



# Equity Paradoxes in **The PLA Boost**

**Opportunity Unrealized for  
Some Students despite the  
Potential for Improved  
Credit Completion**

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The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) received funding from Lumina Foundation and Strada Education Network from 2018-2020 to partner with several organizations to conduct original research and a broad landscape analysis focused on policy and practice issues related to the recognition of prior learning. The landscape analysis focuses on issues arising in the practice of the recognition of prior learning, policies that encourage or limit its adoption, and key research needs and future directions for the field. One of the research projects was conducted in partnership with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), examining the use and impact of prior learning assessment (PLA) on adult student outcomes at 72 postsecondary institutions. That work resulted in the report called *The PLA Boost*, found at [www.cael.org/pla-impact](http://www.cael.org/pla-impact).

This report (not funded by Lumina or Strada) builds on the original study's findings. It is available for download at <https://www.cael.org/news-and-resources/pla-cpl-equity>.

The entire landscape initiative produced a series of briefs, reports, and actionable toolkits that can be found here: [wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning](http://wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning).

## Executive Summary

Previous research from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) found that prior learning assessment/credit for prior learning (PLA/CPL)<sup>1</sup> has a positive effect on adult student credential completion—an effect that was evident for every student subgroup analyzed in a study of PLA/CPL usage at 72 institutions—for different ages, genders, institutional environments, income levels, races, and ethnicities.

There was, however, an *equity paradox* in the findings: PLA/CPL is shown to provide a strong completion boost to lower-income adults, Black adult students, and community college students, but they receive PLA/CPL at lower-than-average rates and, therefore, are less likely than other students to benefit from the completion boost.

For this brief, we further analyzed the study sample, resulting in several deeper dive findings:

- **Deeper dive finding on Pell Grant recipients:** Adult students who received Pell Grants showed a greater-than-average completion boost from PLA/CPL credit-receipt—particularly Black adult students—compared to their non-Pell counterparts.
- **Deeper dive finding on service members:** There was little to no disparity in PLA/CPL credit rates by race/ethnicity among students with a military history on record (“service-member students”), for whom the primary type of PLA/CPL credit was from ACE military credit recommendations. Nonetheless, Black service-member students received the lowest completion boost from having received credit through PLA/CPL.
- **Deeper dive finding on Black adult students:** The lowest PLA/CPL credit rates in this study were seen among non-service-member adult students with PLA/CPL assessment methods other than ACE military credit recommendations. In this segment of the sample, Black adult students consistently had the lowest PLA/CPL rates and therefore did not reap the PLA/CPL completion boost that might otherwise provide parity with their White peers.

### The paradox:

Black and lower-income adult students received strong boosts to credential completion from PLA/CPL credit—but they were the least likely to receive such credit.

As an important tool for recognizing and valuing the learning that adult students bring to postsecondary education and potentially addressing attainment gaps, PLA/CPL should not be out of reach for the adult learners who can benefit most. Institutions interviewed for this deeper exploration offered some possible factors for the PLA/CPL disparities for Black and/or lower-income adult learners in our sample. There are many ways that institutions can take action to address some of the barriers this analysis revealed.

<sup>1</sup> CAEL and WICHE recognize the validity of several different terms for the awarding of credit for a student's prior learning, including credit for prior learning (CPL) and prior learning assessment (PLA). For the purposes of this report, these terms are used interchangeably, as they both describe the range of methods used to award credit to students based on an evaluation of a student's prior learning experiences or an assessment of the student's demonstrated learning.

Possible Factors	Recommendations
<p><b>Cost.</b> PLA/CPL related assessment fees are not covered by Pell Grants or other federal financial aid, and while these fees are often less than course tuition, they may be significant as out-of-pocket costs. Given that a high proportion of the Black adult students in this study were Pell Grant recipients, this may be particularly relevant to the lower PLA credit rates for Black adult students.</p> <p><b>The amount and nature of outreach, marketing, and support.</b> This inadequacy would ostensibly affect all students, but unless information and support are specifically designed for diversity, equity and inclusion, there are likely to be gaps in information and support for some types of students. Further, implicit racial or class bias, simple misinformation, or lack of information among student services staff and advisors could affect the information students receive about PLA/CPL.</p> <p><b>Adaptivity of institutional policies and processes.</b> If the prevailing PLA/CPL opportunities are not specifically adapted for adult learners' predominant labor market experiences or programs of study, inequities may result along class or income perspectives or in ways that overlap with systemic labor market disparities.</p> <p><b>Individual adult learner self-confidence.</b> Some adult learners may arrive to postsecondary education with a lifetime of systemic disparities or possibly lower confidence in themselves as learners or in the applicability of PLA/CPL to them.</p>	<p><b>Prioritize equity in the design of PLA/CPL programs.</b> Equity in PLA/CPL usage will require the intentional design of policies and practices that will open PLA/CPL access to all students and support them in their pursuit of credit for what they already know and can do.</p> <p><b>Develop financial supports for low-income students.</b> Almost by definition, a PLA/CPL program cannot be equitable if it does not offer financial support for students in financial need. Federal and state policy shifts may be needed, but in the meantime, institutions should consider fee waivers, scholarships, or other supports to help low-income students take advantage of these opportunities -- or even provide PLA/CPL free of charge.</p> <p><b>Improve PLA/CPL communications to students.</b> After analyzing for access gaps through an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens, institutions can develop messaging approaches and outreach campaigns that reach students from different backgrounds. Staff providing PLA/CPL information and support should be skilled in relatable communications with diverse student populations.</p> <p><b>Embed PLA/CPL systemically in advising and curriculum.</b> Advisors and staff should be well-trained, and PLA/CPL information should be a part of advising with every student.</p> <p><b>Improve data infrastructure and analysis.</b> To understand where equity gaps exist, track PLA/CPL data, including PLA/CPL attempts, and disaggregate for equity analysis.</p> <p><b>Provide PLA/CPL offerings for more diverse areas of extra-institutional learning.</b> Include college-level learning that occurs outside of managerial and white collar jobs.</p> <p><b>Scale processes for simpler PLA/CPL crosswalks.</b> These would be similar to the processes for awarding credit for military training and experience, for straightforward administration and to be simpler and more engaging for students.</p>

To ensure that PLA/CPL offerings are designed for the full diversity of today's students, institutions may need to consider a range of changes or enhancements: policies that expand PLA/CPL options for all programs of study, assessments that consider diverse work histories (not just managers and office professionals), fee structures that are affordable, advising that views adult learners as bringing valuable learning from their life and work experiences, and strong messages about the benefits of PLA/CPL that reach students at multiple touchpoints at the institution. Making sure that all students have access to PLA/CPL—and ensuring equitable use and impact—are important ways to continue PLA/CPL's social justice history in this new millennium.

# Introduction

Awarding credit for prior learning (CPL) is a great strategy for helping adult learners accelerate their credential completion. In a 72-institution study published last year, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) found that not only do adult students with prior learning assessment/credit for prior learning (PLA/CPL<sup>2</sup>) save time and money in earning degrees, but they also are more likely to complete credentials compared to adult students without such credit. The positive effect of PLA/CPL credit receipt on credential completion was evident for every student subgroup—different ages, genders, institutional environments, income levels, and races and ethnicities.

One important finding from the study, however, was that the PLA/CPL credit rate (the percentage of adult students receiving credit through the various methods of PLA/CPL) was only 11% across our sample. In addition, when comparing the PLA/CPL credit receipt of different adult student populations, Black students, students from lower-income households, and community college students, all had lower PLA/CPL credit rates when compared to other groups.<sup>3</sup> Several recent surveys of adult learners suggest that knowledge of PLA/CPL credit opportunities may be quite prevalent today (see, in particular, Kilgore, 2020, and Klein-Collins & Framularo, forthcoming). This growing recognition of PLA/CPL opportunities reinforces the need to consider the results from *The PLA Boost*, which raise concerns that as postsecondary institutions focus on making PLA/CPL available *generally*, PLA/CPL may not end up *equitably* available. The reason for this concern is that there is a bit of an equity paradox in the findings: PLA/CPL benefits lower-income adults and adult students of color in terms of credential completion, but fewer of the Black and lower-income adult students are receiving that credit.

*The PLA Boost* report recognized the specific challenges in providing access to PLA/CPL at community colleges, such as shorter programs with less flexibility in their course requirements or the challenge of PLA credits being accepted in transfer by receiving institutions. In this new research brief, we explore the specific questions around PLA/CPL equity related to student race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES). In particular: **what may be factors for why Black adult students and adult students in our study who received Pell grants (a proxy for students with lower incomes) did not receive PLA/CPL credit at their institutions at the same rate as other groups, and what can institutions do to address those issues?**

**Prior learning assessment (PLA)** and **credit for prior learning (CPL)** are 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.

