

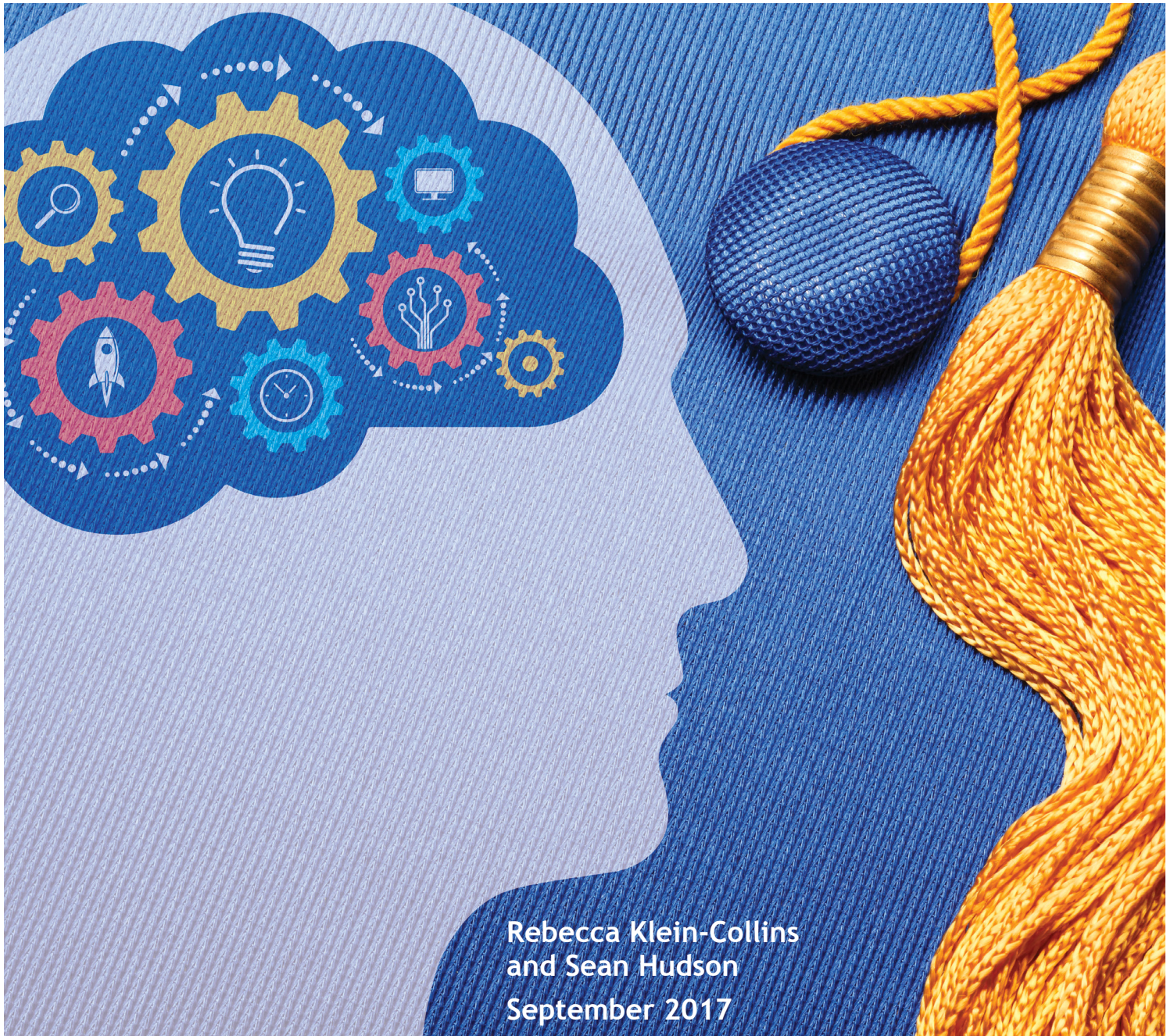


CAEL
Linking Learning and Work

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LEARNING COUNTS?

*Measuring the Benefits of Prior Learning
Assessment for the Adult Learner —*

*A CAEL Self-Study of the Academic Outcomes
of LearningCounts Students*



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and Sean Hudson
September 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) conducted the first major multi-institutional study of the relationship between prior learning assessment (PLA) credit-earning and student academic outcomes. *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes* found that adult students with PLA credit were two and a half times more likely to have earned a postsecondary degree than similar students with no PLA credit. These findings have prompted postsecondary institutions and systems to expand their PLA offerings. In addition, other organizations and institutions have conducted their own studies of PLA and students' outcomes that have resulted in similar findings.

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.

Responding to the increased interest in PLA, CAEL launched LearningCounts™, an online portfolio assessment service designed to expand the capacity of institutions to offer portfolios as a method of PLA in a standardized way. Through LearningCounts, students take a portfolio development course (self-paced or instructor-led) to learn how to document their prior learning in a portfolio. Trained faculty assessors evaluate the portfolios and determine whether to

make a formal college credit recommendation back to the institution for a comparable college course.

While LearningCounts is still in its early days – just six years since the initial program was piloted and three years since enrolling significant numbers of students – CAEL determined that it was time to take a closer look at how students fare academically after engaging with LearningCounts.

This report presents the findings of our study, which examined the enrollment patterns and degree completion of former LearningCounts students as reflected in data available through the National Student Clearinghouse, supplemented by the perspectives of the students themselves through survey responses. The data show that students with the highest level of engagement with LearningCounts – those who earned portfolio credits – had significantly better academic outcomes in terms of both degree completion and overall persistence than students with lower levels of engagement.

Summary of Key Findings

- **Students with portfolio credit have the highest degree completion rates, compared to all other LearningCounts students.** Students with the highest level of engagement with LearningCounts – those who earned portfolio credit – had the highest rate of degree completion at 64%, compared with only 25-41% of other participating students (Figure A).
- **Degree completion for portfolio earners is higher than for other student groups even when controlling for the number of years since the student's matriculation date.** In all but the most recent cohort year, the LearningCounts students with portfolio credit have higher degree completion rates than all other student groups.

For example, of those who had matriculated three years previously, 64% of portfolio credit-earners had earned a degree compared to only 37% of non-portfolio credit-earning students and 35% of non-LearningCounts students (Figure B).

- **Overall persistence is highest for students earning portfolio credit.** Since several of the matriculation date cohorts have not had much time to complete degree requirements, we also examined whether those who had earned portfolio credit were persisting in their educational pursuits at higher rates. The data show that students with portfolio credit were more likely to have positive outcomes of either degree completion or continued enrollment than students without portfolio credit. For example, of those who had matriculated three years previously, 82% of portfolio credit-earners had earned a degree or were still enrolled compared to only 73% of non-portfolio credit-earners and only 61% of a non-LearningCounts comparison group (Figure C).

- **LearningCounts students say that the portfolio process helps them understand their learning better.** Students with portfolio credits acknowledged in survey responses that they perceived other benefits to earning credit through the portfolio assessment process, such as the ability to make stronger connections between their work and learning and developing a better understanding of their current skill sets and capabilities.

The findings of this study show that PLA can be a valuable resource to adult learners in persisting towards and earning their degrees. Additionally, student feedback supports the idea that there are other benefits of the portfolio process that could contribute to an adult learners' overall academic and professional success. The findings reinforce the value of providing PLA services to students through LearningCounts while encouraging all institutions to consider offering PLA as a way to propel students forward in their educational journeys.

Figure A.
Degree Completion
by LearningCounts
Outcome

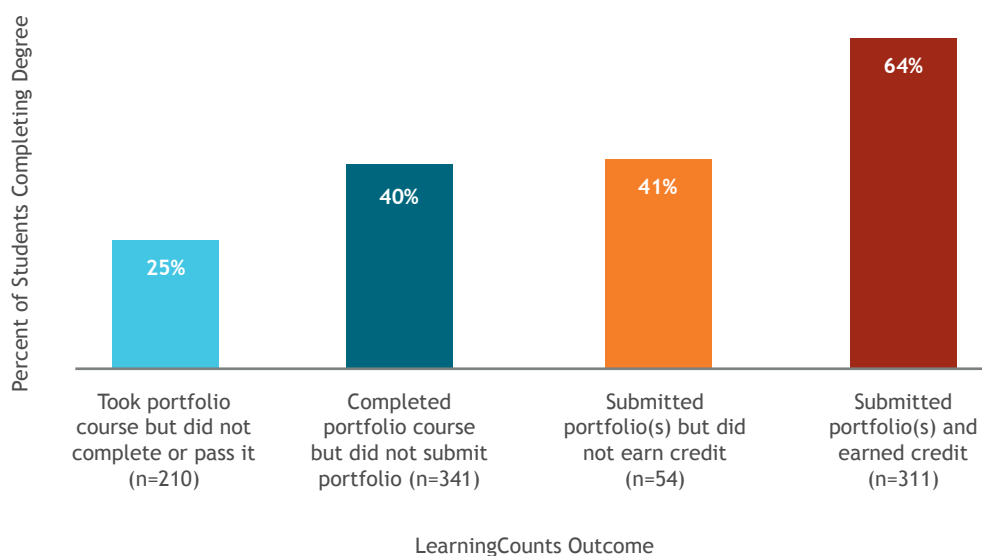


Figure B.
Degree Completion by LearningCounts Portfolio Credit-Earning and Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution

