis of PLA fee and usage data showed that many thousands of students were using PLA but that this was costing the college a considerable sum of money every year. Seeing this as unsustainable, the college set a new pricing structure for PLA that charges students more, but with the goal of breaking even, not making a profit. The fees for portfolio assessment are on a sliding scale, charging, at the lower end, $350 for a portfolio requesting 1-8 credits, and, at the higher end, $1,550 for 33 credits or more." Despite the intentions to break even, college leadership thinks it is possible that the college may still be losing money on administrative costs. However, the college is not concerned. Like other institutions, SUNY Empire State, sees PLA as an important part of the college's mission. Says Nan Travers, Director of Collegewide Academic Review, "PLA is an important piece of our model—not in terms of dollars, but in terms of who comes in the door, who stays, and who keeps going."

Meanwhile, **Argosy University** has taken a very different approach. Years ago, Argosy charged students a onetime $95 portfolio submission fee that was intended to offset some of the cost for administration and assessment. Although nominal, the school was concerned that the fee was a barrier to participation. The institution conducted its own detailed evaluation of different fee options—such as a low application fee, a nominal transcription fee, or a flat fee that would cover the department's cost. Ultimately, concerns about Title IV funding not covering PLA costs led the institution to decide to remove all PLA fees. The institution decided that the long term benefits of student persistence and student satisfaction outweighed any short term financial relief. In the process, they have found that student use of PLA has increased markedly.

BASIC PRICING OF PLA

This section provides a summary of the pricing of PLA methods at 89 surveyed institutions in 2015. This information may help to guide pricing decisions at other institutions, keeping in mind the business model considerations discussed earlier in this report.

Despite the tendency of surveyed institutions to look to other institutions' examples as they set prices for PLA services, there is great variety across institutions in terms of the fee structures and/or tuition charged to students for participation in PLA.

In addition, there do not appear to be any patterns underlying PLA fee amounts: we did not find that two-year institutions had average prices that differed dramatically from those of four-year institutions; we did not find that large institutions charged differently than smaller institutions; and we did not find that institutions with more centralized PLA services charged rates that were noticeably different, on average, than those of institutions with more decentralized programs.

The pricing information is presented for each PLA method:

- Standardized exams
- Departmental/challenge exams
- Portfolio assessment
- Credit for military training and occupations
- Review of non-college training

Among the surveyed institutions, there were five basic types of fees associated with the different methods of PLA: assessment fee, administration fee, review of transcript/training fee, transcription fee, and course/workshop fee.

- **Assessment fee.** Assessment fees typically apply to standardized testing, challenge exams, and portfolio assessments. These assessment fees are flat rates for standardized tests (set by the testing organizations), challenge exams, as well as for most portfolio assessments. However, some institutions charge a sliding scale assessment fee for portfolio based on the number of credits the student is requesting.

- **Administration fee.** Most institutions that offer exams on site will charge a small additional administration fee.

- **Transcript or training review fee.** Faculty or staff time is also involved in the review of a student's military transcript or previous non-college training from other sources (e.g., licenses, professional credentials). Some institutions charge fees for these review services.

- **Transcription fee.** Usually, when an institution administers one of the discussed PLA methods, there is no charge for the transcription of credit. Transcription fees are sometimes used when the assessment of credit was not done through the institution, such as in the case of CLEP exams administered off site. When transcription fees are applied, the amount is typically nominal, such as $10-$15 per credit hour.

- **Course/workshop fee.** Institutions that provide a workshop for the development of a PLA portfolio may do so for free or charge a flat fee. Institutions providing such assistance as a for-credit course typically charge tuition and fees at the same rate as the tuition of other credit bearing courses. In this case, the price of the portfolio has a direct relationship to the cost of tuition.

Charging by the credit?

There is no one right way to charge for PLA, but one approach is problematic: charging by the credit awarded.

Some institutions charge transcription or assessment fees that are determined by the number of PLA credits earned. This runs counter to CAEL's Ten Standards for Assessing Learning, which states that "fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded." There should be no financial incentive of any kind for the institution to award more rather than fewer PLA credits.

A better approach is to charge a flat assessment fee or one that is based on credits requested rather than credits awarded.

Standardized Exams

With standardized exams, the tests themselves may or may not be administered on site. Some institutions do offer CLEP and DDST on site, while others will refer students to other testing locations; UExcel exams are offered only at special Pearson VUE testing sites. Institutions that have in-house testing sites may charge only the fee to the testing organization or there may be an additional administration fee. An institution might charge a transcription fee for all test-based credits, or just for tests taken elsewhere.

Just under one-third of institutions offering CLEP and DSST on site only charged students the testing fee, while over half charged the testing fee plus an additional administration fee (Figure 8). Regardless of whether the tests were offered on site, very small percentages of institutions (9-17%) charged a transcription fee for the test-based credits (Figures 8 and 9).

Administration Fees

Of the institutions that have CLEP testing on site, more than two-thirds (68% of responding in-stitutions) reported that they charge an additional administration fee, while the remainder (31%) only charged the standard CLEP test fee that is required

Standardized exam prices:

Median administration fee (in addition to the standard fees to the testing organizations): $25-$30

Transcription fees sometimes charged, but not common

by the College Board. The median fee charged was $25 although this amount ranged from $10-$55 (Figure 10).

For institutions that have DSST testing on site, more than two-thirds (69%) reported that they charge an additional administration fee, while the remainder (31%) only charged the fee to the parent company Prometric. The median fee charged was $30 although this amount ranged from $15-$60 (Figure 11).

Transcription Fees

The great majority of institutions that award credit for standardized testing did not charge a transcription fee. Only nine institutions reported charging a transcription fee for standard-ized exams, ranging from $10-$25, or a flat fee of either $70 or $129 per exam.

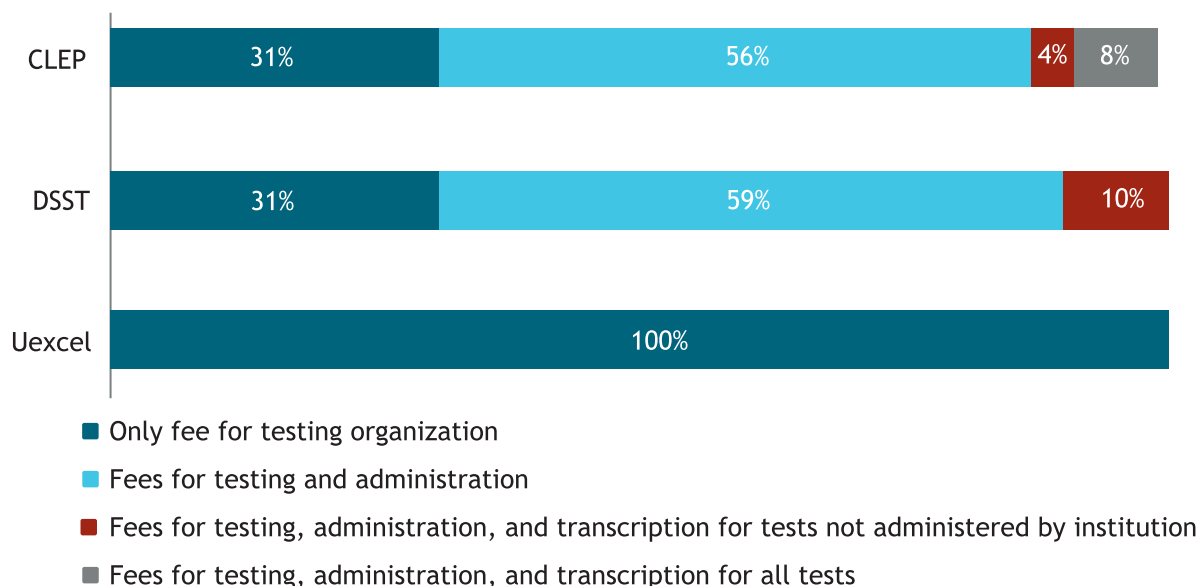**Figure 8. Required fees for standardized exams, institutions offering on site testing**

Exam	Only fee for testing organization	Fees for testing and administration	Fees for testing, administration, and transcription for tests not administered by institution	Fees for testing, administration, and transcription for all tests
CLEP	31%	56%	4%	8%
DSST	31%	59%	10%	
Uexcel	100%			

- ■ Only fee for testing organization
- ■ Fees for testing and administration
- ■ Fees for testing, administration, and transcription for tests not administered by institution
- ■ Fees for testing, administration, and transcription for all tests

Figure 9. Required fees for standardized exams, institutions not offering on site testing