<sup>2</sup> CAEL and WICHE recognize the validity of several different terms for the awarding of credit for a student's prior learning, including credit for prior learning (CPL) and prior learning assessment (PLA). For the purposes of this report, these terms are used interchangeably, as they both describe the range of methods used to award credit to students based on an evaluation of a student's prior learning experiences or an assessment of the student's demonstrated learning.

<sup>3</sup> In *The PLA Boost* report, we used the term "take-up rate" for the percentage of students receiving credit through PLA/CPL. Since we do not know whether PLA credit receipt is equivalent to the rate at which students actually apply for PLA/CPL credit, we are opting to use the term PLA credit rate or rate of PLA/CPL credit receipt in this report.

We sought insights on these topics from a small group of institutions that participated in the 2020 *PLA Boost* study, and we used those insights to re-examine the data, where possible. What we learned is that possible explanations for the observed lower PLA/CPL credit rates of Black and lower-income adult students might be wide-ranging, including barriers related to the cost of PLA/CPL to the student, inadequate outreach and support, the agility or adaptivity of institutional policies and processes, and individual adult learner self-confidence.

This report proposes several remedies for institutions as they consider how to ensure more equitable access to PLA/CPL for their adult learners. Acknowledging that there may be multiple barriers at play for some adult students, the institutional or system response to the PLA/CPL opportunity gap may need to be multi-pronged to ensure that PLA/CPL programs are truly equitable.

### **Common Methods of PLA/CPL**

**Exams.** Standardized exams include The College Board's CLEP exams, DANTES DSST exams, UExcel exams; institutions can also award credit based on comprehensive exams developed by campus faculty.

**Portfolio or other individualized assessment.** Faculty evaluate and award credit as appropriate for a student's portfolio or demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and noncredit activities.

**Evaluation of noncollege and noncredit programs, including certifications, licenses, apprenticeship programs, and employer or military training.** Institutions can award credit for training and credentials that meet the learning objectives of a degree program, based on the institutions' own evaluations or based on recommendations provided by national organizations that evaluate training offered by employers or the military (e.g., American Council on Education or National College Credit Recommendation Service).

High school exams (Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate) are another alternative credit-earning tool. They are sometimes included in the larger definition of PLA/CPL but, because they are not available to most returning adult students, they are not the focus of this report.

# Summary of Equity-Related Findings

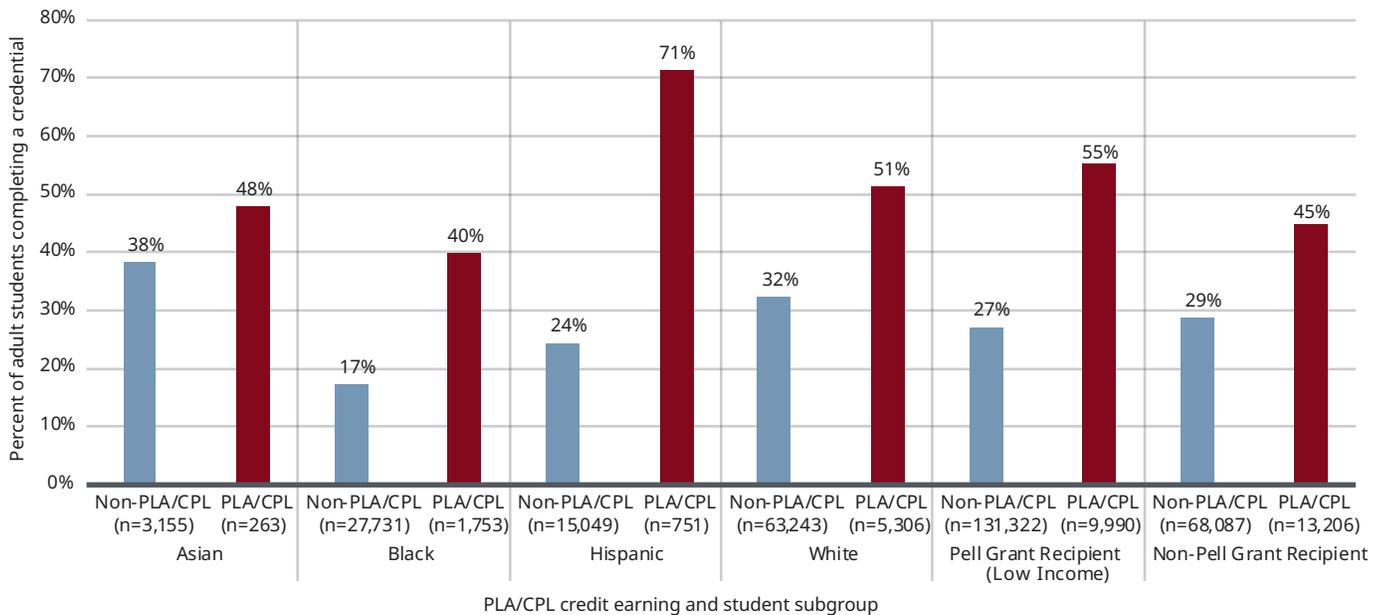
## Original PLA Boost Finding: Adult Students Who Stand to Benefit the Most Were Less Likely to Receive PLA/CPL Credit

The PLA Boost report provided strong evidence that students who received PLA/CPL credits saved money and time, and they also had higher rates of credential completion as tracked over a seven-and-a-half-year observation period. This suggests that encouraging greater use of PLA/CPL could be an important strategy to accelerate credential completion at a time when postsecondary credentials are needed in our post-pandemic economic recovery and in the years that follow.

Black and Hispanic adult students received strong boosts to credential completion from PLA/CPL credit—but Black adult students were the least likely of all students to receive such credit.

But an important part of our analysis was to consider whether PLA/CPL could be a tool for reducing educational inequality in the U.S. for students who historically have been less well-served overall in higher education. Results from the main study did show this potential; PLA/CPL credit receipt boosted credential completion of Black adult students by 23 percentage points, Hispanic adult students by 47 percentage points, and adult Pell Grant recipients (lower income) by 28 percentage points (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1. Hispanic, Asian, Black, and White adult students had higher overall credential completion with PLA/CPL credit compared to similar students without such credit; the same was true for adult Pell Grant recipients (lower-income students), compared to adult non-Pell Grant recipients.**



<sup>4</sup> Deeper investigations of the equity of student outcomes were primarily possible from the data available among Black, White, and Hispanic adult students, and Pell Grant receipt as a proxy for socioeconomic status. Information about other populations and variables of interest that were not sufficient for more in-depth analysis is available in *The PLA Boost* report and *Appendices*—see [www.cael.org/pla-impact](http://www.cael.org/pla-impact).

Despite the overall positive impact of PLA/CPL for the various racial/ethnic groups (of those with sufficient numbers in our dataset for analysis), Black adult students were the least likely to have received PLA/CPL credit to begin with. Similarly, adult Pell Grant recipients were far less likely to have received PLA/CPL credit, compared to adult students who had never received a Pell Grant (Table 1).

**Table 1. The lowest rates for PLA/CPL credit receipt (PLA/CPL credit rates) were among adult students who are Black or lower-income**

	Percent of Adult Students with PLA/CPL Credit
All adult students (age 25+)	11%
Race/ethnicity - U.S. Department of Education method for categorizing*	
Hispanic	8%
Asian	8%
Black	6%
White	8%
Other/Multiracial (includes all NH/OPI- and AI/AN-identifying students)	7%
Race/ethnicity—Students with any identification with smaller race groups*	
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	7%
American Indian/Alaska Native	6%
Pell Grant Status	
Pell Grant recipient (ever)	7%
Never a Pell Grant recipient	16%

*Note: There are some differences in PLA/CPL credit rates for all students compared to subgroups because the results by race/ethnicity are based on the 53% of the adult students in the sample whose race/ethnicity were reported; results by Pell Grant status are across the entire sample. For an explanation of how students were categorized by race/ethnicity, see Table 3 note in The PLA Boost main report or appendix.*

Students were unevenly distributed by race/ethnicity in this sample, but we accounted for these distributions in our deeper analysis for this brief.<sup>5</sup> In the additional analysis presented below, we found that there were far less disparate results for Black adult military member students than overall for Black adult students.<sup>6</sup> But Black adult students in this study otherwise had consistently lower PLA/CPL credit receipts, as did adult Pell Grant recipients. We therefore suggest that something more systemic or widespread may factor in the overall lower PLA/CPL credit rates for Black adult students and students who received a Pell Grant in this sample.