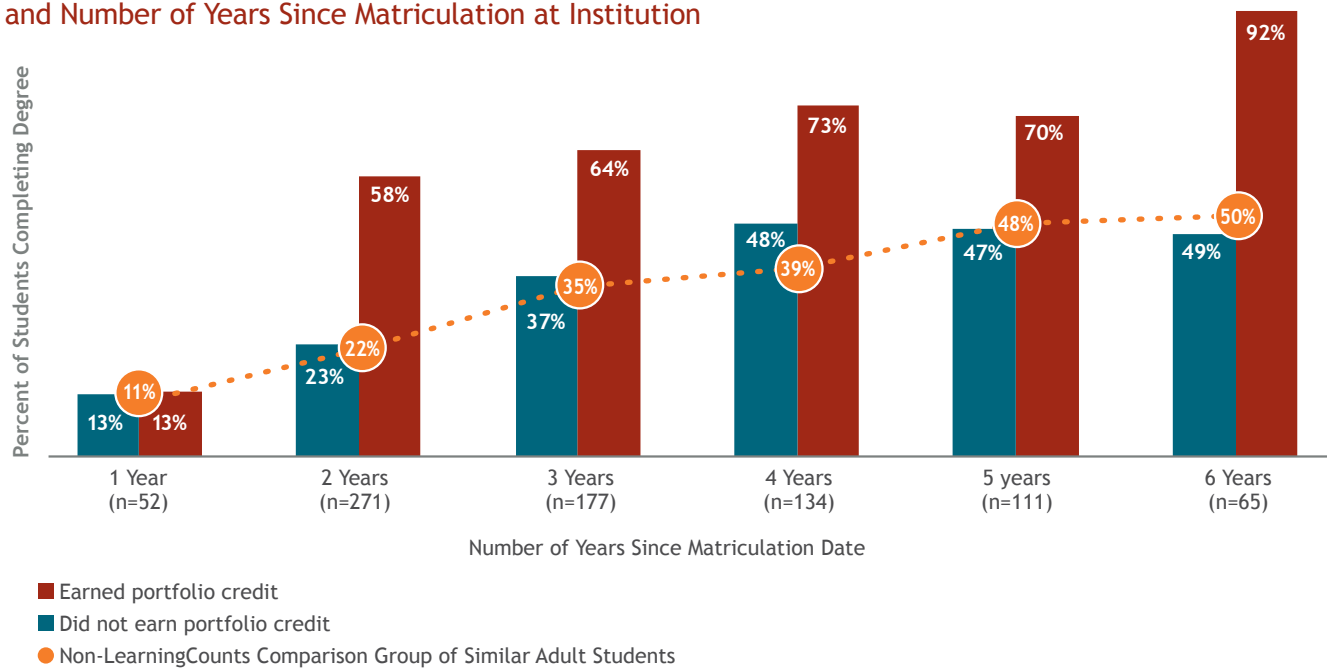
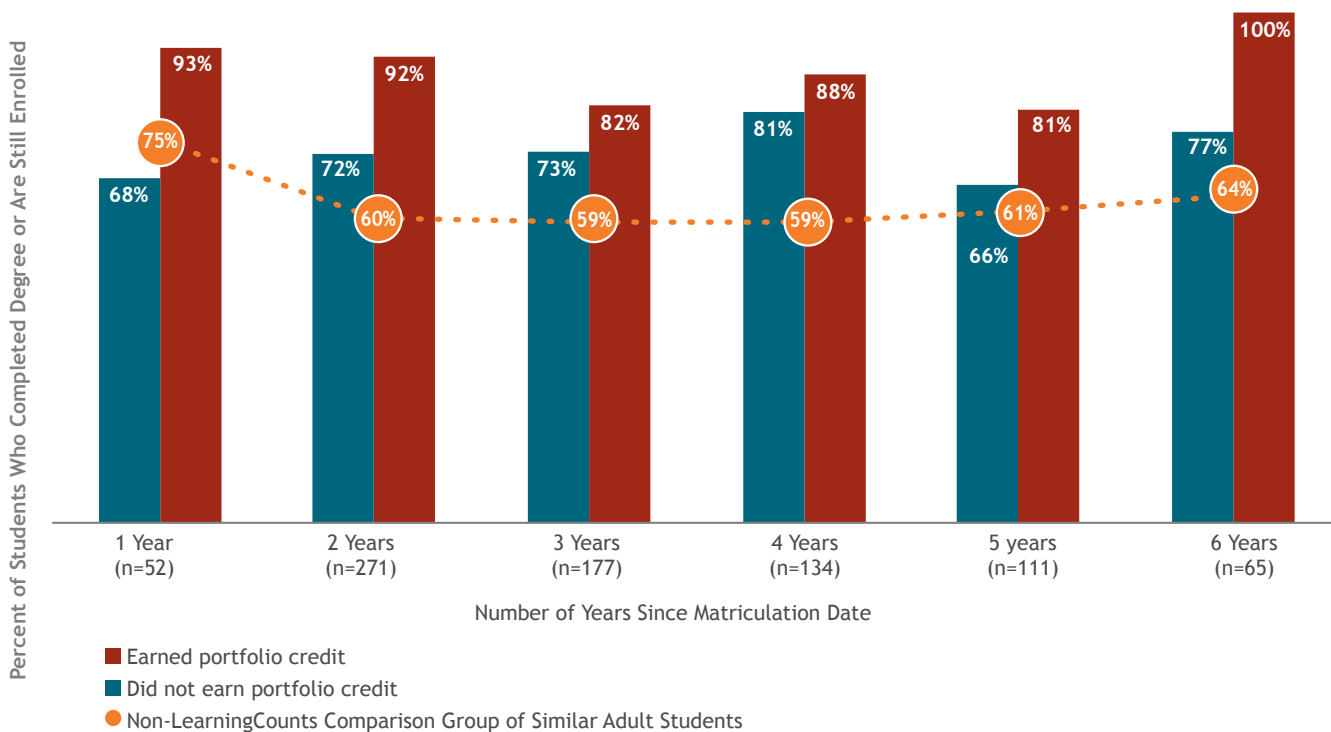


Figure C.
Persistence (Degree Completion or Continued Enrollment) by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio and Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution



When Edvin's employer relocated him from Sweden to the United States, he was confident that the skills he acquired from vocational high school along with his nearly 12 years of work experience would give him a competitive advantage in the U.S. labor market. "I was very optimistic," he told us, "because in European countries, supervisors cared more about what you could do rather than what degree you had." But as he settled into his job in the U.S., he soon realized that to advance with his employer he would need to get a bachelor's degree.

"The United States is not as forgiving to you as European countries if you don't have a degree."

— Edvin, LearningCounts student

Pursuing his bachelors in systems engineering at a local university, Edvin wanted to finish as quickly as possible. But like many adults, Edvin felt rusty and cautious. Determined to complete his studies, Edvin discovered that his prior learning could count towards his degree, and his advisor encouraged him to participate in LearningCounts.

Once Edvin completed the portfolio development course, he began working on his portfolio. He acknowledges that the development course was challenging, but the process of creating his portfolio pushed him to think about his learning in a new way. "It was pretty intense, but it was also rewarding to go through the process of matching the things I learned from work to satisfy the different course objectives." Anxiously, Edvin submitted his portfolio for assessment. After nearly two weeks, he was notified that his portfolio would be recommended for credit. "I was so

excited, relieved, and proud," Edvin recalls. "Once you submit the portfolio, it is like this weight is lifted off of your shoulders and then you realize, 'Oh, this is not so bad, I can do this.'" Edvin would go on to submit seven more portfolios, receiving credit for nearly all of them in courses related to engineering, business administration, and communications. By earning credit through PLA, Edvin estimates that he saved nearly \$5,000 in tuition and fees and was able to finish his degree a semester early.

Edvin's story demonstrates how valuable it can be to offer students options for evaluating the learning they acquired outside of the classroom for possible college credit. So many adults today are enrolling in postsecondary programs with learning that was acquired outside of a formal educational setting. They are coming to college after many years of learning in the workplace, gaining valuable training in the military, acquiring skills experientially through volunteer work, or pursuing learning independently through the vast options available today online. Some of this learning is equivalent to the learning that fulfills the stated requirements of their degree plans or required course. When postsecondary institutions hold the not-so-radical notion that *learning is learning no matter how or where it is acquired*, those institutions offer students ways for that learning to be evaluated for college credit. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a proven method for evaluating such learning and can come in the form of standardized exams, evaluation of corporate or military training, challenge exams, or portfolio assessment.