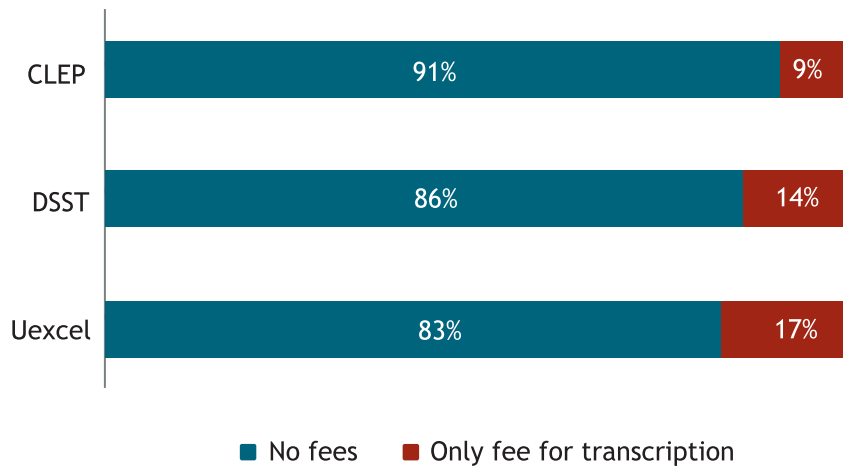| Exam	No fees	Only fee for transcription
CLEP	91%	9%
DSST	86%	14%
Uexcel	83%	17%

■ No fees ■ Only fee for transcription

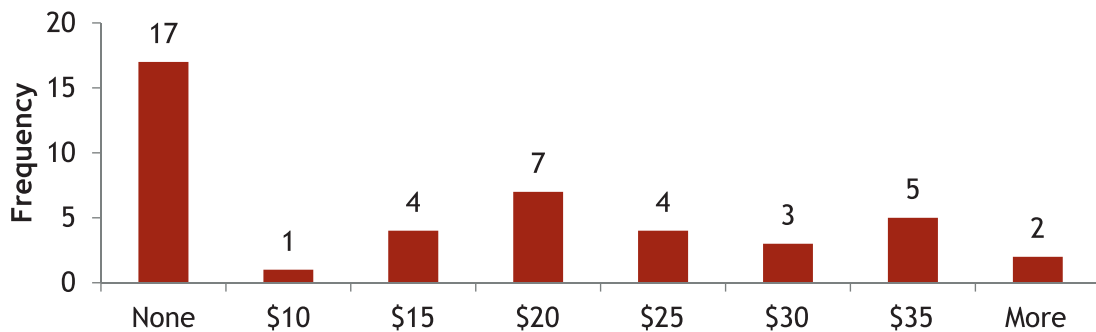**Figure 10. Range of administrative fees charged for CLEP tests, in addition to the fees to The College Board**

Fee	Frequency
None	17
$10	1
$15	4
$20	7
$25	4
$30	3
$35	5
More	2

Figure 11. Range of administrative fees charged for DSST tests, in addition to the fees to Prometric

Fee	Frequency
None	10
$20	8
$30	3
$40	3
$50	2
More	2

**Figure 12.
Fees for
challenge exams**

Administration fee only	63%
No administration or transcription fees	23%
Both administration and transcription fees	10%
Transcription fee only	4%

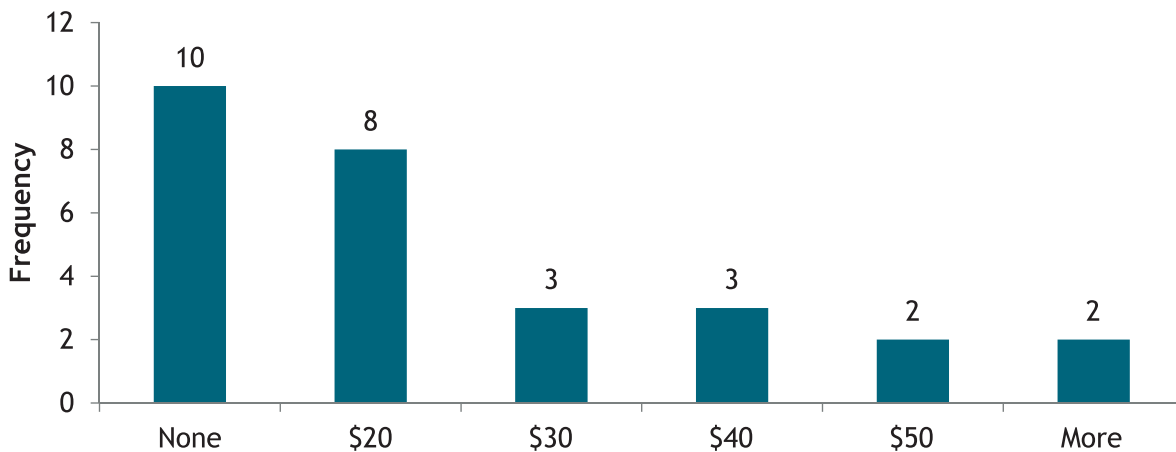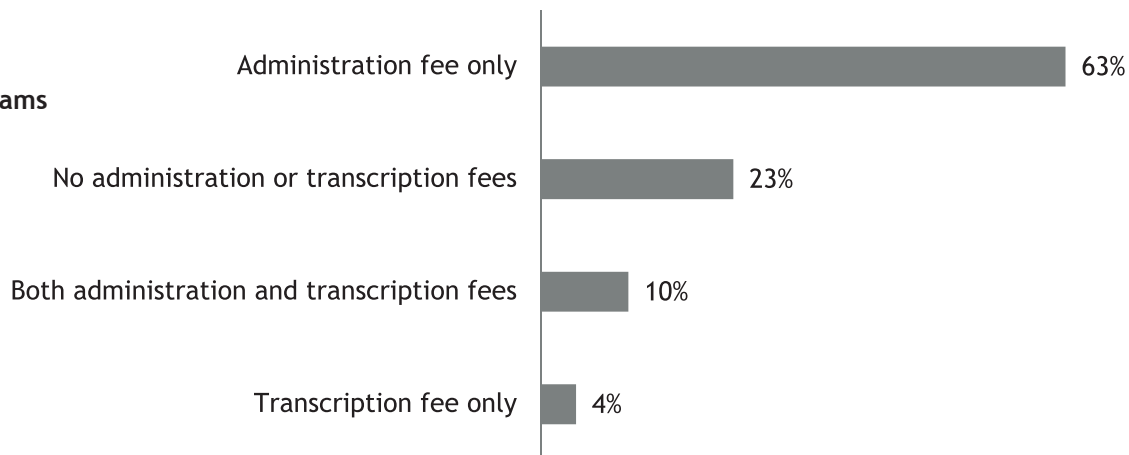## Departmental Challenge Exams

When an institution offers departmental challenge exams, it has the opportunity to apply fees at the point of developing/administering the exam and then again at the point of transcribing those credits to the student's record. The majority of institutions that participated in this study charged only a fee for administration (63%), and about a quarter of institutions (23%) charged no fees at all (Figure 12).

The fees for challenge exams for most institutions ranged from $10 to $252 (one institution charged $600, which we would consider to be an outlier), and the median amount was $100 per exam. A number of institutions charged per credit hour, rather than per exam, at a rate of between $10 and $123 per credit. Institutions with a fee for transcription charged from $5 to $70 per credit with a median of $10.

As noted in an earlier sidebar on faculty compensation, few institutions reported providing special compensation for faculty who develop and assess challenge exams. Of those who do, some reported compensation ranging from $20 to $120

Challenge exam prices:

Median assessment fee: $100 per exam

Range: $10-$252

Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common

per challenge exam. Others said that the amount paid to faculty depended on the department and format of the exam.

Portfolio Assessment

For institutions that offer portfolio assessment, there are three common points at which fees might be applied: the portfolio course or workshop, the assessment of the portfolio, and the transcription of portfolio credit. The most common pricing model for portfolio assessment is to only require the student to pay for the assessment of the portfolio (26%), with the next most common model charging an assessment fee and course fee (22%). Other common models include charging a fee for a required course and for the assessment of portfolios (22%), charging a fee for the required course only (16%), and charging a fee for the required course and the assessment of any portfolios after the first (12%). A small proportion (17%) of institutions charge transcription fees, typically in combination with other types of fees (Figure 13).

Course Fees

The fees for the portfolio development course varied considerably between institutions and models. Most (68%) offered a portfolio development course for which the student could earn college credit (Figure 14) although there were other models described, including free courses in a MOOC (massive open online course) format, online courses, or single day seminars. Portfolio development courses offered for

credit were worth between 1 and 5 credits although most (53%) were worth 3 credits. Tuition charged for the course ranged from $132 to over $2,000 with costs considerably higher at private institutions due to higher tuition rates (Figure 15). The median

for tuition-based courses is $720. A handful of the responding institutions offered their courses with a flat rate not tied to credits or tuition ranging from $20 to $2,000 with a median of around $250. Four institutions offered the course or workshop for free.

