



GATEWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY®  
Illinois Professional Development System

2023

# ECE CREDENTIAL LEVEL 2

## *Prior Learning Assessment Report*



*Special thanks to the dedicated members of the Early Childhood Education PLA Project team who tirelessly dedicated their time and effort to this project, some of whom have been involved for multiple years.*

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Meet Maya, a determined and resilient learner who decided to embark on a new educational journey at the age of 48. After a 30-year hiatus from the classroom, she decided it was time to invest in herself and enhance her knowledge in early childhood education (ECE). With 20 years of experience in various Early Childhood Education environments, Maya had a solid foundation of practical skills and expertise.

One day, Maya stumbled upon information about the Early Childhood Education Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) assessment, offered at Heartland Community College. Excited by the opportunity to earn college credit for what she already knows and can do, she decided to take the virtual assessments utilizing human-powered avatars. This innovative approach

allowed her to showcase her deep understanding and practical application of Early Childhood Education principles, saving her valuable time and financial resources.

Motivated by her successful PLA assessment, Maya set her sights on earning her Level 3 Infant Toddler Credential and possibly her associate degree in Early Childhood Education.

*"This was an excellent opportunity for me, and I am so happy that I agreed to it!! The Early Childhood Education PLA tool gave me the option to use my prior knowledge and experience to earn credits towards my certificate, making it possible to earn my first certificate at the end of one semester. Because of this PLA experience, I am able to reduce the number of classes I will take overall. This has allowed me to focus on the classes I need to take and not feel like I am spinning my wheels by taking classes that would contain knowledge that I already have."*

Maya is not alone. Other incumbent workers are equally as thankful for the opportunity to show what they know and earn credit for their competencies in the Gateways to Opportunity® Early Childhood Education (ECE) Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) project.

This report provides the additional information to the Gateways to Opportunity Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Pilot report, released in 2022. The project's goal is to create a standardized instrument and process for faculty to entice higher education engagement by the almost 13,000 Illinois early childhood workforce members without credentials or college credit by acknowledging what they know and can do professionally, based on the identified competencies of the field.

# Brief History of the Gateways to Opportunity ECE Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment Project

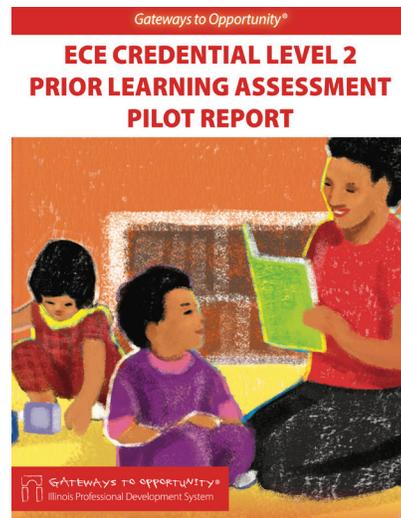
The United States, including the state of Illinois, is facing a shortage of early childhood teachers and paraprofessionals. This shortage has significant implications for the quality of early childhood education and the availability of services for young children. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are not enough trained teachers to meet the demand for early childhood education programs, particularly in low-income communities<sup>1</sup>.

Illinois faces its own challenges regarding the shortage of early childhood teachers and paraprofessionals, caused by a few factors including low wages, inadequate benefits, and the high cost of obtaining the required credentials and degrees. Recognizing the shortage of early childhood teachers and paraprofessionals can have detrimental effects on the quality of education provided to young children, especially in disadvantaged communities where access to high-quality early childhood education is most crucial, Illinois has implemented various initiatives to address this issue. This report provides the 2023 outcomes for the [ECE Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment \(PLA\) Pilot project](#), one of those initiatives.

The Early Childhood Education PLA initiative originated from statewide discussions among Early Childhood Education faculty, employers, and policymakers regarding the comprehensive Early Childhood Education 2020 workforce data released by the Illinois Gateways to Opportunity in early 2021. At that time, an analysis of the Gateways Registry data revealed that there were over 7,000 identified Early Childhood Education employees who did not possess a college degree ([Whitehead, 2021](#)). Many of these employees were younger, aged less than 25 or between 25-34 years old, and were typically working in infant/toddler programs. Considering the potential for higher earnings with a bachelor's degree over the course of 30 years, the significant number of working years these experienced employees have ahead of them, and the positive impact on Early Childhood Education program quality that an educated workforce brings, it was deemed crucial to establish a degree pathway for these individuals. Given that these employees undergo at least 11 hours of professional development training annually ([Whitehead, 2021](#)), along with other informal training, it made sense to find a way to assess work-based learning and convert it into college credit.

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is a process used by colleges and institutions to evaluate and award college credits to individuals based on their learning experiences outside of traditional educational settings. It recognizes that learning can occur through work experience, military training, professional development, volunteer work, or other non-academic avenues. PLA allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills acquired from these experiences and apply them towards earning a degree or credential.

There are several benefits of PLA for learners. PLA provides an opportunity for individuals with extensive knowledge and skills to accelerate their academic progress and complete their degrees more quickly. By earning college credits for their prior learning, learners can save time and money by reducing the number of courses they need to take. PLA also enhances the value of lifelong learning by recognizing and validating the knowledge gained from practical experiences. In turn, PLA encourages and enables a learner-centered approach to education, focusing on the unique strengths and abilities of individual students and providing a more personalized learning experience. PLA often results in learners having more confidence in their



<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Educator resources. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/raisethebar/educators>

abilities and increased motivation to earn a college credential.

Charged with developing a PLA tool to demonstrate the Early Childhood Education field's acknowledgment of the value of Illinois paraprofessionals' daily work, in June 2021, innovators from a range of institutions, agencies, and organizations began devoting over two years' effort to create a virtual reality-based Prior Learning Assessment tool for early childhood education faculty to use with incumbent workforce members wanting a higher-education program certificate or degree.

In 2021 and 2022, the Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment project team achieved many significant accomplishments, including:

- Creating an accessible, standardized competency-based PLA instrument to award college credit and potentially attain the Gateways Early Childhood Education Level 2 Credential.
- Identifying specific changes needed to build a 21st Century PLA system in Illinois that is consistent, clear, and responsive to how early childhood professionals and other adults work and learn across their lifespans.
- Conducting a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) review, also known as a sensitivity and bias review, with national DEI experts, to ensure that the information presented within the PLA scenarios do not unintentionally offend or bias learners based on personal characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, or geographic region.
- Providing access to a standardized, competency-based simulation instrument in both English and Spanish versions that assesses incumbent early childhood workforce members' prior learning for awarding college credit.
- Piloting the PLA instrument in a systematic, controlled manner to collect data and feedback related to the processes, procedures, assessment exercises and scoring tools, as well as recommendations for prior learning credit (PLC), at Illinois community colleges and universities.
- Making recommendations to refine the Gateways Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2 Prior Learning Assessment in preparation for a full launch to all institutions interested in using this instrument in awarding prior learning credit.

With these accomplishments as the basis for future efforts, the Early Childhood Education PLA project team recommended the work continue in 2023 and beyond. To meet Illinois' urgent and growing need for a skilled early care and education workforce that provides high-quality care for our youngest learners, recommendations for the 2023 agenda included these goals:

1. Increase statewide access to and utilization of the newly developed, technology-based prior learning assessment instrument that has been created and tested by Illinois early childhood faculty in collaboration with national experts. This innovative instrument allows for the identification and validation of existing skills and knowledge, resulting in the awarding of college credit for current workforce members. This credit serves as a catalyst for obtaining industry-recognized credentials and college degrees.
2. Enhance the capacity of higher education institutions in Illinois to offer, grant, and acknowledge prior learning for college credit. This initiative aims to provide equitable opportunities for diverse adult learners to enter college through recognition of their prior learning experiences.
3. Expand innovative prior learning assessment practices and policies leading to standardized, competency-based college credit or state-recognized credentials to address employer demands and workforce shortages. To ensure transferability and consistency, these practices will be developed and tested at a state level, moving away from isolated and institution-specific prior learning assessment efforts.