**Something systemic or widespread may factor in the lower PLA/CPL credit rates for Black and lower-income adult students.**

<sup>5</sup> We accounted for this by looking at results among institutions where students were more evenly distributed, reviewing the consistency of findings by institution, and in some cases, by focusing on results among public 2- and 4-year institutions to understand PLA at the type of institutions that serve the greatest portion of students of color in U.S. higher education.

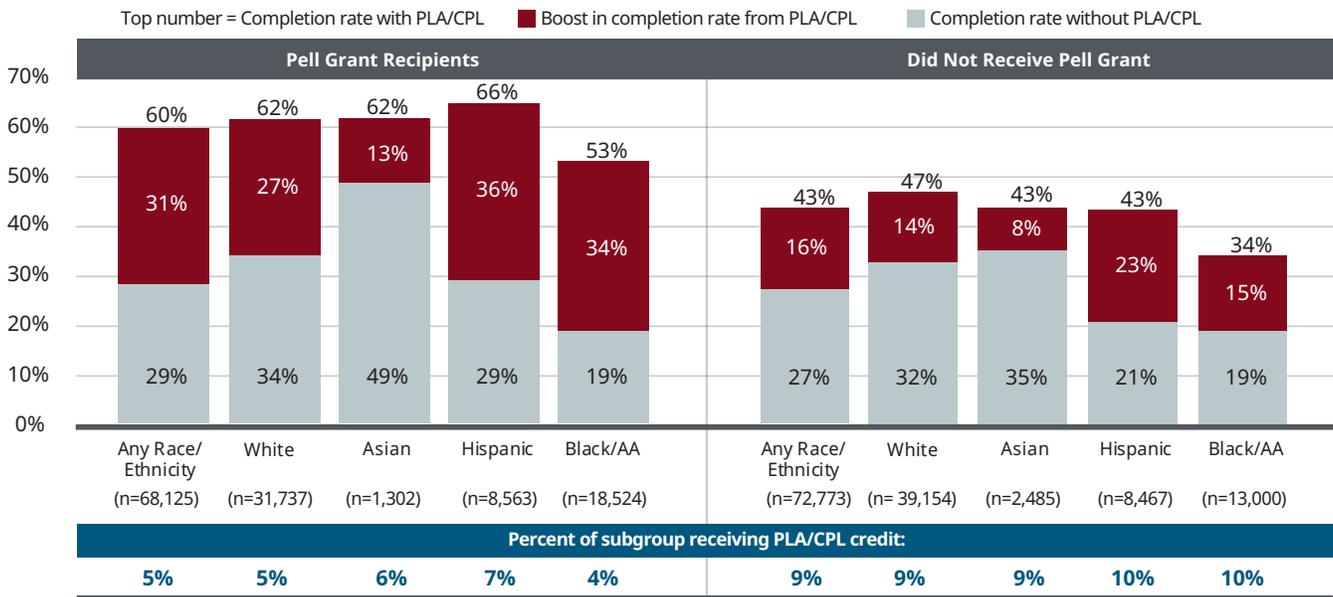
<sup>6</sup> This makes sense; students with military experiences often know to seek out the services to veterans on their campuses because they need to have their military benefits verified; they can then also learn about how to gain credit for what they learned in the military. Institutions often have a very simple and cost-free process for awarding such credit.

## Deeper Dive Finding: Black Adult Pell Grant Recipients Received a Particularly High PLA/CPL Completion Boost

Among all adult students who received a Pell Grant in our sample, there was a 31 percentage point completion boost from receiving PLA/CPL, virtually twice the size of the boost for students who did not receive Pell (only a 16 percentage point boost) (Figure 2). When analyzing race/ethnicity and Pell together, it becomes especially apparent just how much Black adult students with Pell Grant funding in this sample benefitted from PLA/CPL in terms of completion: Black adult students with Pell received a 34 percentage point completion boost over those without PLA/CPL, which was more than twice the percentage point boost of Black adult non-Pell recipients who had PLA/CPL (15 percentage points). Hispanic adult students with Pell also had a higher completion rate boost from PLA/CPL (36 percentage point boost) compared to Hispanic adult students without Pell (23 percentage point boost).<sup>7</sup> Conducting this intersectional analysis was particularly relevant because, in our sample, Black adult students were more likely than average to have received a Pell Grant among the race/ethnicity groupings with sizable enough numbers to analyze (59% of Black adult students received Pell, compared to 48% overall).

Black adult Pell Grant recipients received a greater PLA/CPL completion boost compared to their non-Pell counterparts.

**Figure 2. Credential completion rates with and without PLA/CPL, by race/ethnicity and Pell Grant receipt**



Note: This analysis focused on the 59% of the adult students in the sample attending the institutions that were able to provide race/ethnicity data for the vast majority of their students. For an explanation of how students were categorized by race/ethnicity, see note to Table 3 in *The PLA Boost* main report or appendix.

In summary, Black adult students and adult students who were Pell recipients in this sample disproportionately benefitted from PLA/CPL—within each race-ethnic group that was large enough to analyze, the completion effect from PLA/CPL was even greater for Pell recipients than for non-Pell recipients.

<sup>7</sup> Student race/ethnicity and Pell Grant receipt were both variables used in the generation of propensity scores and the near-neighbor matching for the propensity score analysis in the main *PLA Boost* report. We did not conduct additional propensity score analysis for this brief, but these more in-depth results are generally consistent with the PSM results by race/ethnicity and Pell receipt (see pages 32-33 of *The PLA Boost*).

## Deeper Dive Finding: PLA/CPL Credit Rates for Black Service Member Students Closer to Parity, but the Lowest Completion Boost

When looking only at the students who were service members (current or veteran), we found no disparity in the overall rates at which Black adult students received PLA/CPL credit compared to other races/ethnicities. There was roughly the same rate of credit receipt from PLA/CPL among the service member students in the sample (23%) across all race/ethnicity categories (where there was sufficient data for analysis).<sup>8</sup>

When looking at different types of institutions (Figure 3a), at public 4-year institutions, there was also little variation in the rate of PLA/CPL receipt by race/ethnicity among adult service member students, and Black adult service member students had at least the average PLA credit rate (33% and 31%, respectively). However, Black adult service member students at the participating public 2-year colleges received PLA/CPL credit at lower-than-average rates (28% among Black, 35% among students of any race/ethnicity).

There were also important differences in the completion boost from PLA/CPL—noteworthy especially for Black adult service members at community colleges. For the overwhelming majority of the adult service member students with PLA/CPL credit, ACE military credit recommendations were the sole source of the credit.<sup>9</sup> As we noted in *The PLA Boost* report, the overall completion boost from military-related PLA/CPL (ACE military credit recommendations) was about half of that seen with non-military types of PLA/CPL (very few adult students in the sample had both types). Going deeper for this study, we found that Black adult service member students at the participating public two-year colleges had some of the lowest rates of PLA/CPL completion boost compared to other racial/ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup>

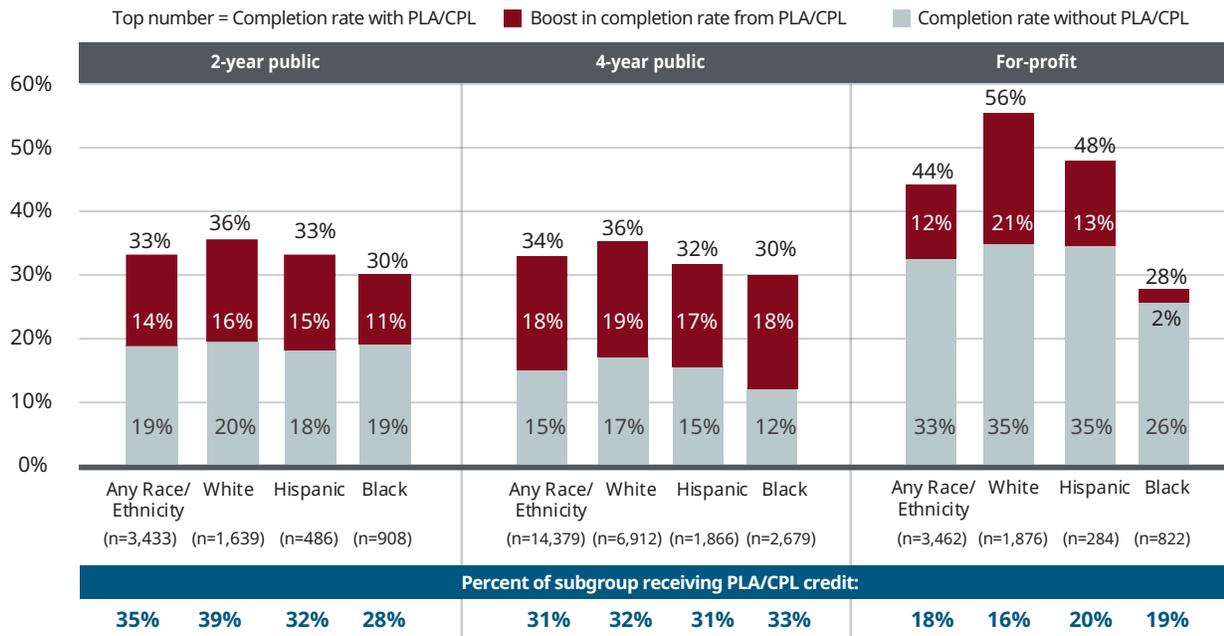
PLA/CPL credit receipt by Black service members is closer to parity—the disparity in PLA/CPL credit receipt largely exists among non-service member students.

