Achieving Dreams

Results from a Survey of Students using LearningCounts Portfolios to Earn College Credit

Achieving Dreams: Student Survey #1

Introduction

Earning credit for prior learning in not a new concept, but it is gaining a higher profile among educators, employers, policymakers, and potential degree seeking students. With that comes advancements in the technology and the process of portfolio development and assessment.

LearningCounts.org is an online innovation initiated by The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), with core funding from Lumina and Kresge Foundations, along with several other funders. Through LearningCounts, students learn how to develop a Learning Portfolio, and they can then submit one or more portfolios to be assessed for college credit. The credit recommendations are transcripted by CAEL and sent to the college of the student's choice.

The benefits of LearningCounts are very real for adult learners. Successful portfolios can save students a significant amount of time and money when they can apply these credits towards their postsecondary degrees.

CAEL recently reached out to current and former LearningCounts students to learn more about them—what brought them to LearningCounts, their experiences with the program, and the impact of portfolio assessment on the achievement of their education and career goals.

For this first survey, we reached out to all students who had completed a portfolio or were enrolled in a course with LearningCounts to date. Out of the 353 total students contacted, we received 103 responses from students who are currently enrolled in or have successfully completed a portfolio development course; 23 of the respondents had already completed the portfolio assessment process and received the results.

The most interesting information we found was about the motivation of our students—before, during, and after their experience with prior learning assessment (PLA). With this information, we will make continuous improvements in both our outreach and the process of learning about and building portfolios.
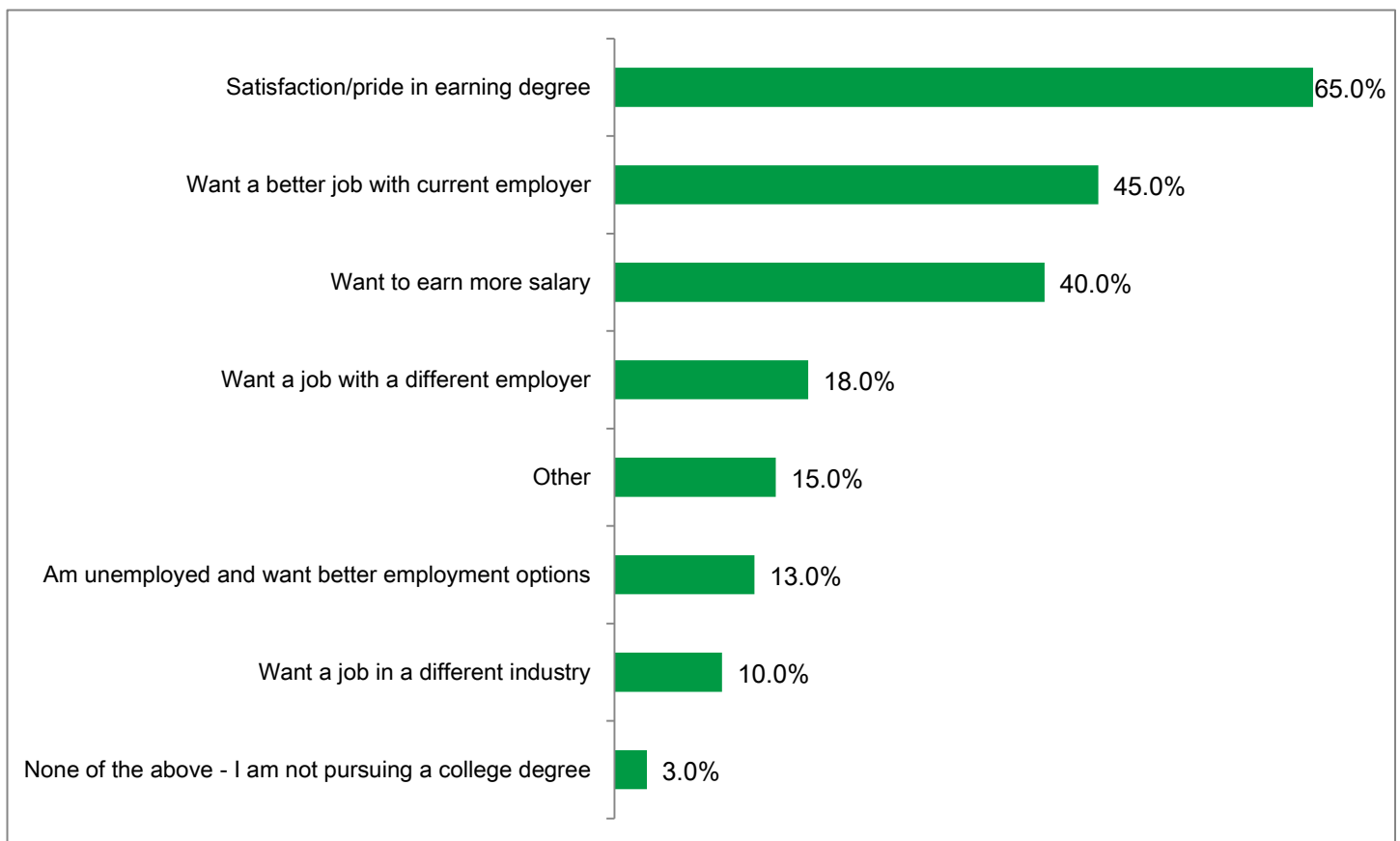
Student Goals and Motivation

