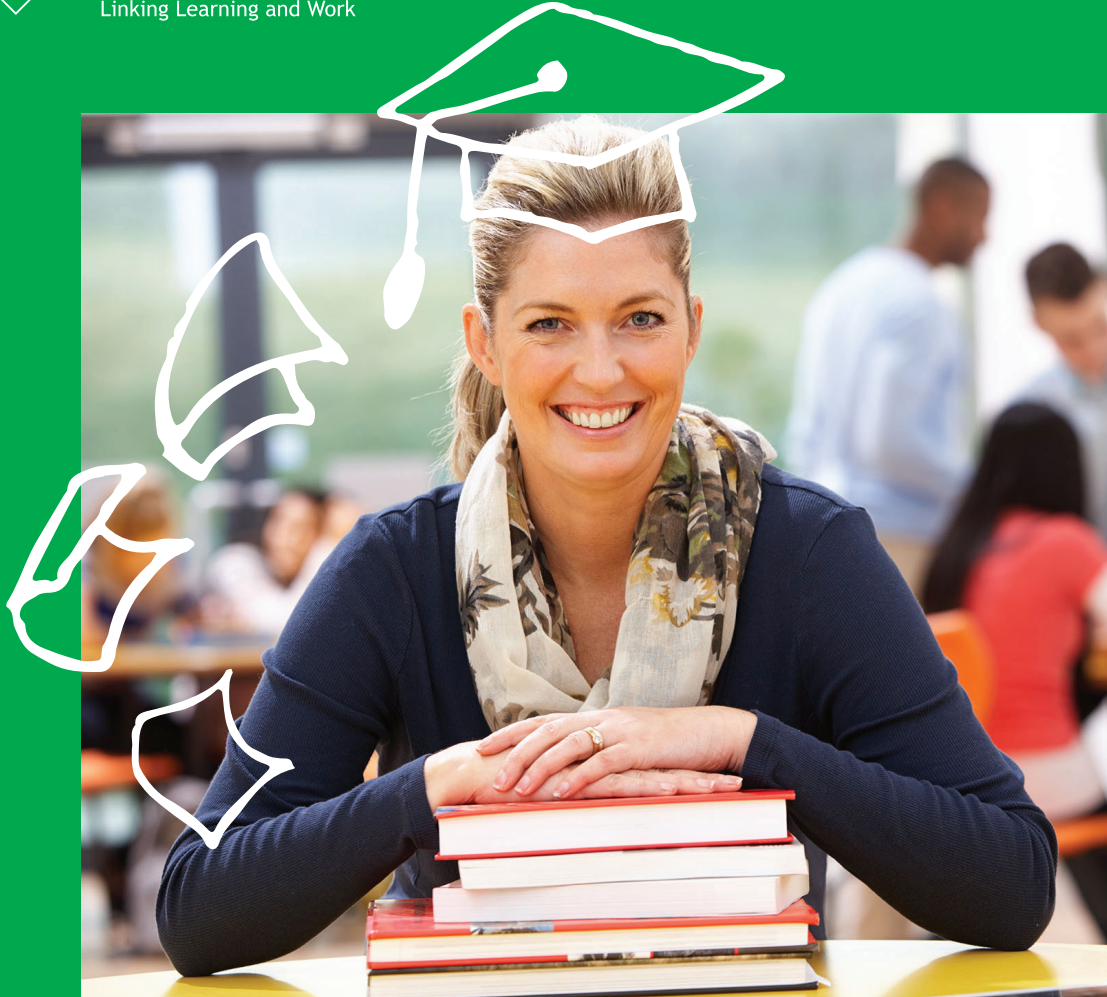




**CAEL**  
Linking Learning and Work



## CHART THE PATH TO ADULT STUDENT SUCCESS WITH PLA

*More than half of today's students are adult learners, juggling jobs and families, in addition to college. This brings new challenges for institutions of higher education, forcing them to adjust rapidly to address the needs of their growing adult student base.*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT HAS BECOME THE NEW NORMAL</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>THE NEW NORMAL BRINGS NEW CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW NORMAL</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>PLA BENEFITS INSTITUTIONS</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>BETHANY MEYER'S SUCCESS STORY</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>LEARNINGCOUNTS FOR UNIVERSITIES</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>HOW LEARNINGCOUNTS BENEFITS STUDENTS</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	<i>15</i>



# THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT IS NOW THE NEW NORMAL

The definition of a traditional student has historically been a student who is under the age of 25, has no dependents, enrolled in college within 12 months of graduating from high school, lives on or near the campus, takes 15 or more credit hours of classes each semester. Today, however, students matching all of these criteria are in the minority. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), almost 67 percent of the undergraduate students enrolled in the fall of 2011 were at least 25 years of age. NCES further states that the actual percentage is higher if the definition of a non-traditional student is expanded to include criteria not normally considered as characteristic of traditional students.