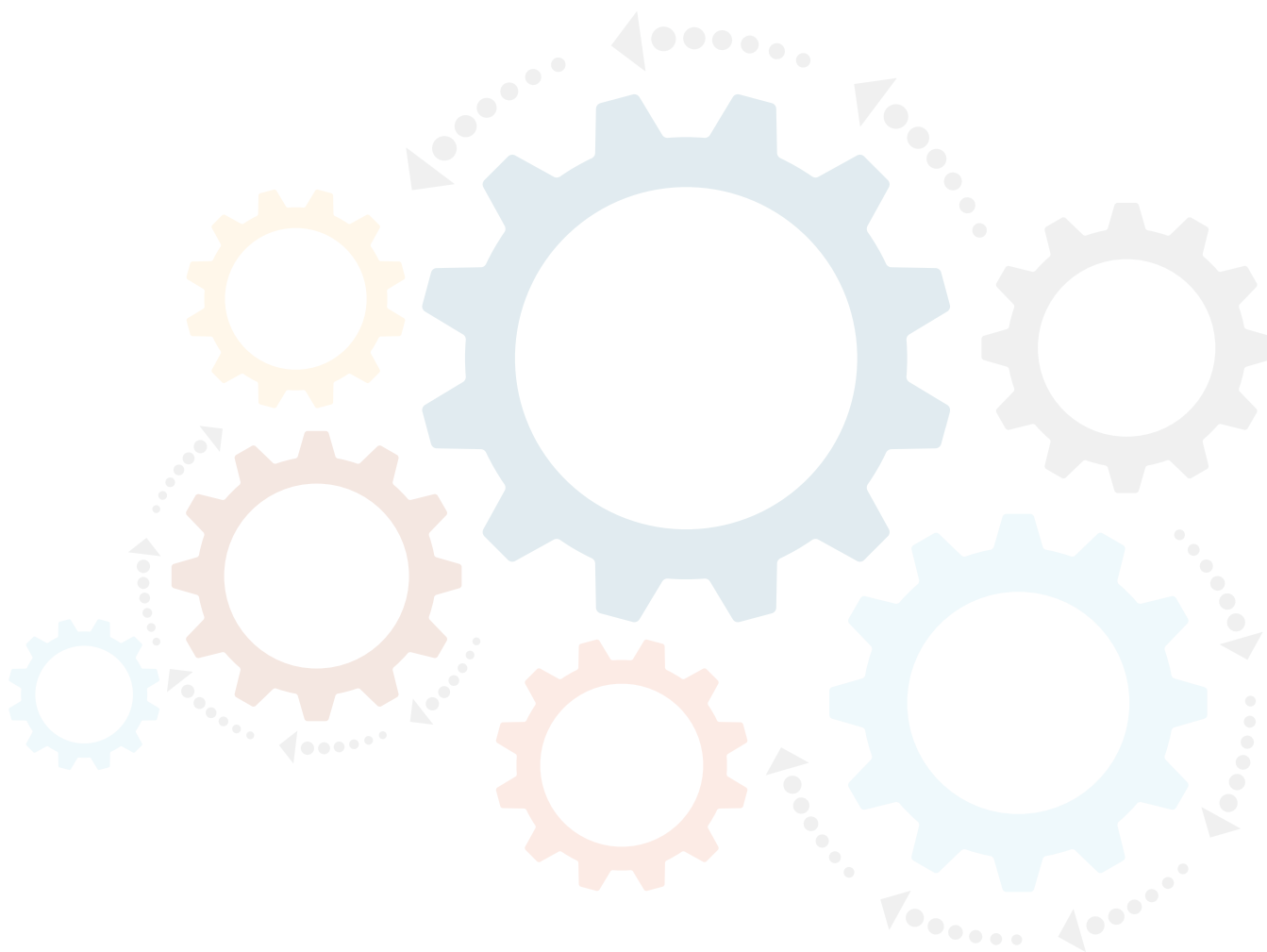
Although PLA has been available to students on a limited basis for more than 40 years, more recently there has been a dramatic growth in interest in PLA from colleges and universities, state systems, philanthropy, the federal government, and workforce development programs. Some of this interest is due to PLA providing a way for students to accelerate their credit-earning. The interest may also be attributed to research findings from the Council for

Adult and Experiential Learning, and others, showing a positive relationship between PLA credit-earning and adult degree completion. At a time when there are ambitious public goals for improving postsecondary degree completion, a process like PLA that helps students accelerate – and reach – their degree goals by valuing the learning they already have is a powerful tool in the proverbial degree completion toolbox.

This past year, CAEL revisited the question of the relationship between PLA and adult student academic outcomes. This time we focused our attention in-house, on the students who have been participating in CAEL’s LearningCounts™ program. LearningCounts offers online portfolio assessment services in partnership with select colleges and universities. Although CAEL’s contact with students is limited to the time in which they engage with LearningCounts (no additional academic support

or coaching is provided by CAEL after the PLA credit is earned), we were curious to know if the students who earned PLA credit through LearningCounts had better academic outcomes.

This new study examines persistence and degree completion of students after engaging with LearningCounts. Similar to the results of other PLA studies, we found that LearningCounts students who were successful in earning credit through PLA – in this case through a standardized portfolio assessment process – were more likely to have persisted and/or completed their degrees compared with similar adult students who did not earn such credit. In addition, LearningCounts students also had better academic outcomes compared to the cohort of all adult students who attended the same colleges and universities at the same time.





THE BENEFITS FROM PLA

Students who take advantage of PLA gain obvious benefits like reduced time to degree completion or cost savings. The PLA options usually take less time to complete, and they have a lower price point in comparison to taking the equivalent course offering. More often than not, when a student chooses not to take a 15-week course costing several hundred dollars (or much more, depending on the tuition rate at that student's college), but rather prepares a prior learning portfolio and pays a fraction of normal tuition costs to have that portfolio evaluated for degree required credit(s), there are clear and obvious cost savings and, likely, time savings as well.

Beyond the quantifiable cost and time advantages of PLA, advocates have long argued that PLA offers additional benefits to students. Some adult learning theorists believe, for example, that the exercise of reflecting on one's previous learning is a process that ultimately helps the student create new learning (Marienau, 2014). In addition, when students earn credit through PLA, the process in and of itself can be validating for them. Adults who are coming to college to earn their degrees at age 30, 45, or older are often those who may not have seen themselves as "college material" before – and in some cases, they may have been told they were not college material by a teacher or a high school guidance counselor. To discover through PLA that they not only can learn at the college level but that they have *already learned* at the college level is a powerful message for these students to hear. And, as some PLA advisors have shared with CAEL, when students hear that message from a college or university representative who is awarding college credit for that learning, that message can help change how those students view themselves as students and learners.

These are all important benefits of PLA. But, in truth, institutional and policy leaders may care far more about student feelings of validation, self-efficacy, and self-worth if and when those benefits lead to greater student motivation to persist and complete their degrees. The question of whether PLA can lead to better academic outcomes is what led CAEL, in 2010, to conduct the first major multi-institutional study of the relationship between PLA credit-earning and student academic outcomes. As reported in *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior*

WHAT IS PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

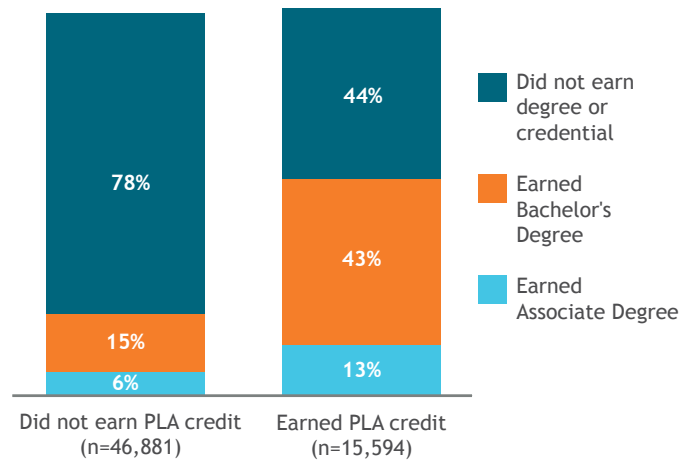
Prior learning is a term used by educators to describe learning that a person acquires outside of a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, 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 Tests (DSST); (2) challenge exams for local courses at the student's college/university; (3) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments such as those conducted by colleges and CAEL's LearningCounts national online service; and (4) evaluated non-college programs, e.g., the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) or American Council on Education's ACECREDIT service and evaluations of corporate training and military training.

PLA options usually take less time to complete, and they have a lower price point in comparison to taking the equivalent course offering. In addition, research shows that students with PLA credit are more likely to complete their degrees, compared to students without PLA credit.

Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes, we found that adult students with PLA credit were two and a half times more likely to have earned a postsecondary degree than similar students with no PLA credit (Figure 1). A strong positive correlation between PLA and degree completion was found for students regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and GPA. PLA students also had greater persistence, and those who graduated had a shorter time to degree (Klein-Collins, 2010).

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



Since CAEL's *Fueling the Race* report, other researchers have conducted similar studies on PLA. One study of four community colleges found that the degree completion rate for students with PLA credit was more than twice that of students with no PLA credit: 28% compared to 12% (Hayward & Williams, 2015). The Colorado Community system examined its own student records and found that students with PLA credit had higher degree completion than students without PLA credit, and the PLA students saved an average of one to seven months in completing their degrees (McKay, Cohn, & Kuang, 2016). Capella University, meanwhile, examined the experiences of students participating in a financial aid PLA experiment with the U.S. Department of Education and found that students with PLA credit saved an average of \$4,319 in tuition costs, earned more credit, and completed their degrees at higher rates than non-PLA students (Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017; Klein, 2017).



