



## Underserved Students Who Earn Credit Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Have Higher Degree Completion Rates and Shorter Time-to-Degree

### Background: Credit from Prior Learning and Adult Student Outcomes

Earning college credit for prior learning can help adult students in many ways. For example, earning prior learning credit can help students avoid having to take courses in subjects they have already mastered. This is especially helpful for adult students who have acquired college-level learning through on-the-job training, work experience, the military, volunteer work, open source courseware and other self-study. Earning credit for prior learning saves students both time and tuition dollars in earning a degree. Advocates further believe that such credit also has a motivational factor, encouraging students to persist towards degree completion.

In 2010, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) released a report on a multi-institutional study on prior learning assessment (PLA) and adult student outcomes. The study examined data from 62,475 adult students at 48 colleges and universities, following the students' academic progress over the course of seven years (See *Fueling the Race for Postsecondary Success* at [www.cael.org/pdf/PLA\\_Fueling-the-Race.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf)).

The data from the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that students with PLA credit had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned.

In this research brief, CAEL showcases the findings by race/ethnicity and income – two demographic categories often used to define underserved student groups. The data show that black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and low-income students with PLA credits have better academic outcomes than similar students without PLA credits. **The positive findings for low-income, black non-Hispanic and Hispanic students suggest that awarding college credit for significant life learning could be an effective way to accelerate degree completion, while lowering the cost, for underserved student populations.**

### Outcomes for Hispanic and Black, non-Hispanic Students

Among PLA students and non-PLA students identified by race/ethnicity in our study, we found that for each racial/ethnic group, graduation rates for PLA students are higher than non-PLA students. The most dramatic difference was for Hispanic students at the bachelor's degree level; Hispanic PLA students earned bachelor's degrees at a rate that was almost eight times higher than that of Hispanic non-PLA students (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Race/Ethnicity, PLA and Graduation Rates

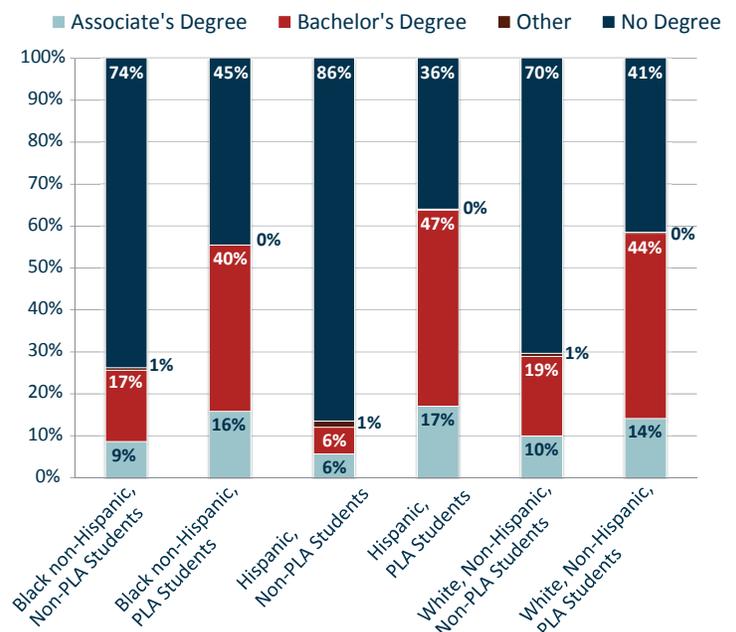
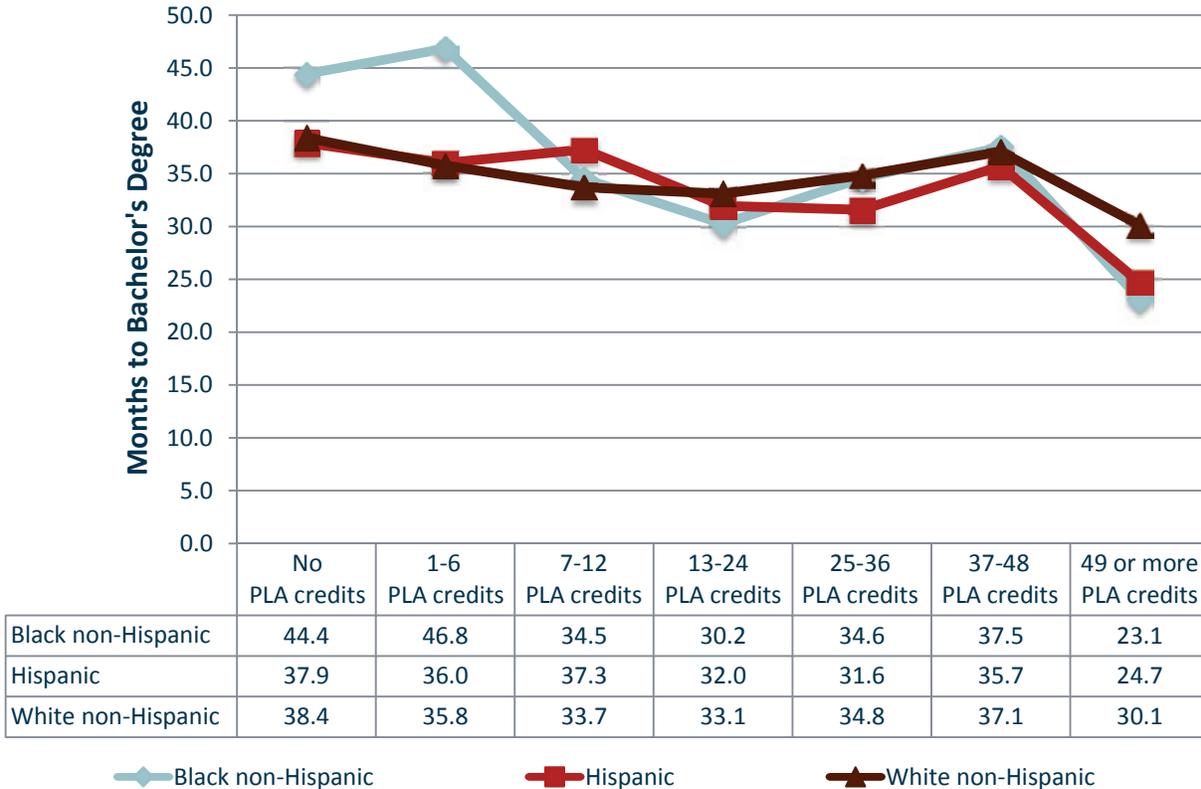