Reasons for Pursuing a College Degree

Students were asked to indicate why they were pursuing a degree, with the option of choosing more than one response. The top three reasons were: satisfaction/pride in earning a degree (65%); want a better job with current employer (45%); and want to earn more salary (40%) (Figure 1).

Four students wrote in that their employers were requiring degree attainment. Additional write-in responses included: to be a good example for their children (3); to stay competitive in the current employment market (4); and to pursue a degree that wasn't available previously (1).

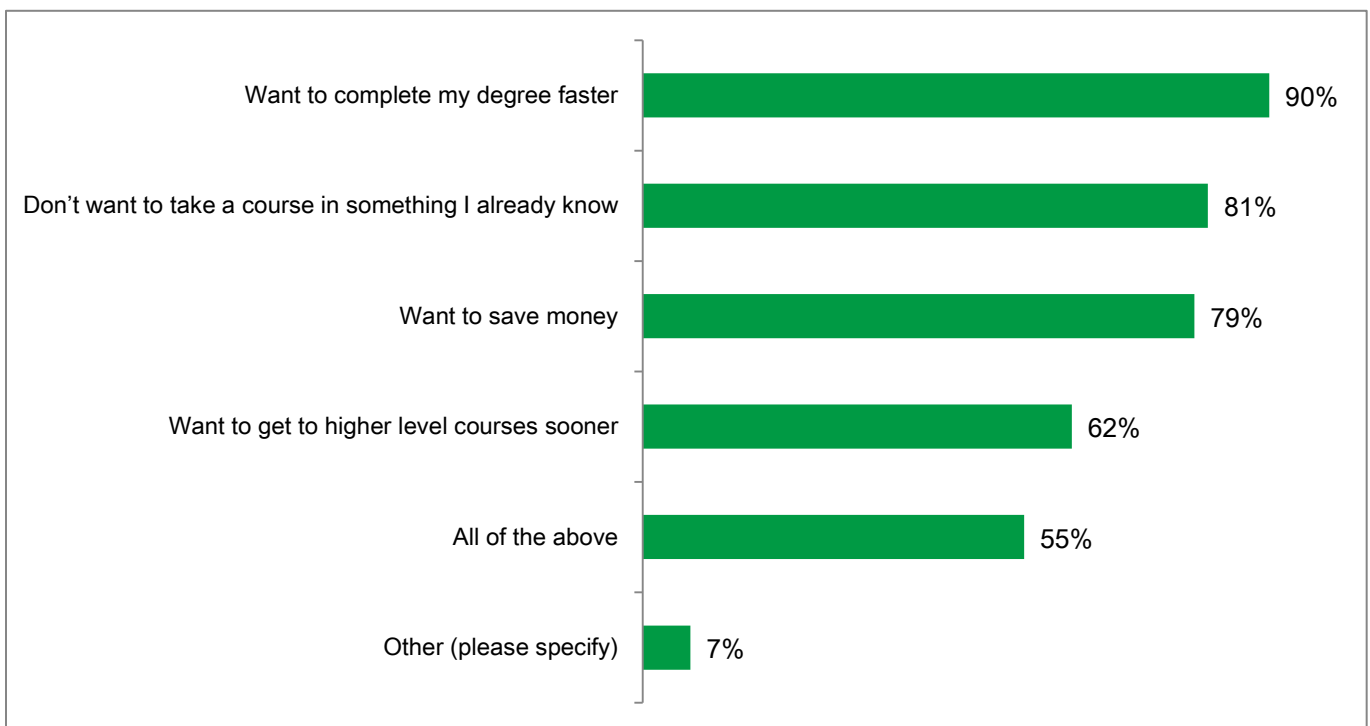*Figure 1. Pursuit of a College Degree*

Reason	Percentage
Satisfaction/pride in earning degree	65.0%
Want a better job with current employer	45.0%
Want to earn more salary	40.0%
Want a job with a different employer	18.0%
Other	15.0%
Am unemployed and want better employment options	13.0%
Want a job in a different industry	10.0%
None of the above - I am not pursuing a college degree	3.0%

Reasons for Pursuing PLA