The additional criteria are:

- Having at least a one-year gap between high school and enrollment in a postsecondary institution
- Possessing an equivalency certificate, such as a GED, or a certificate of completion in lieu of a high school diploma

- Having a spouse or other dependents
- Working a full-time job
- Taking classes on a part-time basis
- Having responsibility for at least one child as a single parent

## Non-Traditional Students and Overall Completion Rates

Because non-traditional students must fill multiple roles, they are less likely to earn their bachelor's degree than traditional students. A report issued by Complete College America stated that no more than 25 percent of all part-time students complete their degrees within eight years, compared to more than 60 percent of the full-time students. The analysis was equally bleak for one-year certificates – 27.8 percent of the full-time students finished within two years versus 12.2 percent of the part-time students – and associates degrees – 18.8 percent versus 7.8 percent who completed their studies within four years.

### The older students start, the less likely they are to finish.

The age at which students enter college also affects the likelihood of graduation, according to the aforementioned study from Complete College America.

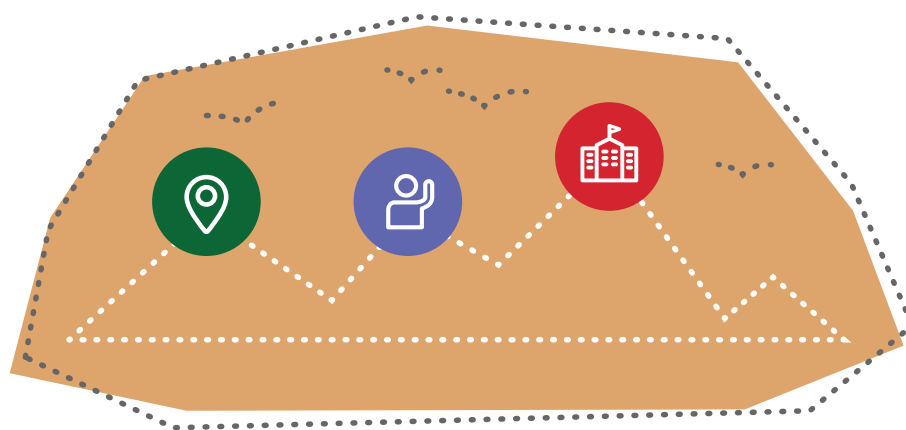
- Among full-time students who were at least 25 years old at enrollment, 30.2 percent completed a one-year program in under 18 months, 14.4 percent earned their associate in less than three years, and 27 percent completed a bachelor's degree within six years.
- Part-time students who were 25 years or older at enrollment had completion rates of 11.3, 4.6, and 17.3 percent, respectively, for the same programs and degrees.

## The Challenge for Higher Ed

Clearly, the odds do not favor non-traditional students. According to the NCES, between 2012 and 2023, enrollment of students over the age of 25 is expected to increase 20 percent. During the same period, the increase among students 24 years old or younger is projected at 12 percent. The non-traditional student has become the “new normal” on campus, leaving colleges and universities scrambling to find effective ways to increase completion rates among this group and to adapt their programs to meet the needs of this rapidly growing segment of their student bodies.

## THE NEW NORMAL BRINGS NEW CHALLENGES FOR UNIVERSITIES

The “new normal” on college campuses is no longer a student who has just earned a high school diploma and can devote all of his or her time and energy to academics. These non-traditional students have to overcome a variety of challenges to make school work because they typically work



at least part-time, have a spouse and/or children, may have a lengthy commute to campus, and are responsible for their own support as well as the costs involved with attending college. Adjusting to this changing market has left many

universities actively seeking ways to respond to the “new normal.”