POSITIVE OUTCOMES SPUR NEW PLA PROGRAMS AND APPROACHES

The data in these studies is not proof of a causal relationship between PLA and degree completion. The students who pursue PLA may differ in significant ways from other students. For example, they may be more highly motivated or higher achieving students to begin with. Still, the previous findings support the idea that PLA can be a useful process for helping to accelerate degree completion for the adult learner. The positive correlation between PLA and student outcomes has encouraged individual institutions and systems to begin offering PLA or expand existing programs, and it has prompted federal and state governments to examine how existing regulations act as barriers to greater PLA use. The U.S. Department of Education, for example, is conducting an experiment to test how federal financial aid regulations can be modified to cover the costs of PLA (Plumlee & Klein-Collins, 2017); and earlier this year, the legislature in Indiana passed a bill that makes PLA expenses eligible for the state's financial aid program (Indiana General Assembly, 2017).

In 2011, the research findings and the growing interest in PLA prompted CAEL to pilot an online portfolio assessment service that evolved into what is now called LearningCounts. Through LearningCounts, students take a portfolio development course (self-paced or instructor-led) to learn how to document their prior learning in a portfolio. Trained faculty assessors then evaluate the learning that is presented in that portfolio and determine whether to make a formal recommendation back to the student's institution regarding the award of college credit for a comparable college course. LearningCounts offers institutions a standard academic process for portfolio assessment

without the colleges needing to build and maintain such a service on their own.

Since the launch of LearningCounts, participating colleges and funders have asked CAEL whether LearningCounts students have the same kind of academic success as did the PLA students in the *Fueling the Race* study. In the nascent days of the program, conducting such a study was not feasible because not enough students had participated in the program and not enough time had passed to allow the students to complete their degrees following PLA credit-earning. It is still early days in the LearningCounts program – just six years since the official pilot and three years since enrolling significant numbers of students. Many adult learners attend college part-time, and the earning of PLA credit sometimes happens at the start of their educational journeys. So, it may be a bit soon to examine degree completion patterns of these students. CAEL, nevertheless, wanted to start examining how students fare academically after engaging with LearningCounts.

This report presents the results of this study, which examined the enrollment patterns and degree completion of LearningCounts students as reflected in data available through the National Student Clearinghouse, supplemented by the perspectives of the students themselves as shared with us through survey responses. The study found that students with the highest level of engagement with LearningCounts (i.e., those who earned portfolio credits) had significantly better academic outcomes (in terms of degree completion and persistence) than students who had lower levels of engagement and who did not earn portfolio credit.

HOW LEARNINGCOUNTS WORKS

At the start of the LearningCounts Portfolio Assessment process, students enroll in a portfolio development course (self-paced or instructor-led). Once students complete the self-paced course or pass the instructor-led course, they submit a course-match portfolio to be evaluated for a possible credit recommendation. CAEL-trained faculty with appropriate disciplinary credentials assess the portfolios for college credit. Credit recommendations, if earned, are then forwarded to partner institutions. There are some students who do not pass the instructor-led course and therefore cannot submit portfolios. There are also students who pass the course but decide not to submit a portfolio, and students who submit one or more portfolios that do not receive a credit recommendation.



ONLINE PORTFOLIO
DEVELOPMENT



PORTFOLIO TOOL
AND GUIDANCE



INDIVIDUALIZED
ASSESSMENT BY FACULTY



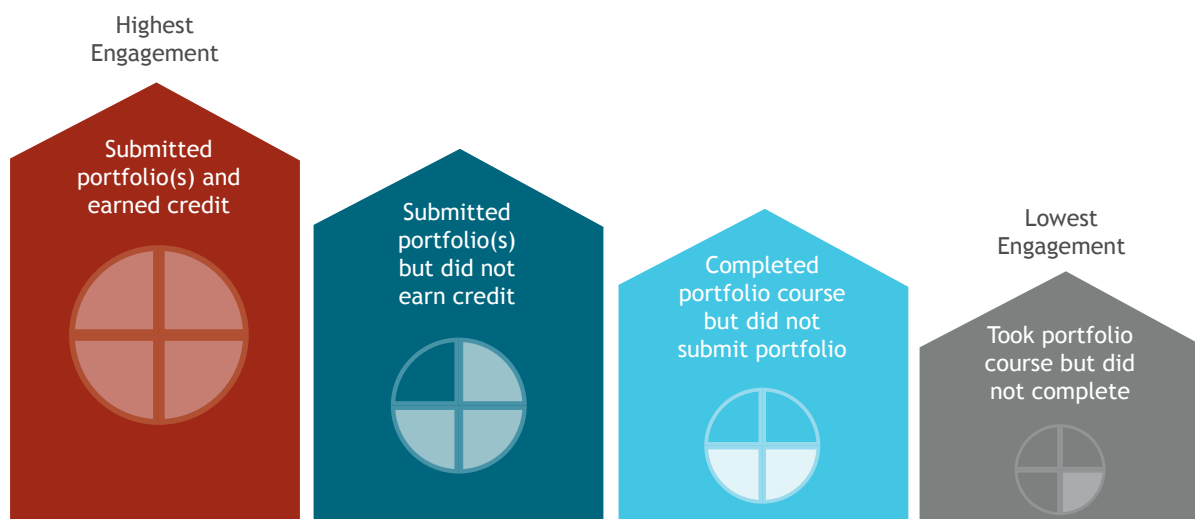
THE APPROACH TO EXAMINING LEARNINGCOUNTS STUDENT OUTCOMES

In the *Fueling the Race* study, CAEL examined the academic outcomes of students who had earned PLA credit compared to those who did not. Ideally, for the analysis of LearningCounts students, we also wanted to compare the academic progress of students who engaged with LearningCounts to those who did not. However, while CAEL knows the identity of students using the LearningCounts program, we do not have direct access to students who opted not to use LearningCounts or who simply did not know that LearningCounts exists.

Despite this limitation, LearningCounts does provide a unique opportunity to examine outcomes based on a student's level of engagement with portfolio assessment. For our purposes, we defined four levels of LearningCounts engagement (Figure 2):

- **Very high engagement: Submitted one or more portfolios and earned credits (34% of all outcomes).** Students in this group passed the instructor-led portfolio course or completed the self-paced course, submitted one or more portfolios for assessment, and earned a recommendation of college credit from at least one of these attempts.¹ (Note: the pass rate for student portfolios in the last two and a half years of our analysis period was 74%.²)
- **High engagement: Submitted one or more portfolios, but did not earn credit (6% of all outcomes).** Students in this group passed the instructor-led portfolio course or used the self-paced option and subsequently submitted one or more portfolios for evaluation but did not earn a

Figure 2.
Levels of Engagement with LearningCounts



¹ A credit recommendation is not a guarantee that the student's institution will award the credit or that the credit will count toward the student's degree plan. However, in the LearningCounts program, partner institutions enter formal agreements with CAEL to accept the credit recommendations, and students are advised throughout the process to make sure that the portfolio credit they are pursuing will satisfy their specific degree's requirements.

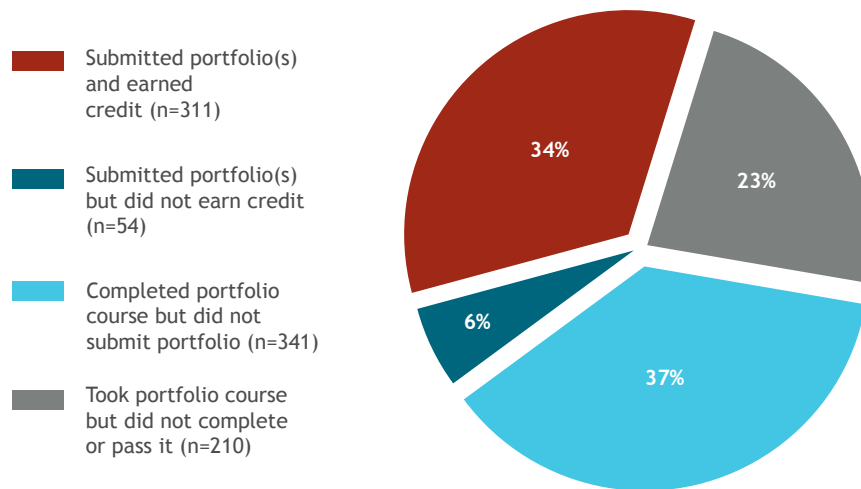
² A new system for success tracking was introduced in mid-2014.

recommendation of any college credits from the faculty assessor.

- **Low- to mid-level engagement: Took the portfolio course, but did not submit a portfolio for assessment (37% of all outcomes).** This group includes students who completed either the self-paced or the instructor-led course but opted not to develop or submit a portfolio for assessment. Students who complete the instructor-led course earn three college credits for that course, and so they do benefit from LearningCounts in terms of some credit-earning.