Figure 2 shows that decreases in average time to degree were apparent for all three subgroups earning PLA credits, with the most dramatic decreases for black non-Hispanic PLA students. With 13-24 PLA credits, black non-

Hispanic PLA students saved an average of 14.2 months for the bachelor's degree, while those earning 49 or more PLA credits saved an average of 21.3 months (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity, PLA and Time to Bachelor's Degree

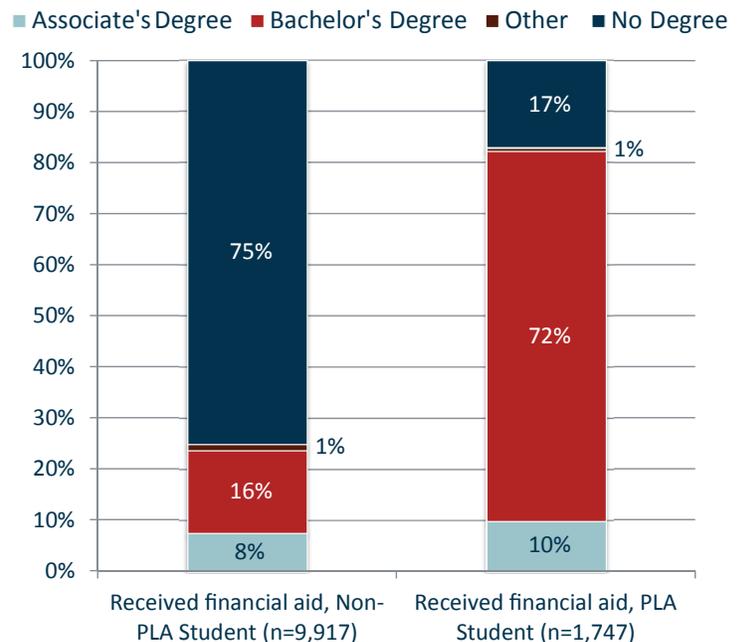


## Outcomes for Lower-Income Students

Although data on students' income level was not available to CAEL, several institutions were able to indicate which students received need-based financial aid. By examining the graduation rates and time to degree of financial aid recipients, and by calculating the cost savings associated with earning PLA credit, we can conclude that PLA could be an effective way to accelerate degree completion, thus lowering the out-of-pocket cost, for lower-income students.

