



**CAEL**  
Linking Learning and Work

## LearningCounts Portfolio Assessment Means Cost Savings for Students...and Employers



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## Overview

Adults who pursue postsecondary education often bring with them considerable college-level learning that they acquired from their work, military, or life experience. Through prior learning assessment (PLA), they may be able to have this learning evaluated for college credit. One form of PLA is individualized assessment, in which students prepare a portfolio of their experiential learning, often with supporting documentation. This portfolio is then evaluated by trained faculty assessors to determine a credit award.

When an employer is providing tuition assistance, the savings from LearningCounts goes to a company's bottom line



PLA can save students a significant amount of time that would otherwise be spent completing coursework in subjects that they have already learned. Additionally, the student can also save money since the cost of the assessment is less than the tuition costs of taking the course itself.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) offers an online portfolio assessment service called LearningCounts. Students enroll in a portfolio development course and then complete a learning portfolio that is evaluated by CAEL-trained faculty who are credentialed in the appropriate disciplines. Students with considerable experiential learning can prepare and submit additional portfolios for a small fee.

**Students who earned college credit through LearningCounts during the 2013-2014 school year earned an average of 9.9 college credits and saved an average of \$3,416 in tuition costs at their postsecondary institutions.** For students paying for their own education, this savings can help them reduce their overall student loan debt or help them afford to continue their studies. For students using employer-provided tuition assistance, this savings goes to the company's bottom line.

## How to Calculate Cost Savings?

When a student earns college credit through PLA, there are two main cost considerations:

- A. **Cost of PLA:** the price the student paid for the course, assessment, and any other related costs
- B. **Saved tuition cost:** The price the student did not need to pay for courses as a result of the credit earned through PLA

The cost savings are the total price not paid for courses less the cost of the course and assessment:

$$\text{Cost Savings} = (\text{Tuition Savings}) - (\text{Cost of PLA})$$

CAEL calculated this cost for a sample set of 100 students completing LearningCounts portfolios between July 2013 and June 2014.

## Calculating the Cost of PLA through Learning Counts

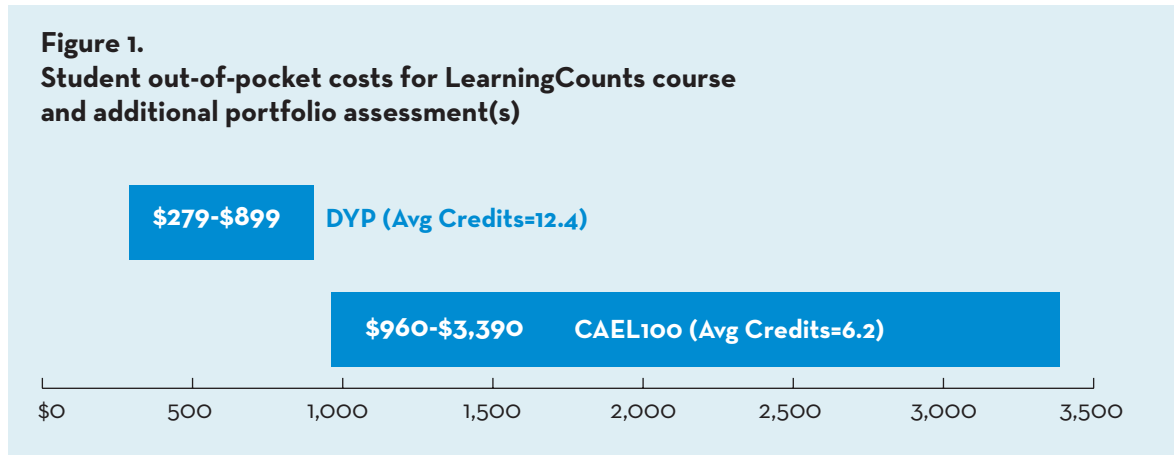
For a student seeking college credit through LearningCounts, typical fees for LearningCounts include the costs of CAEL's online portfolio development course and for the portfolio assessment itself.