When asked why they had decided to pursue college credit through prior learning assessment, most respondents (90%) said that they wanted to complete their degrees faster, but also very popular were the following: avoiding taking courses in something the student already knows (81%); saving money (79%); and getting to higher level courses sooner (62%). More than half (55%) agreed with all four responses (Figure 2).

Two people wrote in that they were participating in the program because they wanted all their work experience to be valued.

Figure 2. Reasons for Pursuing Prior Learning Assessment

Reason	Percentage
Want to complete my degree faster	90%
Don't want to take a course in something I already know	81%
Want to save money	79%
Want to get to higher level courses sooner	62%
All of the above	55%
Other (please specify)	7%

# Student Ages and Backgrounds

More than two-thirds (68%) of the respondents were over the age of 40 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Age Range
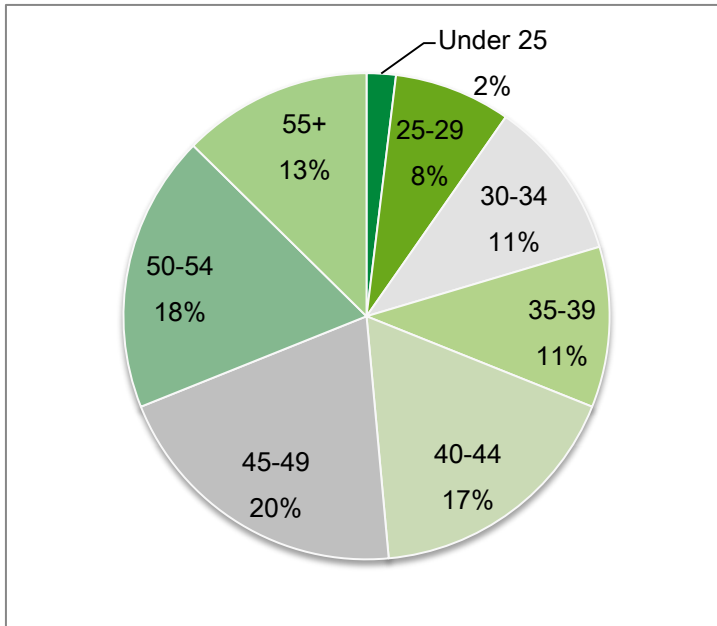
We asked the students how long it had been since they had been in school before enrolling at their current institution. More than one quarter (26%) had been out of school for more than 20 years, and nearly half (48%) had been out of school for 10 years or more (Figure 5).

