



Moving the Starting Line Through Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

An Analysis of the Average Number of Credits Students Earn for What They Already Know

Prior learning assessment (PLA) methods can help adult students earn college credit for what they already know. PLA can be an important offering by postsecondary degree programs because it can save students time and money. In addition, CAEL's *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* study found that adult students who receive PLA credit are two and a half times more likely to persist to graduation—and complete their degrees—than students who do not receive PLA credit (see box on next page).

Institutions interested in expanding their PLA offerings as part of a larger degree completion strategy for adult learners will want to have a sense of what the scope of their program is likely to be. We know from *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* that about 25% of adult students in our sample earned credit through PLA. Therefore, institutions with no history of offering or promoting PLA could initially estimate that as many as one-quarter of its adult students would take advantage of

PLA when such opportunities are offered and promoted. It may also be helpful for institutions to be able to estimate how much credit the average adult student earns through PLA.

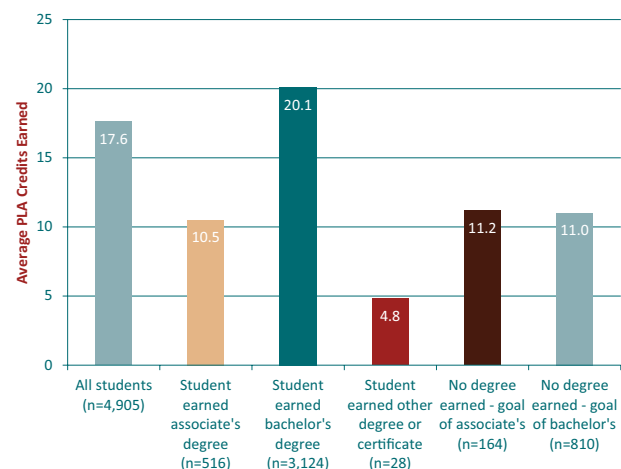
This research brief provides information on the average number of PLA credits earned by a subgroup of 4,905 students in our sample,¹ looking at how the average number of credits differs by institution type and by students of various demographic groups.

For this analysis, we omitted extreme outliers (some institutions will list more than 128 PLA credits on a student's transcript, even if only some credits apply to a degree) and from institutions that were unable to provide the exact number of PLA credits earned by individual students. We omitted students of for-profit institutions from this analysis because only one of the two for-profit institutions in our study provided this data.

Average PLA Credits Earned

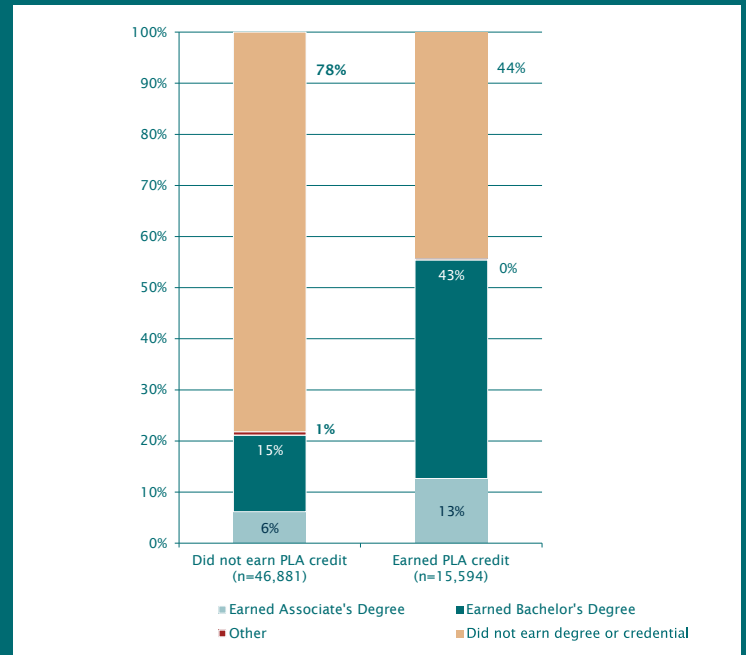
Overall, the 4,905 students in our sample who earned PLA credits earned an average of 17.6 of those credits, the equivalent of more than five 3-credit courses. The subgroup of PLA-earning students who earned bachelor's degrees between the time of their matriculation in 2001 and 2008 (or before) had an average of 20.1 PLA credits; those who earned associate's degrees during that time period had an average of 10.5 PLA credits. PLA students who did not complete a degree had earned an average of around 11 PLA credits (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Average PLA credits earned by all students, and by degrees earned



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 to Postsecondary Success* at www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf).

