



**CAEL**  
Linking Learning and Work



# Random Access:

## The Latino Student Experience with Prior Learning Assessment

By Rebecca Klein-Collins and Richard Olson



## Executive Summary

October 2014  
The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning  
*Excelencia in Education*

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This executive summary can be found online at [www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos\\_and\\_PLA\\_2014\\_summary](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos_and_PLA_2014_summary)  
The full research report can be found at [www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos\\_and\\_PLA\\_2014](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos_and_PLA_2014)

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### Executive Summary

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To meet current and future labor market needs in the U.S., government leaders, philanthropic organizations, and higher education institutions have turned their attention to helping more people – adults as well as traditional-aged college students – access education and succeed in completing degrees. National efforts to address the degree completion goals of the country will not succeed without focusing on strategies to improve the educational attainment of Latinos, “the nation’s largest minority group and among its fastest growing populations” (Brown & Lopez, 2013). Compared to other racial/ethnic populations, the Latino population in the U.S. has lower rates of educational attainment and lower rates of degree completion, on average.

Many Latinos come to higher education as adults. One degree completion strategy that is particularly suited to adult students in higher education is prior learning assessment (PLA). PLA provides opportunities to evaluate a student’s learning from work or life experience for the purpose of awarding college credit. For students whose experiential learning is demonstrably at the college level, PLA saves students time and money on their pathway to a degree.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has found that adult students with PLA credit are two-and-a-half times more likely to earn their degrees compared to adult students without PLA credit (Klein-Collins, 2010), yet compared to non-Latinos, fewer Latino students take advantage of this opportunity. For PLA to be an effective strategy to help with Latino degree completion, Latino students must know about it and use it.

This report presents the findings from a new study by CAEL, in partnership with Excelencia in Education, that examines the experience of Latino students with PLA at 10 postsecondary institutions in the U.S. between 2010 and 2013. Through analysis of more than 32,000 student academic records, as well as interviews with Latino students and PLA administrators, the study examines how Latino students engage with PLA in terms of methods used, number of credits earned, and areas of study for which credits are earned. It also investigates the role that institutions play in encouraging Latino students to take advantage of PLA. The study’s findings suggest specific strategies for more effective outreach to Latino students, as well as other important target populations, on PLA.

#### Summary of Key Findings

The data from 32,940 students at the 10 participating postsecondary institutions in our study show that Latino students have outcomes in PLA take-up and credit-earning similar to their non-Latino peers. This data suggests that for Latino students, participation in PLA is less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution.

These and other findings are described below.

***Latino students used PLA as successfully as other groups – For Latino students, therefore, participation in PLA depends less on ethnicity and more upon the specific institutional approach to PLA***

When all student data was aggregated, Latino students had a PLA take-up (or usage) rate of 15% compared to 42% for non-Latino students (Figure A). However, the take-up rate varied considerably by institutional category: institu-

## PLA Methods

Credit (or other recognition) students can earn for their prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. There are four generally accepted approaches to PLA:

- **Standardized exams. Examples include:**

- Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams)
- College Level Examination Program Exams (CLEP exams)
- Excelsior College Exams (UExcel)
- The DANTES Subject Standardized Tests, or DSST Exams

- **Evaluated non-college programs.**

The National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS) and the American Council on Education (ACE) conduct evaluations of training that is offered by employers or the military. Many employers also work directly with local postsecondary institutions to evaluate their companies' training. The result of these evaluations is credit recommendations for anyone satisfactorily completing that training.

- **Individualized assessments.**

In this method, students prepare a portfolio or demonstration of their learning from a variety of experiences and non-credit activities. Then, faculty with appropriate subject-matter expertise evaluate the student's portfolio to determine a credit award.

- **College faculty-developed exams, also called "challenge exams."**

These allow students to earn credit by taking examinations faculty create for courses offered at a given institution.

tions offering PLA within separate, smaller adult divisions (Adult Divisions); institutions that were adult oriented throughout all programs (Adult Oriented); and institutions that were primarily associate degree granting (Associate Degree).

In each institutional grouping, Latino students had PLA take-up rates that were on par with or exceeded the PLA take-up rate of non-Latino students (Figure A), and they also earned similar numbers of credit through PLA. Latino students have lower PLA participation only in certain institutional settings; namely, associate degree institutions where there have historically been fewer PLA options in terms of methods, less of a PLA-promoting culture, and policies that often limit the flexibility a student has in the degree plan.