- **Cost of Course Option 1, CAEL 100:** The standard option for the portfolio development course is a three-credit online course (CAEL 100). The price for this course, which includes the first portfolio assessment, varies. Students participating in the course independently pay the public price of \$895 for the course and the evaluation of their first portfolio; employers who co-brand the LearningCounts site can send groups of employees and pay a discounted per-person tuition rate depending on volume; students accessing the course through their college catalogues typically pay the standard per-credit cost that they pay for other college courses at that institution, which can be lower than or substantially higher than rates offered through CAEL.
- **Cost of Course Option 2, DYP:** Students also have the option of a self-paced, online workshop (DYP, a no-credit portfolio development workshop) for \$254, which includes the cost of the first portfolio assessment. This option is best suited for highly motivated students.
- **Cost of Assessment:** Each of the course options described above includes one portfolio assessment. Each additional portfolio assessment is \$125.



The students in our sample paid a range of costs for their portfolio courses and assessments. On the low end, one CAEL 100 student who developed a portfolio in the subject of public administration paid a total of \$960 for the course and portfolio assessments and earned 9 credits; while on the high end, a student in the field of hospitality spent a total of \$3,390 and earned 33 credits.

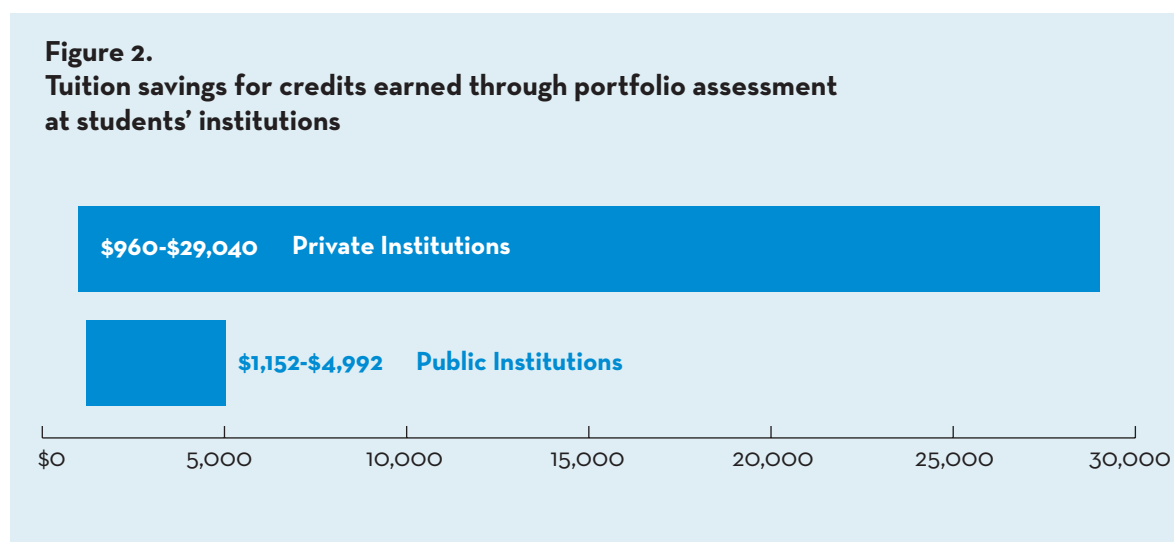
Students choosing the DYP option had costs that ranged from a low of \$279 for 9 credits to a high of \$899 for 14 credits (Figure 1).



## Calculating the Tuition Savings

For each student, we calculated tuition savings (the tuition for courses they did not have to take because of earning LearningCounts credits) by multiplying the total number of LearningCounts credits by the cost per credit hour of taking a course at the student's college or university. The cost per credit hour was determined using 2013–2014 data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The total savings can vary considerably since the institutions range from lower-priced public institutions to higher priced private institutions. For example, on the lower end of the range, one student





in the field of education at a lower-priced public institution earned 9 credits, which for her would result in a tuition savings of \$1,152. On the high end, a student in the field of hospitality attending a higher-priced institution earned 33 credits, which resulted a savings of \$29,000 in regular tuition payments to take the equivalent number of course credits (Figure 2).

## Putting It All Together

Overall, the LearningCounts students in this sample earned an average of 9.9 college credits through CAEL 100 and portfolio assessment. On average, LearningCounts portfolio completers saved \$3,416 each on tuition costs related to the credits earned through portfolios (Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

On average, the students attending private institutions each earned 9.2 credits, saving \$3,559. The students attending public institutions, meanwhile, each earned an average of 15.8 college credits, saving \$2,132 per student.

In general, the most common cost savings category was \$1,000–\$1,999, with over a third of students (37%) falling into this group (Figure 3). In addition, many students saved \$2,000–\$2,999, and nearly 1 out of every 6 students saved over \$5,000. Only 6% of students did not earn portfolio credits and, therefore, did not save money by completing a portfolio.