The data from the 48 postsecondary institutions in this study showed that students with PLA credit had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of degree completion 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. The chart to the right shows the higher degree completion of PLA students compared to non-PLA students in our sample.



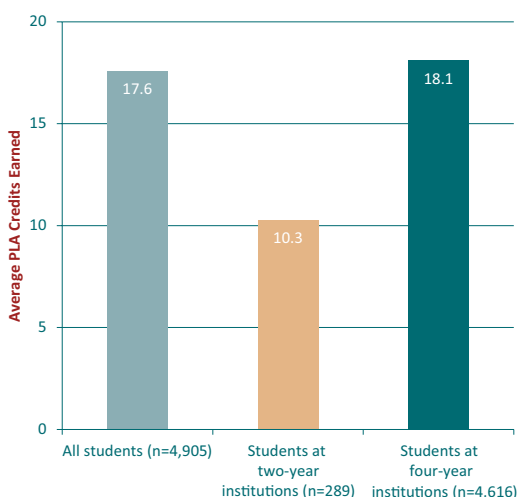
Average PLA Credits by Institution Type

The level and size of institution attended made a difference in the average number of PLA credits earned, but the control of the institution (public vs. private non-profit) did not.

Level of Institution

PLA students at two-year institutions earned an average of 10.3 credits through PLA, and PLA students at four-year institutions earned an average of 18.1 PLA credits (Figure 2). These data are for degree earners and non-degree earners, combined.

Figure 2. Average PLA credits earned by all students and by level of institution



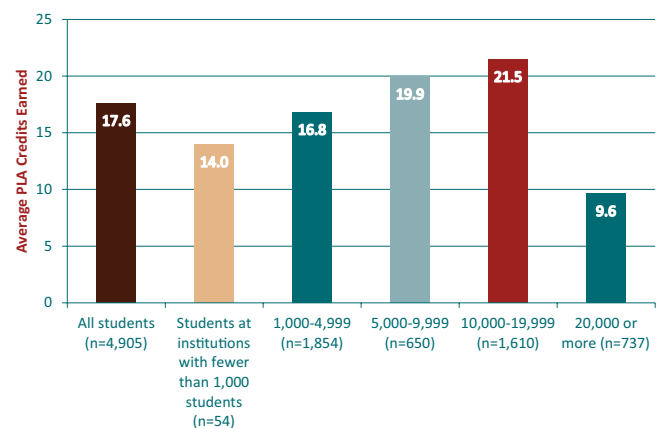
Control of Institution

PLA students at public institutions earned an average of 17.4 credits through PLA, and PLA students at private, non-profit institutions earned an average of 17.9 PLA credits. These data are for degree earners and non-degree earners, combined.

Size of Institution

PLA students at institutions with 10,000-19,999 students earned the highest average number of PLA credits (21.5), and institutions serving more than 20,000 students had the lowest (9.6) (Figure 3). These data are for degree earners and non-degree earners, combined.

Figure 3. Average PLA credits earned by all adult students and by size of institution



Average PLA Credits by Student Characteristics

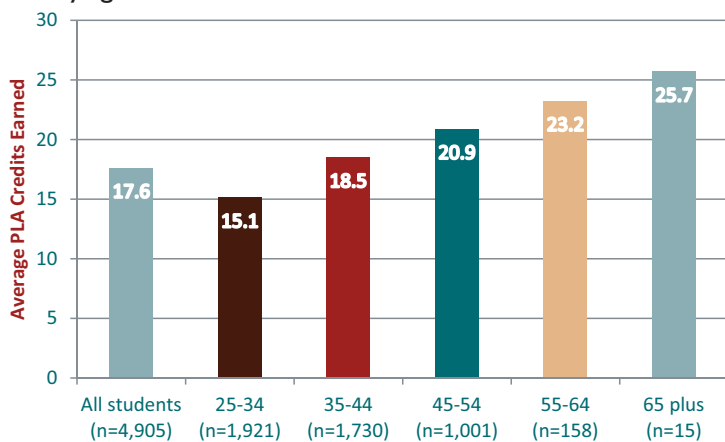
There is a clear pattern of higher average PLA credit-earning in older age groups. However, there were no significant differences in average PLA credit-earning by gender or race/ethnicity.