Figure 13.
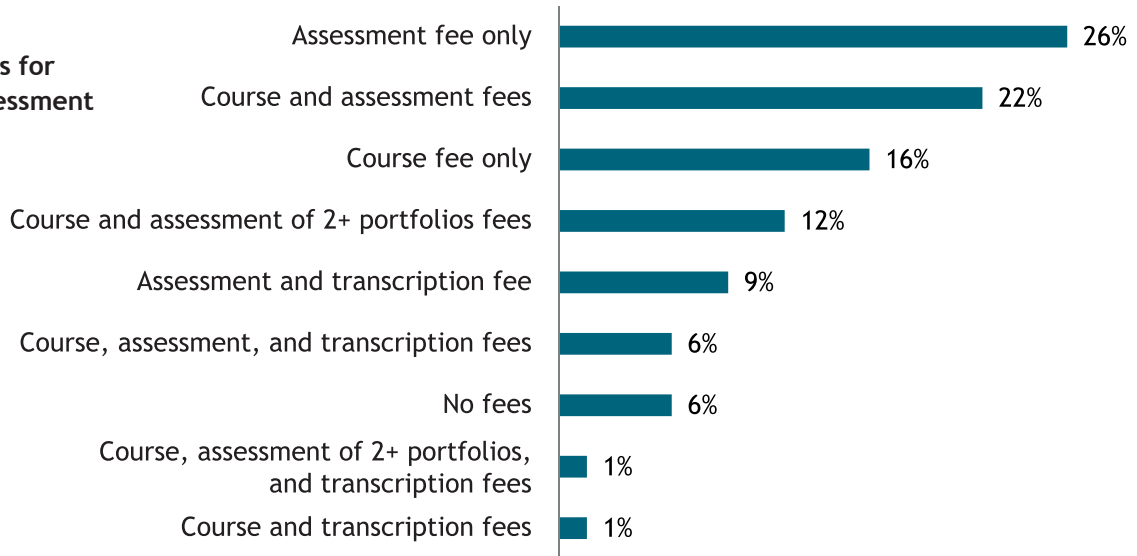**Required fees for**
portfolio assessment

Category	Percentage
Assessment fee only	26%
Course and assessment fees	22%
Course fee only	16%
Course and assessment of 2+ portfolios fees	12%
Assessment and transcription fee	9%
Course, assessment, and transcription fees	6%
No fees	6%
Course, assessment of 2+ portfolios, and transcription fees	1%
Course and transcription fees	1%

Figure 14.
Is a portfolio
development course
offered for credit?

Yes 68%
No 32%
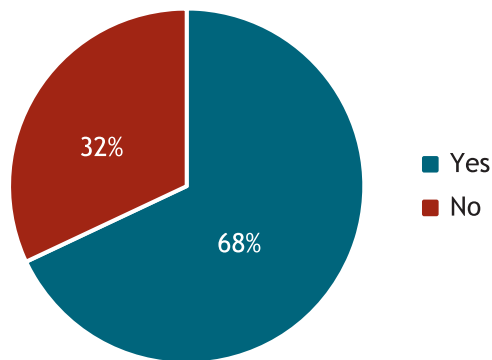
Figure 15.
Portfolio development
course price ranges,
tuition-based model

Frequency

Price Range	Frequency
$200 or less	4
$201-400	3
$401-600	1
$601-800	5
$801-1000	0
$1000-1200	4
$1200 or more	5
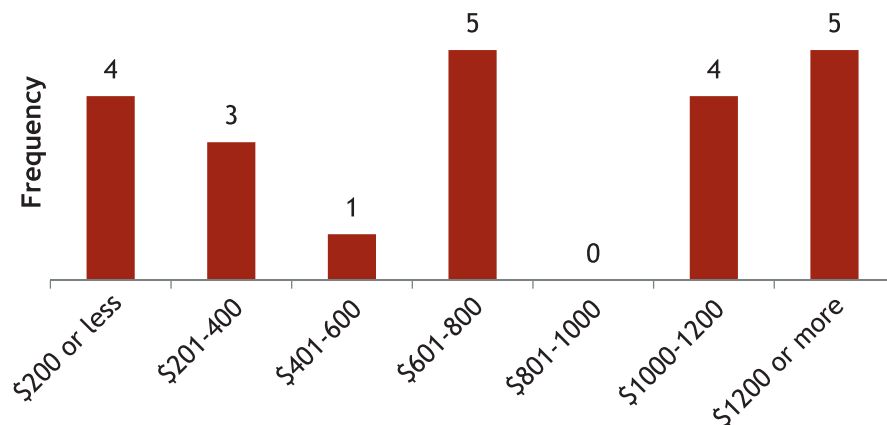
Assessment Fees

Most institutions charged students for the assessment of portfolios although many covered the cost of the first assessment as part of the price of the portfolio development course. The cost of the assessment, be it for the first assessment or for anything after the first assessment, ranged between $20 and $600 with a median of $175 (Figure 16). In other cases, some institutions charged by the credit ($75-$150 per credit) or charged a flat rate, often with a credit limit (e.g., $648 for up to 45 credits, $363 for the first 12 credits, or $1850 with no credit limit). One potential benefit of offering a flat rate is the ability to build the cost of PLA into the student's total cost of attendance for Title IV funding.
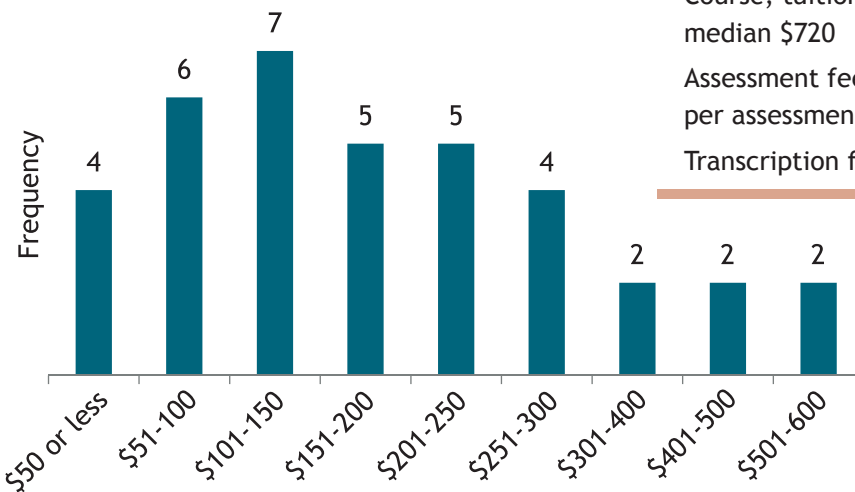
Transcription Fees

As noted above, only a small proportion of institutions charge a transcription fee for portfolio assessment, ranging from $5-$125 per credit.

Faculty Compensation

Institutions that compensated faculty for the assessment of portfolios were asked to share the amount that faculty were paid. The compensation rates ranged between $25 and $250 per portfolio, with a median of $100 per portfolio (Figure 17). Some institutions reported that they pay assessors an hourly rate of $20-$33 per hour, and other institutions said that the compensation rate varied depending on the level of the faculty, the subject matter, or the number of credits requested.

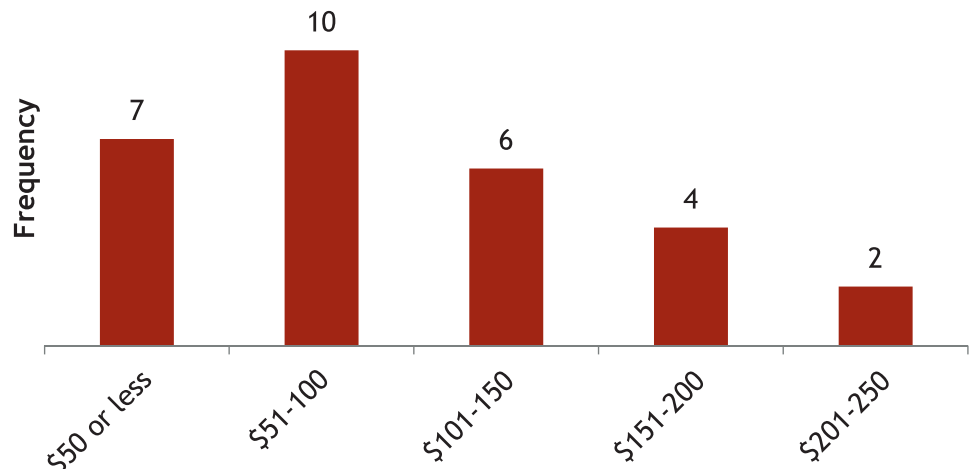**Figure 16. Portfolio assessment fee ranges**

Portfolio assessment prices:

Course, tuition-based: $200-2000+ per course; median $720

Assessment fee: $20-$600 per assessment; median $175

Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common

Figure 17. Range of faculty compensation for portfolio assessment

Credit for Military Training and Occupations

The vast majority of institutions that grant credit for military training and occupations (90%) do not charge the student in any way (Figure 18). Of the few institutions that charged fees, one institution charges a flat fee of $200, and another charges a fee of $50.

