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# Accelerating Degree Completion for Latinos through Prior Learning Assessment

A POLICY BRIEF

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Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)  
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# Accelerating Degree Completion for Latinos through Prior Learning Assessment

## Executive Summary

National efforts to address the degree completion goals of the country cannot succeed without focusing on strategies to improve the educational attainment of Latinos. Latinos are the nation's second largest racial or ethnic group, and growing. Compared to other racial/ethnic populations, however, Latinos have lower rates of educational attainment and lower rates of degree completion, on average.

Latinos also comprise a growing proportion of the workforce, and so it is important to consider strategies to help Latino *adults* complete degrees – not just traditional aged college students. Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a strategy for helping adults and other nontraditional students earn college credit for what they have learned in work, military, self-study, and other life experiences. Previous CAEL research has shown that Latino adult students with PLA credit are eight times more likely to complete their degrees than students without PLA credit. Yet, at some institutions, PLA is not promoted well, and students are not taking advantage of those limited offerings.

Recent research at ten institutions has found that Latino students use PLA as often as non-Latinos do. However, in this study, usage varied significantly by the type of institution. At 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, researchers found that all students were far less likely to take advantage of PLA. Nationally, these associate degree institutions are often the institutions with the highest Latino enrollments.

State and federal policy makers can help to improve access to PLA offerings for Latinos and other target populations. State and system leaders should:

- understand what PLA options are available at each institution,
- establish consistent system-wide policies for PLA,
- support better marketing and outreach to students on PLA,
- encourage special PLA strategies to reach target populations, like Latinos,
- track usage trends by group through data collection and reporting, and
- ensure that publicly-funded programs cover any costs associated with PLA.

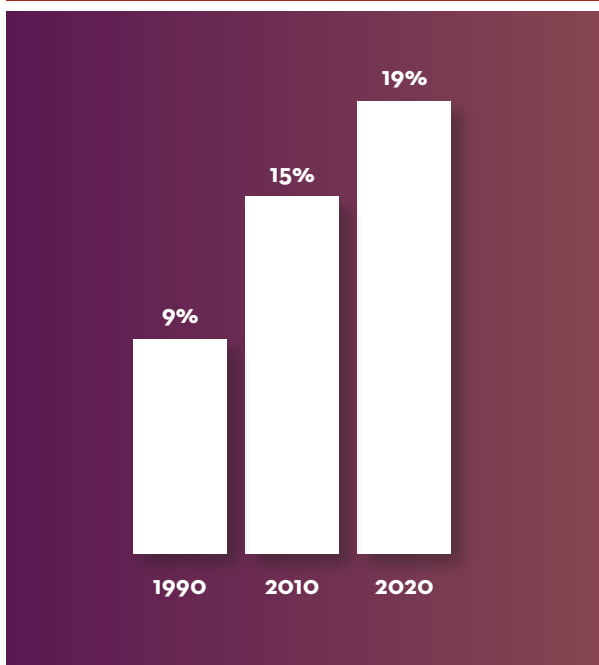
Federal policy makers should similarly ensure that PLA costs are eligible expenses under federal financial aid programs, including Pell grants, veterans educational benefits, employer provided tuition assistance, and workforce training programs.

These strategies will help more students take advantage of PLA so that their college-level learning – no matter where or how it was acquired – counts towards their degrees and credentials.

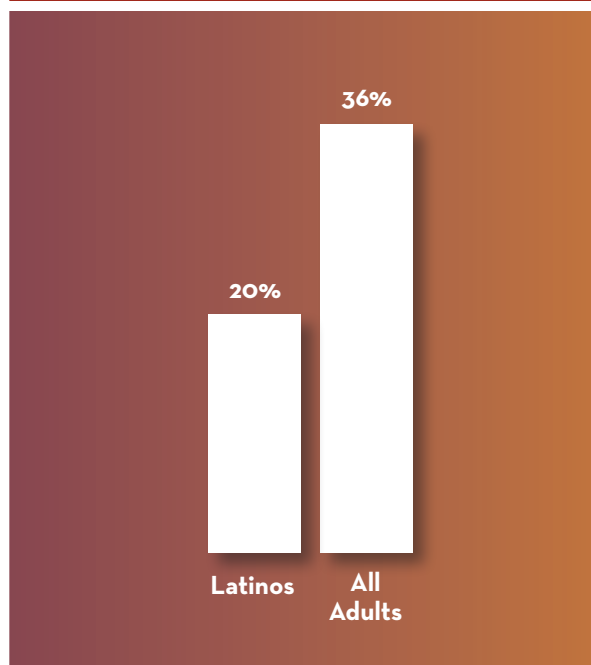
## The Challenge: The Need to Increase Latino Degree Completion