## Challenge of Proximity

Traditional students with on-campus residency and no work commitments often have less difficulty conforming to the institution’s schedule. Holding registration at 10am may not pose a challenge, but non-traditional students may have a scheduling conflict if they are slated to work when registration is held.

## Challenge of Attendance

The non-traditional student typically has multiple demands on his or her time; employers may be unsympathetic toward employees who refuse to work overtime, spouses can fall ill, and babysitters can fail to materialize.

## Challenge of Relevant Courses

Many degree plans are outdated, requiring students to complete courses in subject areas they have already mastered or earn an excessive number of credits that do not count towards their degree if they transfer from one institution to another. Although historically, universities have sought to provide every student with a well-rounded education, non-traditional students want to see relevant results in the shortest time possible.

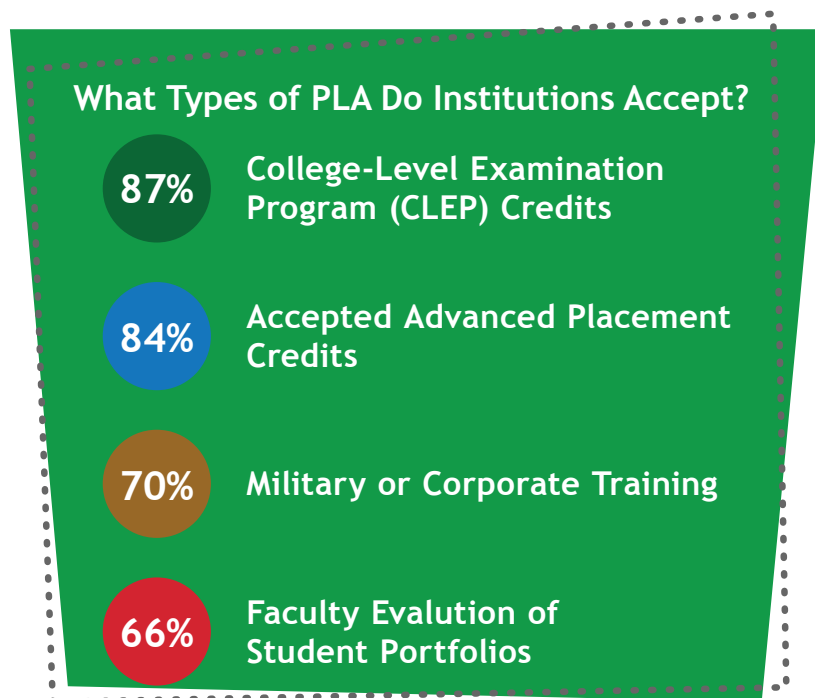
## Challenge of Support Services

Non-traditional students are less likely to avail themselves of the support services offered by the university. In some cases, such as among first-generation students, they may be unaware of the existence of such services. Other students find that the hours during which support is available conflict with classes, their work schedule, or family commitments.



Many universities have made significant strides when it comes to working with non-traditional students. They offer extended hours for registration, more classes on nights and weekends, and on-campus services such as child care centers.

However, one critical area in which universities have made substantial progress is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). PLA is a comprehensive approach to recognizing that what students know is more important than where they obtained their knowledge. A study conducted by the Council for Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) uncovered some interesting trends regarding PLA.



Institutions that accept PLA credits have discovered significant correlations between degree completion and PLA. Students who receive PLA credits have a 58 percent completion rate, compared to 27 percent for students who did not participate in PLA. The differences in completion rates were similarly disproportionate among Hispanics (47 percent versus 6 percent), African Americans (40 percent

versus 17 percent), and students with a GPA of at least 3.0 (66 percent versus 35 percent).

Other methods that colleges and universities use in response to the influx of non-traditional students include:

- Accelerated courses that can be completed in fewer weeks than a traditional semester-long course
- Self-directed or self-paced courses that allow students to work at their own speed
- Courses offered completely or partially online, eliminate the need for students to attend classes on campus

Although universities have made postsecondary education more accessible, there is still much work to be done to meet the needs of the new normal. Non-traditional students are quickly replacing the traditional student of yesterday, and the trend is likely to increase dramatically over the next 20 years. Administrators and faculty will be increasingly challenged to find alternatives to the traditional model of education delivery. However, solutions must be found if the nation's postsecondary institutions are to provide the level of education that a country needs to compete in a global economy.