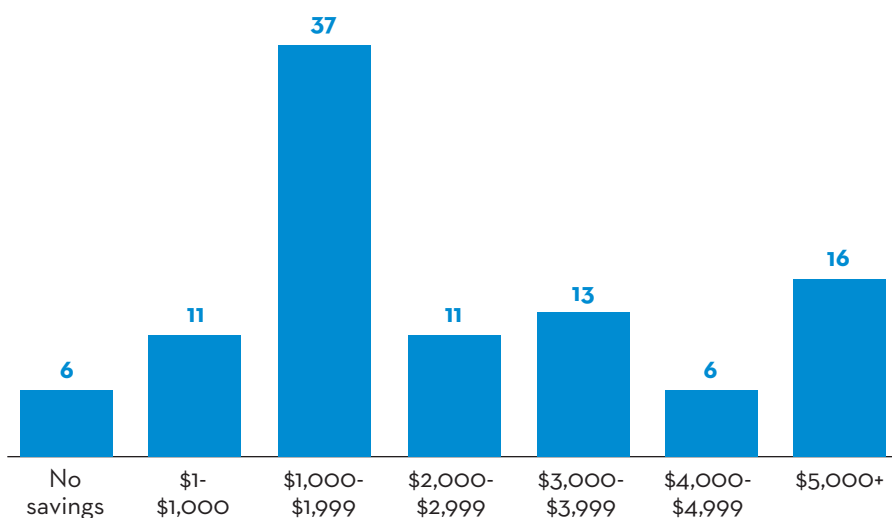


**Table 1.**  
**Student cost savings through LearningCounts**

	Average value of credits earned, in terms of tuition savings	Average spent for course and assessment	Cost savings per student
All Students	\$4,966	\$1,550	\$3,416
Private Institutions	\$5,201	\$1,642	\$3,559
Public Institutions	\$2,854	\$722	\$2,132

<sup>1</sup> IPEDS was used to retrieve all cost per credit hour data, with two exceptions. Data for one school was not available, and so it was calculated based on annual tuition divided by 30 (assume 30 credits per year). For another institution, multiple tuition rates applied, depending upon the program; for these students, the tuition rate for their online degree program was used.

**Figure 3.**  
**Cost savings for all students**



■ Number of students

### Potential Employer Savings

Employers often provide educational assistance to their employees in the form of a tuition assistance program, which can include LearningCounts portfolios as an eligible educational activity. Students accessing LearningCounts through this pathway could pay the standard CAEL 100 fee of \$895, or a lower fee if the company chooses to co-brand with LearningCounts. Using the standard fee as the basis for calculating cost savings for our same student sample, **we see that an employer’s tuition assistance program could realize a savings of just under \$4,000 per employee through LearningCounts** (Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
**Scenario of potential employer cost savings through LearningCounts**

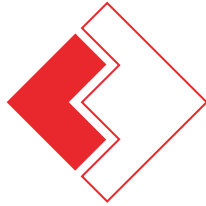
	Average value of credits earned, in terms of tuition savings	Average spent for course and assessment, using \$895 as standard CAEL 100 fee*	Cost savings per student
All Students	\$4,966	970	\$3,996
Private Schools	\$5,201	970	\$4,231
Public Schools	\$2,854	970	\$1,884

\*Costs for employers that partner with LearningCounts may be lower than \$895, depending upon volume



## A Note on Time Savings

Students not only save money by completing a portfolio through LearningCounts but also significant time. Since portfolios are often many pages long and require the compilation of documents, they may take a considerable amount of writing and research on the part of the student. This is particularly true for the student's first portfolio. However, the time spent in building a portfolio can greatly reduce time to degree completion. Most LearningCounts students are adult learners who are enrolled part-time in college while they continue to work. The average student earns 9.9 credits (through both the course and the portfolio assessment) and, therefore, may shave a semester or more off their total time to a postsecondary degree, depending on the number of credits taken per semester. This number is even greater for students from public institutions, who may save a year or more by earning an average of 15.8 credits.



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As a national leader, we strive to lead the evolving national discussion on unique challenges and opportunities linking adult learners and work. We advocate and innovate on behalf of all adult learners, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, to increase access to education and economic security and to develop and provide effective services and tools. We work to enhance our thought leadership role through our research and work with adult learners, postsecondary education institutions, employers and government.

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