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Linking Learning and Work



# Random Access:

## The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment

By Rebecca Klein-Collins and Richard Olson



October 2014  
The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning  
Excelencia in Education



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The executive summary can be found online at [www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos\\_and\\_PLA\\_2014\\_summary](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos_and_PLA_2014_summary)

The full research report can be found at [www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos\\_and\\_PLA\\_2014](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos_and_PLA_2014)

*The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of TG, its officers, or employees.*



# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>About This Study</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Participating Institutions</b>	<b>11</b>
Participating Institutions' Programs and Services for Adult Students, Latino Students	13
History and Basic Offerings of the Institutions' PLA Programs	15
<b>How Latino Students Engage with PLA: Quantitative Analysis of Student Record Data</b>	<b>17</b>
Preview of the Findings	17
Description of the Sample	17
General Usage of PLA: Take-Up Rates, Credit-Earning, and Method	20
PLA Take-Up Rate	20
PLA Credit-Earning	21
PLA Method Used	22
Area of Study Analysis	23
PLA Credit-Earning by Area of Study	25
Number of PLA Credits by Area of Study	26
Academic Major of the Students	27
A Closer Look at Foreign Language and PLA	29
Summary	31
<b>Student and Staff Perspectives on PLA</b>	<b>33</b>
Benefits	33
Challenges	35
<b>Specific Strategies to Support PLA Use among Latino Students</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Findings and Recommendations</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendix: Methodology and Technical Notes</b>	<b>48</b>





# Random Access:

## The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment

### Executive Summary

To meet current and future labor market needs in the U.S., government leaders, philanthropic organizations, and higher education institutions have turned their attention to helping more people—adults as well as traditional-aged college students—access education and succeed in completing college degrees. National efforts to address the degree completion goals of the country will not succeed without focusing on strategies to improve the educational attainment of Latinos, “the nation’s largest minority group and among its fastest growing populations” (Brown & Lopez, 2013). Compared to other racial/ethnic populations, the Latino population in the U.S. has lower rates of educational attainment and lower rates of degree completion, on average.

Many Latinos come to higher education as adults aged 25 or older. One degree completion strategy that is particularly suited to adult students in higher education is prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA provides opportunities to evaluate a student’s learning from work or life experience for the purpose of awarding college credit. For students whose experiential learning is demonstrably at the college level, PLA saves students time and money on their pathway to a degree. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has found that adult students with PLA credit are two-and-a-half times more likely to earn their degrees compared to adult students without PLA credit (Klein-Collins, 2010), yet compared to non-Latinos, fewer Latino students may be taking advantage of this opportunity. For PLA to be an effective strategy to help with Latino degree completion, Latino students must know about it and use it.

This report presents the findings from a new study by CAEL, in partnership with *Excelencia* in Education, that examines the experience of Latino students with PLA at 10 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. between 2010 and 2013.

Through analysis of more than 32,000 student academic records, as well as interviews with Latino students and PLA administrators, the study examines how Latino students engage with PLA in terms of methods used, number of credits earned, and areas of study for which credits are earned. It also investigates the role that institutions play in encouraging Latino students to take advantage of PLA. The study’s findings suggest specific strategies for more effective outreach to Latino students, as well as other important target populations, on PLA.

### Summary of Key Findings

*The data from 32,940 students at the 10 participating postsecondary institutions in our study show that Latino students have outcomes in PLA take-up and credit-earning similar to their non-Latino peers. This data suggests that for Latino students, participation in PLA is less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution. These and other findings are described below.*

### **Latino students used PLA as successfully as other groups—for Latino students, therefore, participation in PLA depends less on ethnicity and more upon the specific institutional approach to PLA**

When all student data was aggregated, Latino students had a PLA take-up (or usage) rate of 15% compared to 42% for non-Latino students (Figure A). However, the take-up rate varied considerably by institutional category: four-year institutions offering PLA within separate, smaller adult divisions (Adult Divisions); four-year institutions that were adult oriented throughout all programs (Adult Oriented); and institutions that were primarily associate degree granting (Associate Degree).

In each institutional grouping, Latino students had PLA take-up rates that were on par with or exceeded the PLA take-up rate of non-Latino students (Figure A), and they also earned similar numbers of credit through PLA. Latino students have lower PLA participation only in certain institutional settings; namely, associate degree institutions where there have historically been fewer PLA options in terms of methods, less of a PLA-promoting culture, and policies that often limit the flexibility a student has in the degree plan. In our study, these were the institutions with the highest Latino enrollments. Given that these institutions have recently expanded their PLA offerings and enhanced their PLA policies and practices, we would expect to see larger PLA take-up rates at these institutions in more recent student cohorts.

Participation in PLA, therefore, appears to be less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution. Latinos can and do take advantage of PLA, but primarily when they are enrolled at institutions where PLA is strongly promoted and supported.

**Latino students were more likely to earn PLA credit in the area of foreign language—but were not limited to only foreign language PLA credit**

Overall, Latino students were six times more likely to earn PLA credit for foreign language than were non-Latino students. This was true for Latino students at each institution type (Figure B). Therefore, it seems appropriate that many institutions are choosing to steer bilingual Latino students in this direction as a first step in PLA credit-earning.

For Latino students, foreign language credit was also highly associated with earning credit in another area of study; about half of Latino students who earned credit in foreign language also earned credit in another area (Figure C). In two out of three institutional groupings, Latino students with foreign language credit were significantly more likely than non-Latinos with foreign language credit to earn PLA credit in a second or third area of study.

Figure A. PLA Take-up rate by ethnicity and institutional grouping

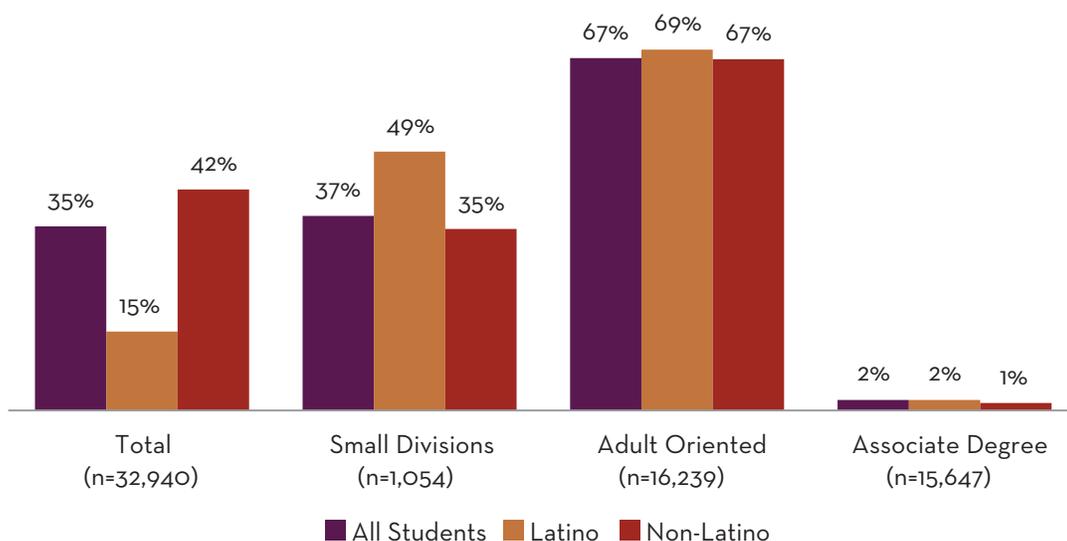


Figure B. Percent of PLA students earning credit for foreign language by institutional category

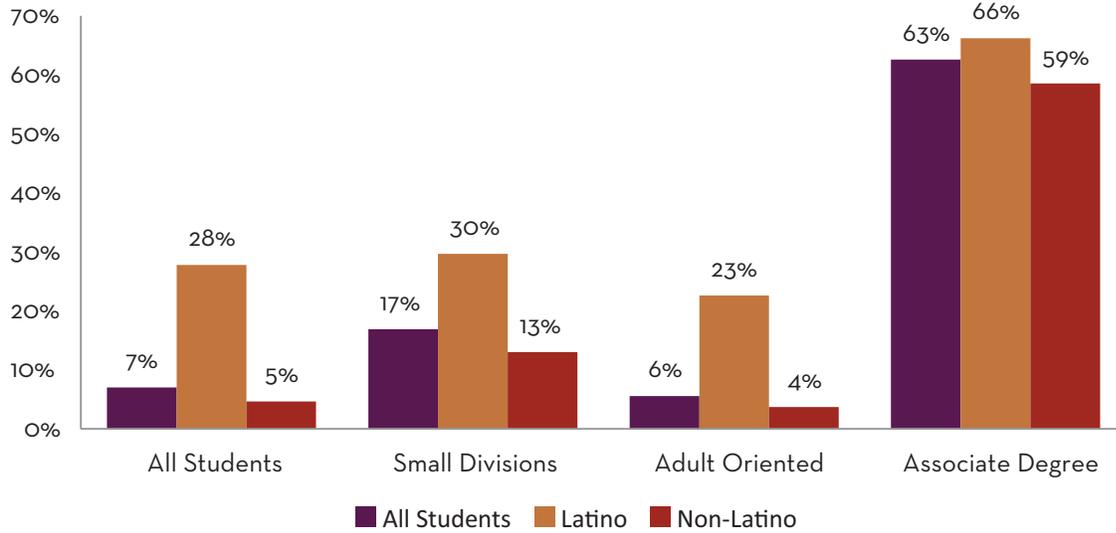
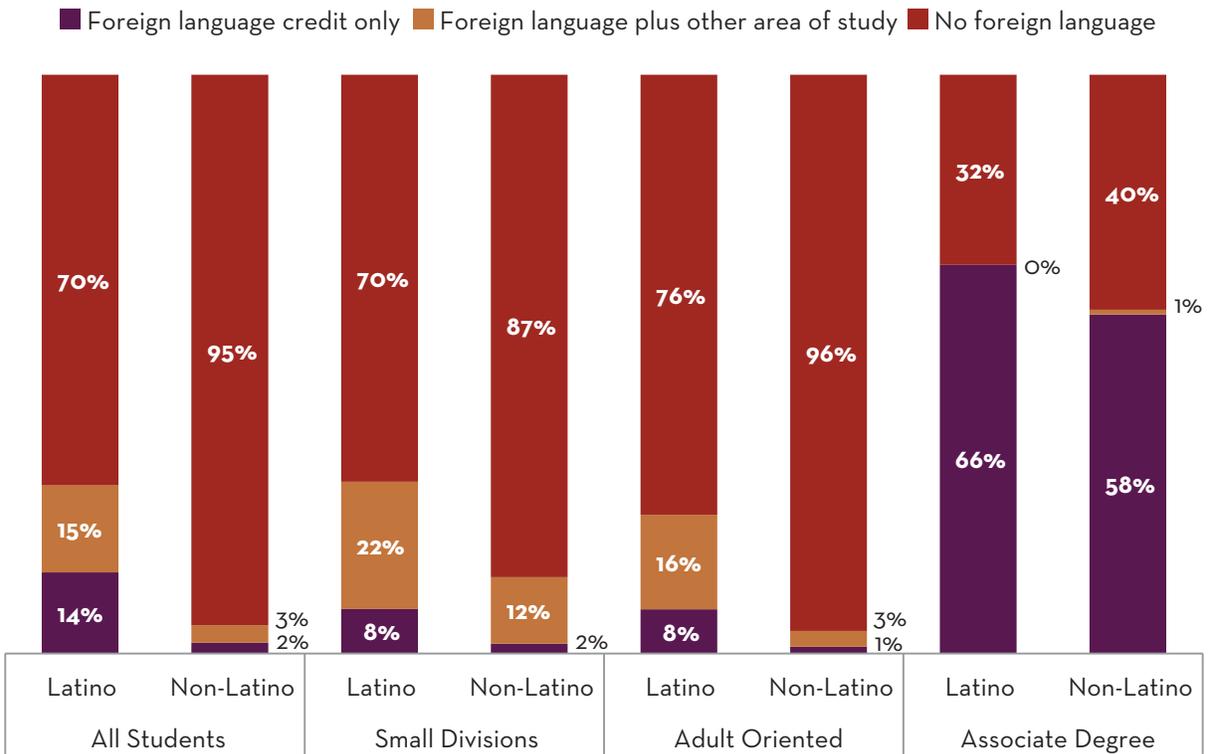


Figure C. Prevalence of foreign language PLA credit-earning by students with any PLA credit, by ethnicity and institutional category



### *Latino students found PLA to be empowering and validating*

Both institutional representatives and Latino students discussed PLA as a practice that empowers and validates. For schools, it is a way to honor what students have learned in their lives. Students who earned PLA credit discussed how the act of reflecting on past learning was a positive experience for them and often improved their self-image. After earning credit through PLA, students felt validated in their experiential knowledge.

### *First generation college students may need additional help with PLA*

Although PLA can be an empowering process for many adult students, students who are worried that they do not belong in college may not respond well to PLA messages that focus on the need to “prove what you know” or “demonstrate what you have learned.” One institution in our study is piloting a program designed to help these students explore their prior learning in a more supportive way.

### *Current PLA marketing strategies may not always hit their mark*

Some student interviewees reported that information about PLA programs at their institutions was not easily accessible, and many reported that they discovered the option through word of mouth. PLA administrators at some of the participating institutions confirmed that word of mouth is a common way for students to learn about PLA. PLA may be mentioned in catalogs, websites, and marketing materials, but if institutions want their students to know about and use PLA, more still needs to be done so that the students understand their PLA options and how to exercise them.

## **Recommendations**

These findings suggest several strategies for institutions to take in order to support Latino students—as well as other populations—in their efforts to earn credit for what they already know.

1. **Examine and improve institutional strategies for marketing and outreach regarding PLA.** Information about the PLA methods offered at an institution should be readily available and easily accessible.
2. **If the institution has the goal of accelerating degree completion through increased use of PLA, reach out specifically to foreign language speakers as a great way for students to get started.** For Latino students, PLA credit through Spanish CLEP exams appears to be an effective way to attract them to PLA, and only a first step in a larger exploration of earning credit for what they already know.
3. **Offer a course to all adult students to explore prior learning.** Programs with high usage of PLA typically offer some sort of course to help students examine their work and life experiences to identify college learning they may have acquired. These courses help the students determine a plan for PLA, including which methods of PLA to use for different types of learning or different areas of study.
4. **Provide portfolio assessment as part of your PLA program offerings.** The students we interviewed experienced gains in their self-image and academic confidence by participating in a portfolio building experience that led them to reflect on their learning in a deliberate way.

5. **Closely track PLA usage at the institutional level.** In order to understand how PLA is used—or underused—by targeted student populations, regularly track trends in PLA credit earning by race, ethnicity, age, military status, and other demographic categories. Subpopulations with lower PLA take-up rates should signal to the institution the need to examine how messages about PLA are reaching these populations and how the institution might best support them with PLA.
6. **First generation college students may require a customized approach to PLA.** Not all Latinos are first generation college students, but those who are may have heightened anxiety about being in college. Consider reaching out to these students in a different way. Explain early and often what PLA is, how to access it, how it works, and how it can help them. Use language that emphasizes the value of their individual expertise and experience, rather than language that emphasizes the need for them to prove themselves.

## Summary and Discussion

CAEL and *Excelencia* undertook this study to expand current knowledge about the use of PLA among adult Latino students. The findings from this study are encouraging. We found that Latino students are just as successful in PLA usage as non-Latino students in similar institutions. Latino students demonstrated much the same outcomes in both take-up rate and number of credits earned. We also learned that foreign language PLA credit may be a great way to encourage Latino students—and perhaps other students as well—to get started with PLA.

One additional finding of interest was that PLA take-up rates varied so significantly by institutional type. Institutions that have well-established approaches to PLA and that promote PLA as an integral part of their offerings to adult learners had much higher PLA participation

rates overall, compared to institutions where it was not as big a part of the institution's approach to adults. While this finding may be partly the result of differences in the student populations of these institutions (e.g., unavailable measures such as academic preparedness, innate motivation, or socio-economic factors), the data nevertheless strongly suggests that PLA is likely underutilized in many institutions. Currently, Latino student enrollment is heavily concentrated at community colleges. While many community colleges have started to give much more attention to their PLA offerings, these institutions have historically not had strong PLA programs. Improving the PLA offerings and related support at these institutions is important for improving PLA use among Latino students nationwide.

For example, institutions may be able to dramatically improve PLA usage by giving PLA more prominence as a program offering and by encouraging all adult learners to explore whether they may have college-level learning from their work and life experiences. The associate degree institutions in our study have already taken steps in this direction and so we would expect to see very different PLA take-up rates in more recent student cohorts.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study show that PLA can be a resource to adult Latino students to accelerate their postsecondary credit earning. Yet they also point to the need for institutions to make sure that they are promoting PLA well and working with students to explore what prior learning they may have. Without this kind of promotion and support for PLA, students may not be aware of PLA or they may not think that they have any learning that is worth evaluating for credit. With a robust and well-promoted PLA program, institutions can make great strides in helping Latino and other adult learners accelerate on their path to a college degree.





