



# Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success:

A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes

Executive Summary



**CAEL**

The Council For Adult & Experiential Learning

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## Executive Summary

### February 2010

In order for the nation to maintain its competitive edge and economic success, we must educate greater numbers of our citizens to higher levels than we have in the past. But what can be done to fuel our educational “race to the top” among adults who are already in the labor market and out of reach of K-12 improvement efforts? Prior Learning Assessment, or PLA, is an important and often overlooked strategy for helping adults progress towards a degree. PLA is the process by which many colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom, including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service. Institutions may use several different PLA methods in order to award credit for prior learning (see box).

PLA recognizes and legitimizes the often significant learning in which adults have engaged in many parts of their lives, and may make education more affordable and take less time. PLA advocates have long argued that by helping students earn credits faster and at a lower cost, PLA can significantly contribute to students’ ongoing progress – or persistence – towards a degree. Yet, to date, there has not been a large, multi-institutional study on this topic.

With support from Lumina Foundation for Education, which works to ensure that 60 percent of Americans are college-educated by 2025, CAEL conducted a multi-institutional study on PLA and adult student outcomes, using the records of 62,475 students at 48 colleges and universities. The study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- ▶ Do adults who earn PLA credit have better graduation rates, compared with those who do not earn PLA credit?
- ▶ Do they have better persistence?
- ▶ Do they earn their degrees in a shorter period of time?

## PLA Methods

**Prior Learning Assessment is not just one method or tool. It includes methods such as:**

- ▶ Individualized student portfolios or Portfolio Assessments.
- ▶ Evaluation of corporate and military training by the American Council on Education (ACE). ACE publishes credit recommendations for formal instructional programs offered by non-collegiate agencies, or the ACE Guides.
- ▶ Program evaluations done by individual colleges of non-collegiate instructional programs that award credit for those who achieve recognized proficiencies, or the Evaluation of Local Training.
- ▶ Customized exams offered by some colleges to verify learning achievement; these may be current course final exams or may be other tests developed at the department level for assessing general disciplinary knowledge and skill, or Challenge Exams.
- ▶ Standardized exams such as:
  - ▶ Advanced Placement (AP) Examination Program
  - ▶ College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams
  - ▶ Excelsior College Exams
  - ▶ The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams

## Summary of Findings

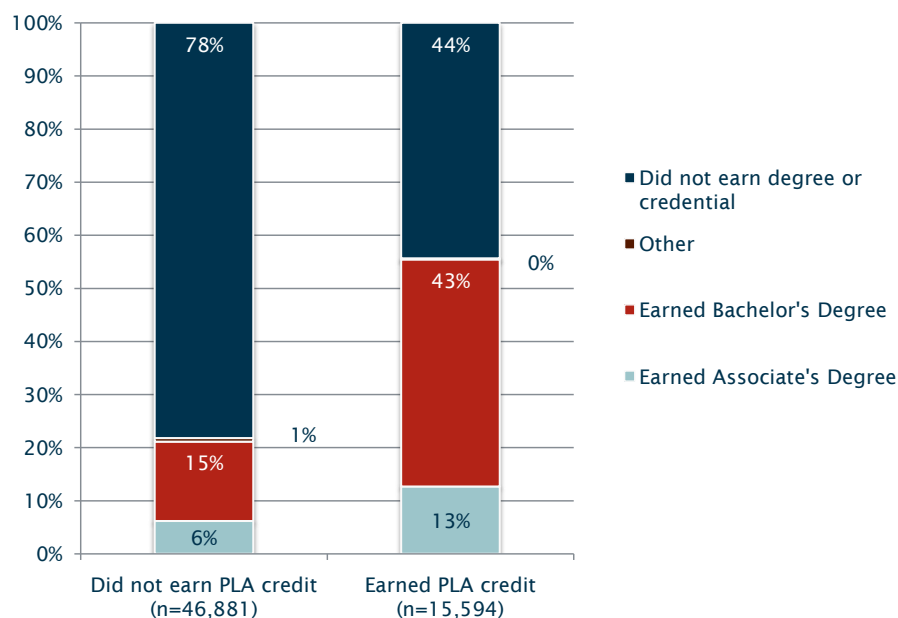
The data from 62,475 students at the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than other adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree, depending on the number of PLA credits earned.

