

A CAEL/STRADA RESEARCH BRIEF
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Attracting Adult Learners with Credit for Prior Learning

Prospective adult learners say that opportunities to earn CPL can drive their enrollment choices, yet differences by income suggest the need for greater clarity in messaging for lower income populations

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Summary of Key Findings

Previous research from CAEL and WICHE has shown that when adult students receive credit for their prior learning (CPL), they are more likely to complete credentials while saving time and money doing so. In addition, colleges and universities can also benefit from CPL: adult students who earn credit through CPL are more likely to persist toward completion, and so they end up taking an average of 17 more course credits from their college compared to students without it (Klein-Collins, et al, 2020). Because of the strong evidence of the benefits from CPL for students, many institutions already use CPL in their efforts to recruit adult learners.

New survey research from CAEL, Strada, and Hanover Research indicates that adult learners are likely to be receptive to such recruiting messages. Survey results included responses from more than 1,000 American adults aged 25-64 who said they were likely/very likely to enroll in a 2-year or 4-year degree postsecondary program in the next six months (“likely enrollees”). The key findings are:

- **The concept of CPL is familiar and clear.** A majority of likely enrollees say they are familiar with the concept of CPL (60%) and find the concept straightforward or clear (79%). Familiarity with and clarity on the concept increase with household income.
- **Most have already applied or plan to apply for CPL.** Roughly half of likely enrollees (47%) say they have applied for credit for past life/work experiences, while another approximate half (48%) say they intend to apply in the future; only 5% say they do not intend to apply. Those with higher incomes are more likely to have applied for CPL credit in the past.
- **CPL may influence choice of college.** The vast majority (84%) of the likely enrollees said that the ability to receive college credit for their life/work experiences would have a strong influence on their college/university choice. Among those who were slightly or moderately likely to enroll, just over half (55%) said that knowing that colleges and universities offer CPL would have an effect on their likelihood to enroll.

In general, as income levels increase so does familiarity with the PLA concept, perceived clarity of the concept, and one’s likelihood to have applied for credit for past life/work experiences. In addition, while Black respondents were just as likely as other racial-ethnic groups to be familiar with the concept, they were significantly less likely than Asian or White respondents to find the concept to be clear. Therefore, institutions interested in ensuring equitable access to CPL will need to develop strategies to raise awareness of CPL for prospective students in the lowest income brackets and perhaps also for students of color — arguably those who have the most to gain from its benefits.

Prior learning assessment (PLA) and credit for prior learning (CPL) are the commonly-used terms for the various methods that colleges, universities, and other education or training providers use to evaluate learning that has occurred outside of the traditional academic environment.

PLA/CPL is typically used within postsecondary settings to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training.

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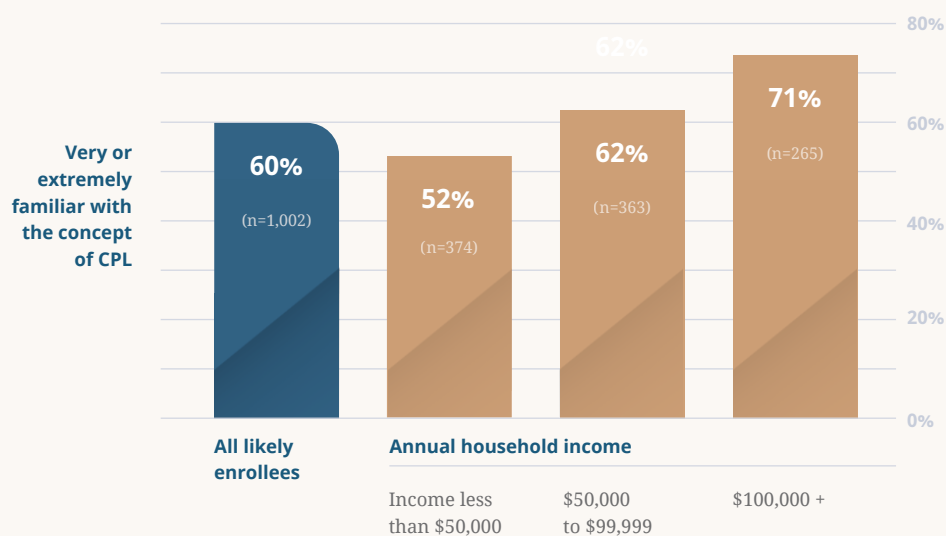
A Closer Look at the Data

A majority of respondents who said they are “likely to enroll” are familiar with the concept of CPL, and familiarity with and clarity on the concept increase with household income.