Similar to the patterns CAEL found with other student subgroups, financial aid recipients earning PLA credit had dramatically higher bachelor's degree completion rates than their non-PLA counterparts (72% compared to 16%) (Figure 3).

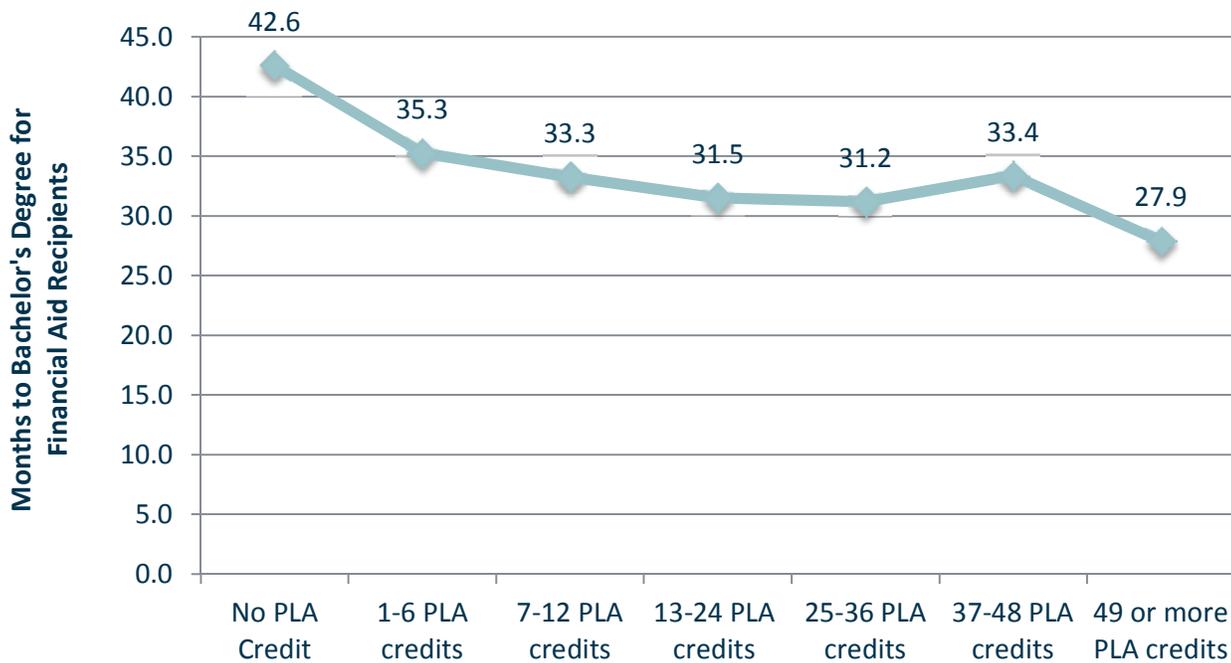
Figure 3. Financial Aid, PLA and Graduation Rates



In terms of time to degree, financial aid recipients without PLA credits earned their bachelor's degrees in an average of 42.6 months (non-financial aid recipients without PLA credits had a comparable average time to degree of 42.0 months). However, as the number of PLA credits earned

increased, the financial aid recipients required less time to earn their degrees, on average. Financial aid recipients with 1-6 PLA credits saved more than 7 months, and those with 13-24 PLA credits saved more than 11 months (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Financial Aid, PLA and Time to Bachelor's Degree



## PLA and Tuition Savings

Whether or not they are financial aid recipients, students from low-income families still struggle to pay for a college education. The College Board recently reported that the median debt of bachelor's degree earners from families earning less than \$30,000 per year in 2007-2008 was \$16,500 for those attending public institutions, \$21,000 for those attending private institutions, and \$30,500 for those attending for-profit institutions.<sup>1</sup>

For lower-income adult students who are facing this kind of college tuition debt, the ability to earn credit

though prior learning assessment can have real financial implications, since the cost of having prior learning evaluated for credit is typically less than the cost of the tuition for the same number of credit hours. For example, an adult student who earns 15 PLA credits<sup>2</sup> that can be applied toward the degree can save from a low of around \$1,605 at a large public university to a high of around \$6,000 at other institutions. The table on the following page provides several scenarios of tuition cost savings, using five institutions from our study as examples.