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## The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment

### Introduction

The continued rise of our global and knowledge-based economy has greatly fueled the demand for an educated workforce. To meet current and future labor market needs in the U.S., government leaders, philanthropic organizations, and higher education institutions have turned their attention to helping more people—adults as well as traditional-aged college students—access education and succeed in completing degrees.

National efforts to address the degree completion goals of the country will not succeed without focusing on strategies to improve the educational attainment of Latinos, “the nation’s largest minority group and among its fastest growing populations” (Brown & Lopez, 2013). Compared to other racial/ethnic populations, the Latino population in the U.S. has lower rates of educational attainment and lower rates of degree completion, on average.

Many Latinos come to higher education as adults. One degree completion strategy that is particularly suited to meet the needs of adult students in higher education is prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA provides opportunities to evaluate a student’s learning from work or life experience for the purpose of awarding college credit. For students whose experiential learning is demonstrably at the college level, PLA saves students time and money on their pathway to a degree.

In 2010, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) found that adult students with PLA credit are two-and-a-half times more likely to earn their degrees compared to adult students without PLA credit (Klein-Collins, 2010). This finding has helped spark interest among institutions, systems, and policy makers in expanding student access to PLA. However, one additional finding from the CAEL study raised questions about whether PLA is as accessible

to Latino students as it is to others: although Latino students with PLA credit had even higher degree completion rates than the adult population in general, fewer Latino students earned credit through PLA. In other words, PLA can be a promising strategy for improving adult Latino students’ success, but the data suggested that not enough Latino students may know about it or know how to take advantage of it.

This report presents the findings from a new study that examined the experience of Latino students with PLA at 10 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. between 2010 and 2013. The study was designed to learn more about how adult students currently access PLA, what conditions lead to higher participation in PLA, and what kind of learning students have assessed for credit—while paying particular attention to the experiences and participation of Latino students.

The findings suggest several recommendations for institutions interested in helping more students—including Latino, first-generation college, or other adult populations—make all of their learning count toward a formal postsecondary credential so that we value what they bring to higher education while accelerating the pace of degree completion.

### Background

The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are labels that researchers often use when referencing U.S. citizens or residents of Latin American or Spanish heritage. The individuals in this group hail from a wide variety of nations and cultures (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a), they may be first generation immigrants or third generation (or more) Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b), and they differ along many other lines, such as education and English language proficiency (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Cuddington, 2013).

## PLA Methods

Credit (or other recognition) students can earn for their prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA:

- **Standardized exams. Examples include:**
  - Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams)
  - College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams)
  - Excelsior College Exams (UExcel)
  - The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams
- **Evaluated non-college programs.** The National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) conduct evaluations of training that is offered by employers or the military. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate their companies' training. The result of these evaluations is credit recommendations for anyone satisfactorily completing that training.
- **Individualized assessments.** In this method, students prepare a portfolio or demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and non-credit activities. Then, faculty with appropriate subject-matter expertise evaluate the student's portfolio to determine a credit award.
- **College faculty-developed exams, also called "challenge exams."** These allow students to earn credit by taking examinations faculty create for courses offered at a given institution.

The 53 million Latinos<sup>1</sup> in the U.S. currently account for 17% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b), a statistic that on its own may seem unremarkable. When examined over time, however, the size of the Latino population in the U.S. is decidedly worth noting. According to analysis by the Pew Research Center, the Latino population has grown 50% since 2000 and nearly 600% since 1970. In comparison, the overall U.S. population grew only 12% between 2000 and 2012 (Brown, 2014). Projections from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that the Latino population will more than double between 2012 and 2060, which, combined with the slower growth of the non-Latino white population, will result in the 2060 U.S. population being nearly one-third Latino (2012). Although more than half of *all* Latinos in the U.S. live in California, Texas, and Florida, all states are experiencing growth in the Latino population (Brown & Lopez, 2013).

Simultaneously with this large demographic change, the U.S. is experiencing a change in the educational demands of the labor market. Larger proportions of existing and new job categories are requiring at least some postsecondary education. According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, at the current production rate in higher education, "we will fall 5 million short of the workers with postsecondary credentials we will need by 2020" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 2). This means that we cannot count on the existing educational pipeline to meet future needs. We will need to improve the educational attainment of those already in the workforce, namely adults, and we will need to dramatically improve the educational success of population subgroups with historically low attainment.

As the fastest-growing population, Latinos will need to be a big part of the country's degree completion solution. As noted above, Latinos as a group are heterogeneous in terms of country of origin and length of time since the family's immigration. While the educational attainment of Latinos can vary based on country of origin or other factors, overall there is an education equity gap between Latinos as a group and

other demographic populations. *Excelencia in Education* recently reported the facets of this gap as follows:

- Degree attainment: percentage of adults with an associate degree or higher: 20% of Latinos, 36% of all adults. Equity gap = 16%
- Total graduation within 150% of program time for first-time, full-time freshmen, 2010–2011: 50% for whites, 41% for Latinos. Equity gap = 9%
- Completions per 100% FTE students: total undergraduate degrees and certificates: 16% Latino vs. 20% white. Equity gap = 4% (Santiago & Galdeano, 2014, April, p. 2)

The education equity gap is not due to a lack of interest in education. The Pew Hispanic Center has reported that a large majority (89%) of Latino young adults say that a college education is important for success in life (Lopez, 2009), and recent enrollment data show that the percentage of Latino college students increased from 11% in 2006 to 17% of all students in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013, September). Also, from 2011 to 2012 the enrollment rate of Latinos 18 and older increased from 8.8% to 9.5% even while the enrollment rate for all other population groups declined from 8.7% to 8.3% (Siebens, 2013).

Persisting in college enrollment, however, appears to be a challenge. One reason that many Latino students do not complete their studies may be related to the fact that, according to a 2008 statistic, about half are first generation college students, nearly twice the rate of white non-Latino students (Santiago, 2011). They and their parents lack previous experience with higher education and so may not know how to access information about financial aid or about the importance of registration deadlines or course requirements (Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010). In addition, many Latino students—regardless of age—are working more than 30 hours a week to support themselves or their families (Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010; Lopez, 2009). Any kind of additional, unexpected

## Institutions Participating in This Study

Alamo Colleges (a system of 5 individual colleges)  
Barry University  
Charter Oak State College  
Excelsior College  
Miami Dade College  
St. Edward's University  
Empire State College (State University of New York—SUNY)  
Texas State University  
Thomas Edison State College  
University of Maryland University College

financial pressures can work against college completion; this challenge is also one that faces adult learners generally, most of whom are also juggling school with work.

To some extent, it can be argued that any institutional, state, or national effort designed to help with degree completion will invariably help Latinos as well, as “a rising tide lifts all boats” (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010, p. 19). Suggested strategies from the field, for example, include:

- Providing better consumer education to help students and their families understand topics like the types of college, associated costs, and financial aid (Bell & Bautsch, 2011; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010; Liu, 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2012)
- Promoting and preserving need-based financial aid (Bautsch, 2011; Santiago, 2011) and other programs that reduce the total cost, such as work study programs (NCSL, 2012)
- Making minority recruitment and retention a commitment of the institution (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010; Santiago, 2013)
- Increasing early college high schools, dual enrollment programs, and college preparatory programs (Santiago, 2011; Zarate, 2010; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010)

- Limiting the window for course withdrawal in order to encourage persistence (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010)

However, general strategies may not ensure that Latinos are well served. *Excelencia's* Deborah Santiago has explained that “increasing Latino degree attainment requires intentionality in institutional policy and practice; it is not sufficient to presume Latinos will be served by default” (2011, p. 10).

Somewhat more targeted strategies that are suggested for improved Latino persistence and success include:

- Using data to track Latino progress and outcomes in order to improve supports (Santiago, 2011; Santiago, 2013)
- Building a system of targeted support services such as living/learning communities, tutoring, and mentoring (Bell & Bautsch, 2011; Santiago, 2013)
- Simplifying transfer from community colleges (where many Latinos start their educations) to four-year institutions (Liu, 2011; NCSL, 2012)

Much of the literature on supporting Latino students, however, is focused on the traditional-aged student. Additional strategies for assisting working adults (including adult Latinos) should also be added to the list above, including providing opportunities for learning and student services in the evening and on weekends; offering accelerated programs tied to career pathways; and providing programs that are modular or otherwise allow students to learn at their own pace.

Another strategy for helping adult students accelerate degree completion is to make sure that the college-level learning they already have from work and life experience is assessed for college credit and counts towards their degrees. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a term educators use to describe the many valid ways to assess that learning and award college credit for it (see sidebar on PLA methods). As reported in *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*, in a large study of more than 62,000 students at

48 institutions, CAEL found that adult students with credit earned through PLA are two-and-a-half times more likely to complete a degree compared to adult students without such credit (Klein-Collins, 2010). This finding was true for students in all demographic groups. However, Latino students were less likely than any other demographic subgroup to have earned PLA credit at all.

## About This Study

PLA can be a promising strategy for improving adult Latino students' success, but only if the students know about it, have access to it, and take advantage of it.

This study examines Latino students' experience with PLA at 10 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. in order to learn more about how they and other students currently access PLA, what kind of learning they have assessed for credit, and how institutions might be able to increase the number of adult Latino students who take advantage of PLA. In consultation with *Excelencia* in Education, CAEL examined student record data at these 10 institutions, learned about each institution's approach to PLA through staff interviews, and interviewed 23 Latino students from these institutions about their experiences with PLA (see methodology in Appendix A). We wanted to learn answers to the following:

- To what extent are Latino students taking advantage of PLA at their institutions, compared to non-Latino students? What does their PLA experience look like in terms of methods used, number of credits earned, and area of study for which credits are earned? Are some areas of study (such as foreign language) more closely correlated with Latino students than others?
- What role do institutions play in encouraging Latino students to take advantage of PLA?
- What have been the challenges in promoting PLA to this population? How can those challenges be addressed?

- What do the students say about their experience with PLA, or, more specifically, with the portfolio development and assessment process?
- Do any findings suggest strategies for more effective outreach to Latino students in promoting PLA?

After introducing the institutions participating in this study, this report presents information on the use of PLA at those institutions by adult Latino students and all adult students, and the various factors likely influencing PLA participation at those institutions. We next examine the areas of study in which Latino students are earning PLA credit, in order to understand the range of college-level prior learning that Latino students bring to higher education. We then discuss the perspectives of the students and staff on PLA's benefits as well as challenges in its implementation. Finally, we summarize the findings and discuss how they might assist institutions in understanding how to promote greater PLA use among Latino students. We believe that many of these strategies could benefit non-Latino adult learners as well.

### Participating Institutions

Project partners CAEL and *Excelencia* in Education identified and recruited institutions for this study from a select group of postsecondary institutions that serve large numbers (or large proportions) of Latino students, and have robust PLA program offerings. The major challenge was the initial identification of institutions eligible to participate. Although *Excelencia* could suggest institutions serving large numbers of Latinos and CAEL could suggest institutions with strong PLA programs, there was little overlap between these lists. Consequently, the partners needed to learn more about other institutions to consider for the study. Finding the ethnic makeup of students at institutions with strong PLA programs proved to be much easier than determining the PLA offerings of institutions serving large numbers of Latinos. Information

about PLA offerings proved difficult to find, or nonexistent, on many institutions' websites.

The characteristics of the 10 institutions are described below, with information such as size, control, and student demographics coming from the National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2012–2013. Information about online offerings and degrees offered comes from the institutions' websites, and information about adult serving divisions comes from the project's survey data.

The 10 institutions selected for the study included 8 institutions offering mostly bachelor's degrees and 2 institutions offering mostly associate degrees (this includes Alamo Colleges, which is a system of 5 2-year colleges; Alamo is treated in this study as a single institution). Of these, 3 are private and 7 are public institutions. Three of the institutions are based in Texas; 2 in New York; 2 in Florida; and 1 each in Connecticut, Maryland, and New Jersey. Several of the selected institutions meet the federal definition of Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), with 25% or more total undergraduate Hispanic full-time equivalent student enrollment, including 4 of the 5 Alamo Colleges, St. Edward's University, Texas State University, and Miami Dade College, while others serve smaller proportions of Latino students (Table 1).

Six institutions provide most of their course offerings on campuses, 2 provide most or all classes online, and 2 have mixed offerings of online and on the ground courses (Figure 1). Five institutions (50%) have an enrollment of more than 30,000, 3 (30%) have between 10,000 and 30,000 students, and 2 (20%) have fewer than 10,000 students (Figure 2). Three institutions have a separate program or department exclusively for adult students (Figure 3).

### Participating Institutions' Programs and Services for Adult Students, Latino Students

Because PLA programs are often considered to be part of an institution's broader approach to

Figure 1. On-ground and online course offerings at participating institutions

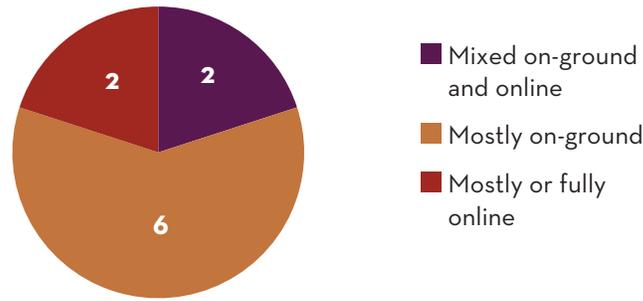


Figure 2. Size of participating institutions

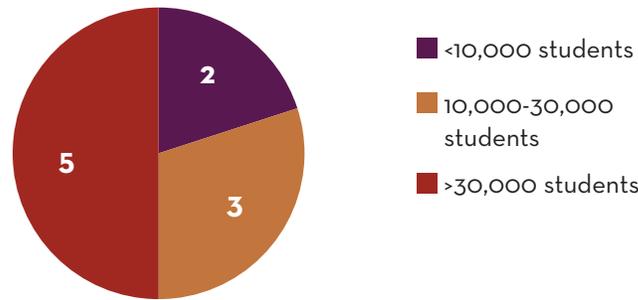


Table 1. Characteristics of selected institutions, grouped by state

Institution	State	Level	Control	Delivery	% Latino
Alamo Colleges (5)	TX	Mostly associate/two-year	Public	Mostly on ground	61.3%*
St. Edward's University	TX	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Private non-profit	Mostly on ground	30.6%
Texas State University	TX	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Public	Mostly on ground	26.5%
SUNY Empire State College	NY	Associate, bachelors, and master's	Public	Mostly on ground	8.1%
Excelsior College	NY	Associate, bachelors, and master's	Private non-profit	Mostly online	8.5%
Miami Dade College	FL	Mostly associate/two-year	Public	Mostly on ground	67.3%
Barry University/ACE School	FL	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Private non-profit	Mostly on ground	16.0%
Charter Oak State College	CT	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Public	Online degree completion	8.7%
University of Maryland University College	MD	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Public	Many online	7.2%
Thomas Edison State College	NJ	Mostly bachelor's and higher	Public	Many online	8.8%

\*Aggregate percentage across 5 institutions

Source: institution websites and IPEDS 2012.

serving adult learners, it can be helpful to understand PLA programs by first understanding the larger context of adult programs and services at an institution. For the purposes of this study, we also asked about the participating institutions' strategies for supporting Latino students. What we learned was that the institutions in this study have many programs and services in place to serve adult students, and, in some cases, first generation college students. However, there is little, if anything, that is explicitly targeted to Latino students.

According to their survey responses, all 10 institutions provide online and distance learning opportunities, and 9 provide educational advising and evening courses. A large majority (8 or more) provide other programs for working adults, such as evening hours for student services, weekend courses, or flexible course formats. However, only 4 have special outreach to adults, only 2 provide child care, and only one provides ESL courses that link to credit-bearing courses (Figure 4).

Although many of the participating institutions serve large numbers of Latino students, none indicated in the survey responses that there is any special outreach to this population. In their interviews, only two institutions

mentioned having specific programs in place for supporting enrolled Latino students. One institution has a program designed to increase college completion among Latino students that involves improved college preparation and advising, and partnerships with employers, the K-12 system, and other colleges. A second institution has a long-running program in place targeting services to students from migrant worker families.

Many of the institutions said that they do not target Latinos specifically, yet had established programs to serve first generation college students; for example, one provides math and writing support to first generation college students (most of whom are Latino at that institution); another institution with mostly online programs offered an e-tutoring option taught in both Spanish and English, but these sessions have had very little student participation in the two semesters they have been available.

Institutions serving large numbers of Latinos expressed that even though most of their strategies to provide academic support were not targeted to Latinos, the institutions were serving many Latino students through these programs anyway, essentially having the perspective of "a rising tide lifts all boats."