### Students with PLA Credit Had Higher Graduation Rates

PLA students in this study had much higher degree-earning rates than non-PLA students. More than half (56%) of PLA students earned a postsecondary degree within seven years, while only 21 percent of non-PLA students did so (Figure 1). In terms of the specific degrees earned:

- ▶ 43 percent of PLA students earned a bachelor's degree, compared to only 15 percent of non-PLA students
- ▶ 13 percent of PLA students earned an associate's degree, compared to 6 percent of non-PLA students

*Figure 1. Degree Completion by PLA Credit-earning for All Students*



Noteworthy is that PLA students in this study had better graduation rates than non-PLA students:

- ▶ regardless of institutional size, level (two-year or four-year) or control (private for-profit, non-profit, or public)
- ▶ regardless of the individual student's academic ability or grade point average
- ▶ regardless of the individual student's age, gender, or race/ethnicity
- ▶ regardless of whether or not the individual student received financial aid

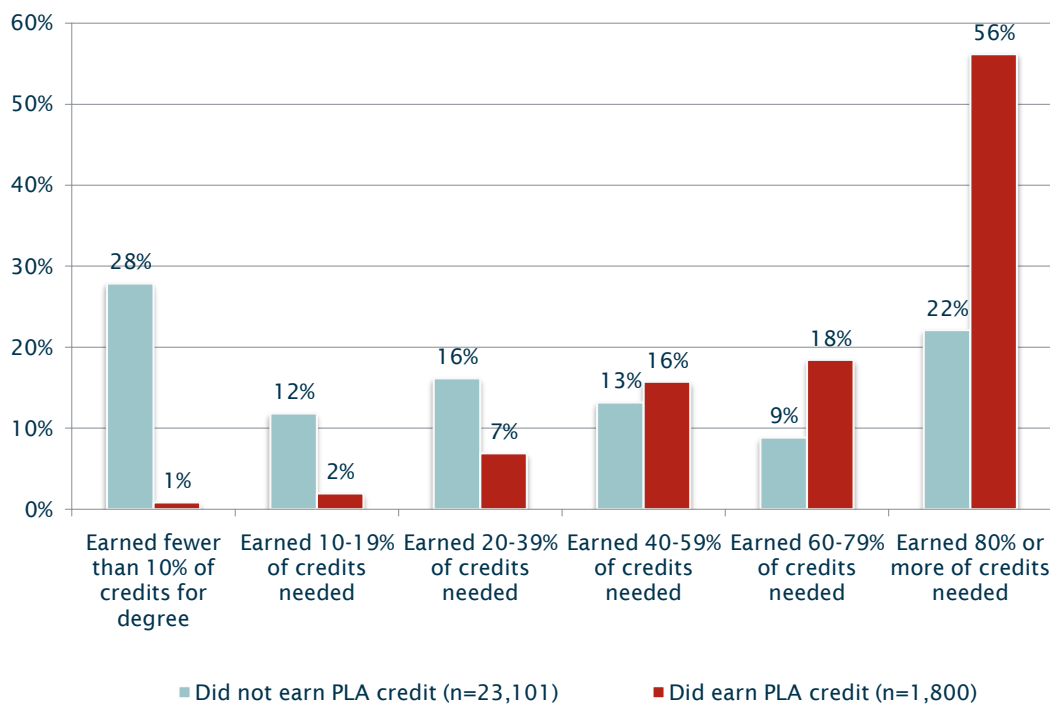
## Students with PLA Credit Showed Greater Persistence

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This study also examined what happened to the students who did not earn a postsecondary credential within seven years. We care about these non-degree-earning students because they are the ones for whom institutions are designing and implementing new interventions to help those students be successful and earn degrees. We explored the topic of persistence by comparing the credit accumulation and annual credit-earning of the PLA students and non-PLA students who did not earn degrees.

PLA students in this study who did not earn degrees were more persistent in terms of credit accumulation than the non-PLA students. More than half of all PLA students who had not yet earned a degree by the end of 2008 (56%) had accumulated 80 percent or more of the credits towards a degree between 2001-2002 and the end of 2008; only 22 percent of non-PLA students with no degree had made similar progress towards their degrees (Figure 2).

