

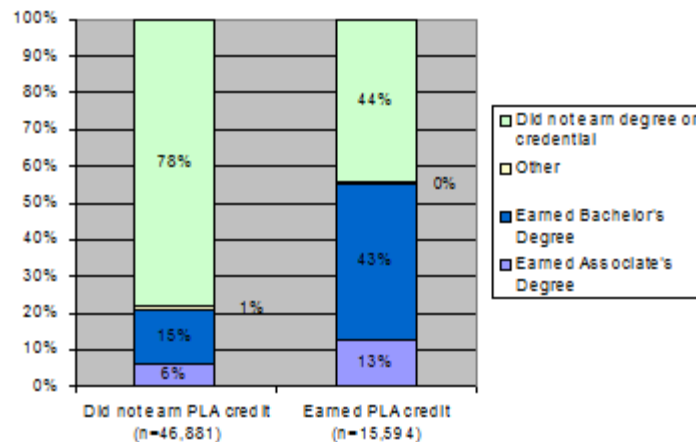
## Transforming Education through Innovations in Prior Learning Assessment Piloting the LearningCounts.org PLA Service

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LearningCounts.org was established in 2010 by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) to expand the availability of prior learning assessment (PLA) services across the United States. The services offered by LearningCounts.org can contribute to improved institutional completion rates and provide additional support for institutions looking to expand PLA offerings at their campuses.

CAEL is an international non-profit organization that has created and managed effective learning strategies for working adults since 1974. A leader in researching and establishing best practices in the area of adult learning -- and in prior learning assessment, specifically -- CAEL has actively contributed to the field of PLA by developing the Ten Standards for Assessing Learning and by publishing key student and assessor textbooks.

Since its founding, CAEL has worked tirelessly on the advancement of prior learning, including its facilitation, distribution and affiliated assessor training. In March 2010, CAEL produced the ground-breaking report, *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*. This report demonstrates links between the use of prior learning assessment services and improved academic outcomes, including increased retention, persistence and graduation rates. Data from this report indicates that PLA users are over 2 1/2 times more likely to complete their undergraduate degrees within seven years than those students who did not use PLA (see image below).



While this research demonstrates the potential impact PLA could have on degree completion rates nationwide, there are simply not enough institutions granting credit for prior learning. There is a clear need for both resources and consistent standards in PLA assessments -- standards that will help ensure the equitable treatment of students, encourage the transferability of PLA credits, and address the documentation, self-assessment and quality concerns that come with maintaining regional accreditation.

LearningCounts.org was launched to make consistent prior learning assessments more accessible to institutions nationwide and to nonaffiliated students. LearningCounts.org helps adult learners earn college credit for what they already know by offering the following three services:

- free academic advising;
- information about multiple PLA options; and,
- individualized portfolio development and assessments.

### **Free Academic Advising**

LearningCounts.org provides students with a complimentary phone session with one of CAEL’s professional academic advisors. Advising sessions focus on the student’s areas of prior learning while helping them define their academic path – an area of particular value for those learners not yet matriculated at an institution. Advising sessions can result in a student being referred to any number of PLA options that best match the student’s learning. If the student is not a good candidate for PLA methods, the advising session may result in a recommendation to concentrate on more conventional educational environments.

### **Information about PLA Options**

Prior learning assessment is not just one method or tool. Many adults have a variety of learned experiences and find that an integrated approach works best. Through LearningCounts.org, students can leverage multiple approaches to PLA, including standardized exams, institutional challenge exams, existing evaluations of non-collegiate programs (including corporate and government training) and individualized portfolios. LearningCounts.org provides information about all of these formats. With the help of our trained advisors, students can be directed to the formats that work best for their learning.

### **Individualized Portfolio Development and Assessment**

LearningCounts.org offers students access to a prior learning portfolio development course called CAEL 100: Prior Learning Assessment Theory and Practice. This writing-intensive, online course is facilitated by a CAEL-trained faculty member. During the six weeks of the course, students are introduced to theories of adult learning and are asked to reflect on all possible areas of their prior learning in order to ensure that students are thinking broadly about the applicability of PLA to their lives. The course also provides opportunities for students to work and receive feedback on components of an individualized portfolio. This course has been evaluated by the American Council on Education (ACE) and carries with it an ACE CREDIT recommendation of three undergraduate credits.

LearningCounts.org is also where students can build and submit their completed portfolios that demonstrate their prior learning. Students work with an e-portfolio platform that can accommodate text-based portfolios, audio and video documentation, and interactive files for courses heavy on design and computer technology.

The submitted portfolio is then matched to a faculty member with content area expertise who provides both qualitative and quantitative feedback. Faculty assessors undergo CAEL training

before working with students. Assessors provide detailed narrative feedback on each portfolio for each student. In addition, each assessor provides evaluation information through a portfolio rubric that is accessible by the student and used by LearningCounts.org to monitor the progress of the program. The portfolio assessments are completed quickly and are transfer-friendly; credit recommendations are completed within two weeks and are then transcribed by ACE CREDIT.

LearningCounts.org continues to build its national faculty roster for both its PLA course instructors and PLA assessors – a roster that has received over 600 qualified applications to date. Because the faculty roster is both broad and deep, LearningCounts.org has the unique capacity to assess portfolios across disciplines – a tremendous asset for those institutions that may receive a request for PLA review in an area they do not regularly staff. If you are interesting in joining this roster, please visit <http://www.learningcounts.org/careers>.

LearningCounts.org is currently halfway through a pilot phase funded largely by Lumina Foundation, the Kresge Foundation and the Joyce Foundation. LearningCounts.org has been developed in collaboration with CAEL, the College Board and ACE CREDIT. Information on a post-pilot LearningCounts.org will be available soon.

If you would like information on how to become engaged with the remainder of this pilot period, please contact us at [colleges@learningcounts.org](mailto:colleges@learningcounts.org).