- **Very low engagement: Took the instructor-led portfolio course, but did not complete or pass it (23% of all outcomes).** This group includes students who either failed the instructor-led course or withdrew before completing it. (Note: not every LearningCounts student takes the instructor-led course. The pass rate for the instructor-led course in the last two and a half years of our analysis period was 83%.)

Figure 3.
LearningCounts Student Outcomes



Why Would 37% of LearningCounts Students Not Submit a Portfolio?

Despite the fact that PLA can help students accelerate their credit-earning, not every student follows through with the entire portfolio process. Students have up to a year to submit a portfolio after completing the course, but preparing a portfolio requires a significant amount of time and effort. In our recent student survey, LearningCounts students who chose not to submit a portfolio shared their reasons. Some of the most common responses included running out of time, thinking it would just be easier to earn credit by taking courses, and not wanting to spend the time or money.

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) provided data on LearningCounts students' enrollment patterns and degree completion between January 1, 2007, and December 31, 2016; the size of the sample population used for our analysis was 916 (see Appendix for additional details). Furthermore, in order for us to have a comparison group of non-LearningCounts students, NSC provided the academic outcomes (e.g., degree completion and persistence) for all adult learners attending the institutions where the LearningCounts students were enrolled; this group was further defined as those students who had similar enrollment patterns as the LearningCounts students (i.e. part-time enrollment for at least two terms).³

In order to hear the perspective of the LearningCounts students themselves, CAEL also conducted an online survey that asked them about their experiences with LearningCounts, how they were able to use their portfolio credit in their degree plans (for those earning credit), and their opinions about the value of the program. We also followed up with several of the portfolio credit-earners by phone to learn more about their personal educational histories and experiences.

A Note about Differences between Students

Our analysis of the data looked at academic outcomes for students who engaged with LearningCounts. We also examined academic outcomes for individual cohorts based on the year students matriculated at the institution they attended while participating in LearningCounts. This cohort analysis provided a way for us to control for the amount of time the student had to complete additional courses required of the degree program. Students matriculating in

2012, for example, had more time to complete their remaining degree requirements, compared to students matriculating in 2014. *In our analysis, we found that the overall relationship between LearningCounts program outcomes (as well as portfolio credit-earning) and student academic outcomes was statistically significant. However, when controlling for years since matriculation, the statistical significance varies by year, which may be explained in part by the smaller subgroups in the layered analysis. (See Appendix for additional details.)*

There are other important differences between the students in our sample, however, that we are unable to control for. For example, while we had access to each student's history prior to their matriculation at the institution that referred them to LearningCounts, we did not have reliable information on the number of transfer credits each student had earned or the number of transfer credits that could be applied to their degree. In addition, we did not have information about whether any of the students in the LearningCounts sample or in the non-LearningCounts group had earned PLA credit outside of LearningCounts.

Finally, as noted earlier, students who successfully earn portfolio credit may differ in significant ways from students who do not. Successful portfolio credit-earners may be students who are more highly motivated, compared to students who opt not to develop a prior learning portfolio. It also may be the case that students who engage with LearningCounts at all may have those characteristics, compared with students who choose not to.

These limitations of our data suggest that while our findings provide important insights on the likely value of PLA, many other factors may also be contributing to the relative success of portfolio credit-earners.

³ Although this comparison group includes the LearningCounts students and other students who have some PLA credit, the percentage of those students in that group would be quite small – in most cases, between 5 and 7%.

THE FINDINGS: PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND DEGREE COMPLETION

Another PLA Success Story

After nearly 8 years as a certified medical assistant, Jill wanted a more flexible work schedule to accommodate her child care needs. “I adopted a son with learning disabilities that required additional attention on my part,” Jill explained, “and my current work schedule was just very inflexible.” So, at age 40 – with one young son and two older daughters – she went back to college to earn a degree in history. Wanting to finish school as quickly as possible, Jill worked with an outside academic advisor who recommended that she enroll in LearningCounts in 2011. “She thought that with my many years of experience that I could earn some course credit that would count toward my degree,” Jill said. She ultimately submitted four portfolios and earned 12 credits for courses ranging from medical terminology to health psychology, and she earned additional credit through CLEP exams. The PLA credit reduced the number of courses Jill needed to take, and she was able to earn her bachelor’s degree in less than three years.

A Closer Look at PLA and Degree Completion

Not every adult student earns PLA credit – many do not even have many PLA options available to them. But when PLA is available, adult students may be able to benefit in significant ways – with degree completion being perhaps one of the most important benefits.

In our analysis of the LearningCounts student outcomes, we define degree completion as a student earning any degree following engagement with LearningCounts. This includes both associate and bachelor’s degrees. We found that LearningCounts students who earned college credit through portfolio assessment had the highest rate of degree completion

“The LearningCounts process not only reinforced my skills and abilities, but my portfolios helped me finish school in enough time so I could show my children the power of determination.”

– Jill, a LearningCounts student who earned portfolio credits in medical terminology, ethics, and psychology

– 64 percent – compared with all other groups within LearningCounts (Figure 4).

Students with the next highest level of engagement – either completing the course and not submitting a portfolio or submitting a portfolio but not earning credit – have the next highest degree completion rates at 40-42%. In contrast, the lowest-engagement group (students who did not complete the portfolio development course) had a degree completion rate of 24%. Of the degrees earned by the LearningCounts students, 87% were bachelor’s degrees.

When it comes to the question of degree completion, perhaps a more important distinction between the various types of LearningCounts students – rather than engagement – is simply whether they earned credit from portfolio assessment or not. Those who earned portfolio credit had a degree completion rate of 64%, while those who did not had a degree completion rate of only 35% (Figure 5).

Figure 4.
Degree Completion by LearningCounts Outcome

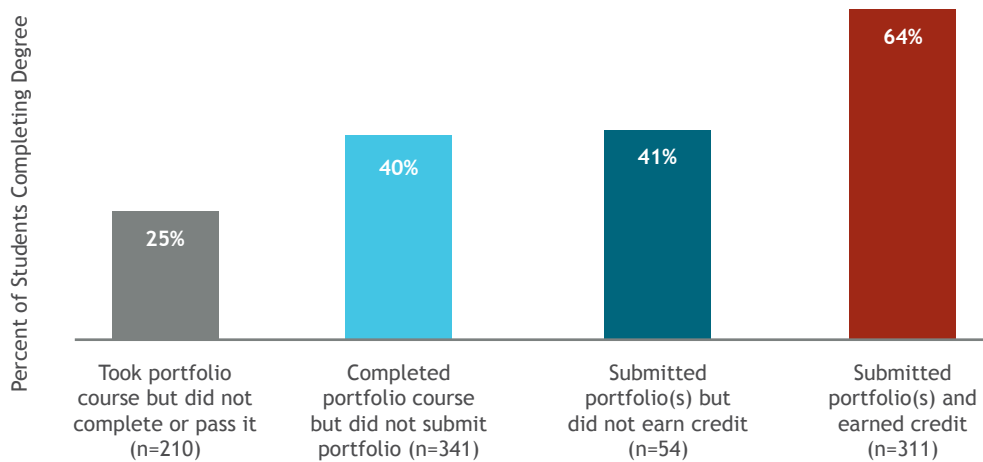
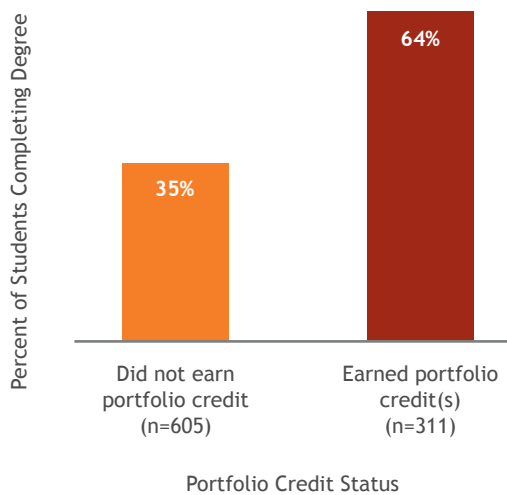


Figure 5.
Degree Completion by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio



What does the data say about degree completion for different demographic groups?

CAEL found that LearningCounts students who earned portfolio credit had higher degree completion, regardless of key demographic characteristics like race, ethnicity, and gender. However, the subgroups used for the analysis were very small and, therefore, not statistically significant.

