



The Learning That Maturity Brings: An Analysis of the Value of Prior Learning Assessment for Mature Learners

America's population is aging: between 2010 and 2020, we will see a 20% increase in the number of people age 50 and over in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, Interim State Population Projections, 2005). Moreover, the labor force participation of these older Americans has been rising in recent years, and we can only expect it to increase further in response to the economic hits older Americans have sustained during our current recession. Many older workers will turn to educational institutions to help them improve their skills or prepare them for new jobs or perhaps even new careers.

Just as mature workers bring decades of experience to the workplace, they also bring learning from that experience to their postsecondary pursuits. This learning, if evaluated through prior learning assessment (PLA) methods, can give mature learners a way to earn college credit for what they already know, helping them complete their learning programs in a shorter period of time.

This CAEL research brief presents data from CAEL's 2010 *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* report on the experience of mature learners with PLA credit (see the end of this document for more information on that study). While the outcomes for PLA students of all ages are impressive, **the data show that mature learners with credit earned through PLA truly excel: compared to younger students with PLA credit, mature learners with PLA credit earn a higher average number of credits through PLA, have higher graduation rates, and require a shorter time to earn a degree.** The data also show that when students aged 55–64 have access to PLA, they earn PLA credit in similar proportions to younger students.

Although the reasons for these impressive outcomes are unknown, one possible explanation is that mature learners simply have more years of experience. These additional years provide more opportunities to learn and more opportunities for the kind of reflection on learning that creates deeper levels of knowledge.

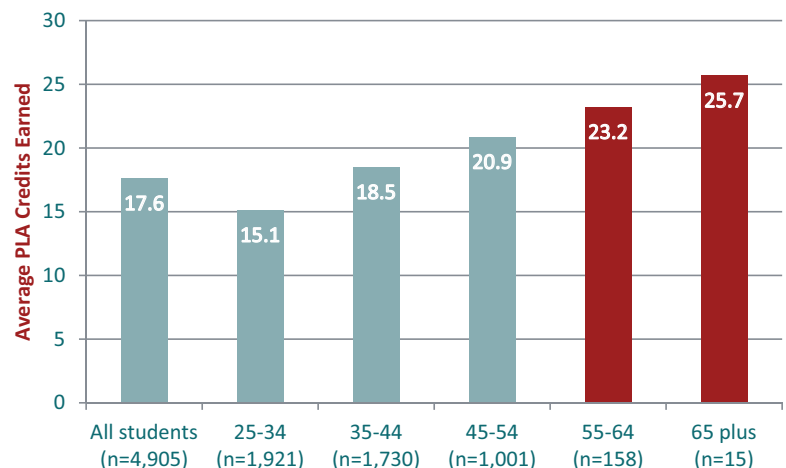
Given the PLA outcomes for mature learners, organizations focused on helping mature learners and mature workers might consider how PLA can be a strategy to help people 55+ achieve their education and training goals.

Mature Learners and PLA Credit-Earning

CAEL's *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success* study is notable for the large number of students—more than 62,000—in our sample. A small proportion of that sample (3%) was aged 55 and older. A total of 173 of the students aged 55+ had earned credit through PLA.

Those mature learners in our sample who earned credit through PLA earned more of those credits, on average, than did younger age groups. Students aged 55–64 earned an average of 23.2 PLA credits, and students 65+ earned an average of 25.7 PLA credits (however, the sample size for those aged 65+ is very small). Younger age groups (25–34 and 35–44) averaged from 15.1 PLA credits to 18.5 PLA credits (Figure 1).

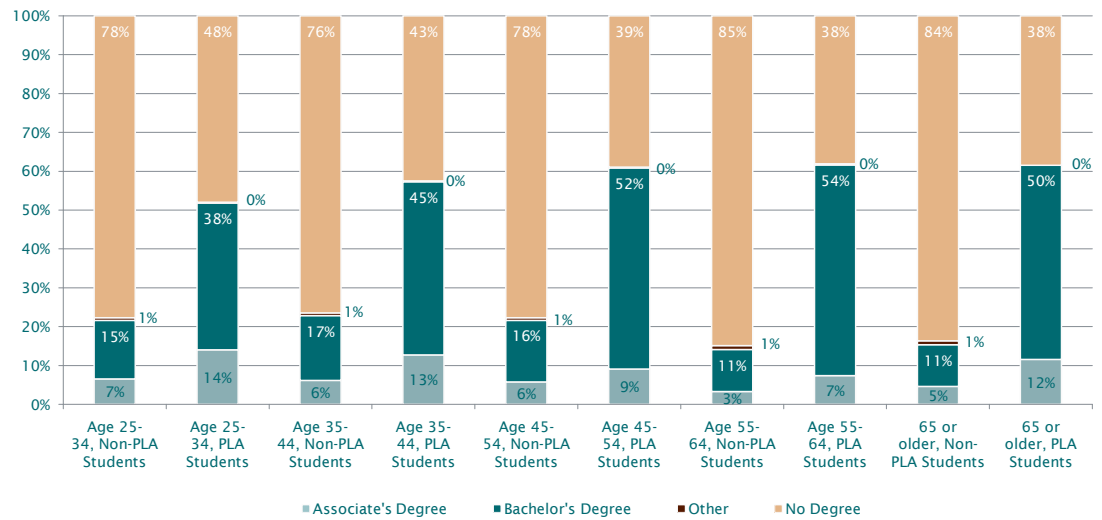
Figure 1. Age and Average Number of PLA Credits Earned