Figure 3. Separate adult serving divisions at participating institutions

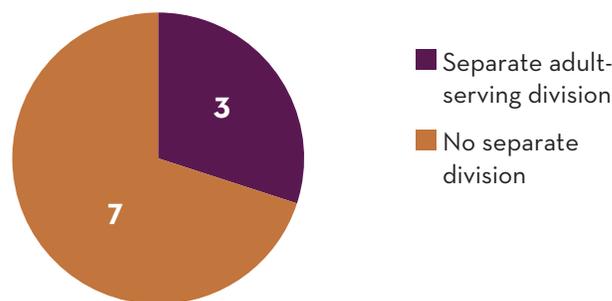
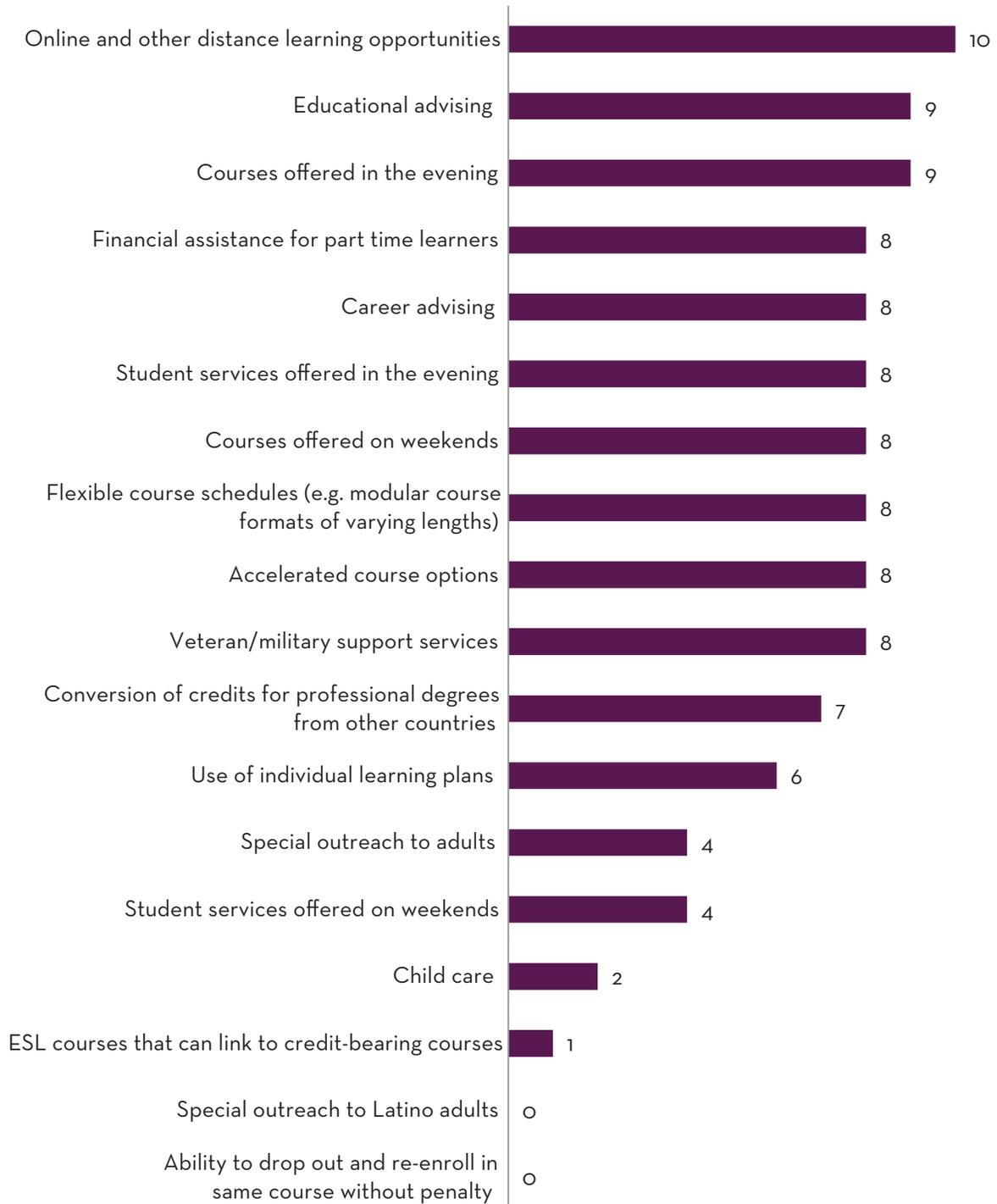


Figure 4. Which of the following services are available at your institution?



### History and Basic Offerings of the Institutions' PLA Programs

PLA program offerings and policies can vary considerably from one institution to another, even among institutions that are well known for the strength of their PLA programs. Differences among the programs at the institutions in this study emerged through information they shared in the initial project application, an online survey, staff interviews, and interviews with Latino PLA students.

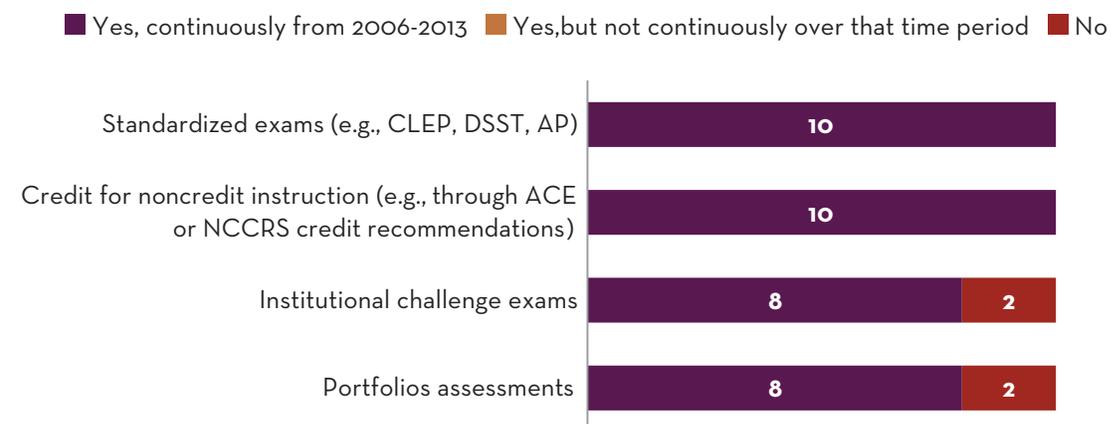
Though all 10 participating institutions offer PLA in some form, they do so to varying degrees. Eight of the 10 institutions in the study boast PLA programs that were initially developed in the 1970s and that have provided students multiple options for assessing prior learning for credit, including portfolio assessment. Both of the remaining 2 institutions are associate degree institutions that are currently expanding their PLA offerings, but during the time period examined by this study (2010-2013), had programs that were more limited. For example, they did not offer portfolio assessment as an option during that time, but today they do.

In order to understand PLA program offerings during the period of time targeted in the

study, we asked which forms of PLA were offered continuously between 2006 and 2013. All 10 institutions offered standardized exams and credit for non-credit instruction evaluated by a third party (e.g., from credit recommendations for military or corporate training from NCCRS and ACE) during that time period; 8 said they offered portfolio assessment (the other 2 are either working on or recently started offering a portfolio assessment option); and 8 said they offered challenge exams (Figure 5).

In their interviews, all 10 institutions indicated that advising is central to helping students identify the range of experiential learning they had and then determining a plan for using various PLA options. Six of the institutions (all of which are institutions that have been providing PLA for 40 or more years) offer a credit-bearing course to help students prepare for portfolio assessment. At one institution, the course is considered an “academic planning” course, while others call it a PLA or portfolio development course. In these courses, the students complete exercises that help them identify all of their prior learning.

Figure 5. Which of the following PLA methods did your institution offer continuously between 2006 and 2013?



The cost of PLA to the student is typically less than tuition for equivalent coursework at an institution. One participating institution imposes a flat assessment fee for any method of PLA of \$100 per credit hour. For the other 9 institutions, fees for PLA depend upon the method used:

- **Standardized exams:** the policies varied among the 10 institutions, with some charging only the price set by the exam vendor (e.g., \$80 for CLEP tests), some charging an additional \$30-40 as an assessment fee, and others reporting that the fees vary.
- **NCCRS or ACE credit recommendations** (e.g. credit for military training and occupations): 9 of the 10 participating institutions do not charge for these credit awards.
- **Challenge exams:** for several of the institutions offering challenge exams, the fees ranged from a low of \$30/credit hour to the tuition that would otherwise be charged for the course. Several institutions noted that fees vary by department.
- **Portfolio assessment:** 2 of the institutions charge no fees for portfolio assessment; others charge by the credit hour (e.g., \$91/credit hour, \$75/credit hour, \$350 for the first eight credits, etc.), and 1 charges a flat fee of \$1850, regardless of the number of credits granted. As noted earlier, 7 of the institutions offer a portfolio development course; 5 of the 7 charge between \$750 and \$800 for a 3-credit version of the that course; in the case of the public institutions, non-residents can pay more, with amounts varying widely, depending on the institution.

Only 1 of the 10 institutions charges a transcription or posting fee for PLA credit, and that is only for the portfolio (\$90/credit awarded).



# How Latino Students Engage with PLA: Quantitative Analysis of Student Record Data

## Preview of the Findings

An earlier study of adult students and PLA found that while Latino students can benefit greatly from PLA, there are questions about the extent to which Latino students take advantage of PLA offerings at their institutions. This current study was intended to examine the Latino student experience with PLA in greater detail at 10 participating institutions.

The data in this study show that Latinos use PLA less frequently than non-Latino students in the overall sample. However, examining the experience of Latino students by type of institution reveals a very different story. Latinos attending institutions with more robust PLA offerings take advantage of PLA at similar or higher rates than non-Latino groups, and they earn similar numbers of credits through PLA. At institutions where PLA is not as strongly emphasized, Latino students have very low participation in PLA, but no less so than non-Latino students at those institutions. This suggests that visibility of and ease of access to PLA options is a critical factor in ensuring Latino use of PLA. In other words, for Latino students, participation in PLA is less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution.

When examining the areas of study for which students earn PLA credit, we found that Latino students are far more likely to earn PLA credit for a foreign language than non-Latino students. As shown through this study, this appears to be an important gateway for Latino students to access PLA for other learning that they have acquired from their work and life experiences. Yet, foreign language is by far not the only type of college level learning that Latino students bring to higher education.

## Description of the Sample

CAEL requested student record data from the institutions for all adult students (age 25 and over) enrolling for the first time in the 2010–2011 school year and their academic activity through June 30, 2013. This cohort was chosen in order to allow for at least two years of study and credit-earning through PLA. The data sets provided by each of the 10 participating institutions ranged from 130 to 9,829 students, and the combined data set contained 32,940 unique adult students aged 25 and over.

Students who indicated Hispanic or Latino for their race/ethnicity comprised 26% of the sample, with the non-Latino group being mostly Caucasian/white (38%) or African American (16%) (Figures 6 and 7). Fifty-four percent were female and 46% were male (Figure 8). Over half of the students in the sample (54%) were aged 25–34, 29% were 35–44, 14% were 45–54, and 3% were 55 or older (Figure 9). The Latino students in the sample closely resembled the full sample in terms of age and gender distribution.

Information on military/veteran status was not universally available and depended upon the institutions' ability to track this information. Of the entire sample, of which 47% were missing values, 26% had some military background, and a smaller proportion of Latino students had some military background (14%) (Figure 10). Further analysis of the student records based on military status was not pursued given the extent of the missing data.

Information on students' receipt of need-based financial aid was also not available from all institutions. Of the entire sample, of which 45% were missing values, 35% were recipients of need-based financial aid (a proxy measure for low income). Latinos in our sample were more likely to be receiving need-based financial aid, with

Figure 6. Student sample by race/ethnicity, n=32,441

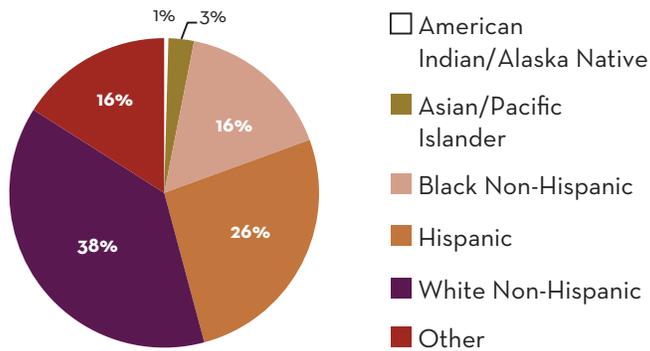


Figure 7. Student sample by ethnicity, n=32,441

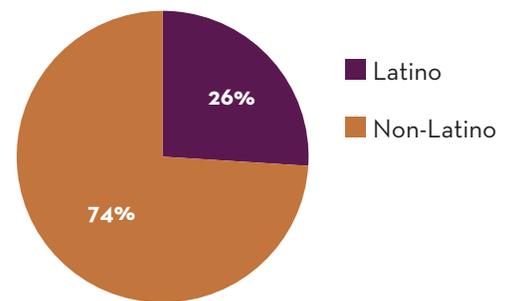


Figure 8. Student sample by gender and ethnicity

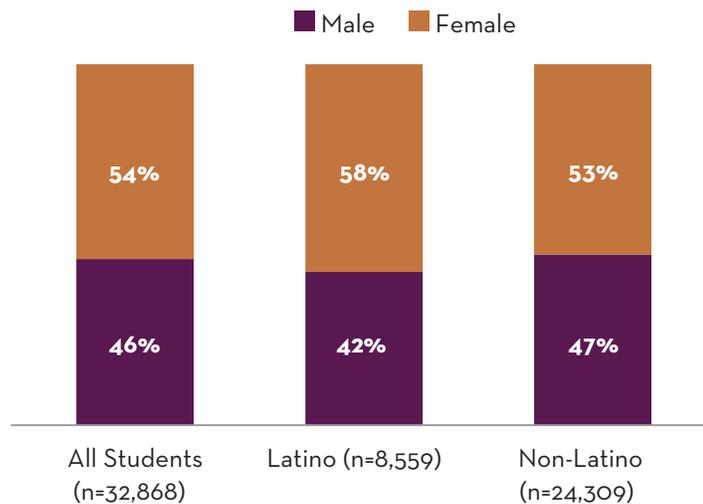


Figure 9. Student sample by age and ethnicity.