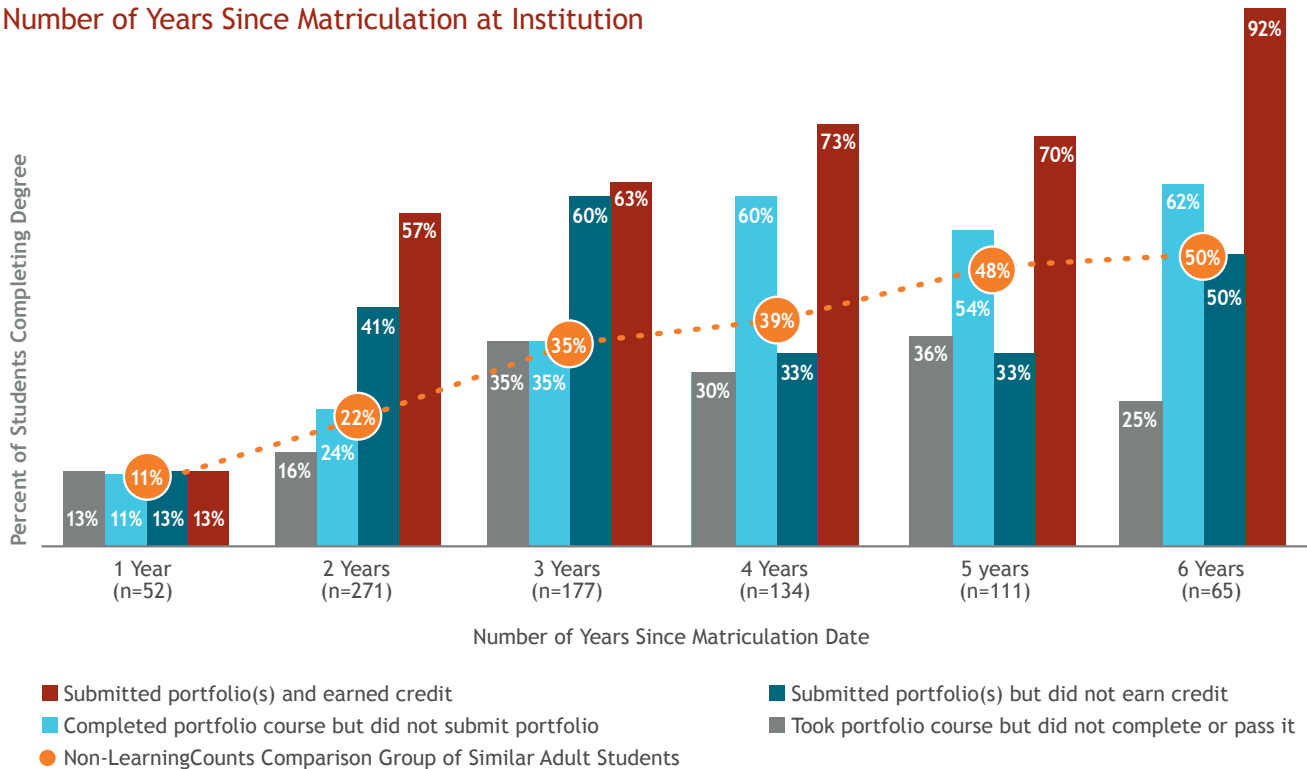
Degree Completion and Matriculation Year

The above findings suggest a strong relationship between portfolio credit-earning and degree completion, but it is important to note that the students in this sample are not from a single cohort that matriculated at their institutions at the same time and were then given the same amount of time to earn credits and complete their degrees. Rather, these are students who not only came to LearningCounts at different times (between mid-2011 and mid-2015) but also matriculated at their institutions at different times (primarily between 2009 and 2015).⁴ Therefore, it is

important to examine these results while controlling for time, thus comparing students who have had a similar length of time to take courses, earn credits, and complete their degree requirements.

We examined degree completion for each LearningCounts program outcome by the year of the student's matriculation at the institution they attended while participating in LearningCounts. This allowed us to compare groups of students who had similar timeframes in which to complete their degrees.

Figure 6.
Degree Completion by LearningCounts Outcome and Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution



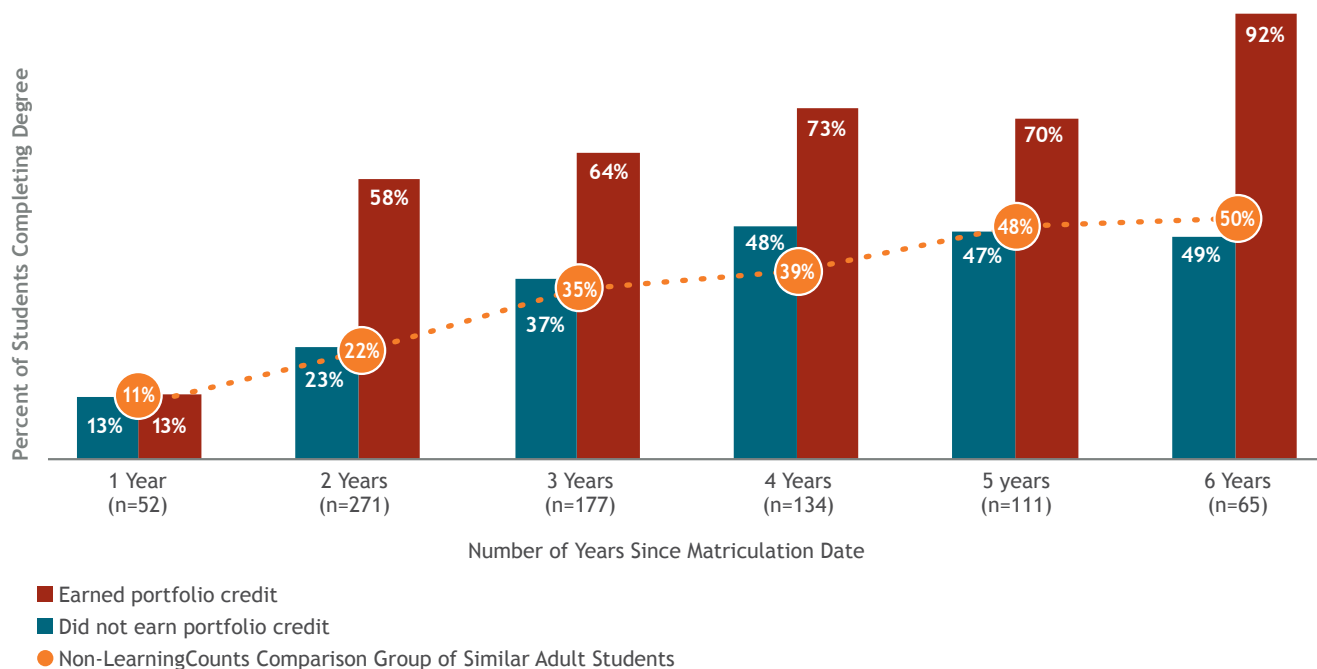
⁴ In contrast, the students in the sample used in *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* all matriculated at their institution in a single year, and the study examined a seven-year period in which the students could earn credits and complete their degrees.

For each group of students examined, degree completion is higher for those who matriculated at their institutions earlier (Figure 6); a distinction grounded in the fact that students who matriculated in 2012, for example, had four years to take courses and progress toward their degrees, while more recent cohorts had less time to make similar progress. However, what is of interest is that, for all but the most recent cohort, students who earned portfolio credits have higher degree completion rates compared to students who engaged with LearningCounts but did not earn credit.

For example, in the 2012 cohort, 73% of students with portfolio credit had earned a degree by the end of 2016 compared to only 48% of students who did not earn portfolio credit (Figures 6 and 7).

In addition, the non-LearningCounts comparison group shows a degree completion rate that closely resembles the students who did not earn portfolio credit. In other words, for each cohort, LearningCounts students who earn portfolio credit have higher degree completion rates than the average adult student matriculating at the same institutions at the same time.

Figure 7.
Degree Completion by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio and
Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution



THE FINDINGS: PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT AND PERSISTENCE

If you find the degree completion rates presented in the previous section to be underwhelming, keep this in mind: over 75% of our sample matriculated at bachelor's degree-granting institutions after 2013, meaning that our analysis is giving them less than four years to earn their degrees. Earning PLA credit certainly allows students to accelerate their degree completion, but we need to acknowledge that in many cases the largely part-time students in our sample understandably have not completed their degrees – at least *not yet*. It is very likely that many of the students matriculating in more recent years are still enrolled and continuing to work on completing their degree requirements.

A better metric to examine, therefore, might be a combination of degree completion and continued enrollment, or persistence. There are many ways to define persistence. Some studies define persisting students as first-time freshmen with full-time and continuous enrollment after the initial semester (Allen, 1999). Other studies try to define persistence in a more holistic way that allows for occasional enrollment gaps and places less emphasis on first-time students. Some institutions, for example, examine the progress a student has made in completing a degree program (Voigt & Hundrieser, 2008).