Review of Non-College Training

Most institutions that offer credit for the review of non-college training do not charge administration or transcription fees (72%), while 15% charge an administration fee only, and 10% charge both an administration and transcription fee. Among the five institutions that shared their administration fees, fees ranged from $30 to $200, with a median of $100. Transcription fees ranged from $10 to $45. Five institutions explained that they award credit for non-college training through the portfolio, and therefore portfolio fees apply.

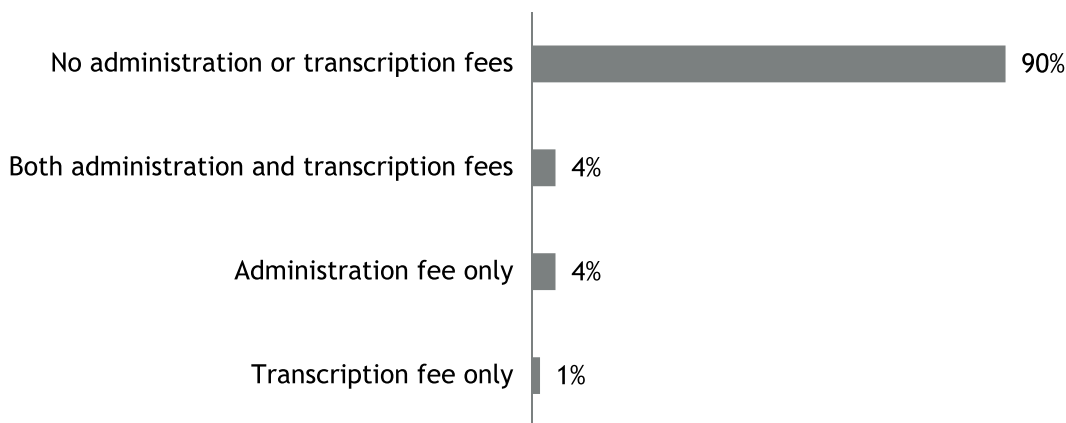**Figure 18. Fees charged for credit for military training and occupations**

No administration or transcription fees	90%
Both administration and transcription fees	4%
Administration fee only	4%
Transcription fee only	1%

Figure 19. Fees charged for review of non-college training

No administration or transcription fees	72%
Administration fee only	15%
Both administration and transcription fees	10%
Transcription fee only	3%
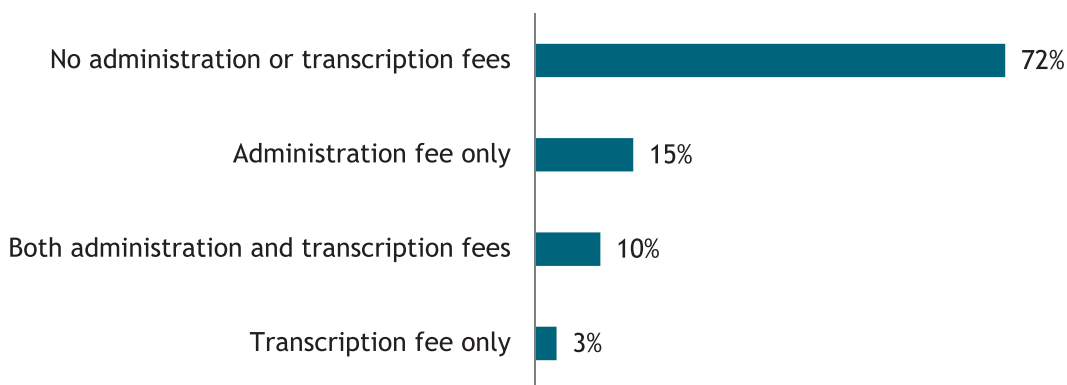
PLA Pricing Summary

Table 2. Summary of Common Pricing Models and Fee Ranges

	Most Common Fee Structures (For Institutions Charging Fees)	Common Fee Ranges
Standardized Exams	Onsite testing: assessment fee, optional administration fee Or Offsite testing: no fee, or nominal credit transcription fee	**Assessment:** standard fees to The College Board (CLEP) or Prometric (DSST) **Administration:** median fee per exam $25 (CLEP) or $30 (DSST) Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Challenge Exams	Assessment fee Or No fee	**Assessment:** $10-$252 per assessment (outlier of $600); median $100 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Portfolio Assessment	Course fee plus assessment fee Or No fee	**Course Fee, Tuition-Based:** $200-$2000+ per course; median $720 **Assessment:** $20-$600 per assessment; median $175 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Credit for Military Training and Occupations	No fee	**In less common cases where institutions charge for the review or transcription:** **Review of training/military transcript:** $50-$200 per review; no median Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common
Review of Non-college Training	No fee	**In less common cases where institutions charge for the review:** **Review of training:** $30-$200 per review; median $100 Transcription fees sometimes charged but not common

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions interested in approaching PLA with a mind to the overall business model will benefit from the experiences of other colleges and universities as described above. Larger observations and general themes that emerged from the survey and institutional interviews include the following:

- **Approaches to PLA Business Models may contradict each other, and yet these models still hold clear logic in affirming the value of PLA.** One approach is to set fees for PLA in a way that helps to offset—or even fully cover—the very real costs to the institution. Another approach is not to charge for PLA and then make it an integral part of how the institution works with students. An institution may find itself somewhere along a continuum between these two approaches. What can be helpful is to clearly articulate how the institution sees the value proposition of PLA—both for the institution and the student—and to use that value proposition as part of the rationale for whatever price levels are set.

- **Institutional will or mission is an important factor in the PLA Business Model.** The value proposition of PLA typically leads institutions to consider it as something more than the average educational product or service. Many institutions see PLA as having real value to the student, both in the short term and in the long term. Institutions with clear missions to serve the adult learner may find the PLA value proposition provides a strong rationale to underwrite PLA costs in some way.

- **Compensation of faculty is an important consideration in the overall business model for PLA.** In some institutions, faculty receive no special compensation for their work on PLA. This approach may be designed to save on costs, or it may be designed to send the message that PLA is an important and embedded role for the faculty. Yet, this model may serve as a disincentive to PLA growth. Faculty will not want to encourage greater use of PLA if it creates additional work load with no additional compensation.

- **PLA prices are often set with no consideration of actual cost to deliver.** Even when PLA fees are ostensibly about covering costs, few institutions have thoroughly calculated what those costs are. Institutions have a general idea of the cost of any dedicated PLA staff or of the cost of paying assessors, but none have factored in anything like indirect costs from marketing or advising functions. Many institutions admit that their PLA fees have remained the same for many years; since prices are often set based on what other institutions are charging, this slow-to-change trend means that PLA fees throughout higher education may be artificially low. The artificially low fees can be an incentive for student participation; but at institutions where tuition is high, they may be a disincentive for some faculty and staff to promote PLA. The exception may be at institutions where the value propositions—particularly regarding any presumptions regarding long-term returns on investment—are clearly communicated throughout the institution.

- **It is sometimes a big mystery how PLA revenue is used.** As noted earlier, institutions generally are not carefully tracking all costs associated with PLA. In addition, they are not tracking revenue either. In some cases, institutions did not know how the revenue was used by the institution. At a minimum, institutions with a cost center for PLA might benefit from having PLA revenue credited back to the cost center. This practice could help to jumpstart a process of analyzing the true costs of PLA to the institution.

- **Targeted vs. universal PLA.** Many institutions indicated that certain majors—such as business, management, IT, criminal justice, and liberal arts—tended to generate more PLA credits than others. While universal access to

and broad usage of PLA are important goals, institutions may find it cost effective to target some of their marketing and outreach resources to programs and/or student populations that are particularly well suited to PLA.

- **Advising, along with portfolio courses and workshops, should be considered important parts of the overall business model.** PLA for the sake of PLA is not what is important. What is important is that PLA is accessible to the students who can best benefit from it. Advisors are one important way to ensure that students with significant experiential learning are connected to PLA. In addition, portfolio courses and workshops are also critical. These courses and workshops help many students develop portfolios that lead to credit. They also help other students see that they might not have sufficient college-level learning to apply for credit, and they therefore self-select out of PLA.

- **A dedicated budget may not be the only sign of an institution's commitment to PLA.** Dedicated funding and other resources are clear signs that an institution considers PLA to be a good investment. Yet, the absence of a dedicated budget does not necessarily mean that the opposite is true. Some institutions do not have a PLA budget because they are integrating PLA into all that they do, and they see it as part of a comprehensive approach to education.

- **Collaboration and partnership can be important to the overall business model.** It may not always be possible to have a self-contained PLA program. Institutions use contract assessors, third party entities such as CAEL's LearningCounts service, or consortia of other institutions to expand their capacity to provide PLA.

With these observations in mind, the table below outlines guidelines or recommendations for institutions in their approach to the PLA Business Model and related pricing discussions.