The U.S. has a knowledge-based economy that increasingly relies on skilled workers; and according to economic data, the supply of those skilled workers is not projected to meet employer needs. Labor economists have projected that by 2018, 63% of all jobs in the U.S. will require some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010); and at the current production rate in higher education, we are expected to “fall 5 million short of the workers with postsecondary credentials we will need by 2020” (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013, p. 2).

**Figure 1.**  
Protected Latino share of the labor force,  
1990 to 2020



**Figure 2.**  
Adult degree attainment,  
2012



National efforts to address the degree completion goals of the country have been ramping up for several years now, but it will be nearly impossible to succeed without focusing on strategies to improve the educational attainment of Latinos. Latinos are the nation's largest and fastest growing minority group (Brown & Lopez, 2013). They made up 9% of the labor force in 1990, grew to 15% of the labor force in 2010, and are expected to be 19% of the labor force in 2020 (Figure 1) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Compared to other racial/ethnic populations, however, the Latino population in the U.S. has lower rates of educational attainment and lower rates of degree completion, on average. Currently, adult degree attainment is 20% among Latinos, compared with 36% of all adults (Figure 2) (Santiago & Galdeano, 2014).

If the educational equity gap for Latinos is a challenge for the nation as a whole, it is of particular concern for states with large Latino populations. Currently, more than half of all Latinos

in the U.S. live in California, Texas, and Florida. And yet, *all* states are experiencing growth in the Latino population (Brown & Lopez, 2013).

### **The Reality of Latino Students in Higher Education**

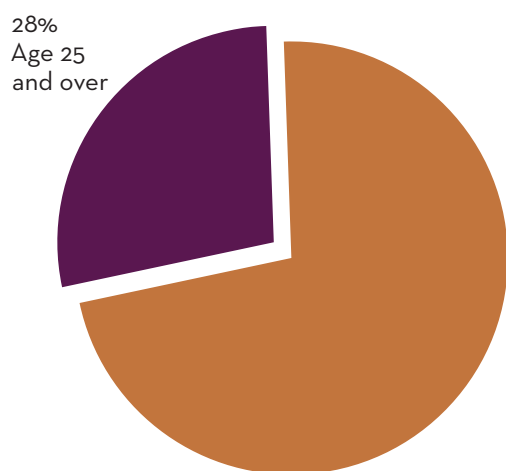
The education equity gap is not due to a lack of interest in education. The Pew Hispanic Center has reported that a large majority (89%) of Latino young adults say that a college education is important for success in life (Lopez, 2009), and enrollment of Latinos in higher education grew by one million between 2007 and 2012, even while enrollment of other racial and ethnic groups saw declines (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, September).

Latino persistence in college enrollment, however, appears to be a challenge. One reason that many Latino students do not complete their studies may be related to the fact that, according to a 2008 statistic, about half are first generation college students, nearly twice the rate of

white non-Latino students (Santiago, 2011). They and their parents lack previous experience with higher education and so may not know how to access information about financial aid or about the importance of registration deadlines or course requirements (Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010).

Noteworthy, too, is that many Latino students are already adults: 2012 Census Bureau data show that 28% of all Latino students enrolled in college are 25 or older (Figure 3). In addition, many Latino students – regardless of age – are working more than 30 hours a week to support themselves or their families (Santiago & Stettner, 2013; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010; Lopez, 2009). Any kind of additional, unexpected financial pressures can work against college completion; this challenge is also one that faces adult learners generally, most of whom are also juggling school with work and family responsibilities.

Figure 3.  
Age of Latino college students



## A Solution for Boosting Latino Degree Completion: Prior Learning Assessment

Many federal and state-level policy solutions have been proposed to boost Latino degree completion, such as: expanding student support services within institutions to help students persist to graduation; supporting a rigorous public high school curriculum that prepares all students for some postsecondary learning; creating seamless pathways from high school to college; providing better consumer information and otherwise helping prospective students make better institutional choices; improving access to financial aid; and using the Higher Education Act to incentivize colleges to support student retention and completion (Santiago, 2011; Liu, 2011; Bautsch, 2011; Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010; Santiago & Stettner, 2013).

*Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) provides a way for college-level learning from work and other life experience to count towards a college degree.*

Often overlooked in policy proposals for Latino educational success are strategies that have been demonstrated to enhance success for adults, such as providing opportunities for learning and student services in the evening and on weekends, offering accelerated programs tied to career pathways, and providing programs that are modular or otherwise allow students to learn at their own pace.

Another important strategy for helping adult students accelerate their degree completion is to make sure that the college-level learning they already have from work and life experience counts towards their degrees.

**Prior learning assessment**, or PLA, measures what a student has learned outside of the college classroom. PLA methods provide a way for institutions to formally evaluate a student's

learning, compare it to courses or competencies that colleges offer in the same area of expertise, and determine how many college credits the student should receive for that learning.

### *PLA methods*

The amount of credit students can earn for prior learning can be determined through several different types of assessments. PLA methods include:

- **Standardized exams, such as:**
  - Advanced Placement Examination Program (AP exams);
  - College Level Examination Program (CLEP exams);
  - Excelsior College Exams (UExcel); and
  - DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (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. These evaluations may result in 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, this PLA method allows students to earn credit by taking examinations faculty create for specific courses offered at a given institution.

## **Research Finds That PLA Is Associated with Better Degree Completion for All Adult Students – and Especially Latinos**

Students who earn credits through PLA often save time by not having to take courses in subjects they have already mastered. Additionally, PLA assessments are typically carried out at a lower cost compared to tuition charged by the credit hour.

*Latino students with PLA Credit are eight times more likely to complete a degree than those with no PLA credit*

Further, in a study of more than 62,000 students at 48 institutions, CAEL found that adult students with credit earned through PLA are two-and-a-half times more likely to complete a degree compared to adult students without such credit (Klein-Collins, 2010). This finding was true for students in all demographic groups, but the most dramatic difference was for Latino students at the bachelor's degree level. **Latino students with PLA credit earned bachelor's degrees at a rate that was almost eight times higher than that of Latinos without PLA credit** (Figure 4).

A recent study by CAEL and *Excelencia* in Education examined the usage rate for PLA on the part of adult Latino students. A promising finding from the study is that Latinos use PLA as often as non-Latinos do. At the same time, however, the study also uncovered the concerning fact that PLA usage rates are very low for all students at institutions serving large Latino populations. Across all 10 institutions in the study, Latino students had an overall PLA usage rate of 15% compared to 42% for non-Latino students (Figure 5). However, this aggregated figure masked the fact that usage rates varied considerably by type of institution. Institutions

Figure 4.  
Degree completion by PLA credit-earning, all students, Latino, and White Non-Latino