The majority of likely enrollees (60%) are familiar with the concept, and find it straightforward or clear (79%). Familiarity levels increase linearly with household income — from 52% of those earning less than \$50,000 to 71% of those earning more than \$100,000 (Figure 1).¹ Finding the concept of CPL to be somewhat or extremely clear (or straightforward) also increases with income — from 76% among those earning less than \$50,000 to 84% of those earning more than \$100,000.²

FIGURE 1

Likely enrollees who say they are very or extremely familiar with the concept of CPL, by income



Respondents of different racial and ethnic groups reported similar familiarity with the CPL concept: 66% of Asian respondents were very or extremely familiar, compared to 63% of Black, 61% of Hispanic/Latino, and 60% of White respondents.³ However, Black respondents were somewhat less likely to find the concept of CPL to be somewhat or extremely clear (72%) compared to Asian (87%), Hispanic/Latino (79%), or White (82%) respondents.⁴

¹ Breaking down income bands further shows that this extends to the lowest and highest income bands: from 49% among those earning less than \$25,000 to 77% of those earning more than \$150,000.

² The results presented for concept familiarity are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); the results presented for concept clarity were significant only for the income groups of less than \$50K and greater than \$100K.

³ These results were not statistically significant.

⁴ Results for Asian, Black and White respondents were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

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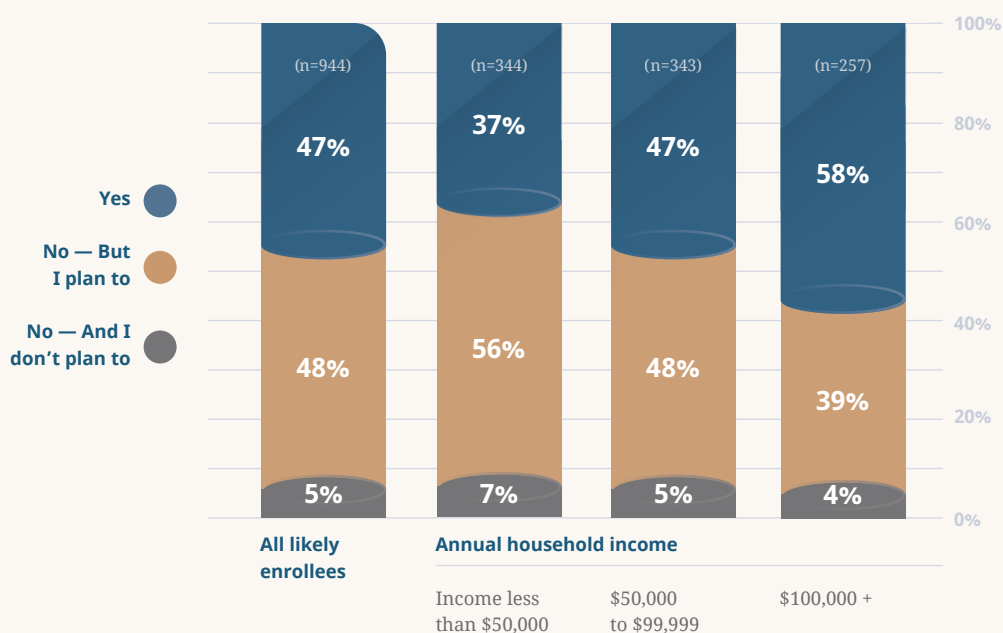
The vast majority of likely enrollees have either applied for CPL in the past or intend to in the future.

Roughly half of likely enrollees (47%) say they have applied for credit for past life/work experiences, and another approximate half (48%) say they intend to apply; only 5% say they don't intend to apply.

Those with higher incomes are more likely to have applied for CPL credit in the past (58% for those making \$100k+, compared to 37% of those making less than \$50K) (Figure 2).⁵ Those with higher incomes are more likely than those with lower incomes to have applied for CPL in the past (58% compared to 37%), and a higher percentage of those with lower incomes had neither applied previously nor intend to apply in the future (7% compared to 4-5% for those with higher incomes). These differences by income persist even when controlling for the respondent's familiarity with CPL. (Differences across racial-ethnic groups were not statistically significant for this question.)