<sup>8</sup> Rates reflect PLA/CPL credit from any assessment method. There was a sufficient number of adult American Indian/Alaska Native service member students for this analysis, and they were the least likely to have received PLA/CPL credits from ACE credit recommendations for military training (19%). Note: Data were available to categorize the PLA method associated with the credit for 98% of the students who had any PLA credit; military service status was available for 71% of the students in this analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the adult service member students with PLA/CPL credit had such credit only from ACE credit recommendations (by sector: 22% at the participating non-profit four-year institutions, 75% at the public four-years, 76% at the for-profit institutions, and 93% at the public two-year colleges). Another 6% of these students had credit from ACE credit recommendations plus another PLA/CPL assessment method, and 17% had PLA/CPL credit from other sources not including ACE military recommendations. Across all sectors, Black adult service member students had credit only from ACE military recommendations at higher-than-average rates (all results reflect the portion of the sample with data available for race/ethnicity analysis).

<sup>10</sup> The completion boost was also substantially lower among students at the participating for-profit colleges, but only 4% of Black adult service member students that could be included in this analysis attended these institutions.

**Figure 3a. Service member adult student credential completion rates with and without PLA/CPL, by race/ethnicity and institution sector**



Note: This analysis focused on the 59% of the adult students in the sample attending the institutions that were able to provide race/ethnicity data for most of their students. For an explanation of how students were categorized by race/ethnicity, see note to Table 3 in *The PLA Boost* main report or appendix, [www.cael.org/pla-impact](http://www.cael.org/pla-impact). This figure omits results for 4-year nonprofit institutions because the disaggregated sample sizes were too small for detailed analysis.

### Deeper Dive Finding: Lowest PLA/CPL Credit Rates Were for Black Adult Students Who Were Not Service Members

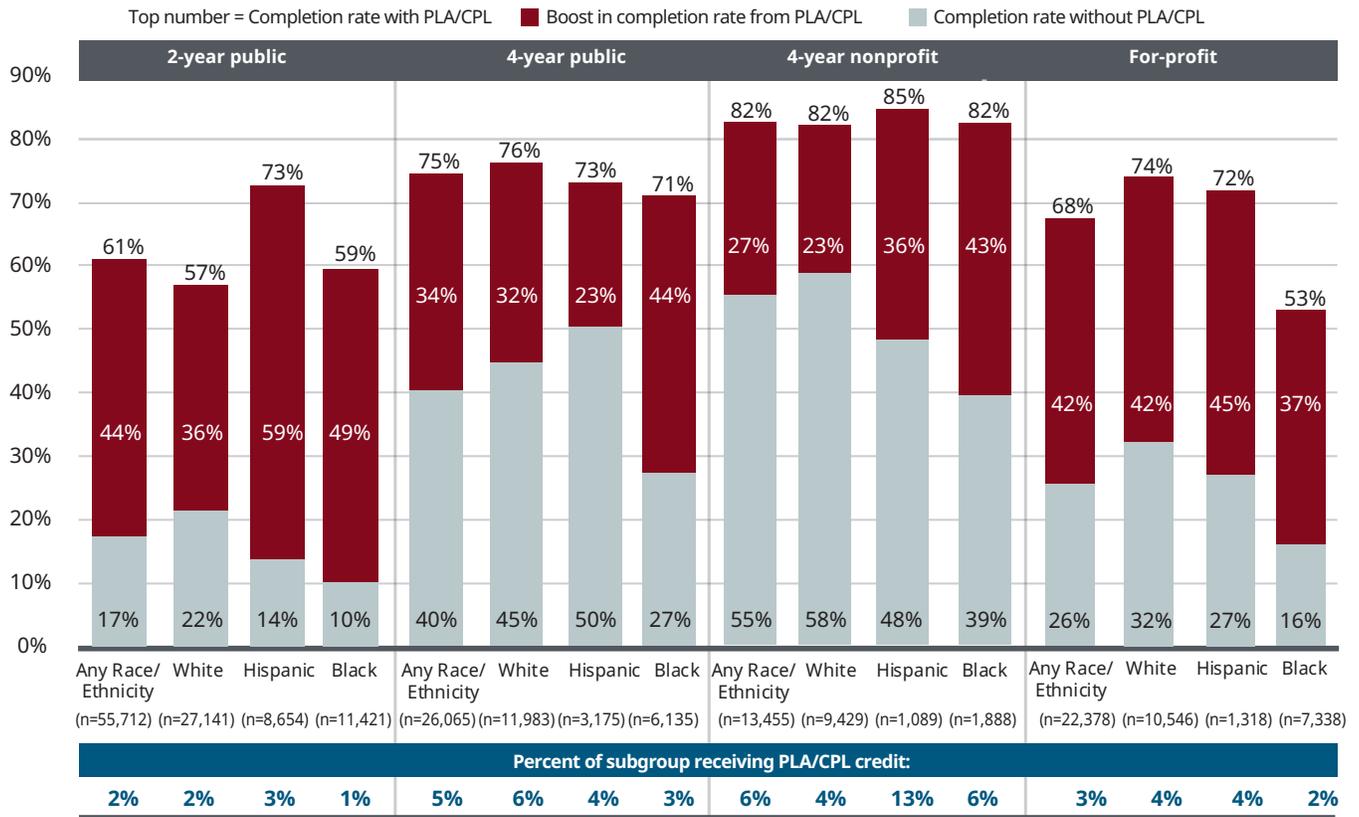
Three percent of adult students in our sample with no service member history on record had PLA/CPL credit. That is, the lowest PLA credit rates in this study were seen with PLA/CPL assessment methods other than ACE military credit recommendations (see “Common Methods of PLA/CPL” box on page 6). Furthermore, among these adult “non-service member” students, PLA/CPL credit rates were consistently lower among the Black adult students, as little as half the PLA/CPL credit rates of peer Hispanic and White adult students (Figure 3b).<sup>11</sup>

Among non-service members, PLA/CPL credit rates were consistently lower for Black adult students than for other groups.

In addition, there were paradoxes in the results for non-service member students similar to the analysis by Pell receipt (Figure 2). For the Black adult non-service member students in this study, having PLA/CPL credit often provided a greater than average completion boost over students without PLA/CPL, and typically greater than for White adult students—despite Black adult students' lower rates of PLA/CPL receipt. And this boost brought the Black adult students at or above parity with White adult students' completion at the participating public two-year and nonprofit four-year colleges.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Adult American Indian/Alaska Native and Asian non-service member students had about the overall average rate of PLA/CPL, 3%.  
<sup>12</sup> There were too few students with PLA credit of other races for this level of analysis.

**Figure 3b. Non-service member adult student credential completion rates with and without PLA/CPL, by race/ethnicity and institution sector**



Note: This analysis focused on the 59% of the adult students in the sample attending the institutions that were able to provide race/ethnicity data for the vast majority of their students. For an explanation of how students were categorized by race/ethnicity, see note to Table 3 in *The PLA Boost* main report or appendix, [www.cael.org/pla-impact](http://www.cael.org/pla-impact).

# Possible Factors in Lower PLA/CPL Credit Receipt by Black and Lower Income Adult Students—and Ideas for Mitigation

To gain greater insights for explaining the differences in PLA/CPL experiences for Black adult students and lower-income adult students, we identified four of the institutions that participated in *The PLA Boost* study that served relatively large numbers of these learners and where those student subgroups had comparatively lower rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt. Two of the institutions were four-year public institutions, one was a four-year private nonprofit, and one was a community college. We interviewed representatives from these institutions about the lower PLA rates, and we discussed possible explanations for the observed disparities for Black and/or lower-income adult learners in this sample. The possible factors identified in these interviews can be categorized as follows:

- Cost of PLA/CPL
- Inadequate outreach, marketing, and support
- Adaptivity of institutional policies and processes
- Individual adult learner self-confidence

Each of these factors is discussed below.