Table 3. Recommendations for Approaching PLA Pricing and the Business Model with Supporting Rationale

CONDITION	PRICING AND BUSINESS MODEL CONSIDERATIONS	RATIONALE
If your mission is one of access and you want to serve your adult students well…	Weigh the desire to cover costs against the entire PLA value proposition. This may lead the institution to absorb a portion of the cost. Consider some alternatives: PLA fees could be designed the same as other academic fees. Or PLA fees could be integrated into the total cost of "business as usual" at the college rather than separating it out as an "add on" fee.	PLA fees should be affordable to the student while covering some, if not all, of the cost to the institution.

CONDITION	PRICING AND BUSINESS MODEL CONSIDERATIONS	RATIONALE
If you have a dedicated PLA office with a coordinator or director….	Ensure PLA revenues are credited back to the PLA program, or otherwise make transparent the relationship of the cost and revenue and how these work together.	Understanding your cost/expenses and associated revenues is essential to refining your business model.
If you want more of your students to use PLA….	Build PLA advising into all the stages of the student's enrollment. Provide professional development across all constituents	Word of mouth is not the way to grow a PLA program.
If you provide portfolio assessment….	Require students to take a course (normal tuition costs) or workshop (percentage of tuition costs or fee). Ensure students have advising and are appropriate for portfolio. Ensure assessors have the qualifications and training before assigning the portfolio. Make sure the business model supports checks and balances to assure academic integrity.	Tuition/fee revenue generated from the course or workshop is an important business model consideration. Ensuring all portfolio development requirements support student development of excellent portfolios will reduce student/assessor frustration.
If your faculty members are assessing portfolios…	Consider how the faculty members are compensated to clearly show the value of the work and its importance to your institution. Make sure the financial reward for doing this work is equivalent to time spent in the classroom or some other measure to show its importance. Make sure that PLA-related work counts toward promotion or is otherwise recognized by academic leadership.	If PLA is an added burden on faculty, without compensation, they will not have an incentive to promote PLA to students. Positive faculty/student interactions are important for student retention.

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CONDITION	PRICING AND BUSINESS MODEL CONSIDERATIONS	RATIONALE
If you want to be a best practices PLA provider...	Do not treat PLA as an "add on" or an "extra." PLA should be part of your regular institutional offerings and priced accordingly. Develop your PLA program with intentionality.	Consider PLA costs as basic to providing students with a high quality postsecondary education. Consider your business model strategically by looking at the long term impact PLA will have on student satisfaction, student persistence and completion, as well as faculty development and satisfaction.
If you are a traditional institution that is now reaching out to adults...	Consider how adult learners and PLA will be viewed in your traditional culture. Ensure that your faculty and staff are all trained in how to talk about PLA with (adult) students. Budget for professional development.	PLA can be a great way to recruit adults, and it can support their persistence and degree completion. But students will not use PLA if they do not know about it, and it will be important for the entire institution to be able to promote it.
If you view PLA as an important strategy for degree completion....	Plan to develop your overall business model by showing the return on the institution's investment. Establish data tracking and regular analysis of PLA usage and relationship to student outcomes.	Examining your institution's own data on PLA can inform you on student usage patterns that can help with identifying future staffing or outreach needs, and data on student outcomes can help to support claims in the value proposition.
If you do not have the internal resources to provide your own PLA program but want to provide services	Consider expanding your assessment capacity through independent contract employees or by outsourcing the assessment to a third party.	Portfolio assessment is a rigorous and valid process for awarding credit based on a student's demonstrated learning. But to do it well, institutions need trained assessors with a wide range of subject matter expertise.

CONCLUSION

The question seems simple enough: "What should my organization be charging for the various PLA services we want to offer?" But, as is clear from this report, the answer to that question is not simple at all. It requires an institution to understand why it is offering PLA in the first place, ensure that the PLA program is designed to serve students well, consider what other institutions are charging for PLA and why they charge the fees they do, and evaluate whether students will be able to take advantage of PLA offerings at various pricing levels.

There is a strong rationale for institutions to view PLA as a something of a loss leader—a service whose fees may not cover all associated costs but is assumed to have significant returns over time that will benefit the students and the institution alike. And yet, PLA is not free. There are real costs with which institutions need to contend; and no matter what value the administration places on PLA, if the program is not sustainable, it will not be able to grow or thrive. The recommendations in this report are designed to help institutions make sure their overall business model for PLA is solid and that the pricing levels are set appropriately for the institution's overall goals.

More institutions are expanding their PLA offerings and working to help more students take advantage of PLA—they are making PLA their business. As they do so, they need to make sure that there is a clear business model for PLA that is understood and embraced by both its leadership and its implementers. With that PLA business model defined, the answers to the pricing questions will be clear.

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APPENDIX A.
CASE STUDIES OF INDIVIDUAL PLA PROGRAM MODELS

Argosy University

Argosy University is a system of for-profit colleges with 8 colleges, 28 campus locations, and several online degree programs. The institution offers degrees at the associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels and serves about 20,000 students annually.

Overall Program Structure

All of Argosy University's 19 campuses and its online campus offer prior learning assessment (PLA) credits to their undergraduate students. The admissions or academic representatives for student services at each campus are trained to understand the different degree programs and to identify and guide students who may be eligible for PLA. Staff at each campus liaise with a centralized office in Phoenix, Arizona, which ensures all prospective and matriculated students have a single resource they can contact in order to receive the same answers regardless of their home campus. There is a large network of PLA trained faculty on which the department relies. The centralized location allows the PLA department to be consistent across Argosy's system of campuses.

The PLA department collaborated with the campus deans to develop the current PLA policies, which were then approved by the chancellor and vice chancellor. They created a framework of policies that ensures every assessment will follow similar processes, procedures and protocols, but also adheres to CAEL and accrediting body standards.

Applying for PLA cannot take place until the student is matriculated. Then, the staff at the Phoenix office access the student's academic record (i.e., transcripts, degree progress audit, class schedule, etc.) to determine if there are PLA opportunities that may benefit the student. An intake interview is conducted to see if the student may have any additional experiential, college-level learning, such as credentials, certifications, or on the job training.

Cost and Fees

In the past, Argosy charged a $90 portfolio assessment fee. However, even though this fee was relatively low, internal research revealed PLA usage increased dramatically once the fees were removed. For this reason there are no longer fees for PLA or transfer credits.

A dedicated PLA budget covers administration and faculty costs like training and faculty salaries. The PLA department has one full-time staff member and three part-time staffers.

Value to Institution

Offering PLA is seen as a key part of Argosy's mission. The institution recognizes that students are concerned about the cost of higher education, and PLA helps the institution provide the programs that lead to the skills and credentials that students need in the most effective way possible.

Argosy University PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** Only fees to The College Board **Transcription:** None
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	**Course:** None **Assessment:** None **Transcription:** None
Challenge Exams	N/A
ACE Credit Recommendations for Miliatary Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

Bellevue University

Bellevue University is a private, non-profit institution with 15 campus locations in Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, and a significant online presence. The main campus is in Bellevue, Nebraska. Bellevue serves nearly 10,000 students annually and offers over 70 degrees at the bachelor's and graduate levels as well as some certificate programs.

Overall Program Structure

The Bellevue PLA program offers a wide range of PLA, including ACE credit, CLEP, DSST, proficiency exams, corporate articulations, and a MOOC course for portfolio assessment. PLA is not centralized; all of the exams are overseen by the testing center; the corporate articulation and ACE determinations are handled by the registrar's office; and portfolio assessment falls under the purview of the College of Continuing & Professional Education. Though these three areas have different policies, they regularly interact with each other and are all overseen by the president's office, which sets PLA related charges and fees. Students can find out about these opportunities through admissions counselors and their academic advisors. According to Michelle Eppler, assistant vice president of the College of Continuing & Professional Education, "PLA is ingrained in our institution. It's not a strategy, it's just what we do."

Bellevue is one of the few institutions that offers their portfolio assessment course in the form of a free MOOC, and they have been doing so since 2014. The course takes students through the process of creating a portfolio, details what the goals are, and explains how to put pieces into writing. Bellevue felt that providing a free MOOC course would allow potential students to experience what it's like to study at Bellevue without having to pay, serving as a sort of introduction. All portfolios developed as a result of the MOOC are assessed by internally trained faculty with the PLA coordinator as a second reader. Students who get credit for their portfolio also get two credits for the MOOC; portfolios falling short of a credit award do not get credit for the MOOC.

Costs and Fees

The PLA program at Bellevue has its own budget, which funds a PLA coordinator, three contracted course facilitators, and the assessment compensation that is paid to the faculty assessors. Other staff members are also involved in the PLA program—five employees in the testing center and three in the registrar's office—though they are not considered part of the PLA budget. Staff and faculty training includes a PLA 101 course, a reader's training, and successful completion of the MOOC (for MOOC facilitators only).

If a student decides to complete a portfolio after completing the MOOC, there is an assessment fee of $125. The portfolio is assessed both by a faculty reader and by the PLA coordinator who make sure that the student's work aligns appropriately with the course outcomes.