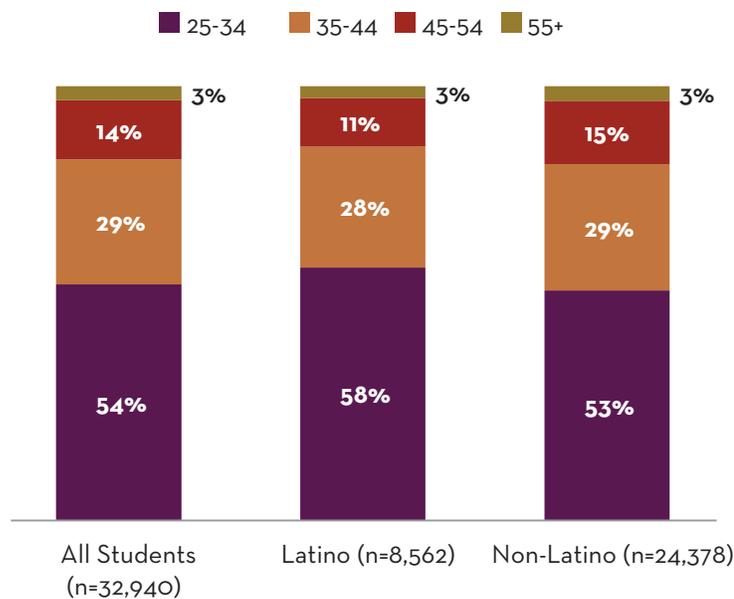


Figure 10. Student sample by military status and ethnicity

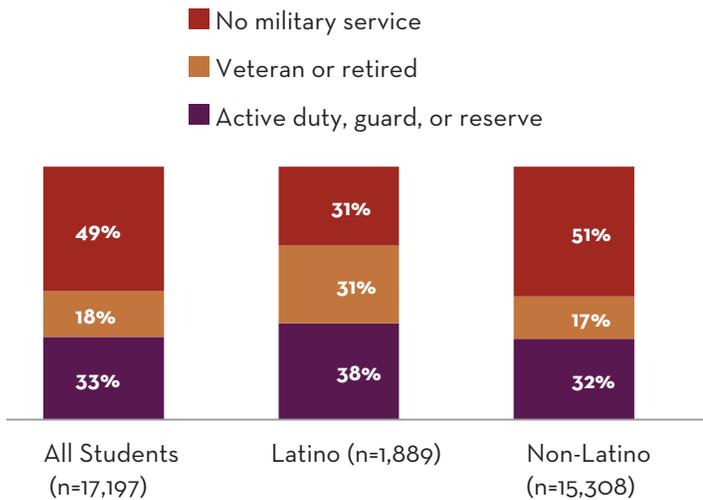


Figure 11. Student sample by financial aid status and ethnicity

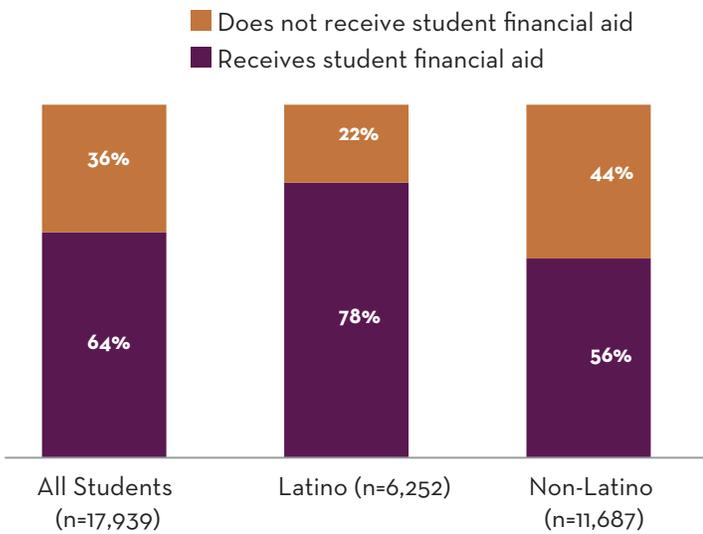
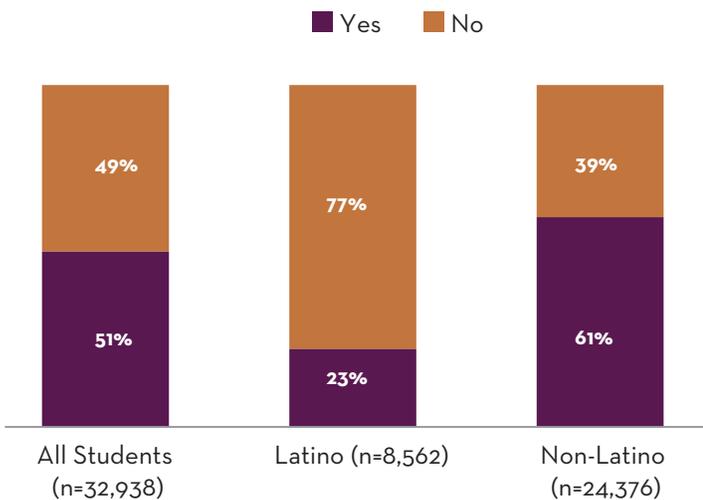


Figure 12. Student sample by transfer credit and ethnicity



56% receiving assistance (Figure 11). Although this data should be considered with caution given all of the missing values, the fact remains that large numbers of the Latino students at these institutions could benefit from a cost-saving mechanism like PLA, if their financial aid does not fully cover all of their educational expenses. Those who are fully supported by federal grants may have less of an incentive to use PLA, since PLA assessment fees are currently not eligible expenses under most federal financial aid programs.

Finally, nearly half of the students in our sample brought transfer credit to their current institution (49%), reflecting the reality that adult learners often start and stop their education and earn credits from multiple institutions. Compared with all adult students, smaller proportions of the Latino students in our sample were transfer students, meaning that in their late 20s, 30s, and 40s, they were starting their educational pursuits. PLA, if used, would provide them an important opportunity to gain additional credits to reduce their time to degree (Figure 12).

The institutions that participated in this study varied widely across a number of variables that can potentially influence outcomes related to PLA usage, such as PLA policy and practice, institution size and structure, discipline specializations, and differences in student ethnicity/race composition. In order to parse the effect of such differences, we identified commonalities among the 10 institutions, particularly in terms of size and structure, PLA program offerings and history, and student ethnic composition. From this analysis, three institutional categories emerged: Small Adult Serving Divisions, Large Adult Oriented Institutions, and Associate Degree Institutions.

- Small Adult Serving Divisions.** The three institutions in the Small Adult Serving Divisions (Small Divisions) category were institutions that had a separate division focused on adult learners; typically, most of the institutions' PLA offerings were housed in these divisions. These institutions had smaller adult student

populations (3.2% of the total sample in our study, or 1,054 students) and, on average, had a smaller proportion of Latino students (17.6%) (Table 2).

- **Large Adult Oriented Institutions.** Five institutions were Large Adult Oriented Institutions (Adult Oriented), which tended to have large student populations (49.3% of the total sample, or 16,239 students) and strong adult learning cultures with extensive use of online courses and PLA. Compared to the total sample, these institutions have lower proportions of Latino students on average (9.6%, compared with 17.6% and 43.6%); but given the size of the institutions, they do serve large numbers of Latino students.
- **Associate Degree Institutions.** Two institutions were categorized as Associate Degree Institutions (Associate Degree). These institutions have large student populations (15,647 students), a high concentration of Latino students (and average of 43.6%), and, like many other community college and associate degree institutions, have only recently started to offer and promote expanded options for PLA such as portfolio assessment.

### General Usage of PLA: Take-Up Rates, Credit-Earning, and Method

In order to assess general usage of PLA, we looked at three measures: PLA take-up rate, PLA credit-earning, and method of PLA. The PLA take-up rate is the percentage of students who had earned any credit using at least one PLA method at the participating institutions.

Overall PLA take-up rate for Latinos in our sample was low, but when controlling for institutional category, Latino students were consistently on par with non-Latino students. We also looked at the average number of credits earned through PLA and found that Latino and non-Latino students earn a similar number of credits through PLA. Finally, the method of PLA employed was analyzed, showing once again that Latino students use PLA in a very similar way to their non-Latino peers.

### PLA Take-Up Rate

The overall PLA take-up rate for the 10-institution sample was 35%, and when examined by ethnicity became 42% for non-Latino students and 15% for Latino students (Figure 13). However when looking at the PLA take-up rate by type of institution, we see a different story. At each type of institution, Latinos participate in PLA at equal or higher rates than non-Latinos. The lower PLA take-up rate by all students at the larger Associate Degree institutions skews the data when aggregated with the rest of the sample.

In the Small Divisions group, Latinos had a PLA take-up rate of 49% versus 35% for non-Latinos. Adult Oriented institutions had the highest overall PLA take-up rate at 67%. At these institutions, Latinos had a take-up rate of 69% while non-Latinos had a rate of 67%. At Associate Degree institutions, the overall take-up rate was very low, with Latinos relatively more likely to earn PLA credit. At these institutions, 2% of Latino students earned PLA credit compared to 1% of non-Latino students.

This shows that Latinos have similar PLA take-up rates, compared to non-Latinos, within the three types of institutions.

**Table 2. Institutional categories**

	Students in Sample	Percent of Total Sample	Percent Latino in Sample Grouping
Small Divisions	1,054	3.2%	17.6%
Adult Oriented	16,239	49.3%	9.6%
Associate Degree	15,647	47.5%	43.6%

Note: Logistic regression analysis on this dataset shows that when controlling for a range of factors (ethnicity, age, gender, institution type, receipt of financial aid, and existence of transfer credits), the variables most predictive of PLA take-up are institutions type (negative effect for associate degree institutions) and the existence of transfer credit (positive effect). Being Latino was positively associated with PLA take-up; however, the effect was much smaller. See additional technical note in the appendix.

### PLA Credit-Earning

PLA students in our sample earned an average of 27.1 credits through PLA, while Latino PLA students earned slightly less than non-Latinos, at 26.0 credits compared to 27.2 credits, on average.

Differences were evident in the number of credits earned within the three institutional groups but the differences were not substantial. Students at Large Adult Oriented institutions earned the most credit through PLA: 28.2 PLA credits for Latino students and 27.5 PLA credits for non-Latinos, on average. Small Divisions also had high PLA credit earnings: 22.0 PLA credits for Latino students and 24.1 PLA credits for non-Latinos, on average. Students at Associate Degree institutions earned far fewer credits through PLA, compared to the other institutional groups: 11.2 credits for Latinos and 11.5 credits for non-Latinos, on average (Figure 14). Some of this difference may be due to less flexibility in the degree plan at the associate level.

Figure 13. PLA Take-up rate by ethnicity and institutional grouping

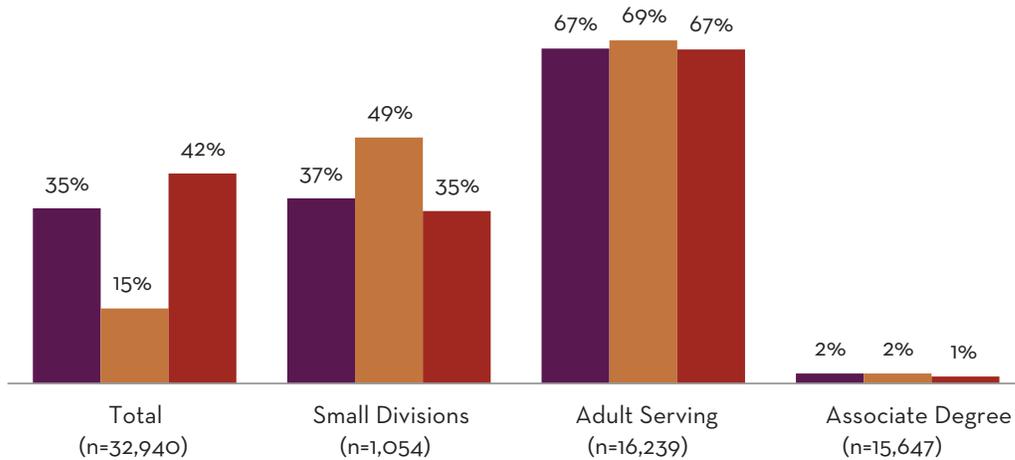
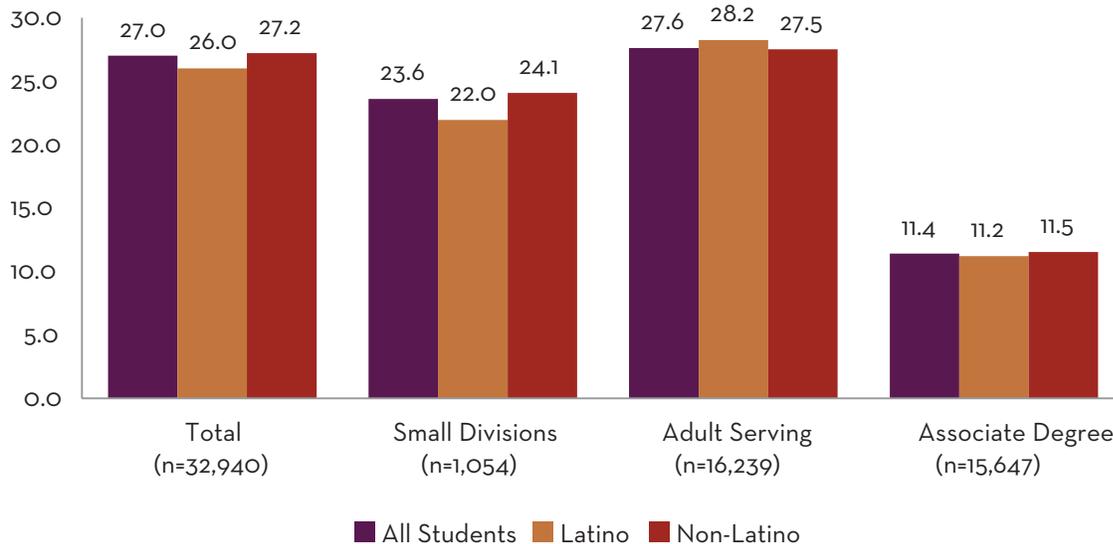


Figure 14. Number of PLA credits earned by institution grouping



### PLA Method Used

When looking at the methods of PLA used, we see that the most commonly used methods were standardized exams (e.g., CLEP), used by 19% of all students, followed by evaluation of non-collegiate training (e.g., ACE credit recommendations for military training), used by 17% of all students (Figure 15). Both Latino and non-Latino student populations used standardized exams and evaluation of non-collegiate training to a greater extent than other PLA methods. These findings would be expected due to comments from institutional representatives noting that these exams can be less time-consuming and less expensive than some other forms of PLA.

Examining the number of credits earned by PLA method, we find that the largest number of credits were earned through evaluation of non-collegiate training (32.7 credits), followed by portfolio assessment (17 credits), standardized exams (14.6 credits) and challenge exams (8.4 credits). Latino students earned three credits fewer on average than non-Latino students through the evaluation of non-collegiate training (30.2 credits), but two more credits than non-Latinos through standardized exams (14.7), one more through challenge exams (9.4), and .5 more credits through portfolio assessment (17.4) (Figure 16).

The use of PLA methods across institutional groupings varied considerably. Students at Small

Figure 15. Method of PLA by ethnicity

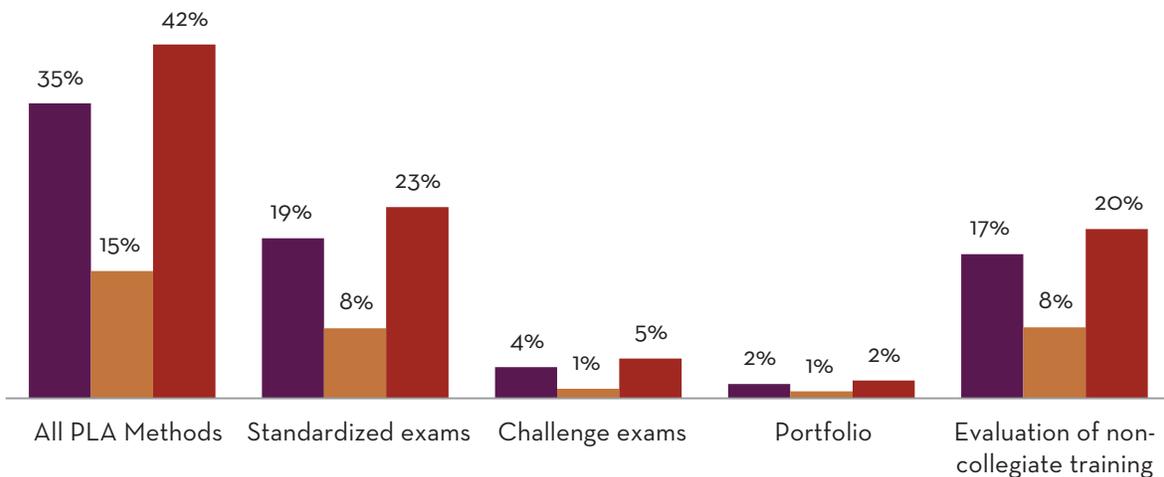
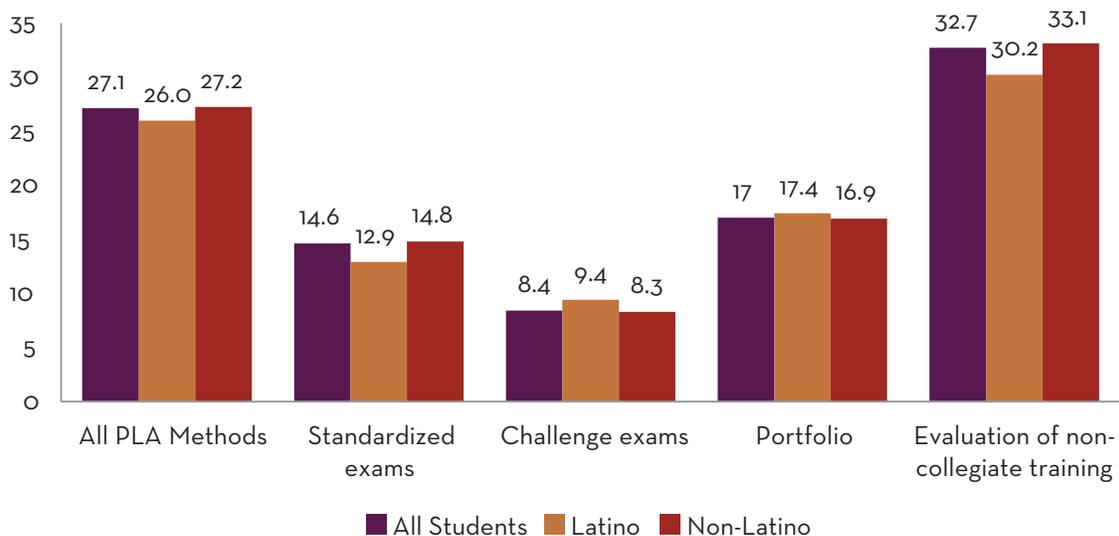


Figure 16. Average number of credits earned by ethnicity and by PLA method



Divisions were most likely to earn credit via portfolio assessment, with 24.8% of all adult students at these institutions earning credit through portfolio assessment; this was expected based on the comments from the Small Divisions staff who said that portfolio is promoted heavily at these institutions. Evaluation of non-collegiate training (8.9%) and standardized exams (8.4%) were also commonly used, and challenge exams were least common (5.3%).