In our study, these were the institutions with the highest Latino enrollments. Given that these institutions have recently expanded their PLA offerings and enhanced their PLA policies and practices, we would expect to see larger PLA take-up rates at these institutions in more recent student cohorts.

Participation in PLA, therefore, appears to be less dependent upon ethnicity than it is on the specific approach to PLA within a given institution. Latinos can and do take advantage of PLA, but primarily when they are enrolled at institutions where PLA is strongly promoted and supported.

### *Latino students were more likely to earn PLA credit in the area of foreign language - but were not limited to only foreign language PLA credit*

Overall, Latino students were six times more likely to earn PLA credit for foreign language than were non-Latino students. When analyzed by institution grouping, Latino students were found in all three institutional groups to be more likely than non-Latino students to earn credit for foreign language (Figure B). Therefore, it seems appropriate that many institutions are choosing

Figure A. PLA Take-up rate by ethnicity and institutional grouping

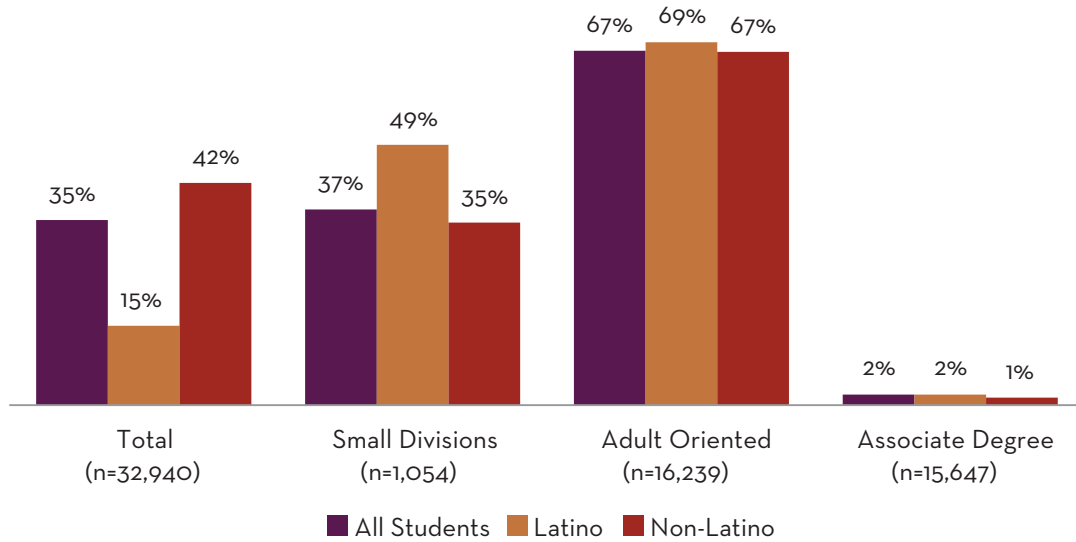
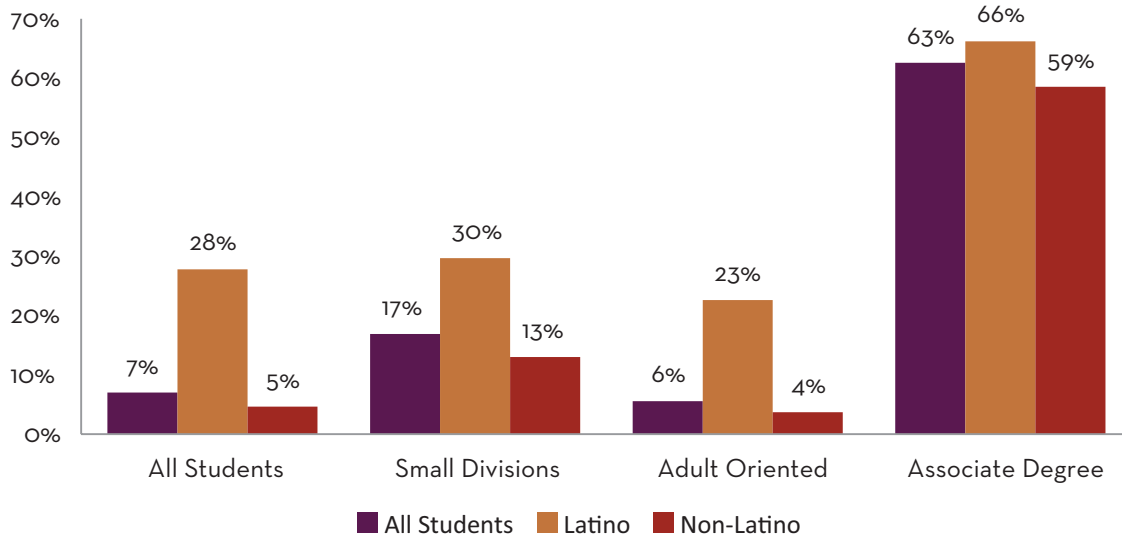


Figure B. Percent of PLA students earning credit for foreign language by institutional category



to steer Latino students in this direction as a first step in PLA credit-earning.