Value to Institution

Fees at Bellevue are kept to a minimum, and the institution aims to keep them low, in part, to maintain a competitive advantage. In addition, Eppler says, "We value real world experience, military service, and the student dollar. Students who can show experience with PLA have already paid, they earned the credit, and it's theirs...We are interested in degree attainment, not making money on peoples' dreams."

Bellevue University PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** Only fees to The College Board **Transcription:** None
DSST	**Admin:** Only fees to Prometric/DSST **Transcription:** None
UExcel	**Admin:** Only fees to Excelsior **Transcription:** None
Portfolio	**Course:** Free (MOOC) **Assessment:** $150 **Transcription:** None
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** None **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

BridgeValley Community & Technical College

BridgeValley Community & Technical College is a multi-campus institution that is the result of a merger between two former community colleges. Campuses are located in Montgomery and South Charleston, West Virginia.

Overall Program Structure

The structure for BridgeValley Community & Technical College's PLA offerings is primarily modeled after its Board of Governor's Associate of Applied Science Degree Completion program (BOG AAS), which is a state-wide program offered across the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia. BOG AAS students design their own individualized courses of study by combining general coursework with PLA activities—primarily the development of experiential learning portfolios—to challenge any number of degree credits. PLA and portfolio development originally started as an offering only in the BOG AAS program, but is now available across the entire institution.

Those students engaging in portfolio development first complete a one-credit course to learn the portfolio development process, after which they are able to build and submit portfolio(s) for assessment to potentially challenge any number of courses or credits. Portfolios can be structured either in a course match model, in which students identify particular courses that their portfolios are meant to cover, or in a block model where a portfolio covers a certain amount of general credits rather than specific courses. Students are made aware of which types of credits are and are not transferable to other institutions.

Costs and Fees

BridgeValley's fee for challenge exams is $25 per credit. Each portfolio submission for the Board of Governors AAS program is $300, with a $10 per credit posting fee. Experiential portfolio submissions in traditional programs charge a $25 per credit review fee and an additional $10 per credit posting fee. This portfolio fee was determined by analyzing the BOG AAS model and establishing a reasonable amount to charge per credit within that framework given the potential number of credits earned through the portfolio.

The primary cost associated with BridgeValley's PLA program is the salaried time of the full-time faculty member who directs the BOG AAS program and manages the institution's PLA activities generally. Additional administrative processing and staff-related costs associated with PLA activities are absorbed by budgetary allocations to other departments, such as admissions or the registrar.

Value to Institution

PLA has many benefits at BridgeValley, namely in attracting students and helping them to accelerate their progress toward completing a degree while also making use of their many work and life experiences. The fee structure and business model in place for PLA at BridgeValley has been generally effective in covering costs to the institution and offering the opportunities most demanded by students.

BridgeValley Community & Technical College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** $10 per credit if not taken at institution
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	**Course:** Tuition cost; $161 per credit **Assessment:** $300 per portfolio (unlimited credits) for Board of Governors AAS. $25 per credit for other degree programs **Transcription:** $10 per credit
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** $25 per credit **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

DePaul University School for New Learning

DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL) is a degree-granting school housed within Chicago's DePaul University that mostly provides competency-based degrees for working adults, although two special degree-completion programs are course based. This school is also where the majority of PLA is administered.

Overall Program Structure

SNL's assessment center, headed by the assessment director and considered the core of the PLA program, is equipped to handle most types of PLA, including standardized tests, ACE credit recommendations, and portfolio assessment (called ILPs), all of which can be used to meet a competency.

While there is a PLA department with a small staff, the program itself is somewhat decentralized, as SNL has not found a need for a central office. In fact, PLA occupies such a pivotal space for SNL that the entire staff and faculty is involved to some extent. The very first course taken by SNL students is Foundations of Learning, which introduces the concept of PLA and provides opportunities to begin the process of seeking PLA credit. Students are also encouraged to enroll in an independent learning seminar, which is a guided approach for students to learn to identify prior learning and produce an Independent Learning Pursuit, or ILP. In addition, instead of an office to inform students about PLA, SNL employs a staffing model in which each student has an academic committee—made up of an academic advisor, a mentor, and a professional advisor—which will always discuss PLA options with the student. All 28 full time faculty act as portfolio assessors for their own students' projects as well as second readers for other student projects.

Costs and Fees

The cost of providing SNL's PLA program includes the assessment director, clerical staff, faculty time for assessment, professional advisors, and some outside assessors. However, almost the entire faculty and staff dedicate some of their time to PLA. Since so many employees dedicate a small amount of time to PLA, the total time spent and the cost of PLA is not tracked, but simply considered part of what SNL does. According to Marisa Alicea, dean of the School for New Learning, "PLA is so integrated into SNL that teasing out the costs associated with PLA as opposed to other costs would be very difficult." PLA is all part of the main budget.

With this model, standardized tests are without cost to the student beyond the fees to the testing organization, the ILP course costs the same as tuition, and the assessment of ILP and challenge exams is $150. PLA fees aren't reviewed or adjusted for rising tuition costs or faculty salaries.

Value to Institution

Alicea says that SNL is very careful about setting fees, because the school wants to be certain that when there is a fee, there is a direct benefit to the student and a sound rationale about why that fee exists. SNL believes that the biggest benefit of PLA is seen in their recruiting efforts. Students are very much attracted to PLA.

DePaul University School for New Learning PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** Only fees to The College Board **Transcription:** None
DSST	**Admin:** Only fees to Prometric/DSST **Transcription:** None
UExcel	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None
Portfolio	**Course:** $585 per credit (course is 2-4 credits) **Assessment:** $150
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** $150 **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** $150 **Transcription:** None

Franklin Pierce University

Franklin Pierce University is a small, private, liberal arts university located in Rindge, New Hampshire. The institution serves 1,400 undergraduate students and 610 adult students.

Overall Program Structure

In 2011, Franklin Pierce had a PLA policy in place, but its program was largely neglected in practice. Around this time, a new dean of the College of Graduate & Professional Studies was appointed, and she was also charged with the resurrection of PLA within the institution. After reviewing the records left by her predecessors, she began her own research on PLA, and came across the CAEL LearningCounts website.

LearningCounts, an online portfolio development service operated by CAEL, offers courses on portfolio development for students followed by the assessment of student portfolios by national faculty experts. Colleges pay an annual flat rate to become a "featured network" institution plus a charge per student enrolled, which gives them access to staff and faculty training, student support and advising, two types of portfolio development courses, professional portfolio assessment for students that complete one of the courses, and data tracking on the students enrolled.

Franklin Pierce became a Featured Network partner of LearningCounts in 2012, and has found the partnership to be a good fit for the institution's needs. Students are first screened for PLA through enrollment management and also by advisors, all of whom have received training via a LearningCounts webinar. Students who are a good fit for PLA are referred to the dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies, the primary contact for portfolio assessment, who can then help the student enroll in LearningCounts, which is a course listed within the college's own course catalogue.

The institution pays an annual fee of $2,500 to LearningCounts. It charges $1,095 to the student to enroll in the portfolio development course based on the institution's tuition rates, of which $625 is paid to LearningCounts. One portfolio assessment is included in the cost of the course; students pay LearningCounts $125 for any additional assessments.

Costs and Fees

Enrolled students pay the normal tuition rate for the course, and LearningCounts handles the rest, from portfolio development through credit recommendations. A calculation done by Franklin Pierce showed that the institution breaks even on costs to the institution if 10 students are enrolled in the LearningCounts course annually. After that point, further proceeds from the PLA program are placed into an operating budget at the college.

Value to Institution

Maria Altobello, dean of the College of Graduate & Professional Studies, states that it is Franklin Pierce's mission to serve the students, and for adult students, PLA can be very helpful. "If we can't give students what they need, they will go elsewhere. We need to satisfy the customer. We know that students with PLA are two and a half times more likely to finish their degrees, so it is really about recruitment and retention. I absolutely feel like we've done things right and made a good choice with LearningCounts."

Franklin Pierce University PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** None; not a testing site. **Transcription:** None
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	**Course:** $1,140 **Assessment:** One free assessment with course; additional assessments $125 **Transcription:** None
Challenge	N/A
ACE and NCCRS Credit Recommendations	**Admin:** $200 **Transcription:** None

Miami Dade College

Overall Program Structure

At Miami Dade College, the Office of PLA is the center of all PLA activities, with advisors very involved in student outreach. In addition, the campus testing centers play a large role in the operations of PLA credit by exam services, as does the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, which handles data tracking and reporting. According to Silvio Rodriguez, director of assessment, evaluation and testing, this multi-departmental approach demonstrates a strong institutional commitment and support for PLA, while providing a focused and consistent application of policy. All PLA policies are the same across the entire institution. Every department is able to use the range of PLA offerings, and all departments accept standardized exams and credit for military training.