## 2023 Action Areas

Based on the 2022 recommendations, the Early Childhood Education PLA project team sought to make progress toward these goals.

### ACTION AREA 1: INCREASE STATEWIDE ACCESS TO THIS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PLA INSTRUMENT

From June through December 2021, faculty from 38 of the 62 Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) member institutions collaborated in developing and/or using a virtual reality-based prior learning assessment (PLA) instrument for awarding college credit at their institutions. As part of their participation in the project, certain faculty were responsible for evaluating prospective students who took the assessment (i.e., the learners) and converting their assessment scores into course credit at their institutions.

Although the number of participating institutions was intentionally kept small in 2023, access to the Early Childhood Education PLA instrument for Spanish-speaking learners was expanded.

Over the duration of the project, the following institutions had students (prospective or current) register to take the assessment in English or Spanish, respectively:

#### English-language Assessment Registrants

School Attending	Count	Percentage of Total
National Louis University	39	32.77%
Heartland Community College	34	28.57%
Western Illinois University	20	16.81%
Chicago State University	10	8.40%
Kishwaukee College	9	7.56%
Governors State University	3	2.52%
Eastern Illinois University	2	1.68%
DePaul University	1	0.84%
McHenry	1	0.84%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

#### Spanish-language Assessment Registrants

School Attending	Count	Percentage of Total
College of Lake County	25	54.35%
Western Illinois University	12	26.09%
(blank)	6	13.04%
National Louis University	3	6.52%
	<b>46</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Promotional videos and flyers were created both in English and Spanish as part of the marketing strategy for the Early Childhood Education PLA project, specifically targeting incumbent workers. These materials were designed to effectively communicate the benefits and opportunities offered by the PLA program to individuals who are already working in the field. By providing information in both English and Spanish, the PLA project aimed to ensure inclusivity and accessibility to a diverse range of potential participants. The videos showcased real-life success stories of likely participants, highlighting the value of earning credits for prior learning. Meanwhile, the flyers featured a visually appealing layout with concise, impactful messaging, emphasizing the advantages of the PLA program for career advancement. Through these bilingual promotional materials, institutions will be able to reach out to incumbent workers more effectively in 2024, attracting them to explore the possibilities of enhancing their education and professional growth through engagement with their college of choice.

Given the proven success of this instrument in evaluating the incumbent workforce's learning related to college coursework, and the need to increase the number of credentialed and degree-holding early childhood teachers in Illinois, it is recommended that the group of participating institutions be expanded to 10-15 institutions in 2024.

## ACTION AREA 2: ENHANCE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR PLA

The members of this project petitioned Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) to remove the “15 credit rule” from the ICCB Systems Rules, and its elimination in 2022 was a huge win for adult college students looking for credit for prior learning. Now they can find out how much credit they can be awarded via PLA as they enter college, instead of waiting for a semester or more. The “PLA Boost” gives them a much higher chance of staying in college and earning a credential.

There were several strategies employed to enhance institutional capacity for PLA, primarily around faculty engagement. A series of regular leadership and faculty meetings to provide ongoing training were held. Robust conversation around each topic helped institutions learn from one another and reinforced the sense of community amongst the Early Childhood Education faculty in Illinois.

Date	Main Topics Covered
March 9, 2023	Faculty, led by Dr. Tiffany Freeze, discussed the continuation of the PLA project, including how to responsibly scale up efforts. Dr. Marie Donovan, the control group assessor for 2023, shared best practices and resources for measurement and fidelity.
March 20, 2023	Faculty discussed interrater reliability and the awarding of PLA on institutional transcripts. Many institutions shared specifics on how PLA credits were awarded and recognized on transcripts.
April 5, 2023	Faculty continued discussions on how PLA is awarded at their institutions, including sharing learner transcripts. They also discussed how interrater reliability is achieved in other types of PLA processes, beyond the Early Childhood Education project.
May 9, 2023	Faculty discussed competency to credit hour equivalencies for 12 IL Early Childhood Education Level 2 Credential competencies.
June 12, 2023	Faculty collectively discussed and worked toward consensus on the PLA recommendations contained in this report.
July 18, 2023	Faculty collectively discussed and worked toward consensus on the PLA recommendations contained in this report.
September 5, 2023	Faculty reflected on lessons learned about PLA at their institutions and the group discussed data collection, scoring, and the retake process.
October 10, 2023	Faculty provided institutional updates related to PLA; deadlines for learner assessments to be included in 2023 data analysis were shared, PLA initial data analysis was discussed.
November 28, 2023	Faculty discussed the 2023 outcomes as shared in this report and key takeaways for inclusion in the annual report supplement.

## **ACTION AREA 3: EXPAND INNOVATIVE PLA PRACTICES AND POLICIES**

Recognizing the variability in PLA practices and policies, including limitations on PLA during the transfer process, Anne Brennan was engaged in 2023 to review PLA processes at each institution and to look for ways to achieve consistency across institutions. She also reviewed how institutions stated they would award credit and verified if and how much credit was actually awarded. There is a lack of consistency across institutions regarding prior learning infrastructure and recognition. This lack of consistency creates barriers for the early childhood workforce as well as for the ECE PLA project.

### **PLA Student Costs**

Colleges and universities often charge for prior learning assessments, typically citing several reasons for this fee. First, conducting a thorough assessment of a student's prior learning and granting them credits for relevant knowledge and skills requires time and resources from the institution. Charging a fee helps cover the costs associated with evaluating and validating the learning experiences of the students. Additionally, institutions argue that charging for a prior learning assessment ensures students take the process seriously and are committed to providing sufficient evidence of their learning. Further, institutions contend it helps in maintaining the integrity and quality of the assessment process by discouraging frivolous requests. Finally, the revenue generated from these fees can be reinvested into the institution to support various educational initiatives and enhance the overall learning experience for students.

A review of institutional PLA charges was conducted on the 43 Gateways-entitled community colleges. Among these 43 colleges, six are members of the City Colleges of Chicago, all with the same policies. Out of the 43 community colleges, 28 of them (65%) have charges for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) requests ranging from \$8 on the low-end to \$180, which represents 50% of tuition for a three-credit class, on the high-end. Six community colleges mention charges for PLA but do not provide specific fee amounts on their websites. On the other hand, 15 of the 43 community colleges (35%) do not have any charges for PLA, according to the information available on their websites.

A total of 21 Gateways-entitled universities were reviewed, consisting of 11 public universities and 10 private universities. Among these universities, 9 out of 21 (42%) charge students for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) requests, with fees ranging from \$30 to a high of \$1875 for a three-credit class. In the case of the 11 public universities, five of them (45%) have costs for PLA ranging from \$30 to \$300, and two of them do not provide specific charges on their websites. Similarly, out of the 10 private universities, four of them (40%) have charges for PLA, with costs ranging from \$25 to \$1875 for a three-credit class. Six of the 10 private universities do not list any costs for PLA on their websites.

### **PLA-Related Costs for this Project**

During the project, students were not required to pay any fees for the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) assessment as all costs were covered by grant dollars. Additionally, in the specific case of the Spanish-language version's development at the College of Lake County, learners were actually compensated for testing the Spanish versions using grant dollars. However, it is important to note that no learners in the Spanish-speaking group received credit for their participation. In terms of faculty costs, they were provided with course reductions using the ECACE grant dollars as an incentive for their participation in evaluating the assessments.