## Factor: Cost of PLA/CPL

### The Role of PLA/CPL Fees

One of the oft-touted benefits of PLA/CPL is that it saves students money. While some forms of PLA/CPL may have fees associated with them to cover the costs of the assessment, those fees are typically much lower than the full cost of tuition the student would otherwise have to pay to take the equivalent course outright. However, for students who rely on federal financial aid to pay for college, that cost savings is less important because PLA/CPL assessment fees are not covered by Pell Grants or other federal financial aid.<sup>13</sup>

Consider, for example, an adult learner with a decade of work experience in marketing for a large corporation, with skills and knowledge largely acquired on the job and through self-study. That adult learner might be a great candidate to receive CLEP exam credit in subjects like Principles of Marketing and Principles of Business Management as well as challenge exam credits for a course in Digital Marketing. Combined, the fees for those exams could total between \$320 and \$520 out of pocket for that student (typically \$85 for each CLEP exam plus \$25 administration fee, and, for this example, \$100-\$300 for the challenge exam<sup>14</sup>). Three hundred dollars is a bargain for nine credit hours, but that might be \$300 that the student does not have. For that student, the rational and affordable choice is to enroll in those courses and have financial aid (either grants or loans) cover the costs of tuition and fees.

<sup>13</sup> Most state financial aid may also have this limitation, though Indiana recently changed its laws to ensure that fees related to PLA/CPL were to be covered by state aid (Garcia & Leibbrandt, 2020). Another exception is that the GI Bill's education benefits can be used to cover the fees for third party standardized exams (see <https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/how-to-use-benefits/test-fees/>).

<sup>14</sup> There is a wide range of fees that institutions charge for challenge exams. In our study, the range was \$0 to \$379, with some fees set as a percentage of tuition.

In addition, as one PLA/CPL practitioner at a participating institution noted, there is the additional consideration that the student is not guaranteed to receive the credit: “It’s not expensive, but for a student needing aid, they might not want to take the risk if there is a chance that they won’t get the credit.” Ultimately, the result is that PLA/CPL is not accessible to that student. Several of the interviewed institutions identified precisely this problem for students who rely on financial aid. When there are fees, there is a real cost to the student to pursue PLA/CPL rather than to take the course outright. This barrier may be part of the explanation for lower rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt among the adult Pell Grant recipients in this study; yet it is important to note that even among Pell Grant recipients in our sample, those who were Black had the lowest rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt (Figure 1).

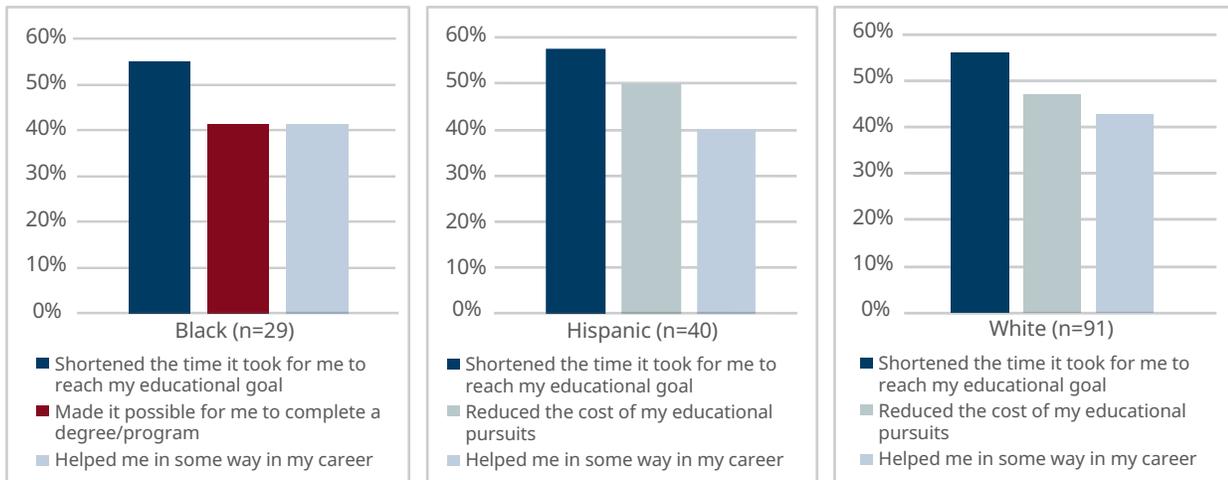
Additionally, there is some intersectionality in the data: Black adult students in this study were disproportionately Pell Grant recipients, and so the cost barrier may partially explain the lower rates at which Black adult students more generally received PLA/CPL credit.

That PLA/CPL fees could be a critical barrier for adult students (whether or not they are also Pell Grant recipients) is backed by other research: in a survey of current postsecondary students conducted by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) last year, students who had chosen not to pursue PLA/CPL were asked to indicate why not. “The money required” was the second-most selected barrier (21% of the respondents) after “lack of information” (26%) (Kilgore, 2020, p. 12).

**Out-of-pocket costs for PLA/CPL were repeatedly mentioned as a barrier for adult students.**

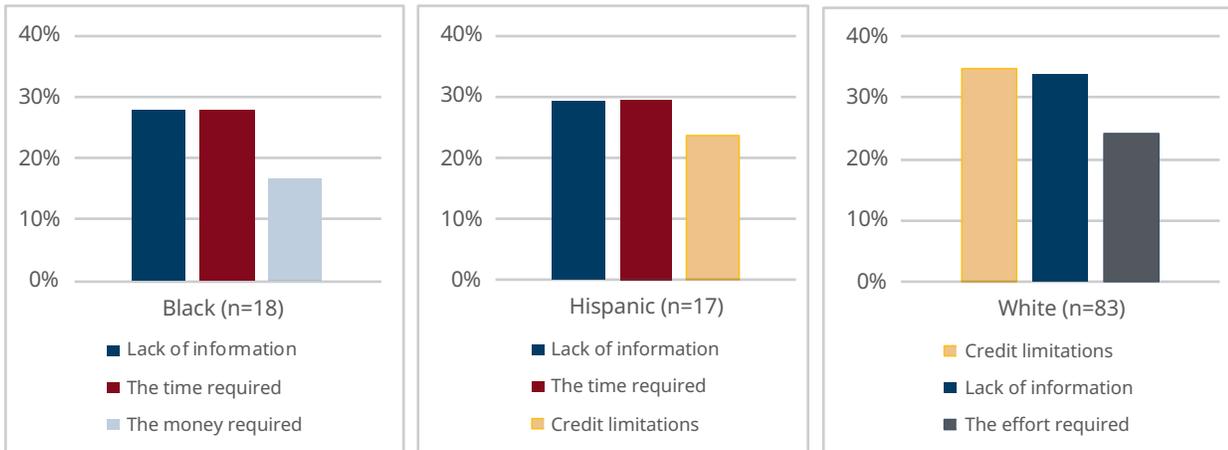
A 2020 WICHE survey of adult learners provides additional evidence from students’ perspectives that the cost of PLA/CPL may be more of a barrier for Black students than for other groups. White and Hispanic student respondents rated “cost savings” as one of the top three benefits to PLA/CPL, while this was not cited as one of the top three benefits by the Black student respondents (Figure 4). Further, “the money required” was listed as one of the top three barriers to PLA/CPL by Black student respondents, but it was not among the top three barriers cited by White and Hispanic student respondents (Figure 5) (Leibrandt, 2020).

**Figure 4. Top three benefits of earning PLA Credit by race/ethnicity**



Source: Leibrandt, S. (2020).

**Figure 5. Top three barriers to PLA by race/ethnicity**



Source: Leibrandt, S. (2020).

Some ways that institutions are trying to address the cost barrier include the following:

- Scholarships and financial support.** One institution we interviewed for this report provides PLA/CPL scholarships that cover the cost of PLA/CPL up to \$500 per year per student, regardless of financial need. This scholarship fund was initially launched as part of a project funded by philanthropic dollars and is now supported by the institution's own foundation. Students wanting to take several exams or submit a number of different portfolios for extensive prior learning can structure it over different fiscal years to access multiple scholarships.
- Reducing or eliminating fees.** Other institutions interviewed for this report were trying to find ways to drive down the costs associated with PLA/CPL, including building the portfolio evaluation into a credit-bearing course (which might then be eligible for financial aid) or absorbing some of the costs and simply offering a service like portfolio assessment free of charge.
- Providing more options for PLA/CPL crosswalks that do not impose student fees.** Another idea came from an institution that was starting to invest in more evaluations of noncredit instruction, such as crosswalking certifications and licenses to an institution's degree programs, as a simpler process for awarding credit for students' prior training. Compared to standardized exams and portfolio assessment, this approach does not require the student to be individually assessed and is typically provided without the evaluation fees. The drawback to this approach is that it is not a solution for learners with specialized knowledge acquired on the job or otherwise outside of some form of formal instruction.