For Latino students, foreign language credit was also highly associated with likelihood of earning credit in another area of study; about half of Latino students who earned credit in foreign language also earned credit in another area (Figure C). In two out of three institutional groupings, Latino students with foreign language credit were significantly more likely than non-Latinos with foreign language credit to earn PLA credit in a second or third area of study.

### Latino students found PLA to be empowering and validating

Both institutional representatives and Latino students discussed PLA as a practice that empowers and validates. For schools, it is a way to honor what students have learned in their lives. Students who earned PLA credit discussed how the act of reflecting on past learning was a positive experience for them and often

improved their self-image. After earning credit through PLA, students felt validated in their experiential knowledge.

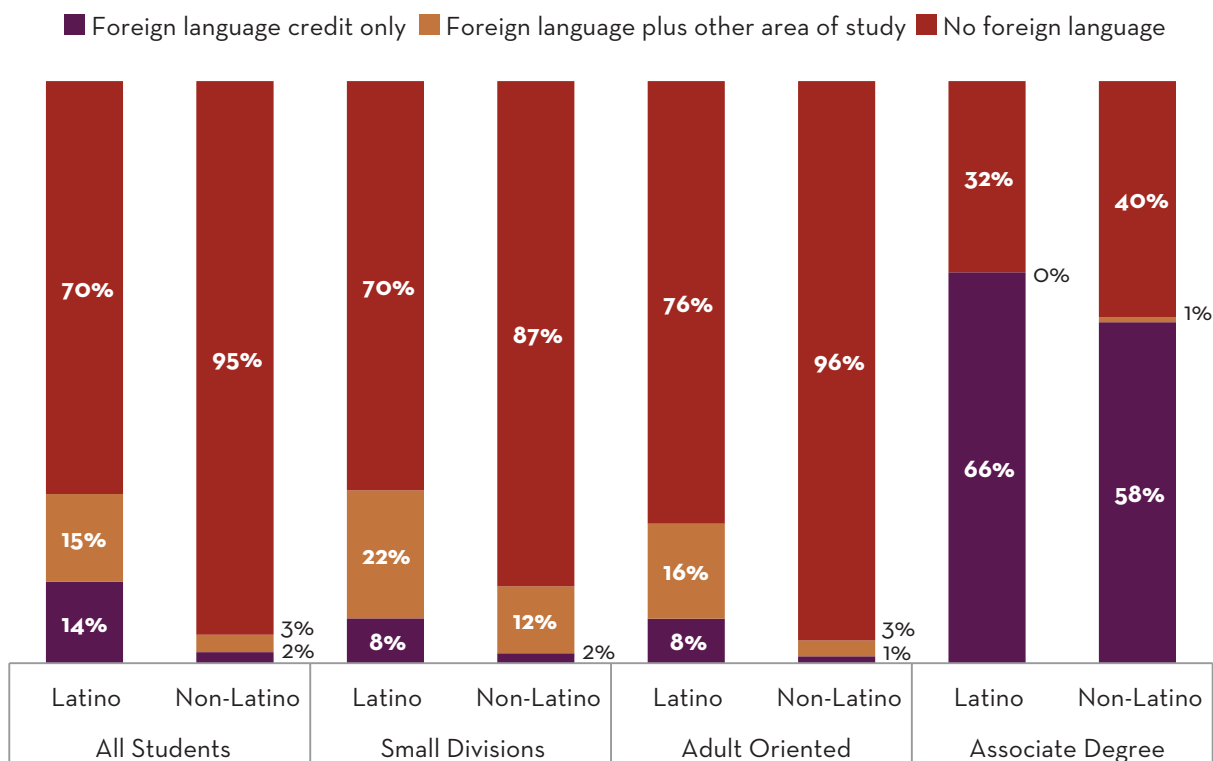
### First generation college students may need additional help with PLA

Although PLA can be an empowering process for many adult students, students who are worried that they do not belong in college may not respond well to PLA messages that focus on the need to “prove what you know” or “demonstrate what you have learned.” One institution in our study is piloting a program designed to help these students explore their prior learning in a more supportive way.