### **Transferability of PLA Credit**

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) has published the PLA Landscape Analysis Brief in 2019, finding that the majority of American colleges and universities polled do not accept PLA in transfer. From the beginning, the project attempted to address and change a known issue

regarding PLA credit and transfer from one college to another, which is of particular interest to community colleges where transfer is part of the mission of the institutions. PLA does not transfer between institutions smoothly unless it is standardized, like Advanced Placement or CLEP tests. The transferability of these standardized credit-awarding options is predictable, so it's no surprise that verbiage regarding how an institution specifically converts these tests to credit is found on many college websites in Illinois. The Early Childhood Education PLA tool needs to be viewed with this level of standardization to enable transferability.

During the review of entitled institution websites, there was a focus on identifying language that addressed the transfer of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and the policies surrounding it. Among the 43 community colleges reviewed, it was found that 20 of them (46%) published explicit statements regarding the transferability of Prior Learning Credit. However, all 20 of these statements included a warning to students that PLA does not automatically transfer. On the other hand, 23 of the 43 community colleges (53%) did not have any language addressing the transferability of PLA on their websites.

Moving on to the 21 universities reviewed, only one 4-year university explicitly stated that it does not accept proficiencies earned at other institutions. None of the other universities listed any language regarding the transferability of PLA. However, one of the reviewed institutions did mention Early Childhood Education prior learning credit and indicated that they may offer additional pathways in the future to defined PLA credit, "due to legislation."

### **Sampling of the Language on ECACE Member Websites:**

- Transferability of CLEP credit is subject to the policies of the transfer school. Proficiency examinations may be required to determine the transferability of academic credits from non-accredited sources.
- PLA credit from another institution isn't guaranteed to transfer to [this institution].
- PLA credit is not guaranteed to transfer to other institutions.
- Students intending to transfer credits to another college are strongly advised to check with the transfer school to determine its policy toward credit for prior learning.
- Students should be aware that transferability of credit awarded through these criteria is not guaranteed and is subject to review by other institutions of higher education.
- Credit for prior learning is not guaranteed and considered on a case by case basis
- Students should be advised that some educational institutions may not accept non-traditional credit as transferable coursework.
- Check with the registrar of the transfer school to verify acceptance of APL credits.
- Transferability of prior learning credit is not guaranteed.
- Other transfer institutions may not accept credit awarded for alternate learning.
- Most institutions treat proficiency credit in the same manner as regular course credit. Therefore, if the course itself is transferable, proficiency credit in the course is generally transferable. However, each institution has its own transfer policies. It is always best to check directly with the receiving institution to determine how proficiency credit will be evaluated.
- Students should be aware that acceptance of credit for prior experience varies among transfer institutions.
- Please understand that it is the student's responsibility to check with transfer institutions regarding transferability of proficiency credit.

## PLA Credit Awards

The following table summarizes the total number of learners assessed and semester credits awarded during the project's two phases, as of 9 November 2023.

Institution	Number of Learners Assessed	Total Semester Credits Awarded
College of Lake County	22 Learners	Taken as part of Spanish testing – no credit was to be awarded 0 Credits
Governors State University	3 Learners	0 Credits
Heartland Community College	22 Learners	72 Credits
Kishwaukee Community College	5 Learners	15 Credits
McHenry County College	1 Learner	0 Credits
National Louis University	29 Learners	120 Credits
Western Illinois University	35 Learners	73 Credits
<b>Totals</b>	<b>117 Learners</b>	<b>280 Credits</b>

The number of learners benefiting from this project will only increase as institutions continue to direct learners through this PLA option.

*This project alone, with its 117 learners, has awarded more prior learning credit for early childhood incumbent workers than any other initiative in our state's history.*

## PLA Course Equivalencies

Awarding college credit is only one part of the PLA challenge. The other part is making sure the credit counts toward a specific course or degree requirement. As the following chart shows, the 12 competencies in the Gateways Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2 count as different courses and credits at each institution.

*Illinois must honor its early childhood workforce by developing an aligned statewide system that supports higher-education institutions in recognizing prior learning in more standardized ways; awarding the resulting credit consistently; and ensuring that all credit awarded remains accounted for and valued. Once fully proven in the Early Childhood Education workforce, Illinois can expand this model into other disciplines and industries.*

Gateways Level 2 Competency	GSU	Heartland	MCC	WIU	Kishwaukee	National Louis University	CLC/ MCC/ GSU
<b>HGD1</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 121 Foundations of Child Development	ECE 120 Child Growth & Development 1 Credit	ECH 481 or ECH 380 licensure or no licensure	ECE 111 The Developing Child	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>HGD2</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 121 Foundations of Child Development	ECE 120 Child Growth & Development	ECH 481 or ECH 380 licensure or no licensure	ECE 110 Foundations of ECE	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>HGD3</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 121 Foundations of Child Development	ECE 120 Child Growth & Development	ECH 481 or ECH 380 licensure or no licensure	ECE 111 The Developing Child	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>PPD1</b>	EDUC 2310 Foundations of Education – partial credit	CHLD 101 Introduction to Early Childhood Education	ECE 115 Early Childhood Education	C&I 110 not currently a Gateways course	ECE 112 Guiding Young Children 1 credit	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>PPD2</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 101 Introduction to Early Childhood Education	ECE 115 Early Childhood Education	C&I 110 not currently a Gateways course	ECE 110 Foundations of ECE	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>HSW1</b>	PSU-HLTH Health or one of these: HLSC 2100, 4100, 4130 Health & Safety	CHLD 228 Foundations of Health, Safety and Well-Being	ECE 125 Early Childhood Nutrition, Health, and Safety	Currently HSW is applied differently depending on student	ECE 222 Child Nutrition and Health	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>HSW2</b>	PSU-HLTH Health or one of these: HLSC 2100, 4100, 4130 Health & Safety	CHLD 228 Foundations of Health, Safety and Well-Being	ECE 125 Early Childhood Nutrition, Health, and Safety	Currently HSW is applied differently depending on student	ECE 222 Child Nutrition and Health	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>FCR1</b>	EDUC 2310 Foundations of Education –	CHLD 238 Foundations of Child, Family and Community	ECE 155 Child, Family, and Community Relationships 1 Credit	ECH 276 (.5 hour) - however this includes completion of a project as well.	ECE 161 Family-Community Relationships	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>FCR2</b>	EDUC 2310 Foundations of Education –	CHLD 238 Foundations of Child, Family and Community	ECE 155 Child, Family, and Community Relationships	ECH 276	ECE 161 Family-Community Relationships	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>FCR3</b>	EDUC 2310 Foundations of Education –	CHLD 238 Foundations of Child, Family and Community	ECE 155 Child, Family, and Community Relationships	ECH 276 (1 hour) - this includes completion of a project	ECE 161 Family-Community Relationships	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>IRE1</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 103 Environmental Design to Support Children's Play	ECE 229 Early Childhood Curriculum and Activities	C&I 110 not currently a Gateways course	ECE 111 The Developing Child	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA
<b>IRE2</b>	EDUC 2330 Educational Psychology	CHLD 103 Environmental Design to Support Children's Play	ECE 229 Early Childhood Curriculum and Activities	C&I 110 not currently a Gateways course	ECE 110 Foundations of ECE	EDU 200CB: Edul Psyc EDU 210CB: Edu Philos	TBA

## 2023 Learner Outcomes

This year's enrollment process was streamlined, eliminating one step deemed unnecessary and unduly burdensome for the learner. This made enrolling more readily accessible to all learners. In sum, the process works thusly: First, eligible workers are recruited through word of mouth, faculty, employer partners, and marketing materials. Learners are directed to the *Gateways to Opportunity Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Learner Enrollment Form* on the Gateways to Opportunity website. Learners can easily complete and submit the enrollment form in either English or Spanish. Upon receipt of the enrollment form and after INCCRRA reviews it to ensure eligibility criteria are met, learners are sent an email with further instructions to register for an appointment to take the assessment. The learner is directly connected to the Competency-Based Education Network's simulation specialist responsible for administering the PLA process. This allows the learner and simulation specialist to directly collaborate on finding the best time for scheduling the virtual simulation assessments.