In summary, students who need or receive financial aid or other financial assistance may be more discouraged by out-of-pocket costs associated with PLA/CPL, leading to inequitable use and benefit of this completion-boosting strategy. This cost barrier has implications for adult students from lower-income households as well as for adult students of color who may be disproportionately dependent upon such financial assistance.

## Factor: The Amount and Nature of Outreach, Marketing, and Support

Another barrier to PLA/CPL for all students is a lack of information about PLA/CPL—what it is, how to access it, and how to successfully apply for and receive credit. While insufficient attention to advising, coaching, and marketing around PLA/CPL would ostensibly affect all students, this lack of information and support could affect some groups more than others.

### The Role of Advising in PLA/CPL Equity

When institutions have strong internal support for PLA/CPL, a common practice is to make sure that all staff who serve in advisory roles with students know how to advise students on how to access it. Advisors then engage with students at various touchpoints—admissions, enrollment, course selection—to explore whether a student may have competencies and knowledge from their work and life experiences that could be evaluated for college credit.

And yet, an intentional approach to PLA/CPL advising is decidedly not the norm at postsecondary institutions, even when there are PLA/CPL opportunities available. According to a 2020 NASPA survey of student affairs professionals, more than half (56%) of all respondents said that their institutions do not require coaches and advisors to talk about PLA/CPL with students (Wesley & Parnell, 2020, p. 6). In our interviews with *The PLA Boost* institutions, one noted that “Assessment is a term that even advisors don’t understand. Our advisors don’t really understand PLA/CPL. They may not truly understand how it works.” Without advisors who can provide information, encouragement, and support for PLA/CPL, students may not hear about it, or, alternatively, they could hear about it but assume that PLA/CPL is not something intended for them.

A potential complicating factor may be implicit racial or class bias. While we do not have direct evidence that racism or racial bias was a factor for the lower-income and Black adult students in our sample (or for other students of color, for that matter), we do know that a lack of diversity among student services staff is a problem for many students of color (New, 2016). In a setting where advising staff are mostly White and/or come from more privileged backgrounds, the advising process could be affected by implicit biases. Advisors often have a great deal of latitude in directing the advising conversations, and the decision to raise PLA/CPL as an option for students could be dependent on the advisor seeing certain students as likely to have college-level learning and others not. Advisors could be making assumptions about what kinds of students have gained relevant learning from their work and life experiences based on racial or class biases and prejudices—potentially making

### Example of Successful PLA/CPL Targeting: Hispanic Adult Students

Hispanics/Latinos in the U.S. have lower educational attainment than Whites and Asians, so it may be surprising that in *The PLA Boost* study, Hispanic adult students had relatively higher rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt, and therefore not raising the same access concerns as for other underserved populations. The difference in PLA/CPL credit receipt may be explained by the common institutional practice of encouraging Spanish-speaking students to receive CLEP language credit (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). And in a recent survey of adult learners, WICHE found that half of Hispanic students learned about PLA from academic advisors at their college compared to only about one-third of Black or White students (Leibrandt, p. 6). This example shows that targeting certain adult student populations for PLA/CPL can be quite effective.

information differentially available (see also the section *Adaptivity of Institutional Policies and Processes*). To ensure that implicit bias is not a factor in whether a student learns about PLA/CPL or not, a better practice is to assume that any adult learner could have college-level learning and to build PLA/CPL into the standard advising process for every student. But taken further, given students' different experiences with the educational system, providing equal outreach to different student subgroups may not be sufficient to close equity gaps.

## The Role of Messaging and Outreach in PLA/CPL Equity

In *The PLA Boost* study, we learned that most of the participating institutions (75%) did promote PLA/CPL in their outreach and marketing to adult students, but few reported doing so “a great deal” (17%) or “a lot” (13%); a much larger proportion (80%) used PLA/CPL in their outreach to veterans or active military. This data suggests significant untapped potential from marketing and outreach efforts that otherwise could increase PLA/CPL awareness and usage among adult students—and specifically, to focus on equitable PLA/CPL usage.

Beyond the frequency of messaging, several of the institutions interviewed for this deeper investigation about equity noted that even intentional marketing efforts might be limited by issues of timing or messaging. One institution noted that some students might not be ready to hear about PLA/CPL when they are first enrolling at an institution, and so it is important to have multiple ways to communicate with students about PLA/CPL at different stages of the process. And even when they are saturating students with messages about PLA/CPL, this institution has found that, regardless, some students do not see themselves as a candidate for PLA/CPL (see the earlier section on *The Role of Advising in PLA/CPL Equity*, including the possible role of implicit bias).

There is new research from CAEL/Strada to suggest income and race may be factors in what adult students understand from the information they receive about PLA/CPL (Klein-Collins & Framularo, forthcoming). In this recent survey of more than 1,000 adults interested in enrolling (or re-enrolling) in postsecondary education, a majority of respondents were familiar with the concept of PLA/CPL (60%) and found it straightforward or clear (79%). However, familiarity levels increased with household income: 52% of those earning less than \$50,000 were familiar with PLA/CPL, compared to 71% of those earning more than \$100,000. Responding that the concept of PLA/CPL was somewhat or extremely clear also increased with income: 69% of those earning less than \$25,000 found it somewhat or extremely clear, compared to 94% of those earning more than \$150,000. With respect to race-ethnicity, Black respondents were as likely as other racial-ethnic groups to be familiar with the concept, but they were less likely than other groups to report the concept to be clear.

On a slightly different note, from the interviewed institutions and earlier CAEL research, we heard consistent themes about students' perceptions, which may sometimes relate to their prior educational experiences: the language used to sell PLA/CPL to students and some processes for assessing credit may inadvertently reinforce or trigger memories of harmful messages from prior educational experiences (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). For example, students who have heard at some point that they “aren't college material”—or have experienced bias—may feel an exceptional need to justify their presence or worth in college settings. PLA/CPL messages that promise credit as long as students can “prove what they know” may trigger feelings of inadequacy that serve as a barrier to pursuing PLA/CPL credit. This aligns with other research on Black/African American students and the impact of “internalized racial oppression” on student self-efficacy and other perceptions on their value in a higher education (Brown, Rosnick & Segrist, 2016).

**Timing of messages may be important. Students may not be ready to hear about PLA/CPL when first enrolling, so institutions should have messages about it at different stages of the process.**

On this note, SUNY-Empire State College, for example, has offered PLA/CPL workshops specifically for female students of color that instead focused first on celebrating and valuing the knowledge and skills that the women had developed in their various life experiences (Leaker & Boyce, 2015).

Institutions should specifically design their messaging and outreach with the expectation that some students will have had inequitable educational and life experiences that may lower their expectations that PLA/CPL applies to them (see also the section *Individual Adult Learner Self-Confidence*).

### **The Role of Additional Academic Support for Successful and Equitable PLA/CPL**

Two of the interviewed institutions raised the possibility that Black and lower-income adult students may be hearing about PLA/CPL—and may also be pursuing it—but their rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt may be lower if their PLA/CPL attempts were not as successful compared to other groups. This is a theory that we are not able to explore using our existing sample; the data were not available in *The PLA Boost* study, or this deeper dive, to evaluate the frequency of *attempts* at PLA/CPL, let alone along equity dimensions. In CAEL's work with institutions over the years, we have learned that institutions may not maintain records on PLA/CPL attempts. This was confirmed by the AACRAO survey, which found that while 89% of institutional respondents recorded the number of PLA/CPL credits earned or received, only 39 percent kept a record of PLA/CPL credit attempts (Kilgore, 2020). Even if institutions did record

better data on PLA/CPL attempts, the data would likely be incomplete since students are not required and typically would not report failed attempts on certain methods of PLA (e.g. standardized exams), and institutions would not have a good way to calculate PLA/CPL attempts for methods like the awarding of credit for noncredit programs. For that reason, our findings only describe the rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt or award.