Miami Dade's Office of PLA currently consists of a full-time director and a full-time PLA coordinator. Additionally, faculty and staff must complete training to earn a PLA certificate, and there are 54 trained staff and 39 trained faculty in all.

The Office of PLA is open to students to meet directly with the PLA staff to ask questions or make requests, and most of the outreach to students and other departments happens through this office. Meetings with advisors, who interact with students from the very beginning, are typically the first place that students learn about PLA, sometimes while students are still in high school. Academic advisors, faculty advisors, and program advisors are also in a position to discuss PLA with students and field questions that they might have about it. Miami Dade has a PLA website where complete information and pricing can be found.

Costs and Fees

Since 2012, there has been a dedicated allocation for PLA within academic affairs. The budget is used to cover salaries, marketing, and resources for students. The majority of other costs, like technology and overhead, are covered under the overall institutional operating costs. Credit by exam fees are part of the testing center(s) budget, and institutional challenge exam fees are part of the budget for the respective academic department. The PLA budget does not include the compensation paid to the portfolio evaluators; these are paid from the fees collected for the portfolio development course for assessing experiential learning for credit.

Benefit to Institution

According to Director of PLA Tiffani Malvin, "PLA aligns with our mission to promote lifelong learners. It's tied to our strategic goals, helps with partnerships, and encourages us to look at innovative assessment methods. That's why we are growing PLA as much as possible." Miami Dade believes that the real benefit of PLA is to help recruitment and increases retention. At Miami Dade College, the PLA motto is, "Let your work experience work for you."

Miami Dade College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** Additional $35 fee (waived for military) **Transcription:** None
DSST	**Admin:** Additional $35 fee (waived for military) **Transcription:** None
UExcel	**Admin:** Only fees to Excelsior **Transcription:** None
Portfolio	**Course and Assessment:** $500 flat fee (up to 45 credit hours) **Transcription:** None
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** $30 per credit **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

North Idaho College

Overall Program Structure

North Idaho College (NIC) Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Business Model is still in the early developmental stages. NIC currently offers CLEP exams and credit recommendations for military training and occupations. There are also a limited number of challenge exams available for students who show proficiency in their business program, and to a lesser extent in the foreign language program.

While there is a general PLA policy in place, the institution has been motivated to expand its offerings due to its involvement in a consortium that was awarded a Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant. A new PLA Business Model will be designed to support PLA in the applied science area, with subjects such as surgical technology, medical assistant, dental assistant being key focus areas for portfolio assessment. NIC will be training advisors to assist students upon admission through the PLA process for those programs, and the consortium will assist in promoting those programs. NIC will also be hiring a PLA coordinator who will be charged with further developing the program and policies.

Cost and Fees

NIC is not yet at the point of looking at a new PLA fee structure, but it is anticipated that some of the discussions from the institutions' regional meeting will be such questions. Those ideas will be taken into consideration as the Dean of Health Sciences, and the new PLA coordinator, develop a PLA fee structure that will be appropriate for the students and the institution.

Although there have not been any discussions as yet, Larry Briggs, dean of general studies, believes that the fees for PLA assessment will be built into the tuition so it can be covered by financial aid, since the community demographics include a significant population of first generation college students and many with financial needs. Although the initial expansion of PLA will be linked to the TAACCCT grant, NIC will be looking at sustainability after the TAACCCT grant ends so that PLA can remain an option for future students.

Value to Institution

As an institution that has a mission of access, NIC views PLA as one of the things that may attract students to the institution, and help to provide a worthwhile experience for them. NIC's PLA efforts are part of a broader strategy for retention and completion.

North Idaho College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin**: Only fees to The College Board **Transcription:** Yes, for those not taken at institution
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	N/A, but in development
Challenge Exams	Admin: None Transcription: $5
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	Admin: None Transcription: $5

Pennsylvania College Credit FastTrack/Montgomery County Community College

Overall Program Structure

In February 2015, the Pennsylvania Commission of Community Colleges (PACCC) launched an innovative, system-wide PLA solution called College Credit FastTrack. It offers a single web-based entry portal, advising process, and an automated portfolio development and submission procedure for all students interested in PLA at any of the PACCC institutions. PACCC students interested in PLA first create an online account on the College Credit FastTrack website. They are then prompted to select a targeted institution—typically, the institution at which they are currently enrolled—to begin exploring existing courses that may correspond with their learning experiences. Students are connected with the PLA advisor/coordinator at their chosen institution who provides a one-on-one consultation about various PLA options and offers guidance in pairing a student's prior learning with the learning objectives of available courses. Students interested in building and submitting a PLA portfolio do so through an automated system in the online portal.

Each community college has a centralized process for all PLA activities, including an advisor who serves as the institution's PLA coordinator within the College Credit FastTrack framework. This structure benefits students by providing a central point-of-contact for all PLA-related activities. Though there is a widespread level of interest in promoting PLA across most academic departments, PACCC colleges typically encounter most PLA activity in programs like business and liberal studies since students are more likely to have gained experiential learning in these areas.

Costs and Fees

The fee for students across colleges for most assessments is $125 (plus a $4 online payment charge). All college presidents agreed to standardize the fee, which also includes the compensation for faculty assessors. Each institution's PLA advisor is the PLA coordinator in the College Credit FastTrack framework, and additional staffing costs have not been required thus far. As the program grows, fees will be evaluated annually determining whether any additional costs should be factored in.

Value to Institutions

The College Credit FastTrack program's success thus far is partly due to its effective initial communication efforts with academic divisions and various staff and faculty. It is particularly important to ensure all stakeholders are in support of PLA and are clear about their roles in this initiative. As the platform evolves and state PLA activity grows, this program will adjust as needed to remain sustainable while continuing to meet the needs of the state's adult student population.

Montgomery County Community College PLA Fees	
CLEP	Admin: $25 Transcription: None
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	Course: NA Assessment: $125 plus $4 online payment fee (standard across all community colleges through FastTrack program) Transcription: None
Challenge Exams	Assessment: $125 Transcription: None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	Admin: None Transcription: None

St. Joseph's College, New York

Overall Program Structure

St. Joseph's College New York's (SJCNY) prior learning assessment program is available at SJCBrooklyn, SJCLong Island, and SJCOnline and is offered mainly through the college's Professional Studies program. Some PLA such as AP and standardized exams may be available to students in its traditional undergraduate programs. However, the students enrolled in one of the Professional Studies programs can earn credits towards their degree for experiential knowledge and on the job training, ACE and NCCRS credit recommendations for non-college training, and standardized exams, such as AP, CLEP, DSST, and NYU Foreign Language Proficiency Exams.

Students interested in having their prior learning assessed through portfolio are required to take a one credit portfolio development course or as a non-credit workshop consisting of five sessions. Once students are registered, the PLA coordinator guides them through the PLA process as they document their learning for the duration of this course up until credit is awarded at the end of the semester. Each portfolio can earn up to a maximum of 27 credits. Students can earn a total of 82 credits through different forms of PLA. These credits include direct transfer credits, non-collegiate sponsored instruction, standardized exams, and portfolio.

Costs and Fees

There is a $250 PLA portfolio assessment fee, which has not increased for 25 years, and a $50.00 application fee for taking exams like CLEP and DSST. There are two different options for the student's portfolio preparation: one option is a non-credit workshop where the student works exclusively with the PLA coordinator. Here the tuition and fees are the equivalent of one credit at the prevailing rate ($720 Fall 2015). The other option is a one-credit class where students cover additional material on adult learning theory with the PLA coordinator over five sessions ($720 Fall 2015). The cost of the one-credit class is covered by financial aid, but the cost of the workshop is not.

Value to Institutions

Some of the advantages of SJCNY's PLA program are that it offers students many options and is flexible. Professional Studies programs are designed to address different learning styles and professional experiences. Early on in the SJCNY PLA program, enrollment was high because the college was forming new partnerships with other institutions, and business employers had just started requiring a college degree for advancement within the organization. This contributed to the college's increased enrollment in its adult programs. SJCNY currently has plans to add a director for graduate and adult admission who will be focused on bringing PLA to the forefront of the institution's marketing and partnership strategies. It is important for them to form new business partnerships because these partnerships contribute significantly to the growth of PLA.

St. Joseph's College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** College Board fees plus an additional $50 fee **Transcription:** None
DSST	**Admin:** Prometric fees plus an additional $50 fee **Transcription:** None
UExcel	**Admin:** Test not offered **Transcription:** None
Portfolio	**Course:** Tuition cost; $720 per credit **Assessment:** $250 **Transcription:** None
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** $150 **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

SUNY Empire State College

Overall Program Structure

SUNY Empire State College (ESC) has nine undergraduate academic centers and each of those has multiple units, for a total of 35 units across NY State, all of which offer a full range of PLA. The overall PLA structure is a distributed model that also has a centralized office. In general, there is a strong culture of PLA at ESC with about one-quarter of its undergraduates pursuing the portfolio and about half of its recent graduates having some kind of PLA credit. Because the college has a distributed PLA model, these services are provided to the students at a local level, i.e., where the students are located. Having a centralized office for final review facilitates additional checks and balances that ensure quality, equity and consistency throughout the PLA process. The disadvantage is that each of the PLA centers has a different culture, and so some variation is inevitable.