**Gateways to Opportunity®**  
**Illinois Prior Learning Assessment Learner Enrollment Form**

**Gateways Registry Membership/ID Required**

Thank you for enrolling in the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment opportunity. You may be able to earn college credit at an institution of your choice through this project (funded by the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development, Preschool-Development B-5 federal grant).

Fill out the form carefully for enrollment in the Illinois Prior Learning Assessment opportunity.

**Learner:**  
 First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Middle Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Birth Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Gateways Registry Membership Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Address**  
 Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ (Mark One)  Cell  Home  Work  Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Secondary Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ (Mark One)  Cell  Home  Work  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

This is the first time I'm taking the PLA assessment

Current Job/Role (use your main role if you have more than one): \_\_\_\_\_

Ages of Children with which You Currently Work:  
 Preschool (3 - 5 years old)  Infant/Toddler (Birth to 36 months)  School Age (6 - 12 years old)

How many years of experience do you have working in the Early Childhood field (birth to 8 years)?  
 1 year  2 years  3 years  4 years  5-7 years  8-10 years  11-13 years  14-16 years  16+ years

Please provide the institution that you want your results shared with: **Select One** \_\_\_\_\_

Reminder, if you are not currently registered in Gateways, please do so before submitting this form.  
 Submit this form to [PLAinfo@inccra.org](mailto:PLAinfo@inccra.org)

**Gateways to Opportunity®**  
**Formulario de Inscripción de Alumno de Evaluación de Aprendizaje Previo de Illinois**

**Numero de Membresía de Gateways/ID del Registro Requerido**

Gracias por inscribirse en el programa de Inscripción de Alumno de Evaluación de Aprendizaje Previo de Illinois. Es posible que puede obtener créditos universitarios de una institución de su elección a través de este proyecto. (financiado por la oficina del Gobernador de Desarrollo de Primera Infancia, Desarrollo Preescolar B-5 subvención federal)

FLlena el formulario cuidadosamente para inscribirse en la oportunidad de Evaluación del Aprendizaje Previo de Illinois.

**Alumno:**  
 Primer Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_ Segundo Nombre: \_\_\_\_\_ Apellido: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Fecha De Nacimiento: \_\_\_\_\_ Gateways Número de Membresía de Registro: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dirección**  
 Dirección: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Ciudad: \_\_\_\_\_ Estado: \_\_\_\_\_ Código Postal: \_\_\_\_\_

Correo Electrónico: \_\_\_\_\_

Número de Teléfono Preferido: \_\_\_\_\_ (Marca Uno)  Celular  Casa  Trabajo  Otro: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Número de Teléfono Secundario: \_\_\_\_\_ (Marca Uno)  Celular  Casa  Trabajo  Otro: \_\_\_\_\_

Trabajo Actual/Rol Actual (use su rol principal si tiene más de uno): \_\_\_\_\_

Edades de los niños con que trabaja actualmente:  
 Preescolar (3 - 5 años)  (Nacimiento a 36 meses)  Edad Escolar (6 - 12 años)

¿Cuántos años de experiencia tienes trabajando en el campo de la primera infancia? (Nacimiento a 8 años):  
 1 año  2 años  3 años  4 años  5-7 años  8-10 años  11-13 años  14-16 años  16+ años

Proporcione la institución con la que desea que se compartan sus resultados: **Selección Una** \_\_\_\_\_

Recordatorio: Si no está registrado actualmente en el programa de Gateways, favor de inscribirse antes de enviar este formulario.  
 envíe este formulario a [PLAEspanol@inccra.org](mailto:PLAEspanol@inccra.org)



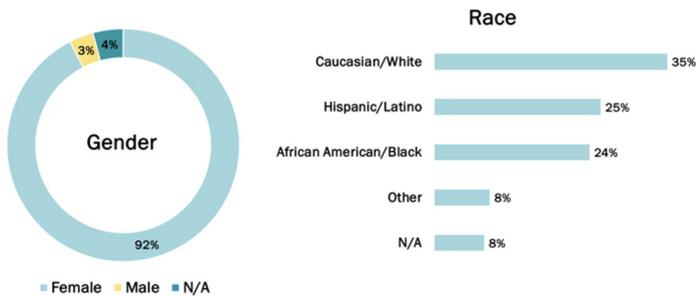
Although this process has been simplified in 2023, some learners lack the technology skills to perform these steps independently and need assistance along the way. Institutional faculty and staff provided guidance during the enrollment process and, once referred to a simulation specialist, the specialists actively pursued learners until they scheduled and completed the assessments. This proactive encouragement is needed throughout the entire enrollment process. Learners take the assessment through a web-based registration portal. The average learner completes the assessment within 60-90 minutes. The learner-reported data collected during the enrollment process is then connected to actual learner results, post-assessment, to keep track of how performance varies across learner demographics (e.g., age, years in field, race, primary language). Learners receive their composite competency-area scores and guidance on developing a degree progression plan as well as the Gateways ECE Credential Level 2 from the Early Childhood Education faculty evaluator or a designated institutional colleague. This process allows for various outcome measurements to prove the efficacy of the PLA project.

Below are the outcomes for the 165 learners, nearly one-third Spanish-speaking, who completed the PLA assessment in 2023.

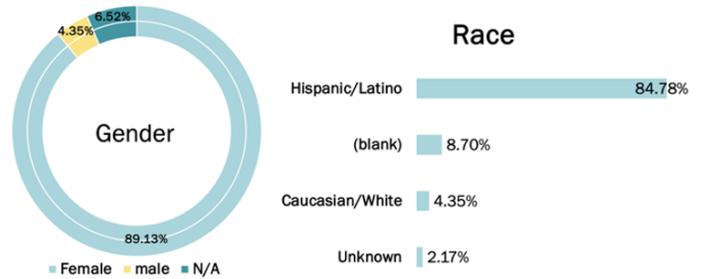
## Gender and Race

In 2023, 92% of English learners were female, slightly more than the 89% of female Spanish learners. This year, just over one-third of English learners were Caucasian, with half identifying as Hispanic/Latino or African American/Black. For Spanish learners, nearly 85% identify as Hispanic or Latino. During 2023, there was an increase in those who identify as Caucasian/White as compared to 2022. One reason for this increase is a shift in the institutions sending learners through the PLA process. Western Illinois University and Heartland Community College learners hail from the southern part of the state, which is less diverse than National Louis University, located in the diverse-rich city of Chicago, which had the highest utilization in 2022. These statistics mirror the current early childhood workforce in Illinois; therefore, the pilot remained a majority-minority serving program.

### English Learners Demographics



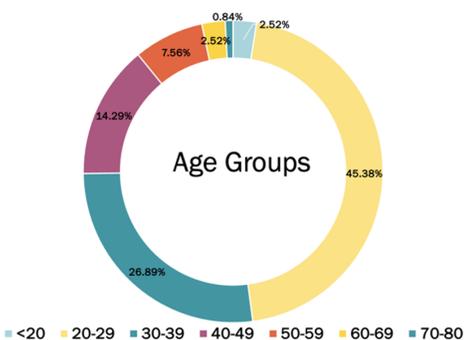
### Spanish Learners Demographics



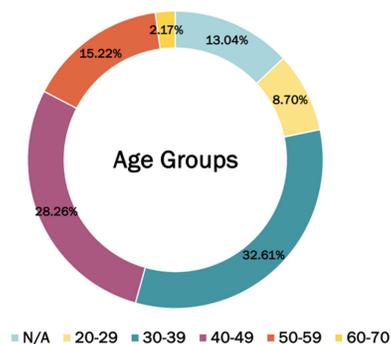
## Age

For English learners, over **half** of students that completed an enrollment form were age 30+ and **72%** were between 20 and 39 years of age. Spanish learners are a slightly older student population than their English counterparts, with **78%** of students that completed an enrollment form of age 30+, with **41%** between 20 and 39 years old. Individuals in the 20-39 age bracket could have between 30-50 years in the labor market before retirement. By engaging these young individuals through prior learning assessment and connecting them to career and credential pathways at participating institutions, Illinois could reap the benefits of a more qualified workforce for decades.