Figure 5. How Long Since Previously Enrolled in School
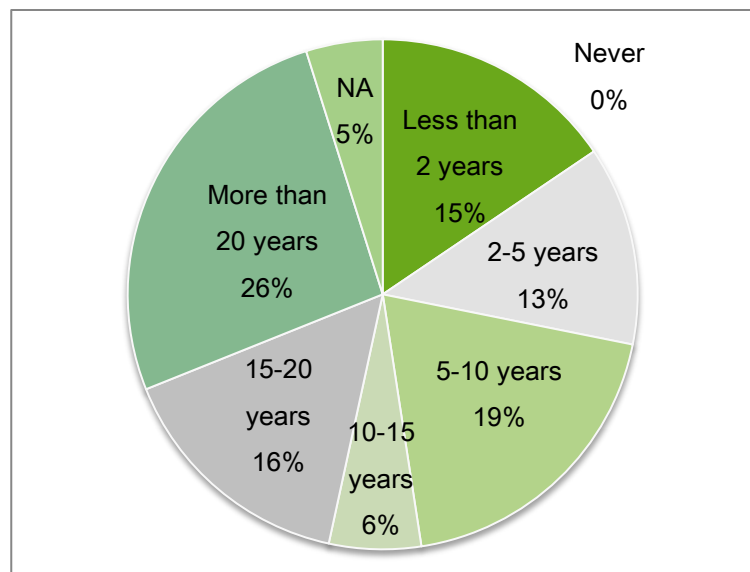
When asked why they did not finish college the first time, students who had taken a break were given the option of indicating more than one reason. The top responses were: they needed to work/earn money (45%) and the more vague reason of "life got in the way" (41%). Other top responses included work responsibilities (25%) and caring for children or other dependents (21%) (Figure 6).

Notably, three people (3%) wrote in that they *chose* to work rather than *needed* to work—in other words, they preferred work over school rather than needing to work for financial reasons.

Figure 6. Reasons for Leaving School Previously
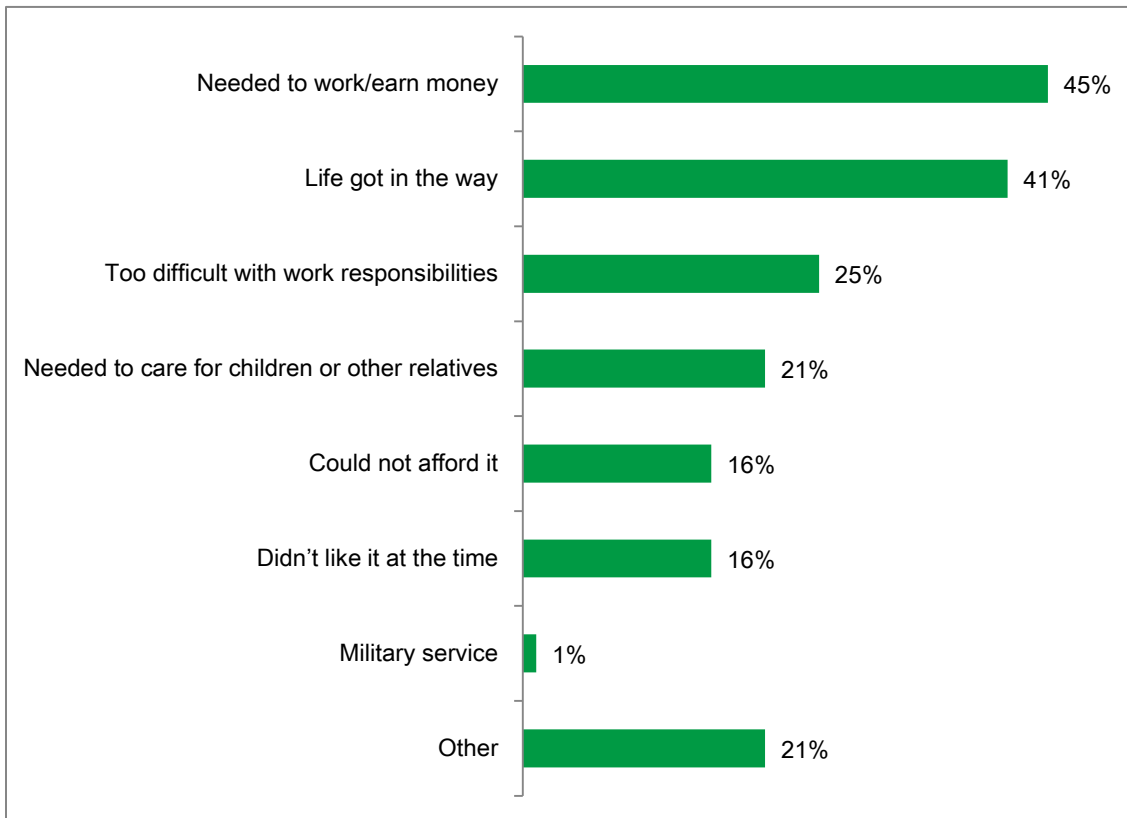
Benefits of LearningCounts

Benefits from the Process

When asked about the best part of their decision to pursue credits using PLA, the top responses were that the process had helped the student organize thoughts and decisions (53%) and that there had been cost and time savings as expected (50%) (multiple responses were possible) (Figure 7).