At Associate Degree institutions, standardized exams were the most common method (1.3%), followed by challenge exams (0.3%); portfolio assessment was not used. Although Associate Degree institutions indicated in their

interviews and policy surveys that they provided credit for evaluation of non-collegiate training, the data they provided from the student records did not show students with any credit from this method. Finally, students at Large Adult institutions relied heavily on the use of standardized exams (36.7%) and evaluation of non-collegiate training (34.1%) (Figure 17 and 18).

### Area of Study Analysis

It is also important to consider what kind of college-level learning students are bringing from their work and life experiences. Knowing this can provide insights regarding how to promote PLA to students and how to advise them through the

Figure 17. Students using PLA method by institutional category

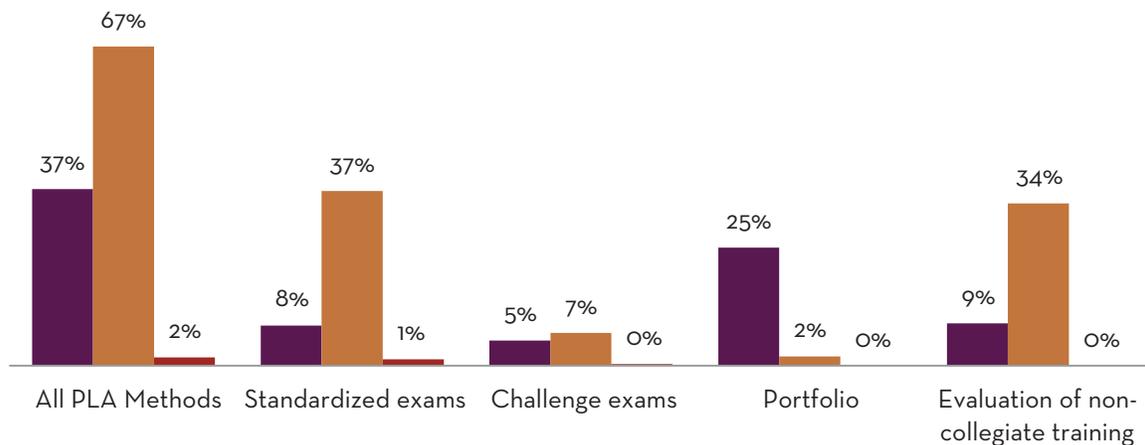
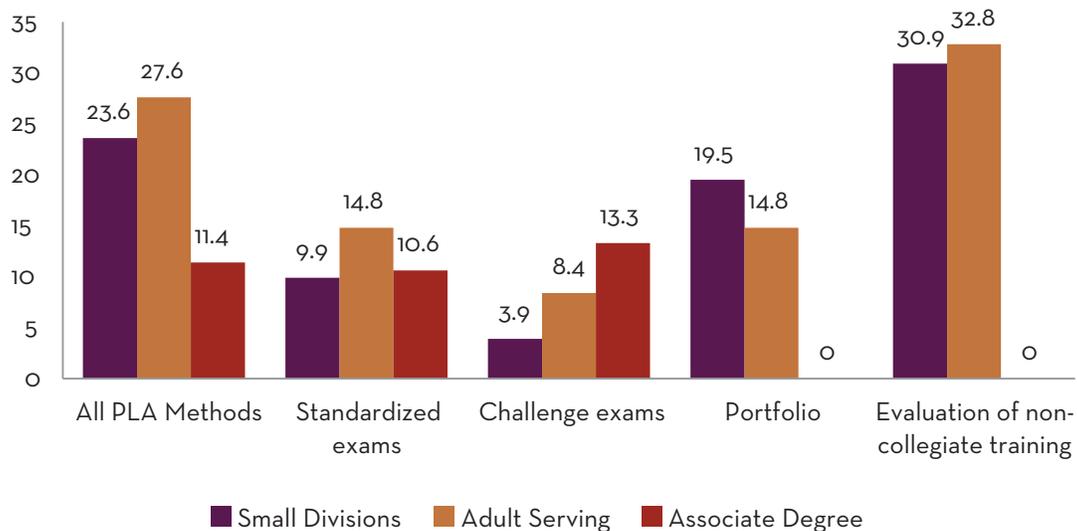


Figure 18. Average number of credits earned by institutional grouping and by PLA method



## Student Profiles: Marissa Saucedo

At a very young age, Marissa Saucedo entered the workforce to help her single mother make ends meet. At age 16, she worked evenings as a medical collector with her sister: investigating cases, filing insurance claims, and negotiating agreements. She stayed with this job for nine years, later supplementing her income with a second job in policy service for an insurance company. During this time, supporting her daughter was her priority, even though she knew that her goal was to earn a degree. As she remembers, “It was all on me, and I needed to make a better life.” In pursuit of this better life, she enrolled in college for the first time, though she admits, “I lacked confidence and didn’t know if I could do it. I had never tested myself academically.”

Marissa had very little time between work and family, but she kept to a slow and steady regimen of coursework and completed an associate degree in psychology after eight years of study. At the suggestion of her spouse, she went straight to Texas State University to earn a bachelor’s degree in applied arts and science through their Occupational, Workforce, and Leadership Studies adult degree program. However, the decision to continue her education was not an easy one: “I had to decide how feasible my education would be.” Marissa wanted to save time and money, and make her work experience count, and the fact that the TSU program offers what they call Life Credit through a portfolio development course made her decision much easier.

According to Marissa, the PLA portfolio course “was actually a life changing experience.” By delving into her work and personal history on the search for experiential learning, she uncovered much more than she expected. In addition to discovering years of skill building in topics such as



investigation, settlement negotiation, interviewing, and analysis, she also discovered a new way of looking at herself. “Up to that point I had seen myself as someone who wasn’t responsible and hadn’t planned for the future. I always saw myself as making bad decisions for myself. When I broke it all down, I stepped back and thought about the major events in my life. I made crazy decisions, but that gave me the drive to better myself. My decisions seem very good in retrospect.”

After completing the PLA course and her portfolio, which covered learning from 10 years of work experience in 125 pages, Marissa earned 25 credits, in addition to the transfer credits that she brought in with her. Earning these credits made her feel “affirmed that all of my efforts weren’t wasted. It justified that amount of time and effort I put into work.” Because she earned these credits at the very beginning of her studies at Texas State, she felt encouraged to continue on towards her degree, which she recently completed. She is currently a loss prevention consultant for the Texas Association of School Boards.

process. In addition, the type of degree that a student is pursuing, in terms of area of study or major, is an important part of the overall picture of whether PLA is helping students earn degrees in fields that are in high demand.

Using data provided by each institution on the areas of study for earned PLA credits, we found that health professions and foreign language were the most common academic disciplines in which Latinos earned PLA credit. A significantly higher percentage of Latino than non-Latino students used PLA to earn foreign language credit, while the reverse was true of health professions. The number of credits earned by Latinos by area of study was, on average, about the same for most other areas of study, with the exception being health professions; Latinos earning PLA credit in the area

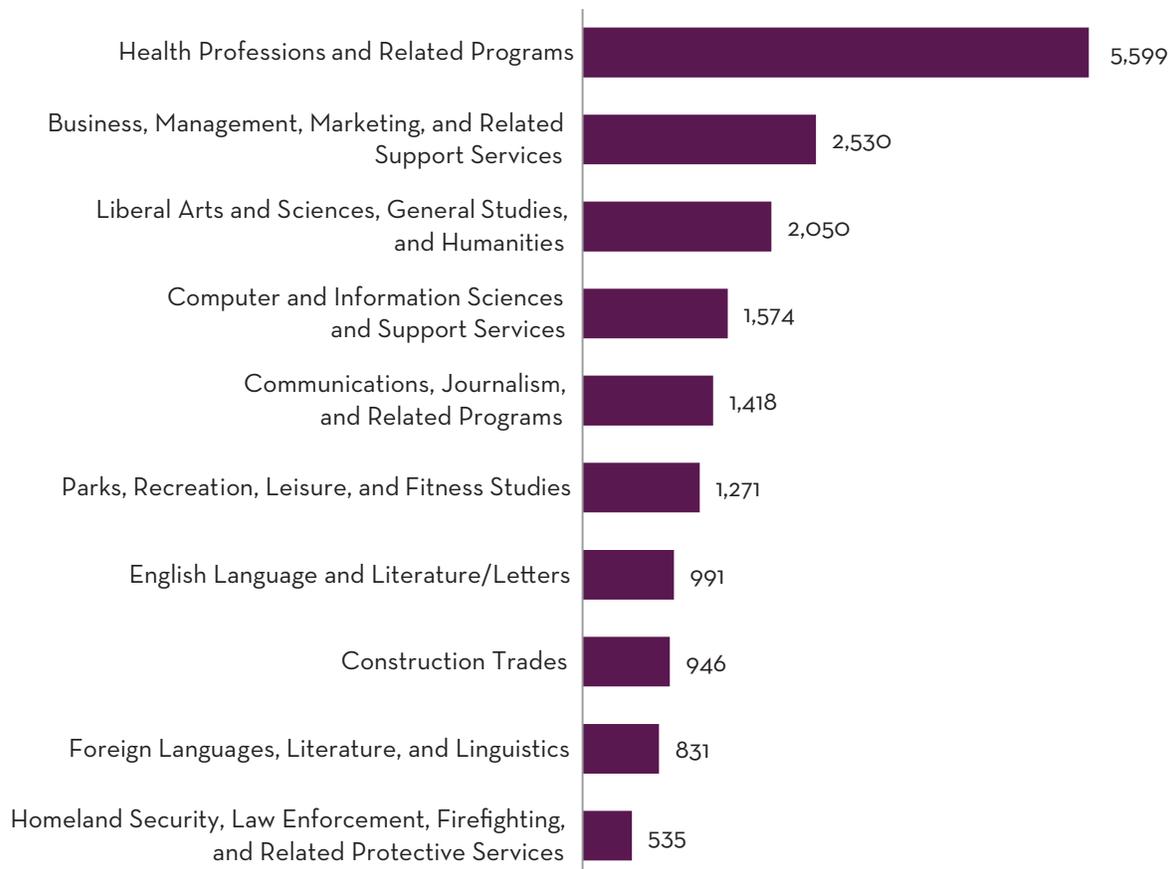
of health professions earned significantly fewer credits, on average, compared with non-Latinos.

### *PLA Credit-Earning by Area of Study*

Among the 11,533 students who earned PLA credit within this sample, the most common area of study for which PLA credit was earned was health professions and related programs (5,599 students); followed by business, management, marketing, and related support services (2,530 students), and then liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities (2,050) (Figure 19).

When examining area of study by ethnicity, we found that the most common areas of study in which Latinos earned PLA credit were health professions (37%) and foreign languages (28%). Although health professions was the top area of study for Latino PLA credit-earning, Latinos

**Figure 19. Most popular disciplines by number of students earning PLA credit**

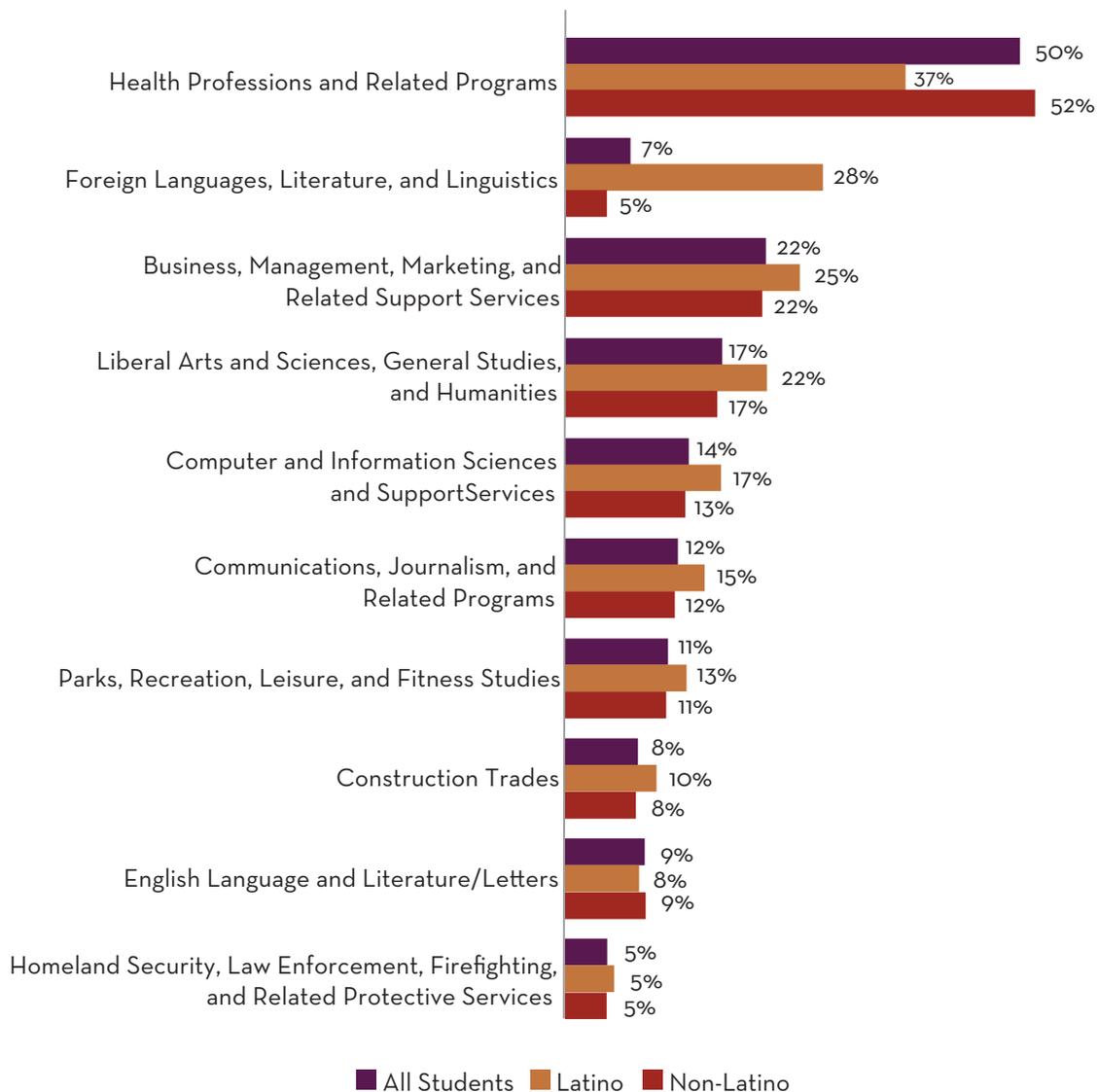


were somewhat underrepresented compared with non-Latinos, as 50% of non-Latinos earned PLA credit in this area. In contrast, in foreign languages, Latinos were much more likely to earn credit when compared to non-Latinos; 28% of Latino PLA credit earners had credit for foreign language while only 5% of non-Latinos did (Figure 20). The difference in health professions is partly explained by the fact that participating institutions with a strong emphasis on health professions had lower Latino enrollment, proportionally, than other institutions, while the higher proportion of Latinos earning foreign language credit in PLA was consistent across all institution types.

### Number of PLA Credits by Area of Study

The data show that there is much variability in terms of the number of credits that students earned through PLA for various areas of study. On average, students in our sample earned the most number of credits in the area of foreign languages (11.8 credits), health professions (10.9), and liberal arts (9.0), on average. In most areas of study, Latino students were, on average, earning equivalent—or near equivalent—numbers of credit. However, in health related professions, Latino students earned 2.3 fewer PLA credits, on average, than non-Latino students; and in parks and recreation, Latino students

Figure 20. Most popular areas of study for which students earned PLA credit, by ethnicity



earned 3.1 more PLA credits, on average, than non-Latinos (Figure 21).

### Academic Major of the Students

Earning any college credential is of value to the individual and to society. The college learning experience is more than just job training, and the college degree is more than just a ticket to a better career. A college education is also correlated with healthier lifestyles, lower reliance on public assistance, and greater civic participation (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Yet, the economic argument for greater degree completion—meeting labor market needs and opening doors to better career options—is often the most persuasive for policymakers and individuals alike. Many

of the students we interviewed for this study were going to school specifically to be able to advance in their careers. Approximately a quarter of the students interviewed for this study stated that they returned to school primarily for career advancement. It is, therefore, useful to look at PLA credit earning in relationship to the areas of study in which the PLA credit-earners are majoring.