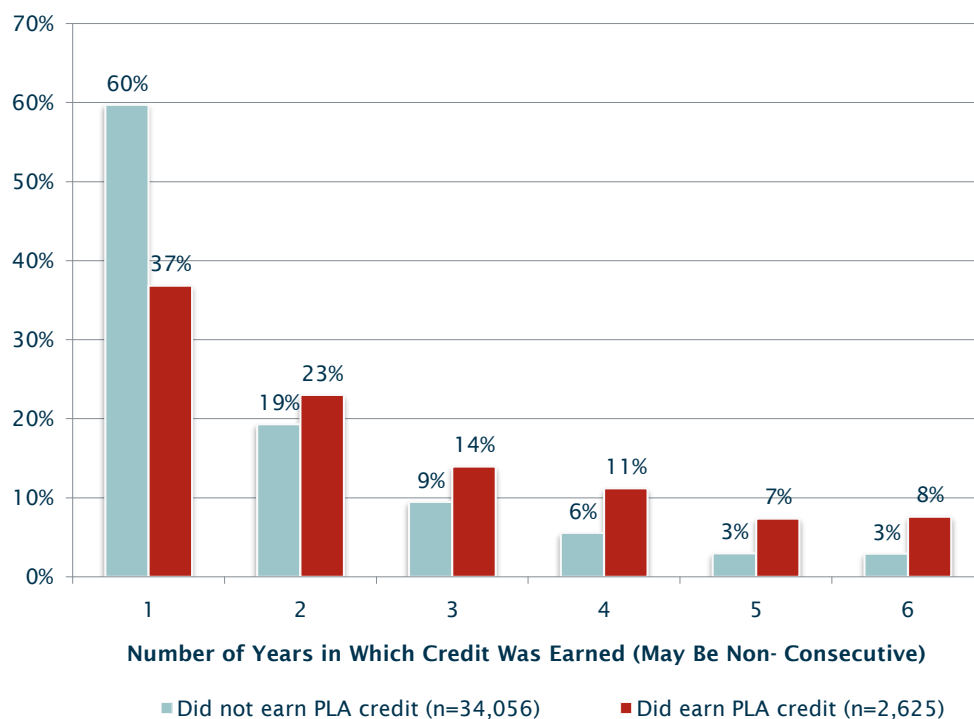
**Figure 2. PLA and Persistence by Total Credit Accumulation, No Degree Earners**



PLA students in our sample earned more institutional course credits, on average, than non-PLA students. PLA students (both degree-earners and non-degree earners) earned an average of 53.7 credits in institutional coursework (as opposed to credit accumulation from PLA credits or transfer credits), compared to an average of 43.8 credits by non-PLA students.

PLA students in this study who did not earn degrees had stronger patterns of annual enrollment and credit-earning than non-PLA students who did not earn degrees. Sixty percent (60%) of non-PLA students without degrees did not earn credit beyond one year of study, while higher percentages of PLA students without degrees re-enrolled and earned credits in the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth years (Figure 3).

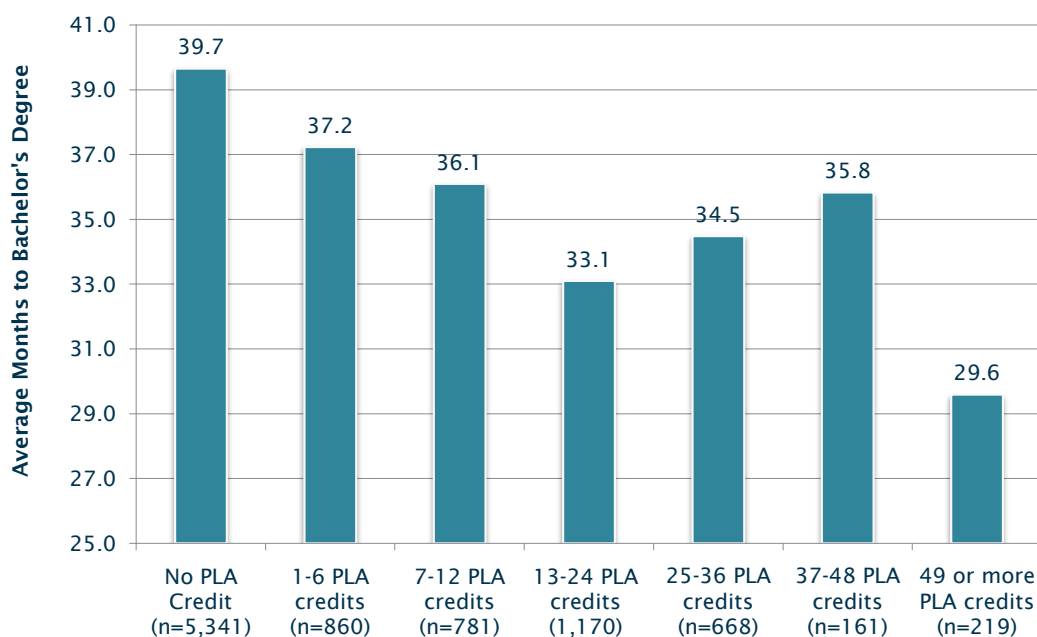
**Figure 3. PLA and Persistence by Years of Credit Earning, No Degree Earners**



