

THE PLA BOOST

Results from a 72-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes

For more than 50 years, colleges and universities have used a range of different methods to award college credit for learning that takes place outside of the classroom—particularly learning from work, life, and military experiences. These methods—often called *prior learning assessment (PLA)* or credit for prior learning (CPL)—value the learning that many students bring with them to college. CAEL and WICHE recently partnered with 72 postsecondary institutions to explore the benefits of PLA for adult learners. Data on more than 230,000 adult students showed that having PLA credits is associated with better student outcomes like higher credential completion, cost savings, and time savings. Further, PLA boosted completion rates for adult students of color, low income adult students, and adult students across the academic performance spectrum. The evidence showed that PLA has strong potential to be a tool for closing equity gaps in postsecondary achievement, provided it is made more accessible to students who could benefit the most.

PLA boosted credential completion

Adult students credential completion rates:

49%
with PLA

27%
without PLA

Using propensity score matching to control for other factors, PLA boosted adult student completion rates by:

17%
All PLA methods

30%
PLA methods excluding credit rec's for military

Yet PLA used by only about 1 in 10 adult students

11%

Adult students earned college credit for their prior learning through PLA

PLA has potential to close equity gaps in postsecondary completion

Using propensity score matching to control for other factors, PLA boosted completion rates for key adult student groups by:

24%
Hispanic adults

19%
Pell Grant recipients

14%
Black adults

25%
Adults at community colleges

The boost to completion was even higher for these groups for certain PLA methods.

Yet PLA use was lowest for adult students who were:

- Black or American Indian/Alaska Native
- Female
- Pell Grant recipients

PLA students earned credits for nearly a semester of full-time study

On average, adult students earned:

15
PLA credits

12
PLA credits through methods other than credit rec's for military

Resulting in time savings for degree earners

9 to 14 Months

Time saved by adult degree earners with 12 or more PLA credits

Adult students with PLA saved money

\$1,500 to \$10,200

Estimated adult student savings through PLA, across sectors

Institutions won, too

17.6 More Credits

Average additional course credits taken by adult PLA students

The full report, related research, and other documents can be found at the CAEL and WICHE websites:
cael.org/pla-impact and wiche.edu/recognition-of-learning.