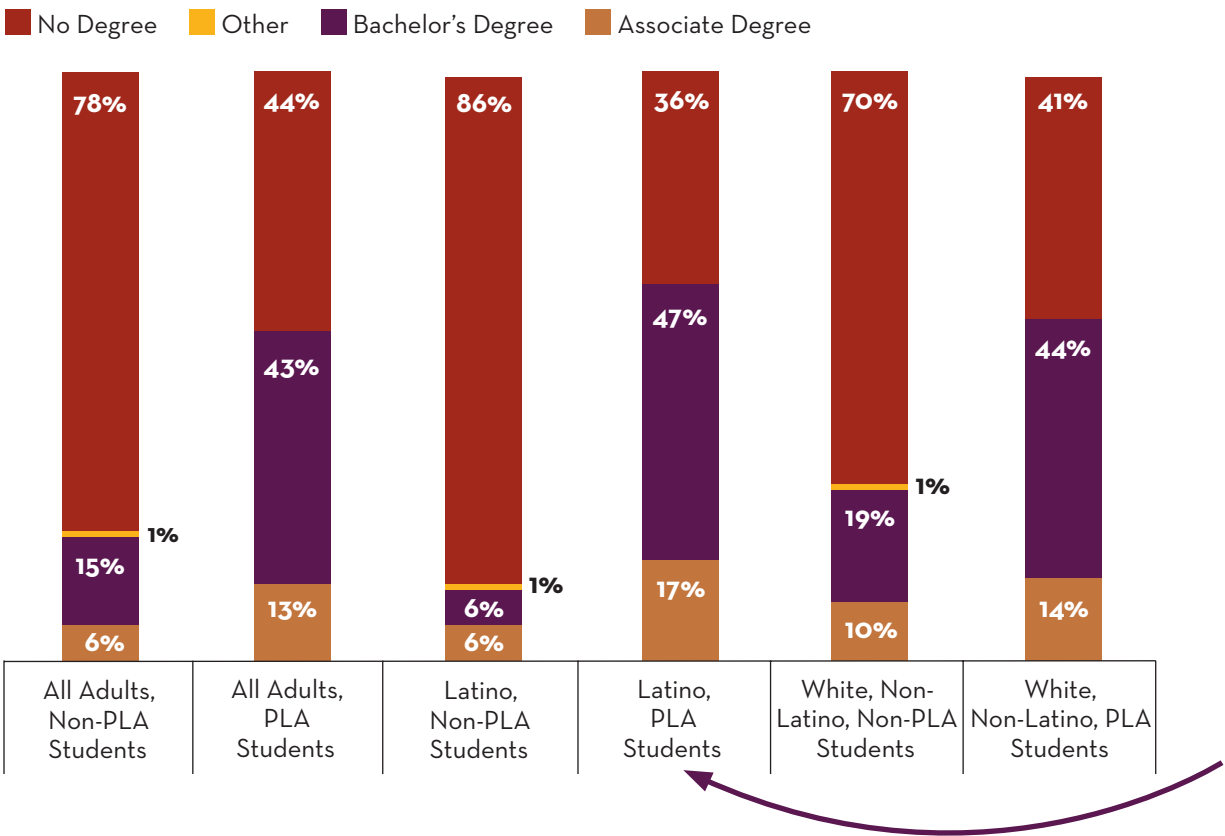
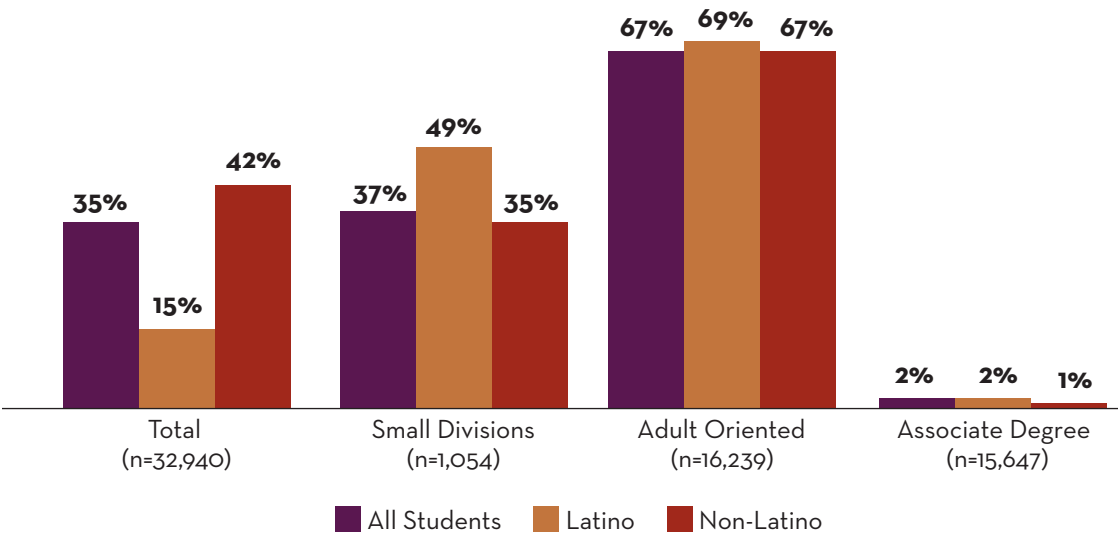


Figure 5.  
PLA usage rate by adult students, by ethnicity, and by type of institution



*At colleges where PLA is well promoted and supported, Latinos use it at high rates.*

offering PLA within separate, smaller adult-focused divisions or as part of a larger adult-focused institution reported that large proportions of adult Latino students took advantage of PLA (49% and 69%, respectively). At associate degree institutions, however, 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, researchers found that all students were far less likely to take advantage of PLA (2%) (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). Nationally, associate degree institutions (such as community colleges) often have the highest Latino enrollments.

In order for Latino students to be able to use PLA as a strategy for reducing the cost and time to complete a degree, PLA needs to be easily accessible to them at all types of institutions, and particularly at community colleges.