## Students with PLA Credit Needed Less Time to Earn Degrees

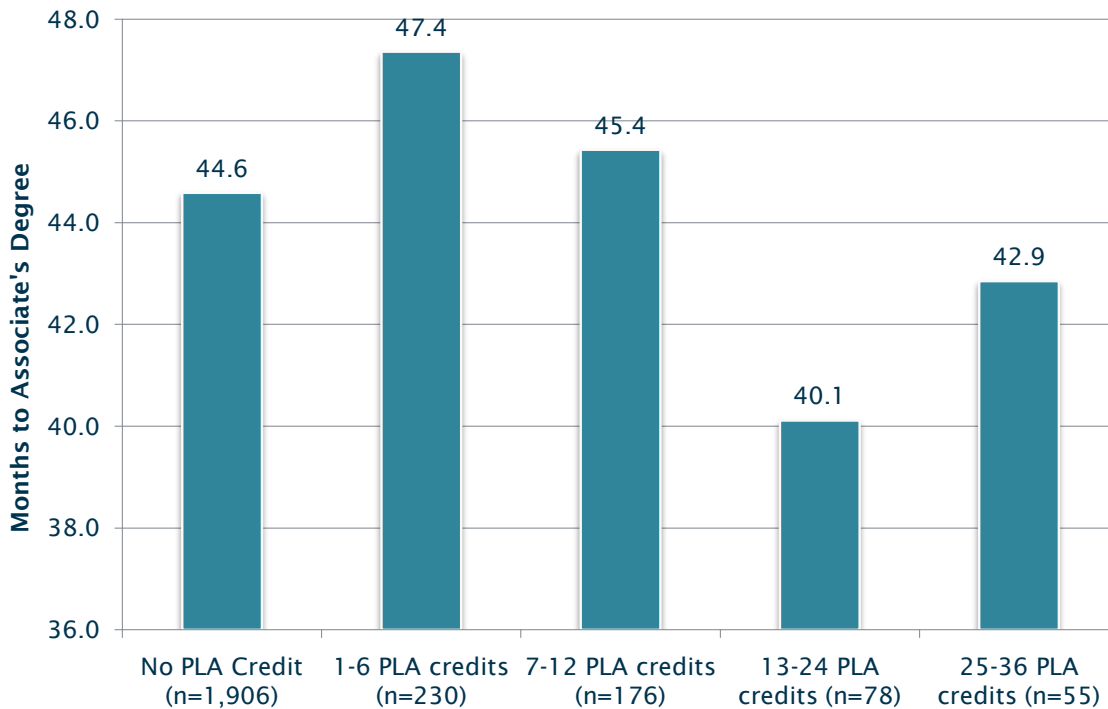
PLA students earning bachelor's degrees saved an average of between 2.5 and 10.1 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning degrees. PLA students earning 13-24 PLA credits saved an average of 6.6 months, and those earning 49 or more PLA credits saved an average of 10.1 months (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Average Months to Degree by Number of PLA Credits, Bachelor's Degree Earners**



PLA earners with associate's degrees saved an average of between 1.5 and 4.5 months of time in earning their degrees, compared to non-PLA students earning associate's degrees (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Months to Degree by Number of PLA Credits, Associate's Degree Earners**



## Institutional Policies on Applying PLA Credit Matter

An important question is whether PLA students' academic outcomes differ depending upon an institution's PLA policies and practices. For example, a student may be able to earn 30 PLA credits from an institution, yet only be able to use a portion of those credits for elective courses and none of them for fulfilling requirements for the major.

We examined four institutional policies that we would expect to have the greatest impact on a student's progress towards degree completion and a reduced time to degree:

- ▶ PLA credit can be used to obtain advanced standing at the institution
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to waive course prerequisites
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to meet general education requirements
- ▶ PLA credit can be used to meet program/major requirements

We found that, on average, the best student outcomes in terms of both degree-earning and reduced time to degree occurred when all four options for applying PLA credit are available to students. In other words, the greater the flexibility the student has for using the PLA credit, the better the academic outcomes.