Age

By definition, older students simply have more years of life during which they can learn from life experiences. Therefore, we might expect that older students have greater potential for PLA credit-earning, and this assumption is supported by the data.

There is a clear upward progression in PLA credit-earning according to age, with the youngest students (age 25-34) earning an average of 15.1 credits, and the oldest students (age 55-64) earning an average of 23.2 credits (Figure 4). Noteworthy is that a very small number of students aged 65+ were in the sample, and although the numbers are not significant, they, too, showed that more experiences yield more learning, earning an average of 25.7 PLA credits.

Figure 4. Average PLA credits earned by all adult students and by age



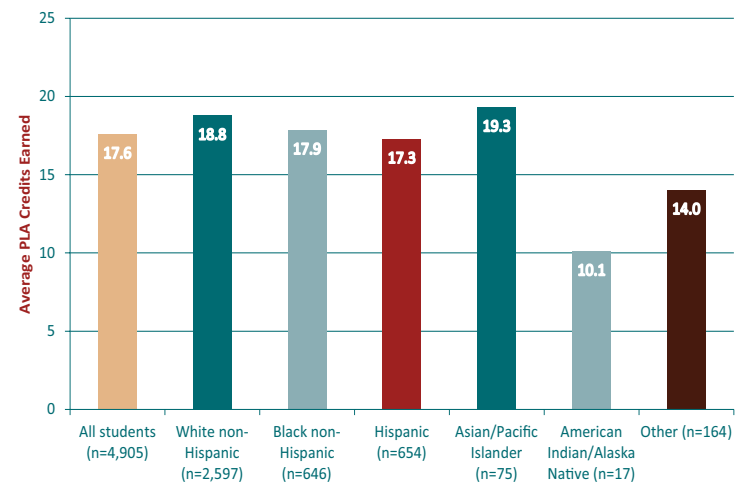
Gender

Average PLA credit-earning did not vary much by gender, with male students earning an average of 18.5 PLA credits and female students earning an average of 17.1 PLA credits.

Race/Ethnicity

Average PLA credit-earning was highest for Asian/Pacific Islander students (19.3) and white, non-Hispanic students (18.8). Averages were lowest for American Indian/Alaska Native (10.1); however, the size of that subgroup is too small to be meaningful (n=17). Black, non-Hispanic students and Hispanic students earned about the same number of PLA credits, on average, as all students in the sample (approximately 17) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Average PLA credits earned by all adult students and by race/ethnicity



Summary

This research brief provides information on average PLA credit-earning by students attending different types of institutions and with different demographic characteristics.

- Student earning bachelor's degrees earned more PLA credits (20.1), on average, than students earning associate's degrees (10.5).
- Students at four-year institutions earned more PLA credits (18.1), on average, than students at two-year institutions (10.3).
- Students at public and private, non-profit institutions earned approximately the same number of PLA credits, on average (17).
- Students at institutions serving 20,000 or more students had the lowest average PLA credit-earning (9.6), while students at institutions serving 10,000 to 19,999 students had the highest (21.5).

- The older the student, the larger the average PLA credit-earning.
- Average PLA credit-earning did not vary significantly by gender or by race/ethnicity.

As more institutions start to offer or expand PLA opportunities to more adult students, they will find it useful to know how many credits students are likely to achieve through PLA. We expect, however, that the numbers presented in this research brief are likely to evolve, particularly as PLA becomes more accessible to students and as more students become more familiar with PLA and its benefits. We encourage all institutions to establish systems for tracking PLA use and credit-earning and to make this information available to others in support of our collective understanding of PLA in practice

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; and (4) individualized assessments, particularly portfolio-based assessments.

The original PLA study, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*, can be found at www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf.

To learn more about CAEL's new national PLA online service, visit www.LearningCounts.org.