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW NORMAL

Given the challenges that non-traditional students face, it is not surprising that they can find it difficult to remain focused on attaining their degree. Examining how PLA helps non-traditional students meet the challenges they face may help explain why PLA students have higher completion rates.



## Challenges of Proximity and Attendance

When students can earn credits for what they already know, they may have fewer mandatory classes they must take to complete a degree. The additional flexibility can reduce scheduling conflicts to make it easier to enroll in seldom-offered – but critical – courses. Many students can reduce the number of days they must attend class each week, making it easier to manage work responsibilities, childcare, or personal commitments.

## Challenge of Relevant Courses

Non-traditional students are typically employed. As such, they want to earn their degrees in the shortest time possible. However, while pursuing their degrees, they want courses that they can relate and apply to their jobs – past, current, and future. PLA speeds the time to completion, but it also allows them to enroll in upper-level courses faster. In many cases, it is these upper-level classes that non-traditional students value the most and find the most relevant.

# PLA BENEFITS INSTITUTIONS

It is not just students who benefit from an effective PLA program, institutions stand to gain several benefits as well.

## Additional Institutional Hours

It is a misconception to think that the reason that PLA students amass more credit hours is due to the “bonus” credits provided by PLA. In an extensive study conducted by CAEL, the results showed that when transfer and PLA credits were excluded, students not receiving PLA credits completed an average of 43.8 institutional credits. Whether they earned a degree or dropped out, PLA students averaged 53.7 institutional credits, which is slightly more than three additional courses completed at the school or university.

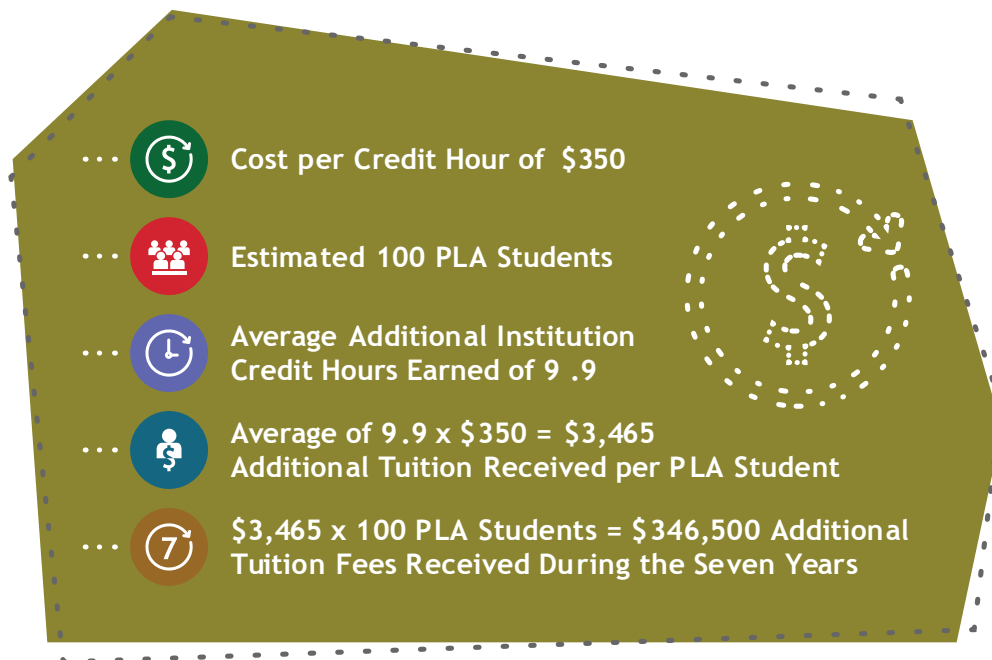


## Greater Continuity in Enrollment

The CAEL study also found that non-degree earners varied in their enrollment patterns if they received PLA credits. Among the non-PLA students, approximately 60 percent did not earn credits after their initial year of enrollment. Students using PLA were much more likely to persist in earning credits at the same institution for their second through sixth years.

## Greater Revenue for the Institution

Some believe that awarding PLA credits reduces the institution's revenue through lost tuition. However, CAEL's study disproves this idea. The following data, calculated for a seven-year period, can be used to illustrate:



Depending on the number of PLA students, the additional revenue could be significantly more. It should also be noted that these estimates do not include miscellaneous charges, such as registration, infrastructure, parking, technology, or lab fees that may also generate additional revenue.