Over 70% of the respondents chose at least one of the responses that was related to planning – whether about their education and career goals, their thoughts and decisions, or their having received assistance from LearningCounts faculty and advisors.

Figure 7. The Best Part of PLA

Perceived Benefits from Earning Credit through Portfolio

CAEL's research shows that earning credit through PLA can help students complete their degrees more quickly, which can lead to other benefits in their lives or in the workplace. We therefore were interested in hearing from the students who completed the portfolio process about what they perceived to be the benefits of PLA on their lives and careers. We asked the 23 respondents who had completed the portfolio about the benefits they had experienced since earning credit through portfolio assessment. 19 of the 23 (82%) said that they experienced "personal pride" after finishing the Learning Portfolio. 10 of the 23 (43%) had successfully completed their degrees already. As more students complete their portfolios, we expect to increase the number of responses to this question in future surveys.

Figure 9. Perceived Benefits
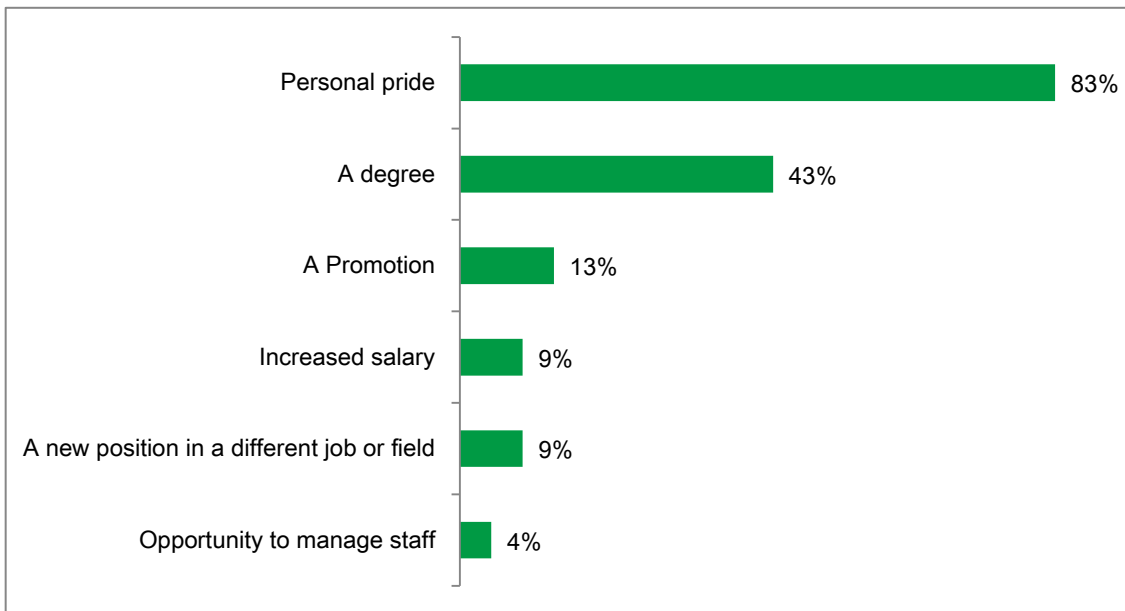
Conclusion

We anticipate that our findings will be encouraging and helpful to those in the field of adult learning and prior learning assessment. Because our mission is to improve opportunities for adults at any stage of life through completion of postsecondary education credentials and linkage to sustainable employment, we are pleased to see that LearningCounts is helping to achieve this mission. These findings have already helped us to understand our students' needs and benefits more clearly and to make advancements in our technology and outreach. This survey will be adapted and conducted on a semi annual basis to build on the data collected here.