### English Learners Demographics



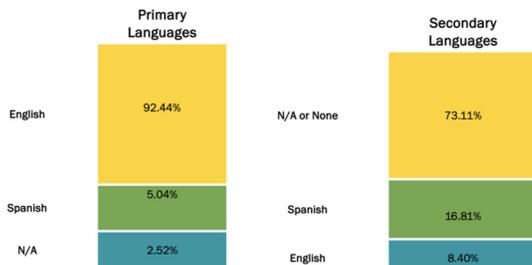
### Spanish Learners Demographics



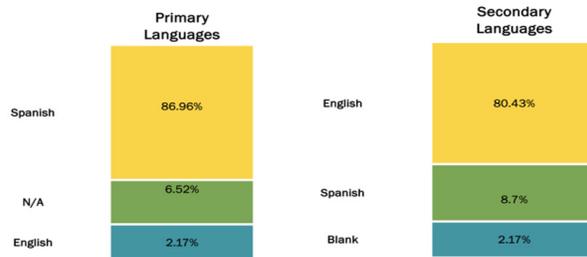
## Languages Spoken

92% of English learners listed English as their primary language, as compared to nearly 87% of Spanish learners listing Spanish. Of English learners, 73% do not have a secondary language, as compared to 80% of Spanish learners stating English as their secondary language.

### English Learners Demographics



### Spanish Learners Demographics



Several faculty noted that Spanish-speaking learners who chose to take the test in English may have benefitted from being given the opportunity to retake in Spanish because many of these learners struggled with technical terminology during the assessment. **In 2024, faculty may want to encourage learners to complete the assessment in their strongest language or retake the assessment in their native language.**

## Highest Level of Education

Today, Illinois has thousands of early childhood paraprofessionals with only a GED or high school diploma. This program targets those individuals, by helping to connect them to college pathways and credentials. The following chart shows how nearly 40% of English participants reported their highest education level as a GED or high school diploma. Additionally, the Illinois workforce has many individuals who earned post-secondary credentials in other countries and seek to apply these credentials in the United States. The PLA project provides an opportunity to recognize the competencies of these individuals without needing to figure out course or credit-hour equivalencies. The project assists those with unrelated associate or bachelor's degrees with earning early childhood specific credits for transferable knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors.

### English Learners Demographics

Highest Level of Education	Count	Percentage of Total
High School Diploma	44	37%
Associate's Degree	33	28%
Bachelor's Degree	16	13%
Some Course	14	12%
College Certificate	5	4%
G.E.D	5	4%
Master's Degree	1	1%
Blank	1	1%
Grand Total	119	100%

### Spanish Learners Demographics

Highest Level of Education	Count	Percentage of Total
(Blank)	25	54.35%
self-reported GED	6	13.04%
Self-reported community college certificate	5	10.87%
Self-reported high school diploma	5	10.87%
GED awarded	2	4.35%
Self-reported Associate's in Accounting	1	2.17%
Bachelors in Economics	1	2.17%
Self-reported BA International Studies	1	2.17%

The self-reported data on education from Spanish learners does not allow substantive analysis. For 2024, concerted effort should be made to capture data from Spanish-speaking learners since over half of all enrolled students in the Spanish PLA program failed to report their highest level of education.

Highest Level of Education	Count	Percentage Total
(blank)	25	54.35%
Self-Reported GED	6	13.04%
Self-Reported Community College Certificate	5	10.87%
Self-Reported High School Diploma	5	10.87%
GED Awarded	2	4.35%
Self-Reported Associate's in Accounting	1	2.17%
Bachelor's in Economics	1	2.17%
Self-Reported BA International Studies	1	2.17%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

## Years of Work Experience in Field

Although 4 out of 10 English participants only had a high school diploma or GED, 42% of these learners had 5+ years of early childhood work experience. Although we do not have enough data on the highest level of education for Spanish participants, 70% of enrolled students have 3+ years of working in the field. The PLA program can help those already working in early childhood education advance their careers through earning recognized college-level credentials.

### English Learners Demographics

Years in Field	Count	Percentage of Total
1 year	18	15.13%
2 years	13	10.92%
3 years	18	15.13%
4 years	10	8.40%
5 - 7 years	25	21.01%
8 - 10 years	9	7.56%
11 - 15 years	4	3.36%
16+ Years	12	10.08%
Not Yet a Year	10	8.40%

### Spanish Learners Demographics

Years in Field	Count	Percentage of Total
1 year	4	8.70%
2 years	3	6.52%
3 years	7	15.22%
4 years	6	13.04%
5 - 7 years	8	17.39%
8 - 10 years	6	13.04%
11 - 15 years	3	6.52%
16+ years	2	4.35%
Not Yet a Year	7	15.22%

## Proficiency Results

The 2023 data mirrored in large part what was seen in 2022 pilot results. Learners deemed proficient by competency ranged from 37-85% for English learners. The results for Spanish learners were significantly better, with a range of 78-97% deemed proficient by competency. This may be the result of the increased years of Early Childhood Education experience possessed by Spanish-speaking learners.

### IL PLA Competencies - Learner Proficiency Results (English)

IL PLA Competencies	Level 2 Competencies	Proficient	Not Proficient	Total Learners	% Proficient	% Not Proficient
Family & Community Relationships	FCR 1	25	21	46	54%	46%
	FCR 2	29	15	44	66%	34%
	FCR 3	23	23	46	50%	50%
Human Growth & Development	HGD 1	20	26	46	43%	57%
	HGD 2	18	28	46	39%	61%
	HGD 3	19	26	45	42%	58%
Personal & Professional Development	PPD 1	39	7	46	85%	15%
	PPD 2	17	29	46	37%	63%
Interactions, Relationships, & Environments	IRE 1	33	13	46	72%	28%
	IRE 2	28	17	45	62%	38%
Health, Safety, & Well-Being	HSW 1	19	25	44	43%	57%
	HSW 2	21	25	46	46%	54%

## IL PLA Competencies - Learner Proficiency Results (Spanish)

IL PLA Competencies	Level 2 Competencies		Total Learners	% Proficient	% Not Proficient	
	Proficient	Not Proficient				
Family & Community Relationships	FCR 1	35	3	38	92%	8%
	FCR 2	35	3	38	92%	8%
	FCR 3	37	1	38	97%	3%
Human Growth & Development	HGD 1	34	4	38	89%	11%
	HGD 2	32	6	38	84%	16%
	HGD 3	35	3	38	92%	8%
Personal & Professional Development	PPD 1	34	4	38	89%	11%
	PPD 2	31	7	38	82%	18%
Interactions, Relationships, & Environments	IRE 1	30	7	37	81%	19%
	IRE 2	30	8	38	79%	21%
Health, Safety, & Well-Being	HSW 1	29	8	37	78%	22%
	HSW 2	28	8	36	78%	22%

The IL PLA competencies related to Human Growth and Development (HGD) and Health, Safety, and Well-Being (HSW) were the most challenging for a learner to demonstrate proficiency in with the PLA instrument. It is believed that these two competency areas are constructed in a more theoretical and less application-oriented way, making it more difficult for practitioners to demonstrate complete competence. In 2024, it will be important to look at these competencies and this assessment instrument's results again, to see if modifications can be made to better balance theory and practice.

