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## **New Study Confirms That Recognizing Prior Learning Results in Higher Postsecondary Credential Completion and Other Institution and Student Benefits**

*Detailed data analysis of more than 230,000 adult postsecondary students underscores link to greater completion and fewer time and financial burdens on learners, suggesting great potential for closing equity gaps*

INDIANAPOLIS – The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) have released a report, made possible by Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network, examining the use and impact of prior learning assessment (PLA) on student outcomes at 72 U.S. postsecondary institutions. The report, “The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment,” continues groundbreaking research CAEL completed a decade ago that helped quantify PLA’s impact on student and institutional outcomes. “The PLA Boost” substantiates earlier findings that PLA credit significantly boosts completion rates for adult students.

For example, the most recent report found that 49% of PLA adult students completed their postsecondary degree or certificate compared to only 27% of non-PLA adult students. Even after controlling for other factors that influence completion, the report found that PLA increases completion by 17 percent, and 30 percent for methods other than credit recommendations for military training.

The report also showed that PLA’s positive impact on completion persists across all learner demographics, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, academic performance, and institution type. However, despite PLA’s broad potential, only about 11% of adult students at the institutions participating in the study earned PLA credit. Black students, Pell Grant recipients, and students who lived in lower-income communities were least likely to have participated.

“The data are clear: PLA’s benefits are many, yet many more students could and should be benefiting from it,” said Wendy Sedlak, strategy director for research and data at Lumina Foundation. “The findings highlight the tremendous upside of PLA and should encourage colleges and universities everywhere to take advantage of this potential to better support working adults. Now, as they face the challenges of building a ‘new normal’ in the aftermath of the pandemic, adults need to reach their educational goals more quickly by building on what they already know and can do.”

“Career success in the future of work will be built on more diverse educational pathways that link lifelong learning with evolving workplace needs,” said Tom Dawson, Strada Education Network chief operating officer and chair of CAEL’s board of directors. “As postsecondary systems and workforce and economic development organizations are forced to do more with less amid

pandemic budget cuts, recognizing college-level learning from learners' work and life experience will accelerate credential completion and help learners access the credentials they need for social and economic mobility.”

“This report provides even stronger statistical evidence of PLA’s many benefits,” said Demarée Michelau, president of WICHE. “But PLA’s full potential will never be realized as long as it remains a niche practice. Postsecondary institutions should consider promoting PLA just as earnestly as they promote their degree programs, particularly to adult students who can benefit the most, including low-income adult students, adult students of color, and other student groups whose completion rates are low.”

“We shouldn’t expect institutions working alone to expand and accelerate PLA practices to the levels adult learners and their communities need, she added. “Regulators, postsecondary educators, industry, and philanthropic funders should work together to build buy-in for PLA, introduce PLA-friendly policies, and maximize its ability to promote equitable student success.”

“The findings suggest that PLA could also be an important tool for our post-pandemic economic recovery,” said Becky Klein-Collins, associate vice president of advancement and impact for CAEL. “Workers who have been displaced from their previous employment have valuable skills and knowledge that should be recognized. Our workforce development programs would benefit from incorporating PLA so that workers can build on their existing knowledge and more quickly position themselves to succeed in growth industries.”

In addition to improved completion rates, the report showed that adult PLA students save time and money during their enrollment. Financial savings were between \$2,224 and \$11,587, depending on institution type. And when earning at least 12 PLA credits, adult PLA students completed degrees between seven and twelve months sooner than their non-PLA counterparts, depending on institutional type and degree goals.

Contrary to common concerns among faculty and administrators, the money and time students save did not come at the expense of the institutions they attended, the report found. Because PLA students were more likely to persist and complete, they earned more traditional-course credits – 17.6 on average – at their institutions than non-PLA students. In addition, the report points out that improved enrollment rates sustain student spending and augment institutional capacity to secure funding contingent on student outcomes.

The complete report can be downloaded at [cael.org](https://cael.org).

### **About 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; and 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. Established in 1974, CAEL, a Strada Education Network affiliate, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization. Visit [cael.org](https://cael.org) to learn more.

**About WICHE**

Since 1953, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has been strengthening higher education, workforce development, and behavioral health throughout the region. As an interstate compact, WICHE partners with states, territories, and postsecondary institutions to share knowledge, create resources, and develop innovative solutions that address some of our society's most pressing needs. From promoting high-quality, affordable postsecondary education to helping states get the most from their technology investments and addressing behavioral health challenges, WICHE improves lives across the West through innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy.

**About Lumina Foundation**

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Lumina's goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy. Learn more at [luminafoundation.org](http://luminafoundation.org).

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