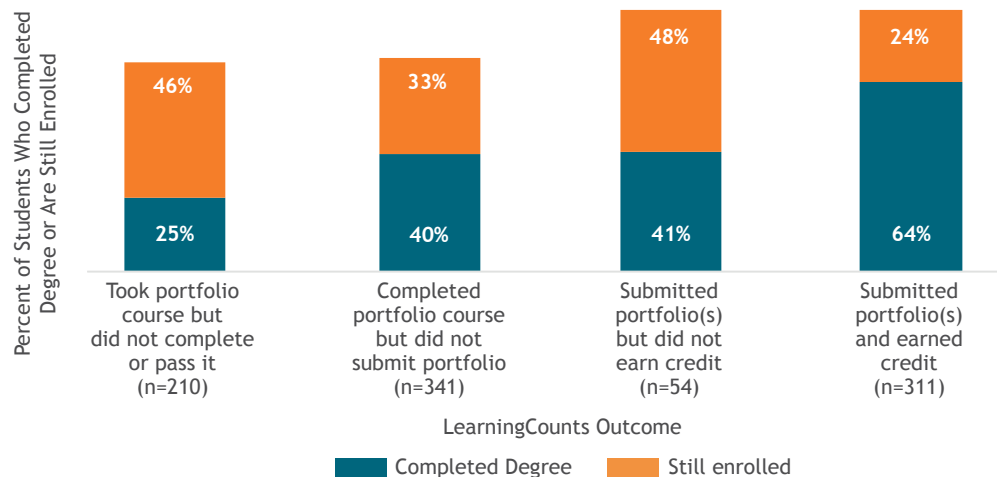
In this study, we also wanted to acknowledge the reality that many adult students stop out and

re-enroll for a range of reasons, including financial issues or personal/work/family obligations, but we did not have access to the credit-earning patterns of students that would have allowed us to examine student progress toward the degree. We opted instead to count students as persisting if they had either completed their degree following their engagement with LearningCounts or had enrolled at any time during the 2-3 most recent terms of our analysis period (in this case, between August 1, 2015, and December 31, 2016).

When we add the still enrolled students to the degree completion data, we see that 88-89% of the students with higher levels of engagement (earning portfolio credit or submitting a portfolio but not earning credit) have overall positive outcomes of either degree completion or continued enrollment, while students at lower levels of LearningCounts engagement have lower overall positive outcomes – 71% for students passing the course but not submitting a portfolio and 70% for students not completing the course (Figure 8).

Similarly, when comparing the broader categories of students who earned portfolio credit versus those who did not, 87% of students with portfolio credit have positive outcomes (degree completion or continued enrollment), compared to 72% of students who did not earn portfolio credit (Figure 9).

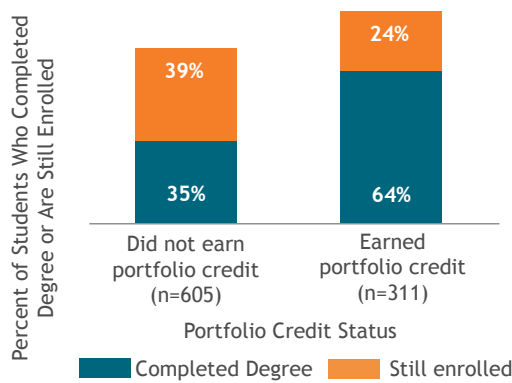
Figure 8.
Persistence
(Completed Degree or Continued Enrollment)
by LearningCounts Outcome



Examining the results by matriculation year cohorts, we again see larger percentages of the students with portfolio credit having positive outcomes (either earning degrees or persisting), compared with other student outcome/engagement categories. For example, 81% of students in the 2011 cohort (5 years

since matriculation) who earned portfolio credit have a positive outcome of either degree completion or continued enrollment (70% completed degree and 11% still enrolled), compared to 66% of students without portfolio credit (47% completed degree and 19% still enrolled) (Figure 10).

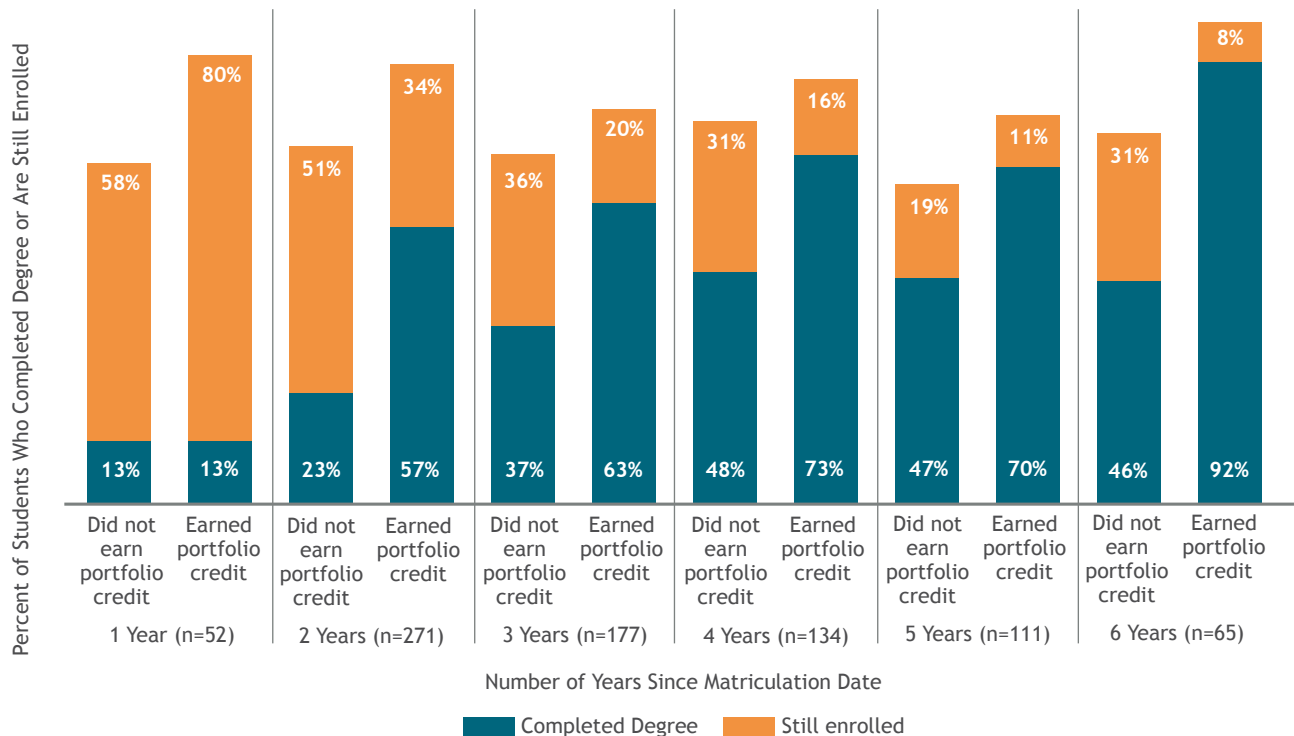
Figure 9.
Persistence (Completed Degree or Continued Enrollment) by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio



“I wanted to be an inspiration to my children by staying in school and finishing. The portfolios I submitted helped in that process.”

— Jill, a LearningCounts student who earned portfolio credits in medical terminology, ethics, and psychology

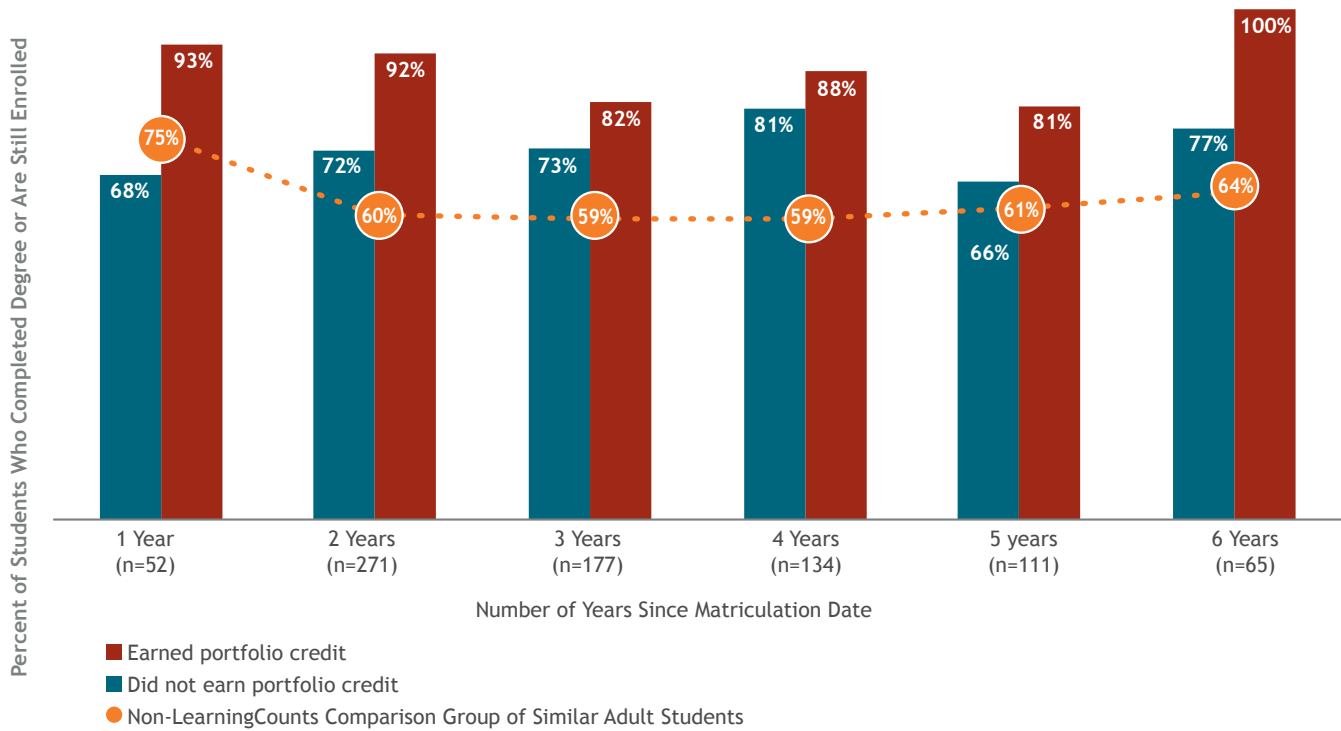
Figure 10.
Persistence (Degree Completion or Continued Enrollment) by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio and Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution



We also found that when compared to non-LearningCounts students, LearningCounts students with portfolio credit have higher persistence rates for each matriculation year (combined degree completion and continued enrollment). For example,

of those who had matriculated three years previously, 82% of portfolio credit-earners had earned a degree or were still enrolled compared to only 59% of non-LearningCounts students (Figure 11).