### Impact of Years of Experience on Proficiency Results

It should be noted that there is a correlation between years in the field and proficiency levels. Based on the small sample size in 2023, "years in the field" appears to be a reliable indicator for increased levels of proficiency attainment for English PLA learners. This should come as no surprise as experience and work-based training often lead to achieving more competencies, making the case that prior learning assessment tools can assist seasoned professionals in seeking college-level credentials.

The following chart correlates learners' years of experience in the field to the total number of competencies deemed proficient.

	1 -4 Years	5+ years
Proficient Competencies	109	159
Not Proficient Competencies	188	68
Total Competencies Assessed	297	227
Average Proficiency Rate	36.7%	70.0%

## IL PLA Competencies - 2023 Learner Proficiency Results By Years in the Field (English)

IL PLA Competencies	Level 2 Competencies	1 Year		2 Years		3 years	
		Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient
Family & Community Relationships	FCR 1	3	6	2	2	1	4
	FCR 2	4	5	2	1	2	2
	FCR 3	3	6	1	3	1	4
Human Growth & Development	HGD 1	3	6	1	3	2	3
	HGD 2	3	6	0	4	1	4
	HGD 3	3	6		4		4
Personal & Professional Development	PPD 1	8	1	3	1	4	1
	PPD 2	2	7		4	1	4
Interactions, Relationships, & Environment	IRE 1	1	8		4	2	3
	IRE 2	6	3	2	2	3	2
Health, Safety, & Well-Being	HSW 1	2	7	1	3	1	4
	HSW 2	5	4	1	3	1	4

Level 2 Competencies	4 Years		5 - 7 years		8 - 10 years		16 + years		Less than a Year Or Blank	
	Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient
FCR 1	4	3	6	3	3	1	5	1	1	1
FCR 2	5	2	8	1	2	2	5	1	1	1
FCR 3	3	4	7	2	3	1	5	1		2
HGD 1	3	4	3	6	4		3	3	1	1
HGD 2	2	5	4	5	4	0	4	2		2
HGD 3	3	4	4	5	3	1	6			2
PPD 1	5	2	9		3	1	5	1	2	
PPD 2	1	6	5	4	4		4	2		2
IRE 1	1	6	4	5	4		6		2	
IRE 2	3	4	6	2	3	1	4	2	1	1
HSW 1	2	5	6	3	2	2	3	3		1
HSW 2	2	5	6	3	3	1	3	3		2

Again, due to the lack of sufficient self-reported learners' years-in-the-field data, it's not possible to draw a similar correlation for Spanish learners.

## Assessor Reliability in Scoring Proficiency Results

As an element of the 2023 project, a control group assessor was retained to review random video submissions and assign a proficiency level based on pre-determined criteria. This assessor did not look at the faculty assessors' work, including the proficiency-level awarded the learner; nor did the control group assessor place her notes in the same scoring system. When the scores of the faculty assessor and control group assessor were compared, the average reliability percentage across the 12 competencies was 89% for English learners. This means, 9 out of 10 times, the faculty and the control group assessor were consistent in scoring English learners. This is a strong reliability percentage for this instrument. However, for the Spanish speaking learners, the reliability percentage dropped to 81%, meaning 8 of every 10 competencies scored were the same between the faculty assessor and control group assessor. Exploring the impacts language or cultural barriers may have on the PLA process and its reliability is worth further study.

In one competency area, Health, Safety, and Well-Being (HSW), the reliability score dipped to 76% and 79%, respectively. Recognizing that HSW is an area needing additional evaluation in 2024, it is recommended that faculty delve into these videos and determine what caused the scoring differences. This might inform the redesign of the HSW instrument, rubric, or competency more generally.

One key takeaway from these inter-reliability data is that community college faculty and university faculty have galvanized around what competencies mean in practice. It did not matter whether a community college or university faculty evaluated the learners. The faculty are commonly aligned around performance expectations. In the future, this common understanding should help facilitate smoother transitions between institutions.

During 2024, it is recommended to investigate competencies with less than 85% reliability to determine if there is an issue with the assessment tool and rubric, or if additional faculty training on the tool or rubric is needed.

### IL PLA Competencies - 2023 Assessor Reliability Percentages (English)

IL PLA Competencies	Level 2 Competencies	PLA Score Agreement	PLA Score Disagreement	Total Sample Size	Reliability Percentage
Family & Community Relationships	FCR 1	26	3	29	90%
	FCR 2	28	1	29	97%
	FCR 3	26	3	29	90%
Human Growth & Development	HGD 1	27	2	29	93%
	HGD 2	27	2	29	93%
	HGD 3	27	2	29	93%
Personal & Professional Development	PPD 1	25	4	29	86%
	PPD 2	24	5	29	83%
Interactions, Relationships, & Environment	IRE 1	27	2	29	93%
	IRE 2	26	3	29	90%
Health, Safety, & Well-Being	HSW 1	22	7	29	76%
	HSW 2	23	6	29	79%

### IL PLA Competencies - 2023 Assessor Reliability Percentages (Spanish)

IL PLA Competencies	Level 2 Competencies	PLA Score Agreement	PLA Score Disagreement	Total Sample Size	Reliability Percentage
Family & Community Relationships	FCR 1	21	4	25	84%
	FCR 2	24	1	25	96%
	FCR 3	18	7	25	72%
Human Growth & Development	HGD 1	22	3	25	88%
	HGD 2	20	5	25	80%
	HGD 3	20	5	25	80%
Personal & Professional Development	PPD 1	24	1	25	96%
	PPD 2	19	7	26	73%
Interactions, Relationships, & Environments	IRE 1	23	2	25	92%
	IRE 2	20	5	25	80%
Health, Safety, & Well-Being	HSW 1	16	9	25	64%
	HSW 2	16	9	25	64%

## Recommendations for 2024 and Beyond

First, it is important to note that the 2022 recommendations for meeting Illinois' need for a skilled early care and education workforce are as relevant today as when originally published, and achieving these recommendations is of paramount importance. These recommendations emphasize expanding access to the Early Childhood Education prior learning assessment tool; increasing institutional capacity for PLA; and implementing innovative assessment practices. The success of this project has sparked interest not only from other states but also from various fields, showcasing the tool's authenticity and the effectiveness of its use of virtual reality. **As a foundational recommendation to ensure the sustainability and widespread adoption of this tool, Illinois should establish an administrative center in the state to oversee its ongoing operations.** With the increasing prevalence of performance- and competency-based assessment methods for prior learning nationally, a coordinated system is needed to validate prior learning and ensure credit mobility. This will require developing a statewide system that supports institutions in the recognition of prior learning by encouraging consistent credit awarding and publicly reporting the amount of PLA awarded at the institution.

Further, addressing previously unresolved recommendations from the 2022 PLA project report is essential for effective implementation of this Early Childhood Education PLA tool. These recommendations include:

- Adding the term "standardized competency-based credit" and its definition as a new credit type resulting from PLA to the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) System Rules Manual.
- Incorporating the category "standardized competency-based credit" into the Illinois Administrative Code section, 'Credit for Prior Learning.'
- Articulate the Associate's in Applied Sciences (AAS) courses through the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) Early Childhood Education Panel.
- Establish a badging system for the Gateways ECE level 2 competencies with the involvement of the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE), as well as the Early Childhood Education Panel faculty of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI).
- Determine the manager responsible for overseeing the badging process.