### Policy Recommendations for Closing the Equity Gap through PLA

There are several steps that policy makers can take to ensure that Latino adults have access to and can take advantage of PLA, so that their learning from work and life experience counts towards a college degree.

#### State and System Policy Recommendations

Leaders in several states and state systems have already recognized the importance of PLA for adult degree completion and have been implementing new policies to encourage new and expanded approaches to PLA in their institutions. The states of Washington, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Ohio are a few states that have been advancing new PLA policies and practices over the last few years; and Montana, the Texas A&M University System, and the Ohio Board of Regents also have initiatives in place to support and encourage PLA use within their institutions.<sup>1</sup> Some of these PLA advancement activities

have been launched due to leadership in the governor's office or the higher education board, while others have been the result of legislation (Sherman, Klein-Collins, & Palmer, 2012).

The following approaches of these states and systems suggest strategies for other state leaders interested in making PLA more accessible to key adult student populations, including Latinos:

- **Find out how accessible PLA is to students in your system/state.** There is considerable institutional variability in PLA offerings. Some colleges offer a full range of PLA options – standardized exams, challenge exams, portfolio assessment, and credit recommendation for evaluated non-college programs – while others limit their PLA options to a few credits from AP or CLEP exams. There is also variability in the number of PLA credits that can be included in a student's degree plan, and whether PLA credits can be used to satisfy general education and major requirements, or just electives. Cataloguing what each college in a state or system offers is a first step in understanding how accessible PLA is to Latino and other adult students.
- **Establish and communicate state- or system-wide policies for PLA.** Given that so many students move between and among institutions in a system – especially from community colleges to four-year institutions – it is important for consistency and transparency in the awarding of PLA credits across institutions. Some states start by establishing a cross-institutional task force to work on system-wide policies. These policies can address a range of topics, including:
  - assessment processes and methods used, including system-wide policies for awarding credit for CLEP and other standardized exams;

1. CAEL has been working with several of these states/systems to support these efforts.

- fees charged for assessments or for posting PLA credit to the transcript;
- transfer of PLA credit;
- how PLA credits are shown on the student transcript;
- awarding credit for learning from military training and occupations; and
- communication of PLA offerings and policies to students.

- **Support marketing and outreach on PLA statewide.** CAEL and *Excelencia's* research has found that students will not take advantage of PLA offerings if they are not well promoted and easily accessible, and many institutions do not promote PLA well (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). Establish expectations for institutions to work with adult students during enrollment, new student orientations, and advising sessions to let them know about these options, particularly at community colleges and other institutions that are serving large numbers of first generation students, Latinos, and other target populations. Provide support to train frontline advising staff on the value of PLA and on locally available PLA offerings. Require institutions to post PLA options and policies in a single, easy-to-locate page on the college website. Provide incentives for institutions to offer workshops or courses that help students explore their previous work and life experiences to identify college-level learning that could be evaluated for credit.
- **Encourage special outreach and PLA exploration for key target populations.** CAEL and *Excelencia's* research has found that specialized approaches to PLA may be effective and appropriate for special target populations. Not all Latinos are first generation college students, but those who are may have heightened anxiety about being in college. 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.” Encourage institutions to reach out to these students in a different way by using language that emphasizes the value of their individual expertise and experience, rather than language that emphasizes the need for them to prove themselves. This may be a particularly important strategy for community colleges where these target populations are heavily represented.

The CAEL and *Excelencia* research also found that Latino students were six times more likely to earn PLA credit for foreign language than were non-Latino students, and that about half of these Latino PLA students also then earned PLA credit in a second or third area of study (Klein-Collins & Olson, 2014). Foreign language PLA can therefore be a great way to get bilingual students started with PLA. Encourage institutions to reach out to bilingual students as a first step in a larger exploration of earning credit for what they already know.

- **Look at the data.** Even if a college has comprehensive PLA offerings, its leaders may not know whether PLA is being used and by whom. Establish guidelines for each institution to collect and report on student record data on the use of PLA so that the college and the system can understand how many PLA credits are earned, through which methods, and by which students. Colleges should regularly review data on PLA credit-earning by race, ethnicity, age, military status, and other demographic categories. Subpopulations with lower PLA usage rates should signal to the institution the need to examine whether and how messages about PLA are reaching these populations and how the institution might best support them with PLA. Institutions with lower PLA usage rates for all populations may need to examine ways to adjust their outreach strategies overall.