New students are introduced to PLA at the beginning of their application process, soon after admission, and again at the new student mandatory orientation. Many students have indicated that PLA is the main reason they chose ESC. All matriculated students are assigned a mentor/faculty advisor who will also introduce PLA to students and will help them incorporate PLA into their degree plan. All students are required to take a minimum of four credits in Educational Planning. Then, with support from their mentor/advisor, they will create an individualized degree program.

Costs and Fees

ESC has a structure that pairs a flat fee with the credit transcription fees on a sliding scale with the intent of breaking even, covering the cost of evaluation as well as a small amount of administrative costs. Students taking exams proctored by the college pay the standard vendor fee to take those exams plus a $10 fee for administration. The only other cost is a $350 fee to evaluate the first 1-8 credits of a portfolio, with an additional $300 for each subsequent 8 credits, up to a cap of $1,550 for 33 credits or more. Students generally do not object to the PLA fees charged by ESC, since the evaluation fees are significantly less than it would be to take the courses.

Value to Institution

PLA is a big part of the college's mission. Nan Travers, Director of Collegewide Academic Review notes, "The benefit we see is that we know students come to us for PLA. It is a recruitment tool, and without it we may have less students come to our institution." She also notes that PLA helps students persist, which leads to tuition from the courses that they end up taking at ESC. Says Travers, "As an institution that is focused on degree completion, PLA is an important piece of our model—not in terms of dollars, but in terms of who comes in the door, who stays, and who keeps going."

SUNY Empire State College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None
DSST	**Admin:** $10 **Transcription:** None
UExcel	**Admin:** Test not offered **Transcription:** None
Portfolio	**Assessment: Portfolio:** Sliding scale: 1-8 credits = $350 to a maximum of $1,550 for 33 credits or more.
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** None **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

University of Maryland University College

Overall Program Structure

University of Maryland University College's (UMUC) prior learning assessment process begins with the degree audit office, which verifies all incoming PLA credits. Many of UMUC PLA credits are through examinations administered by faculty at the institution, which is also a testing center. The PLA director reports directly to the associate dean who is responsible for curriculum and programs. The PLA director works closely with the Degree Audit department. Students pursuing PLA through portfolio assessment are required to enroll in an eight-week, three-credit portfolio course. Although a maximum of 30 credits may be earned through portfolio assessment, the average award is currently between 15 and 18 credits. Credits awarded within the portfolio assessment process are determined by several factors, such as how well the student can document their learning, how the learning documented fits with their degree plan, and how many transferred credits have been applied to the student's degree program. In total, students can earn up to 30 PLA credits by combining portfolio assessments, course challenge exams, ACE credit recommendations, military, and workplace experiences. These credits are considered UMUC resident credit. However, they do not fulfill requirements for graded coursework and so may not exceed half the total credits for any major, minor, or certificate.

Cost and Fees

When a student matriculates to UMUC, an audit is done to assess all of their transfer credits and other PLA credits, such as ACE, CLEP, and similar credits. Fees for assessing PLA are based on evaluation and administrative costs, not on credits earned. While many UMUC students take advantage of transfer credits, a relatively small proportion (compared to the number who stand to benefit) enroll in portfolio assessment. The university is currently studying ways of increasing participation in portfolio and other forms of PLA, as well as ensuring that transfer credits are applied in ways that optimize students' progress in their chosen degree program.

Value to Institutions

The institution is seeking better ways of assessing transfer credits and ensuring that they are tied to the appropriate competency in the UMUC curriculum. UMUC believes having a strong PLA program will provide several advantages for the institution and for the students. It will be more reflective of the students' actual academic abilities, and students will learn about "learning" itself, which will allow them to demonstrate mastery in a given subject area. Additionally, the complete PLA process will illuminate the students' prior learning while simultaneously validating their college-level learning experiences.

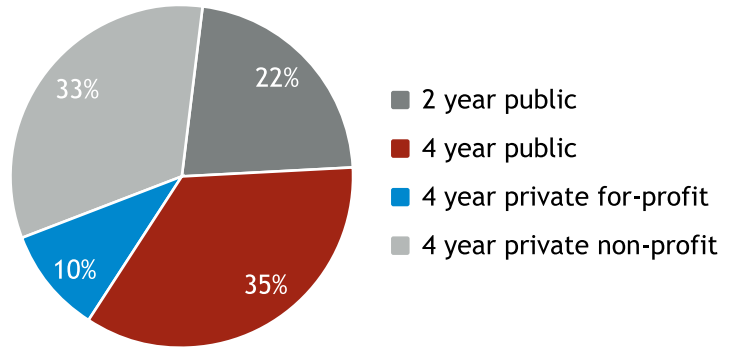| University of Maryland University College PLA Fees	
CLEP	**Admin:** Test not offered **Transcription:** None
DSST	N/A
UExcel	N/A
Portfolio	**Course:** $837 **Assessment:** $250 1st Evaluation per Academic Area - $125 for additional Academic Area **Transcription:** $90 per Credit
Challenge Exams	**Assessment:** $837 **Transcription:** None
ACE Credit Recommendations for Military Training	**Admin:** None **Transcription:** None

APPENDIX B:
SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The CAEL PLA Business Model survey had 89 responses from unique institutions.

Institution Level and Control

Of the 89 responding institutions, 22% were 2-year public institutions, 35% were 4-year publics, 33% were 4-year non-profits, and 10% were 4-year for-profits (Figure B-1).

Geographic Distribution

The responding institutions represent 37 states, with the largest proportion located in the Southeast (22%), Great Lakes (21%), and Mid East (19%) regions (Figure B-2). Nearly two-fifths (37%) of the institutions are in the region of the Higher Learning Commission (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools), 22% in that of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges, and 19% in that of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Figure B-3).

Figure B-1. Institution type

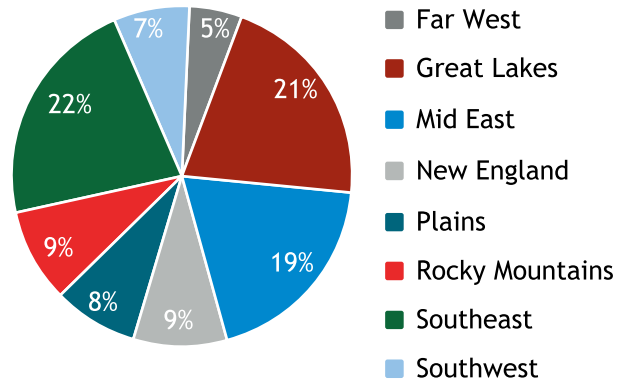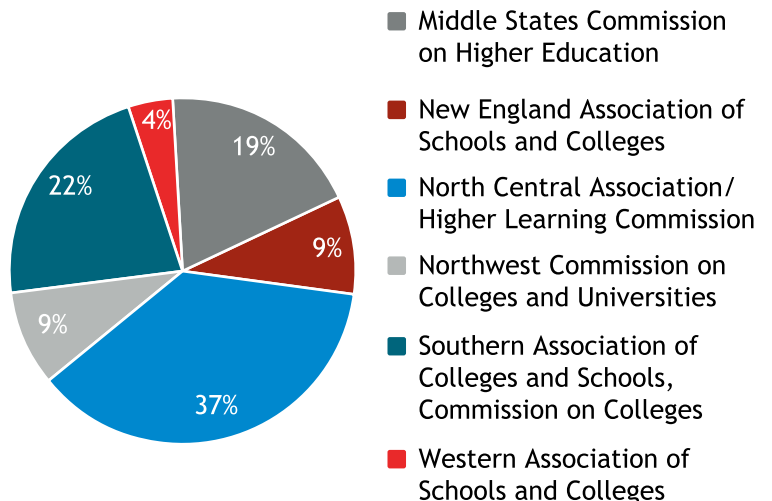- 2 year public — 22%
- 4 year public — 35%
- 4 year private for-profit — 10%
- 4 year private non-profit — 33%

Figure B-2. Distribution by geographic region

- Far West — 5%
- Great Lakes — 21%
- Mid East — 19%
- New England — 9%
- Plains — 8%
- Rocky Mountains — 9%
- Southeast — 22%
- Southwest — 7%

Figure B-3. Distribution by regional accreditor

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education — 19%
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges — 9%
- North Central Association/ Higher Learning Commission — 37%
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities — 9%
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges — 22%
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges — 4%

CAEL
Linking Learning and Work

We advocate and innovate on behalf of adult learners to increase access to education and economic security. We provide adults with career guidance and help them earn college credit for what they already know. We equip colleges and universities to attract, retain, and graduate more adult students. We provide employers with smart strategies for employee development. We build workforce organizations' capacity to connect worker skills to employer demands.