Overall, the majority of students in this sample had majors in the areas of liberal arts or health professions. Latino students were considerably more likely to major in the area of liberal arts (38% compared to 22% for non-Latino students), while non-Latino students were more likely to major in the area of health professions

Figure 21. Average credits earned in most common disciplines for PLA credit earning, by ethnicity

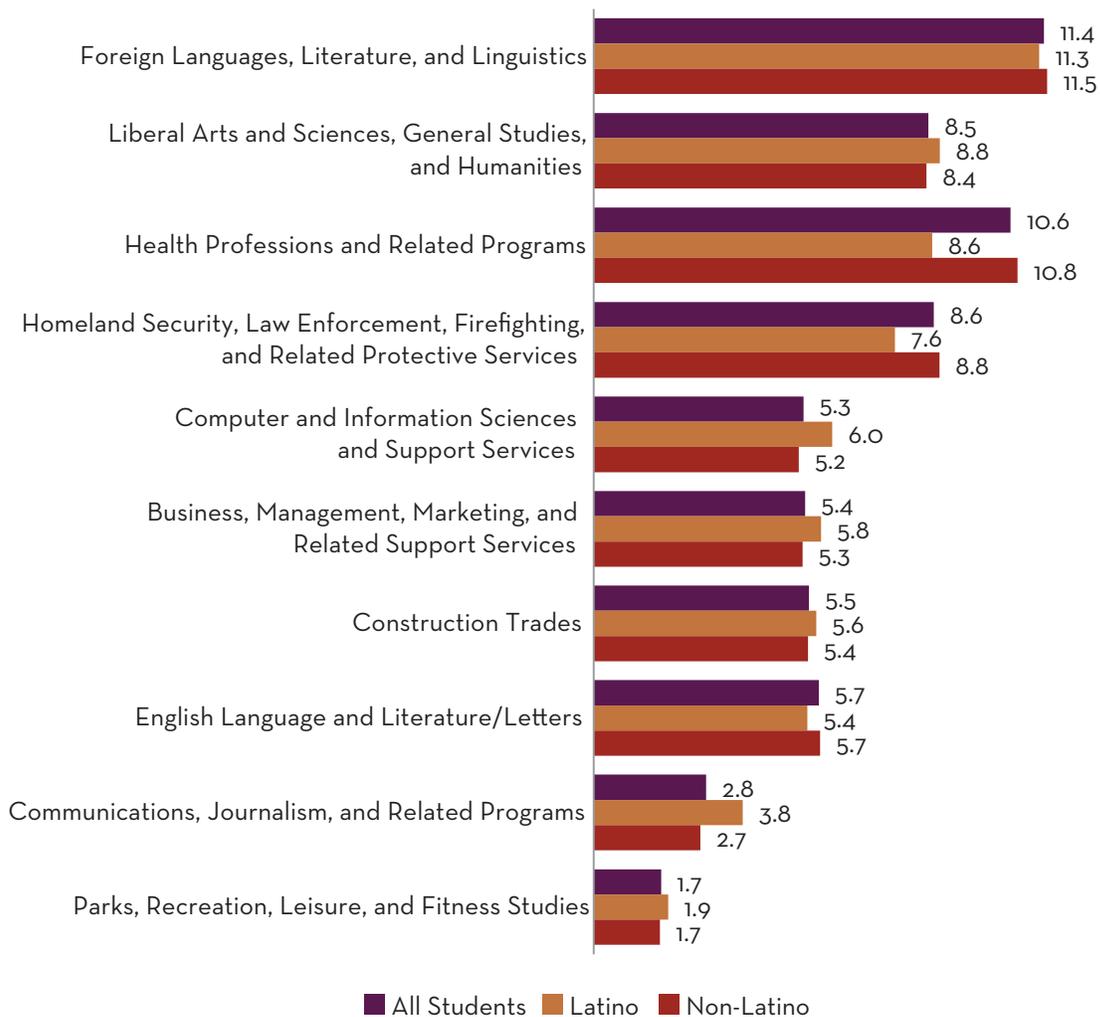


Figure 22. Most common majors, by ethnicity and area of study

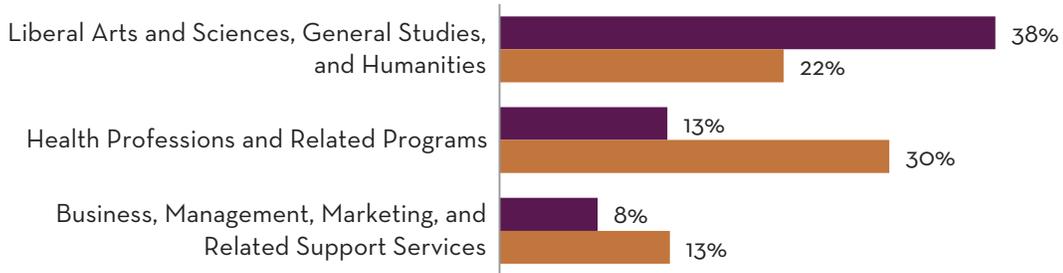


Figure 23. Most common majors at Small Divisions institutions, by ethnicity and area of study



Figure 24. Most common majors at Large Adult Serving institutions, by ethnicity and area of study

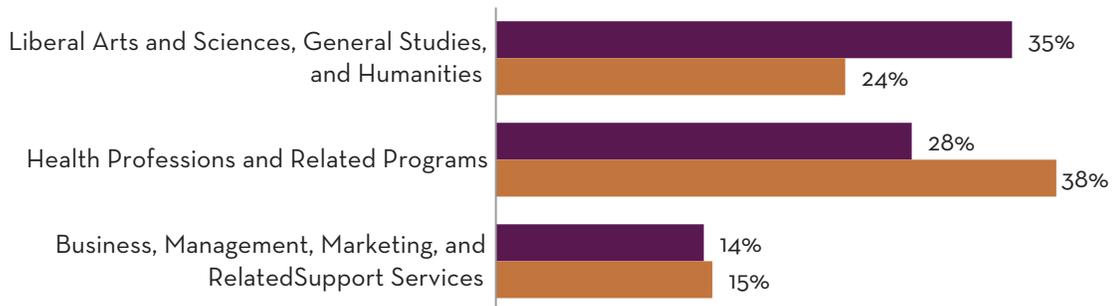
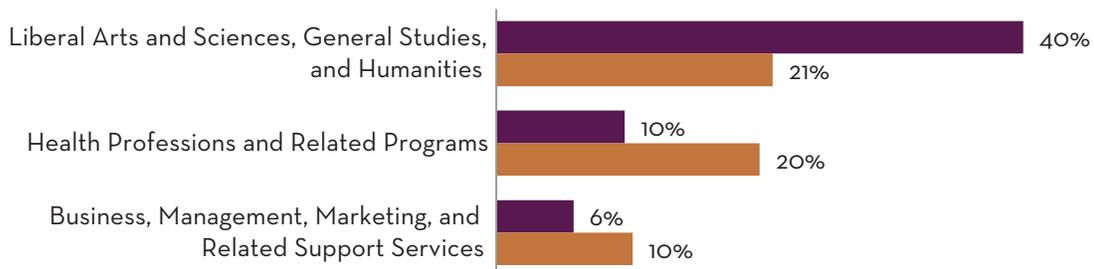


Figure 25. Most common majors at Associate Degree colleges, by ethnicity and area of study



■ Latino ■ Non-Latino

(30% compared to 13%) (Figure 22). This same pattern was seen at both Adult Oriented institutions and at Associate Degree colleges (Figure 24 and 25 ). At Small Divisions, majors in business management and multidisciplinary studies were the most common for both Latino and non-Latino students (Figure 23).

It is noteworthy that several of these areas of study lead to careers in high growth occupations. As the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce has reported, sales/office support, managerial/professional services, and healthcare professional and technical are among the occupational clusters that are projected to grow the fastest between 2010 and 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). This means that PLA can support and is supporting the development of careers in these promising fields for employment.

### A Closer Look at Foreign Language and PLA

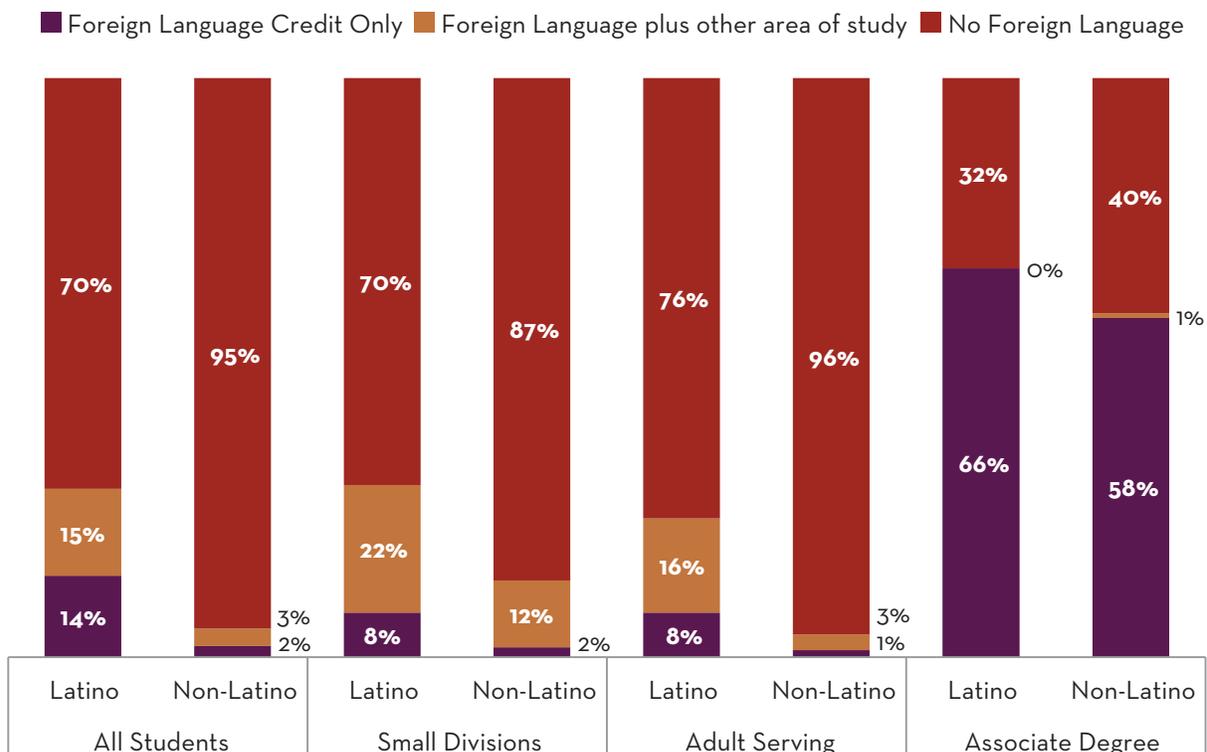
Latino students often possess knowledge of a second language, whether learned at home, in

their communities, or through personal study. According to the students and the institutional representatives we interviewed, this knowledge is often easily translated into college credits through CLEP testing. A particular question of interest in our study was whether Spanish language PLA credit served as a spring board to using PLA for other areas of study, or whether bilingual students who have been steered to Spanish CLEP tended to earn PLA credit for that subject only.

Several institutions reported steering bilingual Latino students toward the Spanish Language CLEP test. It is apparent from the data that this strategy for serving Latinos can be effective for getting more bilingual Latino students to take advantage of PLA, as foreign language credit is one of the top two areas of study in which Latinos earn PLA credit.

The data also show that about half of Latino students with foreign language PLA credit also earn PLA credit in other areas of study (Figure 26). Of all Latino students with any PLA credit, 14% earned only credit for foreign language,

Figure 26. Prevalence of foreign language PLA credit-earning by students with any PLA credit, by ethnicity and institutional category



## Student Profiles: Nilda Vincenty

When Nilda Vincenty graduated high school in 1979, she wasn't exactly sure what her next step should be. Growing up with two parents that had not completed high school, she understood the importance of education and enrolled in college to study theater. She soon found, however, that she wasn't able to keep up with her financial responsibilities while attending school full time and had to leave her studies after only one year. Nilda decided that her education had to take a back burner to working; and over the course of the next 10 years, she found various jobs in entry-level positions to support herself.

Then in the early 1990s, while working as a coat-check girl, a manager saw potential in Nilda's natural ease with numbers and currency, and, as Nilda recalls, "the manager took me under his wing and I learned accounts receivable." From there, she moved into bookkeeping and administration and eventually worked her way up to assistant comptroller.

Throughout her years of ascending into positions with more and more responsibility, Nilda never gave up on the idea of earning a degree, and in 2009 she decided to re-enroll in college. She met with an advisor at a local college who suggested that she look into the adult degree programs at SUNY Empire State College. A conversation with a mentor at SUNY confirmed that Nilda was a perfect candidate for PLA. After having the concept of portfolio assessment explained, Nilda thought "this is the greatest thing since popcorn!" and was excited by the amount of time she could save and the classes she could potentially bypass. Nilda worked very closely with her mentor, who helped her to identify her experiential learning and develop her portfolio essay. As she thought about her career, the task of



writing an essay for college credit became profound; the process "made me realize what I was capable of. Before, I thought of what I did as just a job, but when I wrote about it, there was a 'wow' moment. I didn't realize I had picked up so much along the way."

In the end, Nilda earned 9 credits through portfolio assessment for bookkeeping, accounting, and computer programming along with 3 credits for Spanish through a CLEP exam. Today, she is a senior project bookkeeper for a non-profit, is only 2 credits shy of earning her associate degree, and has plans to move straight into a bachelor's program and eventually become a CPA. She highly recommends portfolio assessment to any adult learner. "You'll feel so much better about yourself. You'll realize things you didn't realize before. A whole bunch of people I know, including myself, wasted time in our youths. It's nice to not waste your adulthood, and grab it back and take control. I've had the chance to reclaim something that I lost."

while 15% earned credit for foreign language plus at least one other area of study (the remaining 70% did not earn credit in foreign language at all).

When analyzed by institution type, this pattern is also evident among the Small Divisions colleges and the Adult Oriented ones. At the Small Divisions colleges, 8% of Latino PLA students earned PLA credit for foreign language only, and another 22% earned credit for foreign language plus another area of study. At the Adult Oriented institutions, 8% of Latino PLA students earned PLA credit for foreign language only, and another 16% earned credit for foreign language plus another area of study.

In general, it is evident that there can be tremendous diversity in the areas of study for which Latino students earn credit. In fact, about half of all Latino students with any PLA credit for foreign language also earned credit in a second or third area of study beyond foreign language. Additionally, it is noteworthy that large percentages of Latino PLA credit earners in each institution group did not earn PLA credit in a foreign language at all. So, while many institutions tend to recommend Spanish CLEP to their binlingual Latino students as a first step in PLA, this student population may be just as likely to respond to PLA outreach strategies emphasizing other areas of study.

## Summary

Overall, the data demonstrate that at institutions with strong PLA programs, where take-up rates are higher for all students, the PLA take-up rate and credit earning of Latino students is comparable to, if not better than, non-Latino students. The methods used by Latinos to earn PLA credit largely reflect those used by non-Latinos, and the number of credits earned in each method varied only slightly.

Our analysis shows that participation in PLA is less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution. Latino students have lower PLA participation only in certain institutional settings, namely,

associate degree institutions where there have historically been fewer PLA options in terms of methods, less of a PLA-promoting culture, and policies that often limit the flexibility a student has in the degree plan. And while this finding may be partly the result of other differences in the student populations of these institutions (e.g., unavailable measures such as academic preparedness, innate motivation, or socio-economic factors), the data nevertheless strongly suggests that PLA is likely underutilized in many institutions. Given that the associate degree institutions in our study have recently expanded their PLA offerings and enhanced their PLA policies and practices, we would expect to see larger PLA take-up rates at these institutions in more recent student cohorts.

Across all institutions, Latino students are much more likely than non-Latino students to earn PLA credits for foreign language, invariably due to knowledge of Spanish acquired in their homes or communities. Therefore, it seems appropriate that many institutions are choosing to steer bilingual Latino students in that direction as a first step in getting credit for prior learning. However, a large proportion of Latino students went on to earn credit in other areas as well, and were in fact as likely—or more likely—to do so than non-Latinos.





## Student and Staff Perspectives on PLA

The interviews with institutional representatives and Latino PLA students provide additional context, not only about the perceived benefits of PLA but also about the real challenges for PLA within the institutions. The comments from the interview subjects (as well as the data on PLA usage), suggest that the Latino student experience with PLA was not very different from the experiences of non-Latino students. At the same time, there are important lessons from their comments that can inform how to serve all students better through PLA.

### Benefits

Representatives from the participating institutions identified many benefits from the use of PLA, for both the students and the institutions. Some of the merits mentioned are examples often highlighted in discussions of PLA: students save money; they do not need to take courses in topics they already know; and they progress more quickly towards their degrees. Additional benefits included having prior learning count for something, expanding course options, providing personal validation, flipping the power dynamic, improving student recruitment, and influencing the next generation. These benefits are important for both Latino students and non-Latino students.