One finding of *The PLA Boost* was that adult students with higher academic performance indicators (based on first term GPA, course success rates, and no enrollment in developmental education courses) were more likely to have PLA/CPL credit. And, when looking deeper into the data, we found that, overall, the Black adult students had the lowest average GPA and were more likely than average to be enrolled in developmental education courses. Such findings support the notion that there is a role for academic support in PLA/CPL equity. Nonetheless, as with other analysis, academic indicators alone did not appear to explain the lower PLA/CPL rates for Black adult students.

In a related vein, it is worth considering whether a difference in PLA/CPL success rates for different groups of students could be influenced by possible exam bias. While we are not aware of any studies on bias in PLA/CPL assessments or for adult test takers, there is considerable research on this topic for K-12 students and for more “traditional-aged” postsecondary students (Rosales & Walker, 2015).

Clearly, institutions should strive to use empirical evidence about PLA/CPL assessment success rates—including whether they vary across student subgroups—in their PLA/CPL strategies. If there are notable differences, then equity-focused institutions should consider investing in additional academic supports for students actively engaging with the PLA/CPL process.

**More research is needed to understand patterns around attempts at PLA/CPL—and whether common PLA/CPL assessments are inherently biased.**

## Factor: Adaptivity of Institutional Policies and Processes

Some barriers to equitable access to PLA/CPL may be related to institutional policies and processes that have not adapted to more diverse adult learner populations' work histories or chosen programs of study. A decade or two ago, it may have been reasonable for institutions to limit PLA/CPL primarily to adult learners enrolled in adult-focused degree programs or initiate conversations about PLA/CPL only with adult learners with extensive backgrounds in white collar or managerial occupations. Those could have been reasonable strategies for who adult learners were at that time. But today's adult learners come to postsecondary learning with much more diverse work histories, and they are enrolled in many different programs of study—not just the separate, adult-learner-focused programs that were more the norm twenty or thirty years ago.

### The Role of Expanded and More Diverse Work-Related Assessments in PLA/CPL Equity

Three of the four institutions interviewed acknowledged that institutions might be accustomed to evaluating some work experiences and competencies more than others. One institution reflected that, in the past, their adult learners typically came with some professional or managerial experience, while in recent years, there have been greater numbers of adult learners whose work experience is in areas such as retail, customer service, and other service-focused occupations.

A bias toward thinking about PLA/CPL with respect to some occupations (managerial) more than others (service and retail) has been noted in other research reports. For example, in *Recent Developments in Prior Learning*, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) and the WCET (WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies) found that PLA/CPL opportunities in many employer-postsecondary partnerships tended to focus on evaluating skills like management, leadership, and business acumen and not as much on the skills and competencies developed in lower-wage service occupations (Uranis & Davis, 2020).

Certainly, the bias toward learning that is acquired in white collar and managerial occupations affects equity in accessing PLA/CPL from a class or income perspective. In addition, there are racial equity implications: when compared to the racial composition of the overall workforce, Latino/Hispanic and Black workers are over-represented in many lower-wage and service occupations. In other words, systemic labor market disparities may disadvantage Black adults in gaining the specific types of college-level learning that are most likely to qualify for the available, prevailing PLA/CPL opportunities. More Black workers are in front-line jobs, with less opportunity for advancement; they are significantly underrepresented in high-growth, high-wage industries and managerial positions; and their job prospects are markedly different from White workers with similar backgrounds (Hancock et al., 2021 and Carnevale, 2019). Also, Black workers are more likely to be underemployed (EPI, 2021), work in positions that underutilize their skills (Abel & Dietz, 2016), or otherwise have disrupted career trajectories (Pager & Pedulla, 2015).

**PLA/CPL programs may focus on evaluating skills found in white collar and managerial occupations rather than on the competencies developed in a much wider range of jobs held by adult learners.**

If colleges have not adapted their PLA/CPL programs to the learning that comes from a wider diversity of work, this could be a barrier for the increasingly diverse adult student population. Some institutions have already made that shift and recognize that managers, supervisors, and office professionals are not the only workers who learn college-level skills and competencies on the job. They are starting to diversify the kind of learning that is valued and deemed worthy of PLA/CPL credit, for example, with the following approaches:

- **Offering individualized degree programs.** At the 2020 CAEL conference, one example was offered by an institution with an individualized bachelor's degree, in which students have the latitude in framing the program around learning they have achieved that is not formally offered as a major. The institution's representative explained, "Students are

going to have lived experiences that are different and beyond what we have in our course curriculum. And opening the door to individualized competence then opens the possibilities for them to bring in their real learning from their real lives and get it recognized...This is an equity and inclusion issue.” That institution has expanded opportunities for students to receive credit for learning from Black youth empowerment and advocacy (in the year of George Floyd and widespread protests focused on racial injustice), language interpreting and health care for Spanish-speaking patients, global issues in human trafficking, working with families of the incarcerated, dance in Hmong culture, social entrepreneurship in lower-income neighborhoods, colonialism and immigration experiences, activism, and organizing.

- **Offering a wider range of portfolio topics.** Another institution offers essay topics for their portfolio assessment program. Topics are designated as equivalent to college courses that may or may not be offered at the institution, and each has a faculty-developed outline and rubric. Within the portfolio class, instructors work with students to identify the topics where they have experience and knowledge (and that does not overlap with the students’ current transcript). Many of the topics were originally identified with a different kind of student in mind—someone in their 30s or 40s who has been working for many years or has been raising children. In the last few years, however, the institution has been working to identify more topics that would apply to their Black and Latino students, or to repackage existing topics with different titles so that students could more readily see their connection to that topic. In recent years, the institution has seen an increase in these students engaging in the “Coping with Illness and Trauma” essay topic. And the appeal of a relatively new topic, “Race and Racism,” has led to the introduction of a new topic this year on “Social Justice.”
- **Training advisors to pay attention to different competencies.** Yet another institution is now focused on looking at PLA/CPL differently with respect to different kinds of competencies that students may be bringing: “Previously, we had focused on business and professional occupations. Now we are starting to think differently about service jobs leading to competencies” (see also the section *The Role of Advising in PLA/CPL Equity*). The institution acknowledges that its advisors had not been trained to think about this different set of competencies and summarized the shift as a business decision: “Forcing students to take classes they don’t need is an invitation to find another school.”

None of these approaches suggests a reduction in rigor or providing postsecondary credit for knowledge that does not meet the threshold of “college-level.” Instead, these approaches represent a recognition that college-level learning encompasses a broader set of knowledge, skills, and competencies than PLA/CPL systems have previously recognized.

By failing to shift their mindset about what types of college-level learning are recognized for credit, institutions are establishing inequitable PLA/CPL access—or pushing students to find an institution that will value their learning.

### The Role of PLA/CPL Limits within Majors and Areas of Study

Two of the institutions interviewed wondered whether the majors that students enroll in might be at play in disparate rates of PLA/CPL credit receipt. These interviewees claimed that at their institutions, students of color were more likely to be enrolled in certain programs where PLA/CPL is not used as extensively as in other programs.

In our sample, we did not find evidence for this theory (though their comments could reflect more recent student enrollment patterns); our data showed that Black adult students were somewhat over-represented in Human Services and Public Safety, and Social & Behavioral Sciences, and in these majors, the rates at which Black adult students received PLA/CPL credit were 25 to 50 percent lower than average *for those majors*. This did not constitute a trend that extended to other majors: Black adult students were slightly under-represented in the two majors that were dominant in this sample— Arts, Humanities, Communication and Design, and Business. But, their rate of PLA/CPL receipt when they were enrolled in these majors was, in fact, on par with the average for those majors.

**Institutions may need to consider whether some majors have better approaches to PLA/CPL equity than others, and then use the more equitable programs as models for replication.**

In other words, there were different patterns of PLA/CPL credit receipt related to major, but not the pattern suggested by the interviewees. This suggests that some programs may be better at supporting PLA/CPL credit receipt by Black adult students than others. Institutions may need to consider, therefore, whether some programs have better approaches to PLA/CPL equity than others and whether those more equitable programs may have models that the less equitable programs could emulate.

## Factor: Individual Adults' Views of Themselves as Learners

### The Role of Adult Learner Self-Confidence

Some adults may come to postsecondary education with lower confidence in themselves as learners, and this could potentially affect choices about whether to pursue PLA/CPL credit. One institution explained, “With the adult students that we get, this may be their second attempt at college, or their third attempt at college, or their fourth attempt at college. So they are a little shy about stepping into things like exams, or... doing the portfolio assessment, if they’re uncomfortable about either one of those things.” Black and lower-income adults are indeed disproportionately more likely to have some college but no degree (NCES, 2017), which gives support to this theory.