Acting on these unresolved recommendations will allow for more rapid scaling of the Early Childhood Education PLA approach in Illinois.

In addition to the 2022 recommendations, the faculty engaged in this project have reached consensus on several technical recommendations for using the Early Childhood Education PLA instrument:

**Maximum of Two Attempts.** To provide clarity and guidance to both faculty and students, it is essential for institutions to establish clear policies regarding assessment retakes. It is recommended to limit students to two attempts for this PLA assessment instrument. After completing their initial PLA virtual assessment for Gateways Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2 competencies, students may be recommended to do a retake for various reasons. In the case where a student has demonstrated proficiency in some, but not all, competencies during their first attempt, faculty will solely evaluate the non-demonstrated competencies during the second attempt.

**Credit Awards.** The college credit awarded for the statewide Prior Learning Assessment model, which evaluates the 12 competencies required for the Gateways to Opportunity Early Childhood Education Credential Level 2, should fall within a specified range. Specifically, the credit should not exceed 12 semester hours or 18 quarter hours, nor should it be less than 8 semester hours or 10 quarter hours for students who demonstrate proficiency in all 12 competencies. The actual amount of credit awarded for each individual competency may

vary based on the discretion of each institution, within the proposed range, and the corresponding course(s) where the credit is applied should be identified. It is important to note that the credit awarded would align with the number of competencies demonstrated, as not all students would exhibit proficiency in all 12 competencies, so the credit awarded would be adjusted accordingly.

**Required Work Experience.** To be eligible for the PLA assessment, the learner must show evidence of a minimum of 12 months/1 year of working in an early childhood program.

## **OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Expand Data Collection Efforts.** In 2024, it is crucial for the project to prioritize expanding its data collection efforts to gather comprehensive and valuable information. This expansion should include the collection of data on various aspects, such as the number of individuals who initially started but subsequently dropped out of the project. Understanding the factors contributing to dropout rates can provide insight into areas that may need improvement or additional support. Additionally, collecting data on retention rates once individuals have started the project will help assess its effectiveness in sustaining participants' engagement. To gain a holistic understanding of the long-term impact of the project, it is essential to gather longitudinal data, including post-graduation outcomes. This will enable analysis on how participants' experiences in the project have influenced their career paths and overall success beyond their involvement in the initiative. By focusing on expanding data collection efforts in these areas, the project can enhance its evaluation and planning processes in a more comprehensive and informed manner.

**Review Instructions Given to Learners.** Although a very specific recommendation, the control group assessor, who watched and scored every 2023 learner, noticed the need for enhanced instructions as the learner begins the virtual assessment. A review of the instructions given by the Simulation Specialists for each of the 15 assessment tools is warranted.

**Secure Intellectual Property.** It is imperative to secure the intellectual property used in the PLA process, including the assessment tool, rubric, simulation instructions, and other proprietary materials. Protecting this intellectual property ensures that others cannot use it for commercial gain, safeguarding the investment made by INCCRRA. By keeping the specifics of the assessment tool and process confidential, we maintain the integrity and validity of the evaluations. It prevents learners from accessing information that could influence their performance and ensures that the assessment remains a true measure of their knowledge and skills. Ultimately, protecting the intellectual property in the PLA process maintains the credibility and value of the program, ensuring its effectiveness and maintaining its exclusivity.

**Make Faculty Training Ongoing.** In response to frequent staff changes, faculty training should continue to be offered regularly to provide an overview regarding the goals of the Early Childhood Education PLA project, the virtual assessment tool, the science behind the process, the actual PLA instruments used and its scoring for faculty. This training will enhance faculty members' understanding of the project objectives, enable them to effectively guide and evaluate students' assessments, and ensure reliability and validity in the PLA process. By investing in faculty training, Early Childhood Education teams will be empowered to confidently navigate the PLA process and provide students with a fair and transparent evaluation of their prior learning, ultimately enhancing the success and effectiveness of the program.

**Continue to Modularize Early Childhood Education Courses.** A valuable approach to enhancing learner flexibility and efficacy of the PLA process is to modularize courses, allowing individuals to enroll in the portions of any course that were not awarded credit through PLA. By modularizing courses, learners can focus on developing specific areas of knowledge or skills that could not be recognized through PLA, enabling them

to build upon their existing competencies. This tailored approach ensures that learners can maximize their learning experience by only engaging with the content that is new to them, ultimately saving time and money. Additionally, modularized courses provide educators the opportunity to design targeted learning experiences that address the specific needs and gaps identified through the PLA process. This modularized format promotes individualized learning pathways, empowering learners to progress at their own pace and customize their educational journey accordingly. When more course content is modularized, Illinois will increase the viability and use of PLA instruments, such as the one used in this project.

**Determine if Certain Competencies Aren't PLA Appropriate.** While PLA is a valuable tool for recognizing and accrediting prior knowledge and skills, it is wise to acknowledge that certain competencies may not be fully demonstrable through PLA alone. This is particularly true for competencies with a theoretical nature, which often require a systematic and structured approach provided by formal coursework in order to learn and master them. This may be true for portions of Health, Safety, and Well-Being as well as Human Growth and Development, as discussed in the outcomes section of this report. Theoretical concepts often demand a comprehensive understanding that is developed through ongoing guided instruction, critical analysis, and practical application. Course work may be needed so learners can dive deeper into complex theories, engage in discussions with peers, and receive feedback from faculty.

**Support Formation of an ECACE Work Group on PLA at Member Institutions.** The Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE) should convene a working group that investigates the current policies, practices, and processes for awarding prior learning credit at its member institutions. This research should focus upon the early childhood major, analyzing the amount and type of credit awarded for both the major and its general education coursework toward degree. The racial, linguistic, and work status (i.e., employed in the Early Childhood Education field) demographics of prior learning credit awardees should be included in the data collection, as well as the transferability of the credit awarded. Should the Illinois Board of Higher Education follow through on the June 2023 recommendation of its Faculty Advisory Council to convene a statewide task force to investigate credit awarded for prior learning in all majors (Appendix B), the ECACE working group should be included as a special interest group in that task force.

**Solicit Long-Term Funding.** This project has benefited greatly from government and philanthropic funding over the last three years. As funding sources change, it will be imperative for the Early Childhood Education PLA program to secure long-term funding sources. There is a need for funds to support learners in taking the assessment, as some students may face financial barriers that prevent them from accessing this opportunity to earn credit for their prior learning. Funds are needed to compensate faculty members for scoring the assessments, as this requires valuable time and expertise. Institutions need financial resources to add earned credits to the learners' transcripts, ensuring recognition of their prior learning achievements. And, funds are necessary to deliver the assessment effectively, providing the necessary technology and infrastructure to make the process accessible and efficient. By securing funding, the Early Childhood Education PLA program can thrive and provide equitable opportunities for learners to showcase their knowledge and skills.

**Create Statewide Infrastructure to Expand PLA Use.** To effectively evaluate the current landscape of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policies, processes, instruments, and the amount of prior learning credit awarded and accepted for transfer at all institutions statewide, the Illinois Board of Higher Education and Illinois Community College Board should establish a task force composed of faculty and transfer administrators from various Illinois Higher Education Institutions (IHEs), as well as representatives from the Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Department of Human Services, and other relevant government agencies responsible for workforce policies and practices. This task force should also consider the type of credit awarded, whether it is general transfer credit, credit towards a major, or elective credit. The research conducted by this task force

should then inform the creation of permanent committees within each Board. These committees would be responsible for annually reviewing and reporting prior learning credit activity across all IHEs and developing policies that align with data trends and meet the needs of adult students and employers.