FIGURE 2

Likely enrollees' past application for CPL and intent to apply for CPL in the future, by income



⁵ Results for responses of "yes" and "no, but I plan to" were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

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The vast majority of likely enrollees say that the ability to receive college credit for their life/work experiences would have a strong influence on their college/university choice, and a majority of slightly/moderately likely enrollees say that CPL would have an effect on their likelihood to enroll

Eighty-four percent of the likely enrollees agree or strongly agree that the ability to receive college credit for their life/work experiences would have a strong influence on their college/university choice (46% “strongly agree”). Interestingly, those who are “extremely likely” to enroll in a program in the next six months are also much more likely to “strongly agree” that being given college credit will influence their school choice (61% vs. 32% of those “very likely” to enroll), which shows the power of CPL on the most likely enrollees.

Among the group of respondents who were *slightly* or *moderately likely* to enroll, 55 percent said that knowing that colleges and universities offer credit to students for learning gained from life and work experiences would have a moderate (38%) or major (17%) effect on their likelihood to enroll. 62% of those “moderately likely” to enroll say CPL credit would have a major or moderate effect on their likelihood to enroll, compared to 46% of those “slightly likely” to enroll.

84%

of likely enrollees say that CPL offerings would influence their choice of college or university

55%

of slightly or moderately likely enrollees say that CPL offerings would have an effect on their likelihood to enroll

Implications for Postsecondary Institutions: CPL May Be an Effective Strategy for Recruiting Adult Students

Prospective adult learners are clearly interested in opportunities to earn college credit for what they already know. They understand the concept of CPL, and the vast majority of them have already applied for CPL credit in the past or plan to do so in the future. Institutions with robust CPL programs have what the prospective adult students are looking for, and these institutions would be wise to ramp up their mentions of CPL in their outreach to prospective adult learners: the results presented in this research brief make clear that such messages could provide a competitive advantage over other postsecondary institutions for adults who are likely enrollees, while also helping to nudge less likely enrollees to take another look.

However, the data also show that as income levels increase so does familiarity with the PLA concept, perceived clarity of the concept, and one's likelihood to have applied for credit for past life/work experiences. In addition, while Black respondents were just as likely as other racial-ethnic groups to be familiar with the concept, they were less likely than other groups to find the concept to be clear. Therefore, institutions interested in ensuring equitable access to CPL should develop strategies to raise awareness of CPL for prospective students in the lowest income brackets and perhaps also for students of color, particularly since those are the students who have the most to gain from CPL's benefits.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The primary sample is U.S. adults aged 25-64 who are extremely likely/very likely to enroll ("likely enrollees") in a 2 year or 4 year degree program within the next six months (N=1,002). A secondary sample is U.S. adults aged 25-64 who are moderately likely/slightly likely to enroll in a 2 year or 4 year degree program within the next six months (N=505). 79% of the total sample is employed.

To accomplish the research objectives outlined above, the Strada Market Impact team worked with CAEL and Hanover Research to field a 5-10 minute online quantitative survey from June 1-14, 2021, to gather data from qualified participants.

Additionally, for those likely to enroll, we aimed to target a sample that is balanced by race/ethnicity and income based on data from the 2020 Strada-Gallup Education Consumer Survey collected by the Strada Consumer Insights team. To this end, the sample was well balanced by race/ethnicity, but balanced slightly higher on income.

REFERENCED WORK

Klein-Collins, R., Taylor, J., Bishop, C., Bransberger, P., Lane, P. & Leibrandt, S. (2020). *The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-institution targeted study of prior learning assessment and adult student outcomes*. CAEL and WICHE. www.cael.org/pla-impact



About The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL): Recognizing that adult learners are the backbone of the U.S. economy, CAEL helps forge a clear, viable connection between education and career success, providing solutions that promote sustainable and equitable economic growth. CAEL opens doors to opportunity in collaboration with workforce and economic developers; postsecondary educators; employers and industry groups; foundations and other mission-aligned organizations. By engaging with these stakeholders, we foster a culture of innovative, lifelong learning that helps individuals and their communities thrive. A national, nonprofit membership organization established in 1974, CAEL is a part of Strada Collaborative. Learn more at cael.org and stradacollaborative.org.

About Strada Education Network: Strada Education Network is a new kind of nonprofit social impact organization, dedicated to increasing individuals' economic mobility through purposeful connections between education and employment. Our approach combines innovative research, thought leadership, strategic philanthropy and investments, and support for individuals through student coaching, work-based learning, career exploration, and helping adults learn new skills throughout their careers. Together, we work to better serve the millions of Americans seeking to complete postsecondary education and training, gain clear value from those experiences, and build meaningful careers. Learn more at stradaeducation.org.