Thus, when you examine the facts, it becomes clear that PLA is a “win-win” scenario. PLA helps meet the needs of non-traditional students by reducing their time to degree

and accelerating their access to relevant courses, which in turn results in higher completion rates. Institutions can gain additional revenue as well as the benefits of improved graduation rates.

## BETHANY'S STORY: USING PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT TO SHORTEN HER TIME TO A DEGREE

Bethany Meyer, profiled in *U.S. News & World Report*, had worked as a human resources professional for the greater part of a decade. When she decided to earn her bachelor's degree in business, a review of the required courses led her to realize that she already knew much of the material. Without the academic credit, however, she potentially faced having to take classes that would do little to enhance her knowledge – but would make her degree more costly and extend her time to completion.

When her school counselor suggested portfolio assessment as an alternative, Meyer was mildly skeptical. She wondered how she could actually earn legitimate academic credits based on her work experience. Now, however, she states that if she had known about portfolio assessment earlier, she would definitely have embraced it.

Portfolio assessments can be an excellent way for students to convert acquired knowledge into college credits, according to Pamela Tate, the president and CEO of CAEL. LearningCounts, a CAEL initiative, guides students through the preparation and submission of a portfolio through an online course. The six-week course is worth three credit hours. The process teaches students how to match their experience to the expected outcome of a college class – the competencies, knowledge, or skills that the student should master in that class.

Although CAEL has included portfolio assessment as an



option for four decades, Tate says that interest did not begin to surge until recently. Student portfolios are evaluated by CAEL-trained assessors, and approximately 58 universities have agreements with CAEL to accept their assessments.

By using portfolio assessment and applying the handful of transfer credits she earned over the years, Meyer estimates she shaved at least 18 months from her bachelor's degree. She is now the human resources director at San Francisco's Marines' Memorial Club & Hotel and completed her bachelor's degree in management. Meyer's plans to pursue a graduate degree.

## LEARNINGCOUNTS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

According to a study conducted by CAEL, 56 percent of students receiving PLA credits completed a postsecondary degree within seven years compared to 21 percent of those without PLA credits. These numbers reflect both male and female students of all ages, races, and academic ability at all types and levels of institutions.

Clearly, PLA can be an integral part in raising completion rates – and an important aspect of PLA is portfolio assessment. However, many institutions are not certain of what portfolio assessment is or how to implement such a program.



## What is Portfolio Assessment?

Portfolio assessment is a structured process by which skills and knowledge acquired by students outside of a classroom can be related to a postsecondary course and evaluated for college credit. Portfolios include various documents to demonstrate how the student has mastered the learning outcomes of the specific course. The more portfolios a student completes, the less courses they have to take, helping them complete their degree faster.

## How Universities Benefit

Here are the four most important benefits that an educational institution receives from PLA.

1. Students who receive PLA credits show greater persistence, graduating at a rate that is 2.5 times greater than the rate for students without PLA credits. Students are motivated by the realization that completing their degree will take less time and be more economical than they previously expected.
2. Adult students can bolster enrollment numbers—and they often choose to enroll in institutions that allow them to earn college credit for their learning from work and life experiences.
3. Adult students can lead to more robust discussions in the classroom. Adults can bring hands-on experience and real-world insights into the discussions.
4. Both non-traditional and traditional students can benefit from the expansion of experiential learning opportunities.

## LearningCounts Can Help

LearningCounts is a key initiative of CAEL, the organization that helped establish the guidelines for assessing learning. The online portfolio assessment service provides a cost-effective, professional way to modernize and scale-up PLA

offerings. Here are just some of the ways that LearningCounts can help:

- Increased Enrollment - Student guidance and support offered through the program encourages participation.
- Marketing Tools - Institutions receive access to tools for their promotional efforts related to the program.
- Trained Assessors - LearningCounts has an extensive network of trained faculty assessors who evaluate portfolios to ensure that they are relevant and complete and then recommend the appropriate credits.
- Increased Staff Competencies - Training for admissions staff and counselors is available to help identify candidates for portfolio assessment, as well as team staff members on how to answer questions from students on the process.
- Flexibility - LearningCounts offers a self-paced online course and a six-week faculty-led course, allowing each institution to select the course that best suits the needs of their students.