For Black students, there is research to suggest this as a real possibility: if Black students have internalized racial oppression, that can result in those students accepting negative perceptions regarding their academic and career potential (Brown, 2016; Brown & Segrist, 2015). In other words, because of their lived experiences and possibly internalized racism, some Black adult students may have lower confidence or expectations that their experience will qualify or count for PLA/CPL.

Further findings from the 2021 CAEL/Strada survey suggest that a student’s income level may play a role in their self-confidence to pursue PLA/CPL. In a recent survey of more than 1,000 adults who were interested in enrolling (or re-enrolling) in postsecondary education, respondents were asked if they had ever previously attempted to receive credit through PLA/CPL. Of those making \$50,000 per year or less, 25% said they had not attempted PLA/CPL because they did not think their life and work experiences would qualify, compared to 19% of those with incomes of \$50k to \$99K and none (0%) of those making more than \$100K per year (Klein-Collins & Framularo, forthcoming). In other words, some students may hear about and understand PLA/CPL but assume that they do not have the right work experience or skills to qualify, and that is more likely to be the case for those who have lower incomes. These sentiments dovetail with the focus on professional and managerial experience in PLA/CPL, as discussed previously.

**Some students may be more likely than others to believe their experience-based learning will not qualify for PLA/CPL credit.**

While not every student will have prior college-level learning, let alone such learning that maps easily to their program of study or degree requirements, some students may be more likely than others to believe their prior learning will not qualify for PLA/CPLA credit. This lack of confidence in one’s own learning may be correlated with other factors like race or income level, which, in turn, could be influenced by systemic labor market inequities (certain occupations may not require technical or business writing) and/or prior negative educational experiences.

# Recommendations for Institutions

There are a range of approaches to equitably scaling the use of PLA/CPL. Like many policy domains, improvements in federal and state/system policy can be a first step—and there are several needed policy adjustments at those levels—but a focus on policy and practice at the institutional level to improve equitable access to PLA/CPL is also important.

The following recommendations are drawn from an analysis of our dataset and from interviews with institutional practitioners:

## Prioritize equity in the design of PLA/CPL programs.

Institutions need to recognize that equity in PLA/CPL usage likely will not happen on its own. It requires examining which students are engaging with it on your campus and which are not, and it calls for the intentional design of policies and practices that open PLA/CPL access to all students and support them in their pursuit of credit for what they already know and can do.



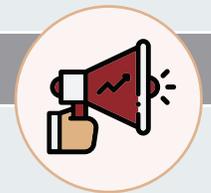
## Develop financial supports for low-income students.

As demonstrated both by CAEL and WICHE’s quantitative research and interviews with PLA/CPL practitioners, students may opt to forego PLA/CPL opportunities because they cost more out-of-pocket than courses paid for through financial aid (and this could disparately affect students of color, who are disproportionately lower-income.) Almost by definition, a PLA/CPL program that does not offer financial support for students in need cannot be equitable. There are clear needs for federal and state policy shifts to address this gap, but in the meantime, institutions can work to identify fee waivers, scholarships, or other supports to help low-income students take advantage of these opportunities. Some institutions may find it advantageous to both the institution and the student to provide PLA/CPL free of charge.



## Improve PLA/CPL communications to students.

To improve communication about PLA/CPL, an institution should first understand where its equity gaps are, then develop messaging approaches and outreach campaigns. Recognizing that students from different backgrounds may respond to messages and channels differently, and may be more likely to respond to someone they can relate to, is a key first step to improving communications. But relying on data, both quantitative from student information systems and qualitative information from students themselves, is crucial to understanding the effectiveness of different outreach approaches. Communications about PLA/CPL should not be limited to marketing and advising staff; it could also be embedded into curricula. For example, some institutions incorporate explorations of a student’s prior learning into mandatory first-year courses. In this way, everyone is exposed to PLA/CPL. One institution interviewed for this report has observed that PLA/CPL success rates for students enrolled in such courses are also higher; that institution is working to build more of these opportunities into curricula. Another institution has been successful in communicating with students through student-run affinity groups.

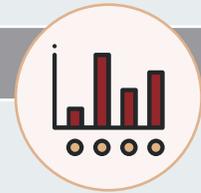


### Embed PLA/CPL systemically in the advising process.



Having well-trained advisors who understand PLA/CPL options is crucial to scaling the use of the practice. Require PLA/CPL discussions as part of the regular advising process both to increase usage and ensure that traditionally underserved populations have access to these opportunities. This effort should also include focused professional development for advisors to provide them with necessary content knowledge about PLA/CPL opportunities. Based on the WICHE survey data showing that Black students are less likely to learn about PLA/CPL from their advisors than Hispanic students, this professional development should include training on implicit bias.

### Improve data infrastructure and analysis.



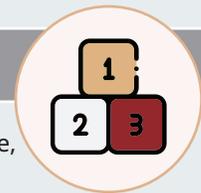
Previous research shows institutional data systems are generally not being well-used to improve PLA/CPL practice (Kilgore, 2020). Institutions need to have robust systems for tracking PLA/CPL credit receipt, but also for tracking attempts at PLA/CPL credits. They also need to have the ability to disaggregate their data by race/ethnicity, income status, first-generation status, and other student categories as an essential first step to ensuring equity for both PLA/CPL credit receipt and credential completion. Having the data does not—by itself—guarantee that a PLA/CPL program will be equitable, but it is impossible to claim that such a program is ensuring equity without data.

### Provide PLA/CPL offerings for more diverse areas of extra-institutional learning.



Currently, there is little research on how many students come to postsecondary education with college-level learning gained outside of the classroom. This would be a crucial piece of information for understanding how many students might miss opportunities to significantly boost their chance of completing a credential. Additionally, such information would help an institution target its outreach, adjust PLA/CPL methodologies that are employed, and assess the true equity of their PLA/CPL rates. This information could be gathered through student surveys or through questions in the advising process. In a related vein, institutions should work to identify college-level learning that occurs outside of managerial and white collar jobs. Using recommendations for military training and occupations as an analog, it is clear that there are many different types of jobs that instill college-level learning beyond civilian managerial and office work.

### Scale processes for simpler PLA/CPL crosswalks.



Considering the process most institutions use to award credit for military training and experience, it is clear why there is such a prevalent methodology. Faculty experts have reviewed training programs and provide relatively straightforward crosswalks that enable institutions to assign credit based on what military-connected students have learned during their service. The same process also works well for industry certifications and other formal training, and it could be used more widely. Such models are more straightforward to administer and simpler for engaging students. Following better assessments of student backgrounds, an institution could assess the most prevalent industry certifications and develop standardized credit awards that would likely boost PLA/CPL usage among adult students. Institutions can also join networks where such assessments can be shared among multiple institutions.

## Conclusion

PLA/CPL is an important tool for recognizing and valuing the learning that adult students bring to postsecondary education, but it should not be out of reach for the adult learners who can most benefit. While in this brief we cannot definitively identify the causes for lower PLA/CPL credit rates among Black and lower-income adult learners, what we found and heard from institutions focused on PLA/CPL suggests that no one explanation is sufficient for understanding what is, without doubt, a complex set of factors, including individual circumstances, behaviors (by institutional representatives and students alike), systemic labor market inequalities, racist or classist biases baked into our various systems, or institutional systems that have not been specifically evaluated or designed to support every student's engagement with PLA/CPL.

This complexity demands that institutions approach the PLA/CPL equity issue from multiple angles. To ensure that their PLA/CPL program is designed to accommodate the full diversity of today's students, institutions may need to consider a range of changes or enhancements: policies that expand PLA/CPL options for all programs of study and diverse work histories (not just managers and office professionals), fee structures that are affordable, advising that sees each adult learner as bringing valuable learning from their life and work experiences, and relevant messages about the benefits of PLA/CPL that reach students at multiple touchpoints at the institution.

In the 1970s, many institutions adopted PLA/CPL as a way to address the cause of social justice: by recognizing and valuing the learning that adult learners were bringing to academia, these pioneering institutions acknowledged that college is not just for the privileged, not just for new high school graduates, and not about limiting what counts as knowledge to something that comes out of a professor's mouth or a textbook's pages. Making sure that all students have access to PLA/CPL—and ensuring equitable use and impact—are important ways to continue PLA/CPL's social justice history in this new millennium.

**A complex set of factors demands that institutions approach PLA/CPL equity from multiple angles.**

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# About the Organizations



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, and employers, 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. Established in 1974, CAEL, a Strada Education Network affiliate, is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) membership organization. Visit [www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org) to learn more.



For more than 65 years, 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. Visit [www.wiche.edu](http://www.wiche.edu) to learn more.

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