## Summary and Discussion

The data from the 48 postsecondary institutions in our study show that PLA students had better academic outcomes, particularly in terms of graduation rates and persistence, than non-PLA adult students. Many PLA students also shortened the time required to earn a degree; the average time to degree decreased as the number of PLA credits earned increased.

Considering the above findings, an important question is why we are seeing better academic outcomes for PLA students compared with non-PLA students? One possible explanation is that students who pursue PLA credit are the students who are already highly motivated or academically successful, and that motivation and academic strength are what are propelling the students forward to a degree. Some of the PLA administrators at the institutions in this study acknowledged that this can often be the case. However, these same administrators also described PLA itself as a powerful motivator, as a booster of self-esteem and self-confidence by validating students' existing skills and knowledge, and as something that enhances student and alumni loyalty to the institution. These observations suggest that the argument of "PLA students are the smart ones to begin with" does not tell the whole story, especially when our data showed that academic ability did not matter. Remedial students with PLA credit had better graduation rates than their non-PLA counterparts, as did PLA students of varying GPA levels.

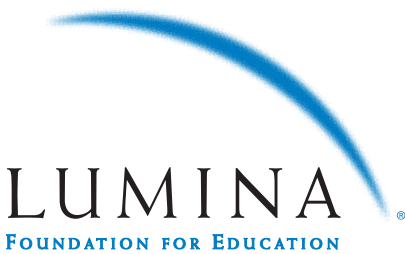
For this particular study, CAEL did not have access to the kind of data that would allow us to control for some of the factors that have been proven to influence better academic outcomes for adult students. This limitation prevents us from going so far as to say that PLA credit-earning is what determines the better outcomes. However, previous research that has examined the relationship between PLA and student outcomes in single institutions has been able to control for many of those factors. The fact that this larger study shows similar patterns of higher graduation rates and other academic success factors for PLA students is an important complement to that research and suggests that a "PLA effect" exists across a range of institutional contexts and with diverse student populations.

## Conclusion

The findings - that PLA students had better academic outcomes than non-PLA students - support claims that PLA is a strategy that will help adults earn degrees and progress more quickly to their goals. These findings are important particularly as the U.S. strives to improve educational attainment and reach Lumina's goal of having 60 percent of the population with a college credential by 2025, as we seek to make better connections between the academy and the larger society, and as educators strive to rethink and reform systems that need to more effectively respond to the personal, academic and professional needs of our citizens. This kind of data, showing the current patterns of academic outcomes among PLA students, has never been collected on this scale before. We hope that it contributes to deeper thinking about the value of PLA, further program development in Prior Learning Assessment, and to the expansion of its availability and offerings across the U.S.

# Participating Institutions

Athabasca University (Canada)  
Azusa Pacific University  
Barry University  
Bucks County Community College  
California Lutheran University  
Calumet College of St. Joseph  
Capella University  
Centenary College  
Charter Oak State College  
CUNY Baccalaureate for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies  
CUNY - Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York  
DePaul University  
Eastern Connecticut State University  
Eastern Illinois University  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Empire State College  
Excelsior College  
Golden Gate University  
Houghton College  
Indiana University School of Continuing Studies  
Inver Hills Community College  
Lakeshore Technical College  
Manhattan Christian College  
Maryville University  
Miami Dade College  
Mid-America Christian University  
National-Louis University  
New York University-SCPS-Paul McGhee Division  
Northern Kentucky University  
Northern Oklahoma College  
Northwood University  
Ottawa University  
Palm Beach Atlantic University  
Pennsylvania State University  
Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College  
Simpson College  
St. Edward's University  
Suffolk County Community College  
The College of New Rochelle  
Thomas Edison State College  
University of Arkansas - Fort Smith  
University of Louisville, College of Education & Human Development  
University of Phoenix  
University of St. Francis  
University of the Fraser Valley (Canada)  
University of the Incarnate Word  
Vermont State Colleges/Community College of Vermont  
Webster University



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CAEL is grateful to the Foundation for this support and applauds its commitment to helping more adult learners achieve postsecondary success. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of Lumina Foundation for Education, its officers or employees.

This summary document can be found at:  
[www.cael.org/pdf/PLA\\_Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Executive-Summary.pdf)

The full report can be downloaded at:  
[www.cael.org/pdf/PLA\\_Fueling-the-Race.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/PLA_Fueling-the-Race.pdf)

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