- **Cover the costs.** Review all state-funded financial assistance programs – including grants or loans for special populations, such as low-income students, underserved minorities, or military veterans – to make sure that all fees associated with PLA are eligible costs covered by the financial assistance program. Some methods of PLA do not cost anything for the student, but many important ones do have fees to cover the cost of expert faculty assessment (these fees are typically far less than tuition for credit-based courses). Financial assistance programs often omit specific mention of assessments as eligible costs related to a student’s education.

### *Federal Policy Recommendations*

As noted above, the cost of PLA to the student is typically far less than the tuition for a credit-based course. Currently, however, federal financial aid programs like Pell grants support only traditional course-based learning. The federal financial aid system is not structured for an outcomes-based and assessment-based approach to postsecondary completion, even if those approaches have the potential to help the student make real progress towards a degree or credential at a lower cost. The financial aid system typically does not consider as eligible educational expenses any assessment fees. Without a fresh approach to financial aid in its treatment of PLA, adults will not have the same incentive to have their college-level learning count when it matters the most.

Right now is the ideal time to examine what kinds of changes need to be made to the HEA in order to support PLA as an allowable expense for federal financial aid while ensuring adherence to quality standards. Specifically, the federal government should make clear that all costs associated with assessing students’ college-level knowledge, skills, and abilities – for the purposes of awarding college credit or granting

advanced standing – will be eligible costs under Title IV.

The federal government should further specify that the following programs cover the cost of prior learning assessment, whether provided by an accredited institution or by an independent, third party evaluator of student learning:

- Section 127 employer-provided educational assistance;
- Veteran education benefits (including the Post 9/11 GI Bill, the Montgomery GI Bill, and Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment benefits); and
- Individual Training Accounts through the Workforce Investment Act.

### **Conclusion**

Many institutional, state, and federal leaders are working to establish policies and programs to help close the educational equity gap for Latinos and other population groups. Because our nation’s educational goals are ambitious, it is not enough to focus solely on improving access and success for traditional aged college students. Adult degree completion must also be a goal.

Latino students who come to higher education with considerable learning from work, military, self-study, and other life experiences should have access to – and know about – options to have that learning count towards their postsecondary degrees and credentials. PLA can be an important strategy to help this population accelerate their degree completion in less time and at a lower cost.

The above policy changes would help to make PLA more accessible to students through information, outreach, guidance, and financial support.

## Further Reading on This Topic

*Latino College Completion: United States.* Excelencia in Education, 2014. <http://www.edexcelencia.org/research/college-completion/united-states#downloadresources>

*Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48 Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes.* Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010. [http://www.cael.org/pdf/pla\\_fueling-the-race.pdf](http://www.cael.org/pdf/pla_fueling-the-race.pdf)

*Random Access: Examining the Latino Student Experience with PLA.* Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Excelencia in Education, 2014. [www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos\\_and\\_PLA\\_2014](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/Latinos_and_PLA_2014)

## State PLA Policy Resources

*State Policy Approaches to Support Prior Learning Assessment: A Resource Guide for State Leaders.* CAEL and HCM Strategists, 2012. [www.cael.org/pdfs/college-productivity-resource-guide2012](http://www.cael.org/pdfs/college-productivity-resource-guide2012)

**Ohio:** *PLA with a Purpose: Prior Learning Assessment & Ohio's College Completion Agenda.* Ohio Board of Regents, 2014. <https://www.ohiohighered.org/PLA>

**Oregon:** *Oregon Credit for Prior Learning Standards: Draft for Institutional Consideration.* Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission, 2013. [http://oregonstate.edu/ase/sites/default/files/credit\\_for\\_prior\\_learning\\_draft.pdf](http://oregonstate.edu/ase/sites/default/files/credit_for_prior_learning_draft.pdf)

**Tennessee:** *Recommended Standards in Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Policy and Practice for Tennessee Public Colleges and Universities.* The Tennessee Prior Learning Assessment Task Force, 2012. <http://www.kansasregents.org/resources/PDF/3078-TNRecommendationsforStandardinPLA.pdf>

**Washington:** *Assessing and Awarding Credit for Prior Learning: A Handbook for Faculty and Staff.* Washington Student Achievement Council, 2013. <http://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/>

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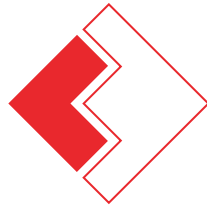
### From the author:

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*The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of TG, its officers, or employees.*



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