### Current PLA marketing strategies may not always hit their mark

Some student interviewees reported that information about PLA programs at their institutions was not easily accessible, and many reported that they discovered the option through

Figure C. Prevalence of foreign language PLA credit-earning by students with any PLA credit, by ethnicity and institutional category



word of mouth. PLA administrators at some of the participating institutions confirmed that word of mouth is a common way for students to learn about PLA. PLA may be mentioned in catalogs, websites, and marketing materials, but if institutions want their students to know about and use PLA, more still needs to be done so that the students understand their PLA options and how to exercise them.

## Recommendations

These findings suggest several strategies for institutions to take in order to support Latino students – as well as other populations – in their efforts to earn credit for what they already know.

- 1. Examine and improve institutional strategies for marketing and outreach regarding PLA.** Information about the PLA methods offered at an institution should be readily available and easily accessible.
- 2. If the institution has the goal of accelerating degree completion through increased use of PLA, reach out specifically to foreign language speakers as a great way for students to get started.** For Latino students, PLA credit through Spanish CLEP exams appears to be an effective way to attract them to PLA, and only a first step in a larger exploration of earning credit for what they already know.
- 3. Offer a course to all adult students to explore prior learning.** Programs with high usage of PLA typically offer some sort of course to help students examine their work and life experiences to identify college learning they may have acquired. These courses help the students determine a plan for PLA, including which methods of PLA to use for different types of learning or different areas of study.

- 4. Provide portfolio assessment as part of your PLA program offerings.** The students we interviewed experienced gains in their self-image and academic confidence by participating in a portfolio building experience that led them to reflect on their learning in a deliberate way.

- 5. Closely track PLA usage at the institutional level.** In order to understand how PLA is used – or underused – by targeted student populations, regularly track trends in PLA credit earning by race, ethnicity, age, military status, and other demographic categories. Subpopulations with lower PLA take-up rates should signal to the institution the need to examine how messages about PLA are reaching these populations and how the institution might best support them with PLA.

6. First generation college students may require a customized approach to PLA. Not all Latinos are first generation college students, but those who are may have heightened anxiety about being in college. Consider reaching out to these students in a different way. Explain early and often what PLA is, how to access it, how it works, and how it can help them. Use language that emphasizes the value of their individual expertise and experience, rather than language that emphasizes the need for them to prove themselves.

## Summary and Discussion

CAEL and Excelencia undertook this study to expand current knowledge about the use of PLA among adult Latino students. The findings from this study are encouraging. We found that Latino students are just as successful in PLA usage as non-Latino students in similar institutions. Latino students demonstrated much the

same outcomes in both take-up rate and number of credits earned. We also learned that foreign language PLA credit may be a great way to encourage Latino students – and perhaps other students as well – to get started with PLA.

One additional finding of interest was that PLA take-up rates varied so significantly by institutional type. Institutions that have well-established approaches to PLA and that promote PLA as an integral part of their offerings to adult learners had much higher PLA participation rates overall, compared to institutions where it was not as big a part of the institution's approach to adults. This suggests that PLA is likely underutilized in many institutions. Currently, Latino student enrollment is heavily concentrated at community colleges. While many community colleges have started to give much more attention to their PLA offerings, these institutions have historically not had strong PLA programs. Improving the PLA offerings and related support at these institutions is important for improving PLA use among Latino students nationwide.

For example, institutions may be able to dramatically improve PLA usage by giving PLA more prominence as a program offering and by encouraging all adult learners to explore whether they may have college-level learning from their work and life experiences. The associate degree institutions in our study have already taken steps in this direction and so we would expect to see very different PLA take-up rates in more recent student cohorts.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study show that PLA can be a resource to adult Latino students to accelerate their postsecondary credit earning. Yet they also point to the need for institutions to make sure that they are promoting PLA well and working with students to explore what prior learning they may have. Without this kind of promotion and support for PLA, students may not be aware of PLA or they may not think that they have any learning that is worth evaluating

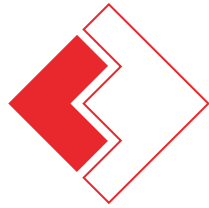
for credit. With a robust and well-promoted PLA program, institutions can make great strides in helping Latino and other adult learners accelerate on their path to a college degree.

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