Degree Completion of Mature Learners with PLA Credit

Looking at the degree-earning patterns of different age groups, we found that PLA earners in every age group of our sample had higher graduation rates than non-PLA students. The difference in graduation rates was highest for those aged 55 and older; 54% of PLA students in that age group earned bachelor's degrees compared to 11% of non-PLA students (Figure 2).

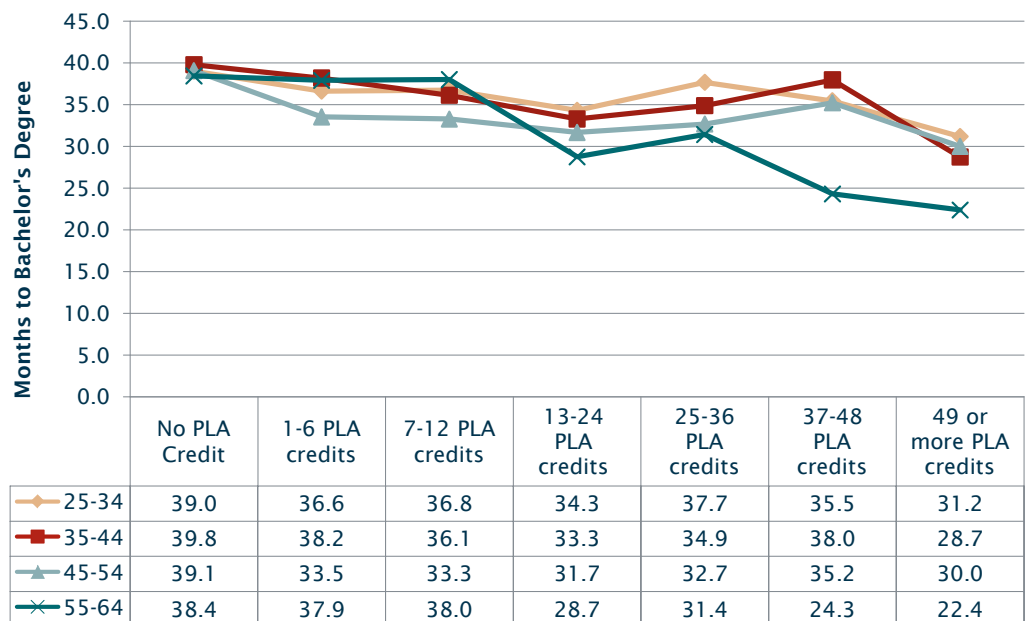
Figure 2. Age, PLA, and Graduation Rates



Time to Degree of Mature Learners with PLA Credit

Similarly, while students of all age groups required less time to earn bachelor's degrees with PLA credits, the greatest time to degree difference was for students aged 55-64 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Age, PLA, and Bachelor's Time to Degree



PLA Participation by Mature Learners

Students aged 55-64 earned credit through PLA at similar proportions to younger age groups: 24% of students aged 55-64 earned PLA credit, compared to 22-29% of the younger student groups. These participation rates are in line with the overall PLA participation rate in our sample, which was 25%. However, the oldest students, aged 65+, had much lower participation rates (11%) (Table 1).

Table 1. PLA Participation Rate by Age

Age Range	Students Who Earned PLA Credit
25-34 (n=30,440)	22%
35-44 (n=20,213)	29%
45-54 (n=8,851)	27%
55-64 (n=1,390)	24%
65 or older (n=235)	11%
All students (n=62,475)	25%

Implications

Based on data from CAEL's *Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success*, we find that students aged 55–64 who take advantage of PLA opportunities have seen impressive outcomes in terms of average number of credits earned, graduation rates, and time to degree. These outcomes may be due to the fact that mature individuals have more life and work experience from which they have learned. Additional research is needed to determine a more precise explanation.

As colleges, universities, and workforce agencies begin to see more students and participants from older age groups, it may be particularly important to consider how PLA might be used to evaluate and formally recognize their experience-based learning. This can help mature learners and mature workers earn postsecondary degrees and credentials sooner and at a lower cost.

What Is Prior Learning Assessment?

Prior learning is 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 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.

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.



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.