Equity Paradoxes in The PLA Boost

Opportunity Unrealized for Some Students despite the Potential for Improved Credit Completion

Previous research from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) found that prior learning assessment/credit for prior learning (PLA/CPL) has a positive effect on adult student credential completion, but Black and lower-income adults receive PLA/CPL at lower-than-average rates and, therefore, are less likely than other students to benefit from the completion boost.

To ensure that PLA/CPL offerings are designed for the full diversity of today’s students, institutions may need to consider a range of changes or enhancements. Making sure that all students have access to PLA/CPL — and ensuring equitable use and impact — are important ways to continue PLA/CPL’s social justice history in this new millennium.

Institutions interviewed for this deeper exploration offered some possible factors that could explain the PLA/CPL disparities or Black and/or lower-income adult learners in our sample:

- **Cost:** PLA/CPL related assessment fees are not covered by Pell Grants or other federal financial aid.
- **The amount and nature of outreach, marketing, and support:** Adult learners may not be hearing about PLA/CPL at the right time, or they may need additional encouragement and support.
- **Adaptivity of institutional policies and processes:** Prevailing PLA/CPL opportunities may be focused on a limited set of learners’ labor market experiences or programs of study.
- **Individual adult learner self-confidence:** Some adult learners may have lower confidence in themselves as learners, leading them to believe that PLA/CPL does not apply to them.

There are many ways that institutions can take action to address some of the barriers this analysis revealed.

- Prioritize equity in the design of PLA/CPL programs.
- Develop financial supports for low-income students or provide PLA/CPL free of charge.
- Improve PLA/CPL communications to students.
- Embed PLA/CPL systemically in advising and curriculum.
- Improve data infrastructure and analysis to understand where equity gaps exist.
- Provide PLA/CPL offerings for learning that occurs in a wide range of occupations.
- Scale processes for simpler PLA/CPL crosswalks between industry-developed skills and academic programs.