**Motivation from time and cost savings.** PLA is often advertised as a way for students to save time and money in earning their degrees. Student interviewees acknowledged the appeal of this message, with 14 of the 23 mentioning time savings and 10 mentioning cost savings. As noted earlier, a higher percentage of Latino students in our sample received need-based financial aid, so cost savings understandably is quite important.

**Degree completion.** Several institutions mentioned the relationship between PLA credit-earning and better graduation rates, not just as a statistical finding from CAEL's *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* study but also as real-life fact from their own anecdotal experience

with students or from analyzing their own student data. PLA sometimes played an important role in a student's return to school, with one respondent saying, "Without PLA I don't know if I would have started pursuing this. It allowed me to see a light at the end of the tunnel. It was attainable, something I could do."

**A way to make learning from experience count.** Another motivation was to take advantage of experiential learning. One student was excited to learn that PLA was an option for her, saying "I had so many years of work experience, and I always thought it was wasted." With PLA, the learning from that experience could be evaluated for college credit and count towards her degree.

**Leverage of Spanish language knowledge.** Institutional representatives noted that they often advise Latino students who speak Spanish to take the Spanish CLEP exam as a way to earn PLA credit. This is by far not the only area of study for which bilingual Latino students earn PLA credit, but it is a great way to get them started in the process. In this way, PLA is recognizing a feature of a student's ethnic background as something valuable in the context of higher education.

**Expanding course options for students.** One institution noted that PLA can be a way for students to earn credit for courses that are not offered through the college's regular catalog. For example, a student interviewee earned credit for Portuguese via CLEP even though her institution did not officially offer this course. This benefit of PLA has some limitations, however, since some institutions have policies that restrict PLA credit-earning to only areas of study offered at the institution.

**Validating students and what they bring to higher education.** One institutional representative noted that PLA is "honoring what has gone on in their life and what they've learned. It gives them validation." The validation message

## Student Profiles: Isidro Guerrero



Isidro Guerrero is a U.S. Army veteran and current student at Barry University, seeking a degree in information technology. In 1990, when Isidro graduated high school, he briefly enrolled in a local community college but took classes for only six months. He felt uncertain about the direction that his life should take and decided to join the Army where he worked in communications. After his discharge, Isidro brought his military honed skills to a private computer technology company and soon decided to once again enroll in college. He studied only briefly, however, before realizing that he was not motivated to continue with his degree plan.

Soon thereafter, Isidro went through a period of personal development and self-realization explaining, “[I wanted] to apply myself and go back to school. I wanted to be more competitive and get a better job.” So, he pursued law enforcement training through the department of justice and became a trained criminal investigator. A continued desire for further educational attainment, however, eventually led him

to Barry University, which offers an adult-oriented program with evening classes that fit his schedule. After learning about Barry’s PLA portfolio program from online research, Isidro enrolled and began the process of creating his portfolio. He took an independent approach, acquiring the information and skills needed for the task through his own research, and was able to complete his portfolio within three months of enrollment.

For the learning he demonstrated from his many years of work and military experience, Isidro earned a total of 18 credits, both lower and upper level, in the field of communications, along with 6 credits through a Spanish CLEP exam. According to Isidro, earning these credits “felt fantastic. I felt compensated and recognized for what I learned in the past.” In addition to getting college credits, Isidro thought the portfolio building process was useful because “it shows you what you lack so you can fill in those spaces, as well as what you have already accomplished.” Today, Isidro is 19 credits away from completing his bachelor’s degree, and he doesn’t plan on stopping there. His sights are set on earning a master’s degree in business administration in order to run his own business. For now, he is satisfied that, by earning his degree, he is going to prove to his children that “they can do it too, with will power.”

was also mentioned by institutions when asked specifically about the benefits of the portfolio assessment option. One institution's representative explained that the portfolio development and assessment process requires students to reflect on their learning, and this gives the students a greater sense of their own knowledge and ability to learn. The interviewed students also mentioned this as a benefit of PLA. Eighteen of the student interviewees (including all 14 who completed portfolios) felt that the self-reflection they undertook during the PLA process increased their feelings of pride and self-worth. One student explained, "The process requires you to work backward and reflect back on every experience you've had. I went all the way back to when I was 16. I saw where I came from and it made me very proud." Another stated, "In high school, I was below average, and the portfolio helped me understand that the hard work that I've done has really paid off. I went from being someone not college educated to being successful. It changed the way I thought about myself. I have abilities, or I wouldn't be where I am."

**Flipping the power dynamic.** One institutional representative noted that not only does earning credit through PLA give students confidence and a sense that they "belong" in higher education, but in cases where the student is explaining what academic skills they have acquired in the context of a workplace, the portfolio process serves to "flip the power dynamic" by having the students be the experts. In this new dynamic, the faculty assessor may be in the position of learning from the student.<sup>2</sup>

**Appealing to adults who are considering a return to education.** Some institutions mentioned that PLA can be a way for the institution to recruit students or expand the pool of students who typically attend the institution. Providing a way for these students to shorten the time to degree while reducing the overall cost can be an important factor for their consideration.

**Influencing the next generation.** Finally, one student noted that getting a college degree

was an important message to send to her own children, and she viewed PLA as making that possible. She explained, "When you have kids in school, you want to finish, you want to show them that it's possible. You don't want them to follow in your shoes [and not continue with their educations]. But it's challenging, and PLA made it so much easier."

The portfolio helped me understand that the hard work that I've done has really paid off. It changed the way I thought about myself.

### Challenges

Though there are many benefits to offering PLA, participating institutions and students also discussed a number of challenges related to its implementation. Communicating PLA options to students through marketing and outreach was one of the biggest challenges discussed. Part of the challenge may be that institutions are not doing enough outreach on PLA, or that the outreach they are doing on PLA is not reaching the students effectively. A second obstacle to the promotion of PLA is the fact that financial aid often does not cover various methods of PLA; so while these methods cost less than tuition, there is a reduced incentive for students to pursue PLA if tuition is fully covered by financial aid. Other issues include faculty resistance to PLA and the writing demands of certain PLA methods.

**Marketing and outreach.** Ensuring that students hear about and understand what PLA is and how it can help them is a major undertaking. According to their survey responses, the institutions informed students about PLA in different ways. At all 10 institutions, academic advisors and a website informed students of their PLA options, and 9 of the 10 institutions also used the catalog to communicate with students about PLA. Some other popular methods included admissions counselors (6 institutions), advertising (5 institutions), a PLA brochure (5 institutions), and the

<sup>2</sup> This change in the student-teacher dynamic, where the students become the experts, has also been referenced in PLA literature (Pokorny, 2012).

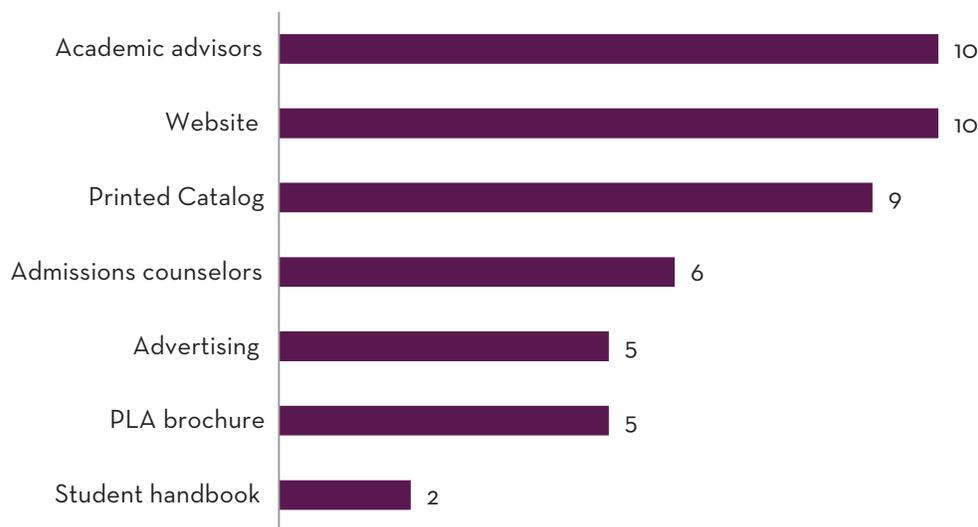
student handbook (2 institutions) (Figure 27). In interviews, institutions added that other outreach strategies are used as well, such as talking about PLA at workplace recruitment visits, as well as television and radio ads. The institutions said that student responses to hearing about PLA ranged from being “pleasantly surprised” or “excited” to being “overwhelmed and crying when they realized that what they have done has value.” The institutions said that these reactions were no different for Latino than non-Latino students. Only one institution reported doing special outreach and marketing to Latino students to let them know about PLA options.

While these institutions were clearly taking steps to disseminate information on PLA, the outreach did not always hit the mark. One representative stated, “The challenge is that they haven’t heard about it. More people would come if they realized that they could get credit for what they learned at work. Once people hear about it, it’s a plus.” Many student interviewees, especially from schools that do not offer a specialized PLA course, spent considerable time searching for information about possible PLA options online or through calls to various school

departments. One student concurred with the institutional representative in saying that as a credit option, PLA “is just not talked about” and another student added, “It (PLA) should be at the forefront... I don’t recall PLA jumping out at you, and it should.” This means that the PLA take-up rate we do see, at least in some institutions, is likely to be the result of only the most motivated students consulting the catalog, talking to advisors, learning about PLA, and taking action. For example, even when information is available on a school’s website, it is not specifically highlighted or easily accessible. In fact, one student identified this “fragmented” information as a problem and took it upon himself to compile all of his school’s PLA related information into one document, which he presented to a school administrator.

One of the reasons for these communications challenges, according to representatives from two institutions, is that the faculty and staff charged with telling students about PLA (or identifying students who are good candidates for PLA) may not be fully informed themselves. One representative added that even when faculty or advisors do know a lot about PLA and communicate it well,

Figure 27. How do you inform students about PLA?



students may “underestimate the quantity, quality, and value of what they know.”

On the flipside, some of the institutions with long PLA histories acknowledged that they have a reputation for offering PLA, and many of their students come to those institutions knowing about PLA already, a topic also touched on by the student interview participants. In fact, the most commonly discussed reason for choosing their current school was the institution’s PLA program; nearly half of the participants considered PLA policy as part of their decision to enroll. One student said that “They [the institution] were the only one I found that offered credit for

houses, however, may not reach the typical adult, especially one who is also juggling work and family responsibilities. In fact, institutional representatives and students agree that one of the most effective means of spreading the word on PLA offerings is from student to student. Three institutions said during their interviews that many students come to PLA through “word of mouth.” One representative explained, “The best recruiters are satisfied customers. We have information on our website, but they generally need to hear it from someone they know.” Nearly half of the student interviewees heard about PLA credit through prior learning by word of mouth, anywhere from spouses to friends to “the tax-guy.” About one-third heard about it through a school advisor, and fewer than a quarter learned about PLA through school websites (Figure 28).

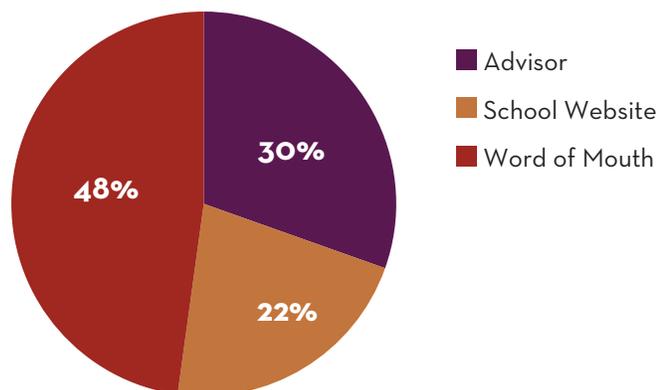
Acknowledging a potential downside to institutions drawing students based on a reputation as a PLA school, one institution mentioned that sometimes students come to the school with heightened expectations about PLA because of messages from the institution’s marketing department. A student agreed with this sentiment when he said “there needs to be a disclaimer with this, that not everyone can get the same results.”

### Nearly half of the student interviewees heard about PLA credit through prior learning by word of mouth

my certification,” while another student “found them online and it looked like they did lots of PLA, and at my age, time is very important.”

Aware that PLA offerings can be attractive to many potential enrollees, several institutions mentioned that PLA is presented to students during open houses or student orientations, and others present PLA at events for employers. Events like student orientations and open

Figure 28. Question to student interviewees: How did you first learn about PLA?



**PLA is not an eligible expense for many financial aid options.** Several institutions also mentioned cost as a challenge for PLA. While the cost of assessment is usually less than enrolling in a course, PLA is generally not covered by federal financial aid and is not always covered by employer tuition assistance. One institution said that students would rather take a loan and enroll in the course than pay out-of-pocket for the assessment; for that reason, the institution offers payment plans for PLA. Notably, no student interviewees discussed cost as a hindrance to using PLA.

**Faculty resistance.** One common challenge for PLA is faculty resistance to awarding credit for learning that takes place outside the institution, so CAEL researchers asked about this specifically. The participating institutions varied in their responses. Some of the institutions that have offered PLA for 40 years said that faculty support is high because PLA is “part of our DNA” or institutional mission. However, that was not universally the case; one institution with a long history with PLA said that its faculty are getting “more traditional” and are focused more on their own courses. Institutions with PLA offered primarily within adult-focused divisions said that faculty support within their divisions was high, but faculty in other parts of the institution are less informed about it and may, therefore, be less supportive of what they do not understand. Said one representative of an adult-focused division, “Originally it was tough explaining that PLA was legitimate. It took years to explain concepts. After demonstrating that we need students to demonstrate high levels of competencies, we were more accepted.” Right now, she noted, support for PLA is very strong.

### **Writing demands of learning portfolios.**

There are also some challenges that are specific to portfolio assessment, particularly the need for the student to have strong writing skills. A Latino student interviewee explained: “It’s hard to write; not everyone is a writer. This is about writing a story, your story. If you aren’t a writer, and you haven’t written anything in years, it’s hard to start.” This is true for not only Latino students, but adult students in general, many of whom may be coming to higher education after being out of the classroom for many years, and many of whom may not have had positive experiences with writing. Earning PLA credit through a writing-intensive process may not seem to them like an appealing experience, regardless of the promise of saving time and money.

Since over a third of Latinos in the United States have English as their first language (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), and 64% were born in the United States (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Cuddington, 2013), it is incorrect to presume that language will be a particular barrier for all Latino students. However, some of the institutional representatives interviewed acknowledged that the writing requirement could be a barrier to any student whose English language skills are not strong.

Even when a student already writes well, the portfolio development process can be demanding and instructive from a writing perspective. One student interviewee saw this as an opportunity to improve his writing skills and added that completing a portfolio “definitely made me a better writer, which is important for my job.”



## Specific Strategies to Support PLA Use Among Latino Students

Most of the participating institutions acknowledged that, with the exception of steering bilingual Latino students to Spanish CLEP exams, there were no special strategies in place to assist Latino students in identifying their prior learning or accessing PLA opportunities. As with other adult learners, the onus is on the student to find PLA and get the support services they need.

One institution explained that in online institutions, it can be difficult to provide student support services in general. Another institution pointed out that the Latino population is very diverse and may not be easily identified. The representative said, “Latinos are not a single monolithic group. They have differing politics, socio-economic backgrounds, race divisions, and ethnicities. Also, they may not be easily identified. Probably a third of Latino students don’t have what we would think of as a Spanish surname, and some don’t speak Spanish.”

Although our data show that Latino students are participating in PLA in equal rates to non-Latinos, several institutions acknowledged that additional support for this population might still be warranted, particularly if the goal is to encourage greater PLA use and, ultimately, degree completion. One representative noted that many Latino students are first generation college students and that the experience of first generation students is one in which everything at a higher education institution can seem “like a foreign language.” An option like PLA, which even students from more educated families might not fully understand, will require some additional outreach and explanation.

One institution did have a special pilot program for assisting Latino and other underserved female students with PLA, and portfolio development in particular. The program is called Women of Color: Valuing Experience, Identifying Learning and was developed specifically in response to the findings of *Fueling*

*the Race to Postsecondary Success*. The 2010 CAEL report noted that underserved students like Latinos and African Americans can benefit greatly from PLA and yet their take-up rates can be low (Klein-Collins). The Women of Color program consists of a series of workshops to promote PLA to female students of color through the exploration and articulation of their own life experiences. The self-reflective and self-expressive workshops culminate in a formal request for each woman’s life learning to be evaluated at the college level (see sidebar, following page).