Although universities have made postsecondary education more accessible, there is still much work to be done to meet the needs of the new normal. Non-traditional students are quickly replacing the traditional students of yesterday, and the trend is likely to increase dramatically over the next 20 years. Administrators and faculty will be increasingly challenged to find alternatives to the traditional model of delivering an education. However, solutions must be found if the nation's postsecondary institutions need to provide the level of education that a country needs to compete in a global economy.

## Return on Investment

As demonstrated earlier, institutions with 100 PLA students stand to generate an additional \$346,500 in revenue



over seven years. Assuming a \$175 per student difference in the costs between an institution's course cost and the LearningCounts course cost, \$61,215 for seven years of CAEL annual fees, and \$87,500 in LearningCounts fees for 100 students, the total investment would be \$148,715. This provides a return on investment of \$61,285.

## HOW LEARNINGCOUNTS BENEFITS STUDENTS

Staying the course to complete a degree can be challenging, especially for adult students who must also deal with the demands of a job and family. PLA can make a degree more economical and less time-consuming, but it offers other rewards that may be less apparent. The following student success stories can perhaps best illustrate the benefits.



### Marissa

At the age of 16, Marissa took a job as a medical collector, working evenings to offer financial support for her single mother. She kept this job for nine years, later adding a second job with an insurance company's policy service department. She spent eight years earning an associate degree in psychology. Marissa wanted to continue her education and earn a bachelor's degree, but she was not certain it would be feasible. Luckily, she found a university to attend that accepted

portfolio assessment. She earned 25 PLA credits, which made her feel that her earlier years were not wasted and encouraged her to persist. She has since completed her bachelor's degree and is a loss-prevention consultant.

## Alice

A single mother with a full-time job, Alice was dismayed to learn that the promotion she wanted required a degree. She was able to develop her portfolio and received college credits that saved her both time and money. Alice is on track to complete her bachelor's and has a promotion waiting upon graduation.

## Nilda

In 1979, Nilda completed high school and enrolled in college, only to leave after just one year due to financial pressures. For more than a decade, she worked various entry-level positions, including a stint as a coat-check attendant. An employer recognized Nilda's potential and trained her in accounts receivable. Over the years, Nilda moved into positions of greater responsibility, eventually becoming an assistant comptroller. Despite this, she never lost her desire to earn her degree. When a counselor at a nearby college suggested she explore portfolio assessment, she decided to try it and earned nine credits. Today Nilda lacks only two credits toward her associate degree, and she plans to continue her education and eventually become a CPA.

## Ryan

Ryan launched his own construction business at the age of 18. Eventually, he took a job in the finance industry. Ryan knew that he needed a bachelor's degree to improve his chances for promotions, but as a father of three, time and money were both limited. Portfolio assessment saved him two years of time and thousands in tuition costs.

## Who Can Benefit From Portfolio Assessment?

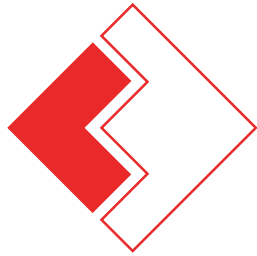
Although it is possible for any student to benefit from portfolio assessment, the students who gain the greatest benefits tend to share certain traits:

- Are typically at least 25 years of age or older
- Have been in the workforce for several years
- Have some on-the-job training or have skills they have learned from more experienced workers
- Are willing to perform the type of in-depth personal assessment needed to prepare the most effective portfolio

## CONCLUSION

PLA is proven to provide benefits to students as well as their schools. Students are more persistent, have higher completion rates and amass more credit hours while reducing the amount of time required to earn their degrees. Schools receive an excellent return on investment, and the enhanced completion rates can bolster the school's reputation. Through its LearningCounts initiative, CAEL is uniquely qualified to help institutions who want to enhance and expand their PLA programs with portfolio assessment.

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# CAEL

Linking Learning and Work

We advocate and innovate on behalf of adult learners to increase access to education and economic security. We provide adults with career guidance and help them earn college credit for what they already know. We equip colleges and universities to attract, retain, and graduate more adult students. We provide employers with smart strategies for employee development. We build workforce organizations' capacity to connect worker skills to employer demands.

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