Figure 11.
Persistence (Degree Completion or Continued Enrollment) by Credit-Earning through LearningCounts Portfolio and Number of Years Since Matriculation at Institution



OTHER BENEFITS TO PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN THE LEARNINGCOUNTS EXPERIENCE

As mentioned in the introduction, some advocates believe that there are other important benefits from PLA; notably, students gain a higher regard for their own academic abilities and even the development of new learning. In addition to examining the relationship between degree completion and portfolio credit-earning, we wanted to know if LearningCounts students experienced the other, less transactional benefits as well. As part of our analysis, therefore, we surveyed 143 former LearningCounts students to hear their views on what they gained from LearningCounts.

The students who earned credit through LearningCounts largely agreed with statements regarding the perceived benefits of portfolio assessment besides degree completion or persistence. Large majorities of the responding students agreed that the portfolio development process helped them

“The portfolio helped me understand that the hard work that I’ve done has really paid off.

It changed the way I thought about myself.”

— Isidro, LearningCounts student who earned portfolio credits in communications

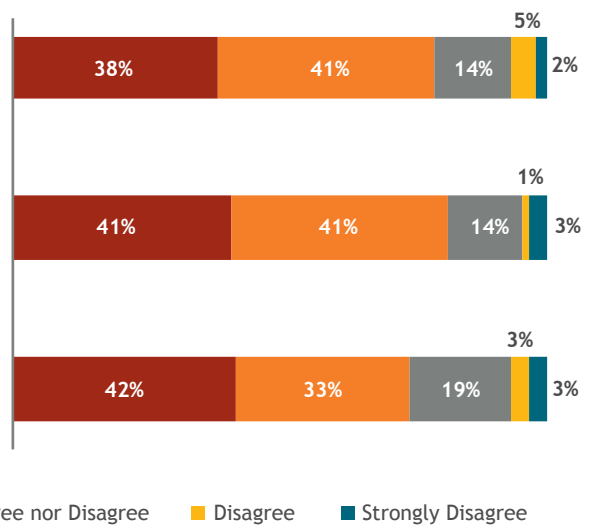
make clear connections between their learning and work (79%), increased their self-confidence (75%), and helped them better understand their existing skills and capabilities (82%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12.
Student Agreement with Various Benefits to Portfolio Assessment

Developing a portfolio helped me see clear connections between learning and work.

Developing a portfolio helped me better understand my existing skills, knowledge, or capabilities.

Creating and submitting a portfolio increased my confidence in myself as a student/learner.



“One of the main reasons I went back to school was to show my supervisor that I have the ability to be a leader. Going through the portfolio class helped me clearly make those connections.” — Kelli, LearningCounts student with portfolio credit in business ethics and technology

CONCLUSION

From our examination of LearningCounts student outcomes, we found that students with high levels of engagement with LearningCounts – in particular, those who earned portfolio credits – had better academic outcomes than students with lower levels of engagement. The LearningCounts students also affirmed that they perceive additional benefits from the portfolio assessment process such as increased self-confidence and a better understanding of their skills, knowledge, and abilities.

To be sure, there are many factors that contribute to student success for which studies like these cannot control, such as the number of transfer credits that these students had or whether the PLA credit-earners were highly motivated students to begin with.

The findings nevertheless contribute to a growing body of research that underscores the value of PLA – in all of its forms – as a strategy to help adult learners save money, accelerate their degree completion and reach their educational goals.



STUDENTS WITH HIGH LEVELS
OF ENGAGEMENT WITH
LEARNINGCOUNTS –
IN PARTICULAR, THOSE WHO
EARNED PORTFOLIO CREDITS
– HAD BETTER ACADEMIC
OUTCOMES THAN STUDENTS
WITH LOWER LEVELS
OF ENGAGEMENT.

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APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The Sample Used for This Report

We drew an initial sample of 1,296 students age 25 and older who engaged with LearningCounts between January 1, 2011, and December 31, 2015. Students were defined as engaging with LearningCounts if they enrolled in a portfolio development course (either instructor-led or self-paced) or if they submitted a portfolio. The number of institutions attended by these students totaled 110.

Of this original sample, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) located records for 923 students. Several hundred students were not found in the NSC tracking system either because of insufficient identifying information (in terms of date of birth or institution they attended) or because the student attended an institution that does not share data with NSC. Finally, there were seven students whose complicated enrollment patterns created a challenge for determining their original matriculation record, and so these students were omitted from our analysis. As a result, our final sample for analysis totaled 916 students.

The final sample used in the analysis closely resembles the original sample in terms of LearningCounts outcomes, gender, and ethnicity. Table 1 shows that the proportion of students with the various demographic characteristics are nearly identical – with only slight variations. For example, the NSC sample has a slightly higher proportion of white/Caucasian students and a slightly higher proportion of students who had earned portfolio credits through LearningCounts.

Table 1:
Comparison of LearningCounts Student Characteristics in Original vs. Final Sample

LearningCounts Outcomes	LearningCounts Original Sample	Learning Sample as found by NSC
Took instructor-led course, but did not complete or pass it	24%	23%
Took portfolio course but did not submit a portfolio	40%	37%
Submitted portfolio(s) but did not earn credit	5%	6%
Earned portfolio credits	31%	34%

Demographics	LearningCounts Original Sample	LearningCounts Sample as found by NSC
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	53%	54%
Male	46%	45%
Did not answer	1%	1%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White/Caucasian	58%	61%
Black/African American	16%	16%
Hispanic/Latino(a)	5%	5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	2%	2%
Native American or Alaskan Native	1%	1%
Two or more races	4%	4%
Prefer not to answer	12%	10%

Statistical Significance Tests

Tests of Significance

The results in Figure 4 show that LearningCounts program outcome and degree completion are positively correlated. Additionally, the same positive correlation is found between portfolio credit-earning and degree completion as shown in Figure 5. In both figures, the results are statistically significant.

For Figures 6-7 and 10-11, we controlled for the number of years since the student matriculated at the institution. LearningCounts program outcome and degree completion remain positively correlated in Figure 6 and again for portfolio credit-earning and degree completion in Figure 7. The same is true for

portfolio credit-earning and persistence in Figures 10-11. However, the results from these figures are statistically insignificant because a partial statistical significance is observed for some cohort groups. In Figures 6, 7, and 11, the results were significant for all cohort groups with 2 or more years to complete degree requirements while the results for the cohort group with only 1 year to complete degree requirements were not statistically significant. In Figure 10, the results were statistically significant for students with 2, 3, 4 and 6 years to complete degree requirements. However, the results were statistically insignificant for students with 1 and 5 years to complete degree requirements.

Figure Number	Significance	Results
Figure 4	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=916)=84.47, p<0.001
Figure 5	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=916)=72.78, p<0.001
Figure 6	<i>Not Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=916)=84.47, p<0.001
6 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=65)=19.95, p<0.001
5 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=111)=7.71, p=0.05
4 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=134)=14.852, p=0.002
3 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=177)= 2.19, p=0.01
2 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=271)=36.09, p<0.001
1 year	<i>Not significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=52)=0.006, p=1.00
Figure 7	<i>Not Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=916)=72.78, p<0.001
6 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=65)=14.53, p<0.001
5 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=111)=5.26, p=0.02
4 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=134)=7.67, p=0.01
3 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=177)=9.90, p<0.001
2 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=271)=31.69, p<0.001
1 year	<i>Not significant</i>	χ^2 (3, n=52)=0.002, p=0.97
Figure 8	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (6, n=916)=96.34, p<0.001
Figure 9	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=916)=75.15, p<0.001
Figure 10	<i>Not Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=916)=75.15, p<0.001
6 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=65)=15.00, p<0.001
5 years	<i>Not significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=111)=5.40, p=0.67
4 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=134)=7.778, p=0.02
3 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=177)=9.99, p=0.01
2 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=271)=3.65, p<0.001
1 year	<i>Not significant</i>	χ^2 (2, n=52)=3.073, p=0.22
Figure 11	<i>Not Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=916)=28.81, p<0.001
6 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=65)=6.96, p=0.01
5 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=111)=1.94, p=0.22
4 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=134)=1.29, p=0.25
3 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=174)=1.85, p=0.17
2 years	<i>Significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=271)=13.59, p<0.001
1 year	<i>Not significant</i>	χ^2 (1, n=52)=3.639, p=0.85



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