While the pilot sessions have only served small numbers of students to date, the program designers and administrators have learned a great deal from the students; as a result, the administrators are developing some theories about why PLA take-up rates for underserved groups might be low. Perhaps the most important lesson learned so far is that many of the student participants report that they do not have a lot of self-confidence in their academic abilities and do not feel that they belong in college. When they then come to a largely white institution, where most of the students and faculty are white, they are intimidated and feel like they need to prove that they belong there. Then, the message of PLA is: “You may have college-level learning, but we need you to prove it.” Asking this particular student population to prove what they know, says one institutional representative, “can be a loaded message for them.” The workshops try a different approach, using messages about “valuing our voices,” acknowledging the student’s struggles in adapting to the white higher education culture, and identifying and documenting what they know for PLA.

The program administrators believe that these workshops may be a promising approach for encouraging more underserved students—whether Latino or not—to take advantage of PLA.

## SUNY Empire State College's Women of Color PLA Workshop

Empire State College has offered a series of workshops designed to help more female students of color understand and take advantage of PLA.

The workshops are offered in a face-to-face, small group format in Brooklyn and Long Island. They provide a “risk-free dialog about race, gender, experiential learning and college credit.”

There are four workshops designed to be taken sequentially. The program brochure describes the workshops as follows:

- **Valuing Our Voices.** This workshop will explore how we can create knowledge by critically reflecting on our daily life activities. We will emphasize the importance of valuing all learning and ways of knowing. Finally, we will consider what we can learn from the historical struggles of minority women to have their voices heard.
- **Knowing, Translating and Navigating.** This second workshop will focus on the specific set of skills and levels of understanding that women of color have developed in order to successfully navigate a predominantly white culture. Among these is the capacity to “translate” their experience about race and gender to others. Our goal is to work together to demonstrate that the skills of navigating and translation constitute college-level learning.
- **Identifying and Recording Learning.** During this workshop, students will have the opportunity to record detailed interviews with experienced mentors. Through the process of affirming and supportive interviewing, mentors will help students recognize and articulate what they know. Following the session, students will have continuing access to their recorded interviews in order to help them frame their formal learning requests.
- **Documenting Learning for College Audiences.** This culminating workshop will build on the previous three as students share their emerging prior learning requests. In a constructive workshop setting, facilitators and students will work together to develop the persuasive capacity of each shared request.



## Findings and Recommendations

This study set out to learn more about the Latino experience with PLA—the extent to which Latino students take advantage of PLA offerings at their institutions, their patterns of credit-earning, the type of experiential learning they bring to their college studies, and the role of the institution in PLA usage patterns. Key findings from our analysis are as follows:

1. **Latino students see many benefits to PLA.** Latino students viewed PLA as a way to save time and tuition costs in addition to earning credit for the learning acquired from work, military, and other life experiences.
2. **Latino students found PLA to be empowering and validating.** Students who earned PLA credit discussed how the act of reflecting on past learning was a positive experience for them and often improved their self-image. After earning credit through PLA, students felt validated through their experiential knowledge.
3. **When controlling for institutional category, Latino students took advantage of PLA offerings at levels comparable to other populations.** In terms of PLA, Latino students were not underperforming, but rather were on par with or exceeded the PLA take-up rate of non-Latino students. When the data were aggregated across schools and institutional groupings, Latino students only *appeared* to lag because the institutions with the highest number of Latinos were also the institutions with very low PLA participation rates.
4. **Participation of Latino students in PLA is less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution.** Latinos can and do take advantage of PLA, but primarily when they are enrolled at institutions where PLA is strongly promoted and supported.
5. **Methods of PLA used and number of PLA credits earned were similar.** The frequency with which Latino students employed the various methods of PLA closely mirrored the patterns of non-Latino students. The number of credits earned in PLA was only slightly different between Latinos and non-Latinos.
6. **Latino students were more likely to earn PLA credit in the area of foreign language—but were not limited to only foreign language PLA credit.** In the aggregate, Latino students were six times more likely to earn PLA credit for foreign language than were non-Latino students. About half of Latino students who earned credit in foreign language also earned credit in another area as well. In two out of three institutional groupings, Latino students with foreign language credit were significantly more likely than non-Latinos with foreign language credit to employ PLA with a second or third area of study.
7. **In some institutions, the onus fell on the student to find information about PLA and to seek supportive services.** Some student interviewees reported that information about PLA programs at their institutions was not easily accessible, and most discovered the option through word of mouth. PLA may be mentioned in catalogs, websites, and marketing materials, but more still needs to be done so that students understand their options and how to exercise them.

8. **First generation college students need additional help with PLA.** Although PLA can be an empowering process for many adult students, students who are worried that they do not belong in college may not respond well to PLA messages that focus on the need to “prove what you know” or “demonstrate what you have learned.” Programs designed to help these students explore their prior learning in a more supportive way are needed.

These findings suggest several strategies for institutions to implement in order to support Latino students—as well as other populations—in their efforts to earn credit for what they already know.

1. **Examine and improve institutional strategies for marketing and outreach regarding PLA.** Information about the PLA methods offered at an institution should be readily available and easily accessible. Adult students should be made aware as soon as possible about the potential for PLA credit via advising, orientation, or promotional materials. In addition, adult students are drawn to institutions that honor their experiential learning, so efforts to advertise PLA offerings should be incorporated into institutions’ overall marketing strategies.
2. **If the institution has the goal of accelerating degree completion through increased use of PLA, reaching out specifically to foreign language speakers is a great way for students to get started.** For Latino students, PLA credit through Spanish CLEP exams appears to be an effective way to attract them to PLA, and only a first step in a larger exploration of earning credit for what they already know. Consider using foreign language CLEP options, for both bilingual Latino students and for non-Latinos with foreign language

mastery, as a way to open the door to PLA for students who might otherwise think they do not bring college-level learning from their life or work experience. Be mindful that students with a foreign language will often have other learning that could be evaluated for credit as well.

3. **Offer a course to all adult students to explore prior learning.** Programs with high usage of PLA typically offer some sort of course to help students examine their work and life experiences to identify college learning they may have acquired. These courses help the students determine a plan for PLA, including which methods of PLA to use for different types of learning or different areas of study.
4. **Provide portfolio assessment as part of your PLA program offerings.** The students we interviewed experienced gains in their self-image and academic confidence by participating in a portfolio building experience that led them to reflect on their learning in a deliberate way, such as through a portfolio development course offered by the institution. Colleges that wish to promote increased self-confidence among adults learners may want to consider implementing a portfolio assessment program, particularly one that includes a portfolio development course. (A more general PLA exploration course may also include a section that helps students develop learning portfolios for assessment purposes.)
5. **Closely track PLA usage at the institutional level.** In order to understand how PLA is used—or underused—by targeted student populations, regularly track trends in PLA credit earning by race, ethnicity, age, and other factors, such as military status, socio-economic status, and status as a first generation student. While our

research showed that Latino students are not lagging behind non-Latinos in their use of PLA, it is nevertheless important to be aware of demographic trends for PLA use at any given institution. Subpopulations with lower PLA take-up rates should signal to the institution the need to examine how messages about PLA are reaching these populations and how the institution might best support them with PLA.

6. **First generation college students may require a customized approach to PLA.**

Not all Latinos are first generation college students, but those who are may have heightened anxiety about being in college. Coming from families without a college-going experience, everything is different. As one administrator told us, “Everything I say about college is in a foreign language.” Yet, this population may have just as much college-level learning from their previous work and life experiences, and they can benefit greatly from the time and cost savings of PLA. Consider reaching out to these students in a different way. Explain early and often what PLA is, how to access it, how it works, and how it can help them. Use language that emphasizes the value of their individual expertise and experience, rather than language that emphasizes the need for them to prove themselves.





## Conclusion

CAEL and *Excelencia* undertook this study to expand current knowledge about the use of PLA among adult Latino students. The findings from this study are encouraging. We found that Latino students are just as successful in PLA usage as non-Latino students in similar institutions. Latino students demonstrated much the same outcomes in both take-up rate and number of credits earned. We also learned that foreign language PLA credit may be a great way to encourage Latino students—and perhaps non-Latino students as well—to get started with PLA.

One additional finding of interest was that PLA take-up rates varied so significantly by institutional type. Institutions that have well-established approaches to PLA and that promote PLA as an integral part of their offerings to adult learners had much higher PLA participation rates overall, compared to institutions where it was not as big a part of the institution's approach to adults. This suggests that PLA is likely underutilized in many institutions.

Currently, Latino student enrollment is heavily concentrated at community colleges. While many community colleges have started to give much more attention to their PLA offerings, these institutions have historically not had strong PLA programs. Improving the PLA offerings and related support at these institutions will be important for improving PLA use among Latino students nationwide.

For example, institutions may be able to dramatically improve PLA usage by giving PLA more prominence as a program offering and by encouraging all adult learners to explore whether they may have college-level learning from their work and life experiences. The associate degree institutions in our study have already taken steps in this direction, and so we would expect to see very different PLA take-up rates in more recent student cohorts.

Studies like this one contribute to our collective understanding of PLA in higher education. There is much that still needs to be explored and understood. Future research may focus on the PLA usage of other target student populations, such as African Americans or veterans. Other studies are needed to fully understand the extent to which PLA is available to adult and nontraditional students: What proportion of institutions offer PLA? Which methods? For which programs? Research is also needed to understand what works in PLA marketing and outreach, and to understand how institutional processes for PLA can be designed to help more students take advantage of PLA.

The findings of this study show that PLA can be a resource to adult Latino students to accelerate their postsecondary credit earning. Yet they also point to the need for institutions to make sure that they are promoting PLA effectively and working with students to explore what prior learning they may have. Without this kind of promotion and support for PLA, students may not be aware of PLA or they may not think that they have any learning that is worth evaluating for credit. With a robust and well-promoted PLA program, institutions can make great strides in helping Latino and other adult learners accelerate on their path to a college degree.



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## Appendix: Methodology and Technical Notes

### Research Questions

This study set out to answer a range of research questions, including:

1. What are the successful strategies used by the participating institutions to serve their Latino students? What role does PLA play in the overall strategy to help Latino students and others succeed academically?
2. What are the successful strategies used by the participating institutions to market PLA to Latino populations? What messages resonate with Latino students?
3. What have been the challenges in promoting PLA to this population? How can those challenges be addressed?
4. How do institutions work with this population to identify the range of experiential learning they have?
5. What internal research do institutions currently do to understand how Latino students engage with PLA options?
6. What PLA methods are currently used by Latino students to gain college credit and/or advanced standing in postsecondary degree and certificate programs? Do usage patterns vary by institution, by age, or other factors?
7. How many credits—on average—do Latino students earn with the various methods of PLA? How does this compare to other students at the same postsecondary institution?
8. What are the courses for which the Latino students are earning credit through PLA? Are there observable trends in terms of areas of study or subject matter? Do these patterns suggest areas for stronger outreach to Latino students in promoting PLA?
9. To what extent are institutions successful in helping students move beyond earning PLA credit for Spanish language mastery? To what extent are Spanish language credits—earned through PLA—a gateway to using PLA to assess other college-level learning for credit?
10. What specific degree areas/disciplines are Latino students pursuing and to what extent do their PLA credits count toward degrees in those disciplines?
11. What do the students say about the portfolio development and assessment process?

### Student Record Data

The 10 participating institutions were asked to provide two data sets. First, researchers requested student record data for the entire adult student population (age 25 and older) for students enrolled between the years of 2010 and 2013. Researchers identified 35 variables of interest, which included demographic information, enrollment information, and each student's PLA usage and PLA credit earning (if earned at all). Secondly, a separate data file was requested for only those students who earned PLA credit. This second file would provide further data on each individual course for which a student earned PLA credit, including CIP code (area of study), course name, method of PLA, and number of credits earned. All data collected from the 10 institutions was combined into two datasets (student record data and course information data) along with basic institutional data

from IPEDS, and was analyzed to address select research questions.

The institutions that participated in this study varied widely across a number of variables that can potentially influence outcomes related to PLA and ethnicity, such as PLA policy and practice, institution size and structure, discipline specializations, and differences in student ethnicity/race composition. For this reason, aggregate analysis was generally avoided, and institutions were instead split into three groupings of similar institutions, as discussed in the report.

With the combined dataset, CAEL examined the PLA credit earning of the entire student population, as well as any racial/ethnic differences in PLA credit earning, type of PLA method used (exam, portfolio, ACE recommendation, etc.), and course area of study (general education, foreign language, business administration, etc.). With the two combined datasets, CAEL used SPSS statistical software to carry out the analysis, primarily looking at frequencies and summary statistics, but also employed chi-squared tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA). *Excelencia* in Education reviewed all findings and assisted with interpreting the data.

*Technical Notes: Unless otherwise noted in the text, all findings included in this report were found to be statistically significant with p-values under .05. The exception is the take-up rate of Latino vs. non-Latino students at Adult Oriented institutions and average credit earned by Latino vs. non-Latino students. These were marginally significant, with p-values below .10.*

*In order to assess relative importance of contributing variables to the dependent variable of PLA take-up, CAEL constructed a logistic regression model that examined the effect of ethnicity (Latino), age, gender, institution type (associate degree), receipt of financial aid, and existence of transfer credits. This model correctly predicted PLA take-up in 92% of the cases,  $\chi^2(6, N=17,807) = 10,059.81, p < .001$ . The analysis shows that the variables most predictive of PLA take-up are institution type ( $\beta = -2.86,$*

*$p < .001$ ) and the existence of transfer credit ( $\beta = 3.68, p < .001$ ). Being Latino was positively associated with PLA take-up, however, the effect was much smaller ( $\beta = .54, p < .001$ ).*

## PLA Administrators Survey and Interviews

In addition to the quantitative analysis described above, researchers included qualitative methods in the study as well. Administrators from each of the 10 institutions were asked to take part in both an online survey and a phone interview. The online survey was created to document institutions' policies and practices on prior learning assessment, and included questions about PLA methods offered, institutional policies, and how PLA credits can be applied towards a degree.

After completion of the online survey, researchers conducted in-depth phone interviews with representatives of the participating institutions in order to learn more about their PLA policies and practices and the experiences of Latino students at that institution. These interviews also captured issues and challenges that exist in ensuring that Latino students take advantage of PLA. The data collected from the interviews was qualitative comments and observations from those who are closest to the PLA students and the PLA programs at select institutions. Institutions were asked to provide a specialist on PLA practices and policies and a specialist on the Latino student population; this was sometimes the same individual or same team of individuals with overlapping knowledge. Interviews typically lasted one hour, were conducted by telephone, and were not recorded.

CAEL reviewed all data collected through the online survey and transcripts from administrator interviews for a qualitative analysis of PLA policy, PLA potential for Latino students, and the student PLA experience. *Excelencia* in Education reviewed CAEL's findings and assisted in interpreting the data.

## Student Interviews

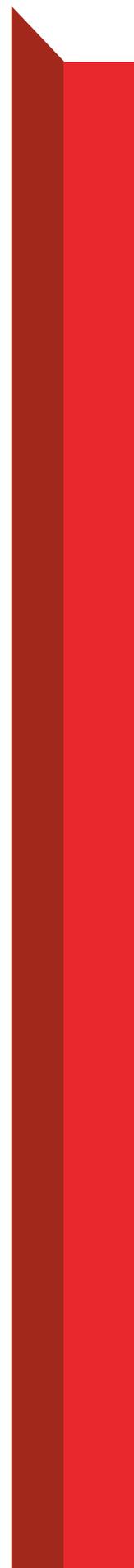
From January through June of 2014, twenty-three Latino students that recently earned credit through PLA at 1 of the 10 participating institutions each took part in a 30-minute telephone interview, which covered topics ranging from family history, early educational and work experience, current educational and career goals, and use of PLA. Each of the 10 institutions was asked to provide three students for interview, for a total of 30, out of which 25 would be chosen; the plan was for at least two students to be chosen to represent each school with a preference for students who have completed portfolio assessment.

Student recruitment varied considerably between institutions. While each school was asked to provide three students for interviews, the final number provided did not necessarily reflect this goal; one school provided four students to interview, five schools provided three students, two schools provided two students, one school provided one student, and one school was unable to identify any students. Institutions that were unable to provide three students were

those that had large student bodies and tended to be geographically scattered or primarily online. Since there were fewer than 25 students provided, there was no need to randomly select students, and all students were interviewed.

Participating students signed and electronically delivered a consent form provided to them by the institutional contact, and students were given the interview questions for review prior to the scheduled interview. CAEL researchers conducted the interviews by telephone and tracked responses by hand (interviews were not recorded). Students were provided a \$50 stipend for participation (one student declined the stipend because she works for a federal agency).

CAEL reviewed all interview transcripts from students for a qualitative analysis of their views on PLA policy, PLA potential for Latino students, and the student PLA experience. *Excelencia* in Education reviewed CAEL's findings and assisted in interpreting the data. After all interviews were complete, three students were chosen for profiles. These students completed a second consent form and provided a photograph for use in this publication.





# CAEL

Linking Learning and Work

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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