<sup>1</sup> See *Trends in Student Aid 2010*, The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center. Trends in Higher Education Series.

<sup>2</sup> The average number of PLA credits earned by students in our study was 17.6.

**PLA Tuition Cost Savings at Five Sample Institutions, 15 Credit Scenario**

Institution	Tuition Needed for 15 Course Credits (2009-2010)*	Cost for 15 PLA Credits**	Difference (Dollars Saved by the Student)
Large public university #1	\$149 per credit hour x 15 (\$2,235)	\$20 per 3-credit challenge exam x 5, for a total of \$100	\$2,135
Large public university #2	\$207 per credit hour x 15 (\$3,105)	\$300 per 3-credit assessment x 5, for a total of \$1,500***	\$1,605
Mid-sized private college, adult program	\$312 per credit x 15 (\$4,680)	\$530 per portfolio evaluation x 5 (\$2,650)***	\$2,030
Large private university, adult program	\$455 per credit hour x 15 (\$6,825)	\$150 per assessment x 5 (\$750)	\$6,075
Small private university	\$1,680 for 3-unit course x 5 (\$8,400)	\$500 for credit for learning from work experience x 5 (\$2,500)	\$5,900

\* Current tuition rates taken from institutional websites. Does not include fees.

\*\* PLA rates taken from information provided by the institution in online survey. Most expensive option used; assumed 3 credits hours earned per evaluation/assessment.

\*\*\* At these institutions, only the portfolio evaluation has a fee; all other PLA options are free of charge. Therefore, this calculation may be underestimating the average student's cost savings.

## Summary and Conclusion

The findings outlined in this research brief show that Hispanic and black, non-Hispanic students who earn PLA credits had higher graduation rates and required less time to earn their degrees, compared to their peers without PLA credit. Combined with the impressive outcomes of the financial aid recipients with PLA credit, the findings suggest that PLA could be a potentially important strategy for helping underserved or disadvantaged adult populations succeed in completing postsecondary degrees, and at a substantial cost savings.

CAEL's new online PLA service LearningCounts.org, in partnership with ACE and the College Board, is providing a way to expand student access to PLA generally, but is

also working to provide special opportunities to lower-income students through scholarships and public sector workforce development programs (these are special LearningCounts.org initiatives funded by the Walmart Foundation and the Joyce Foundation). As we serve more low-income and other underserved populations with PLA, we are looking forward to learning more about how these students use PLA, how many PLA credits they earn, and what kinds of work and life experiences are providing them with that learning. This information will be informing how we educate policy-makers, public officials institutions and advocacy organizations about the uses and value of PLA.

## What Is Prior Learning Assessment?

*Prior learning* is a term used by educators to describe learning that a person acquires outside a traditional academic environment. This learning may have been acquired through work experience, employer training programs, independent study, non-credit courses, volunteer or community service, travel, or non-college courses or seminars.

*Prior learning assessment (PLA)* is a term used to describe the process by which an individual's experiential learning is assessed and evaluated for purposes of granting college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA and, when properly conducted, all ensure academic quality:

1. National standardized exams in specified disciplines, e.g., Advanced Placement (AP) exams, College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, Excelsior college exams, Dantes Subject Standardized Texts (DSST);
2. Challenge exams for local courses;
3. Evaluated non-college programs, e.g., American Council on Education (ACE) evaluations of corporate training and military training;
4. Individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments

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The full report of *Fueling the Race for Postsecondary Success* can be found at:

[www.cael.org/pdf/PLA\\_Fueling-the-Race.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf)

To learn more about CAEL's new national PLA online service, visit [www.LearningCounts.org](http://www.LearningCounts.org).



For more information about CAEL's PLA study and related research, please contact the author of the study and of this research brief, Rebecca Klein-Collins, Director of Research, [bklein@cael.org](mailto:bklein@cael.org).