**Mandate Colleges Report Prior Learning Credits Awarded Annually.** Colleges should be mandated to annually report the amount of prior learning credit awarded to their students to ensure transparency and accountability. This information should be included in the annual state enrollment reports. To facilitate this reporting process, clear guidelines should be provided to colleges, outlining how to collect and report prior learning credit awarded to enrolled students each year. Additionally, the annual report should include data on the percentage of graduates who obtained their degrees with the help of transfer and prior learning credit and should provide learner demographic data for expanded analysis. This will enable better tracking and understanding of the impact and utilization of prior learning assessment across the state's higher education institutions and the Illinois citizenry.

**Encourage Transparency and Informed Decision-Making.** Promote transparency and support informed decision-making by requiring Illinois colleges to provide transparent statements on their websites regarding the transferability of prior learning credit. These statements should outline the policies and procedures for transferring prior learning credits to and from the institution. Additionally, colleges should be directed to publish transparent statements about the cost of prior learning assessments on their websites. This information will help prospective students understand the financial implications of pursuing prior learning assessments and make informed choices regarding their educational journey.

**Provide Support for Modularization.** To help learners realize the full benefits of PLA, resources must be provided to Illinois ECACE members to assist with modularizing the Early Childhood Education curriculum. As discussed earlier, modularization maximizes prior learning and reduces time and cost for learners.

**Ease Transferability through Variable-credit Coursework.** To facilitate the transferability of Early Childhood coursework among ECACE institutional members, it is recommended to implement variable-credit coursework that is articulated across the consortium. This approach aims to ensure that credit awarded for Early Childhood coursework transfers seamlessly, regardless of how or where it was earned within the consortium. To support this initiative, assistance should be provided to Illinois ECACE members in articulating the new variable-credit coursework framework. This will help streamline the transfer process and create a more flexible and efficient pathway for students seeking to continue their professional education in the early childhood field. Workshops were held during 2023 to ensure faculty had the knowledge and capacity to build variable credit coursework at their institutions.

**Increase Recruitment and Marketing Efforts.** It is imperative to increase marketing efforts of this PLA instrument's availability, targeting incumbent workers and prospective PLA learners, both in English and in Spanish. By doing so, the benefits and opportunities that PLA offers will be communicated to a wider audience. To maximize the impact of these marketing efforts, it is crucial to collaborate with employer partners and educational institutions. Their support will not only enhance the credibility and visibility of the PLA program but also ensure that the messaging resonates with the target audience. By increasing marketing efforts in multiple languages and with the support of employer partners and institutions, Illinois can successfully engage incumbent workers and prospective PLA learners, empowering them to advance their education and career trajectories.

**Extend Professional Development to Registrars.** Investing in professional development for registrars is crucial for enhancing the process of awarding credit for prior learning and making it more feasible. By providing specialized training, registrars can become better-versed in the principles and practices of PLA, gain a thorough understanding of modularized curricula, and learn about national advances in transcribing credit earned through PLA. Partnering with established organizations like AACRAO (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers) will lend credibility and national support to the Early Childhood Education PLA project. By collaborating with AACRAO, the professional development efforts can align with national best practices, standards, and guidelines, ultimately leading to the widespread adoption and acceptance of PLA.

**Propose and Secure Wage Increases for Credential Attainment.** It is essential to explore the possibility of wage increases for incumbent workers who earn new Gateways to Opportunity credentials, such as the Gateways ECE Level 2. By recognizing and rewarding the professional growth and development of the early childhood workforce, Illinois can motivate and incentivize them to continue improving their skills and knowledge in the field of early childhood education. A wage increase not only acknowledges their dedication and commitment but also serves as an encouragement for others to pursue further credentials and advancement opportunities. The Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Early Childhood (DEC) is working through several initiatives to raise the income of these workers. The Division implemented the Smart Start Transition Grants a program that requires 75% of the grant funds each program receives to be spent on enhanced personnel, to include raises and bonuses. DEC is also piloting the Smart Start Quality Supports program that provides funding for programs to pay individuals higher wages that have credential attainment. This initiative contributes to the overall quality improvement of early childhood programs by ensuring that educators possess the necessary qualifications and competencies. Through establishing clear pathways for wage increases tied to the attainment of credentials, Illinois would create a supportive environment that values and invests in the professional growth of incumbent workers in the early care and education field.

**Explore Apprenticeship Models.** A cost-efficient apprenticeship model could be effectively used to facilitate wage increases based on increased competence or earned credentials. By implementing a structured program that combines on-the-job training with classroom instruction, incumbent workers can develop and enhance their knowledge, skills, and intellectual behaviors. As they progress through various stages of the apprenticeship, employees can demonstrate their competencies, qualifying them for wage increases.

**Consider Use of a Neutral Third-Party Evaluator.** It may be beneficial to utilize a neutral third-party evaluator to administer and score the Early Childhood Education Prior Learning Assessment tool and to make institutional credit recommendations. By engaging an external organization like Educational Testing Service or American Council on Education, institutions could ensure objectivity and fairness in the evaluation process, making this PLA instrument more comparable to widely recognized credit programs like College-Level Examination Program or Advanced Placement exams. By partnering with established and reputable evaluators, it may lend credibility and national recognition to the PLA program, enhancing its acceptance and value. Since this tool's assessed professional competencies are aligned with those of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, its relevance and utility for national workforce development could be broadcast more widely through a third-party evaluator.

**The end goal of all these recommendations, and the aim of all the work poured into the PLA project, is to provide incumbent workforce members without credentials or college credit an opportunity to return to school by first recognizing their existing knowledge and skills.**

By acknowledging their prior learning and awarding course credit, a message is clearly sent that professional learning outside the college classroom matters – and is connected to that which occurs inside of it. **If Illinois will follow these recommendations, this goal can be achieved.**

# Appendices

## APPENDIX A

### PLA Cost ECACE Sites at Illinois Colleges & Universities

2 Year Institutions					
2-year ECACE Institutions	Private/ Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/ Evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 1	Public	Y	\$10-\$164	Fees for proficiency courses at Institution include a \$10 per credit hour tuition charge which is nonrefundable and a \$1 per course recording fee. To get Prior Learning Portfolio (PLP) option credit, a student must complete LIB 240. AP exams recording fee of \$10 per course transferred.	1. Transferability of CLEP credit is subject to the policies of the transfer school. 2. Proficiency examinations may be required to determine the transferability of academic credits from non-accredited sources.
Higher Education Institution 2	Public	Y	\$30-\$100	"Institution PLA fees Institutional Challenge Exam - \$100 Portfolio - Requires approval from Vice President of Academic & Student Affairs. Standardized Exam - \$30 CCC processing fee in addition to testing vendor fee. CLEP- \$89 & ACTFL \$70. Fees subject to change. Credit by Evaluation (Professional Training) - \$50 Specialized programs may have a different fee associated. Neither financial aid nor veterans educational benefits are available for PLA assessment. Military personnel may be eligible for a CLEP exam waiver. (Speak with Veteran Coordinators for more information). PLA partnerships will require no charge. Standardized fees are paid through the third-party vendors."	PLA credit from another institution isn't guaranteed to transfer to institution. However, if an academic program approves previous credit, the exemption may be allowed. All previous documentation must be submitted for department review.
Higher Education Institution 3	Public	Y	\$75	Proficiency exams are available in the Testing Center for the courses listed below and can be taken to gain credit. The fee is \$75 per course.	PLA credit is not guaranteed to transfer to other institutions.
Higher Education Institution 4	Public	N	x	No costs to students	Students intending to transfer credits to another college are strongly advised to check with the transfer school to determine its policy toward credit for prior learning.
Higher Education Institution 5	Public	Y	\$150	Proficiency Exam Fee: The fee to take a proficiency examination shall be a minimum of one credit hour tuition \$150 or one-half the current tuition of the college for that course, whichever is greater.	x
Higher Education Institution 6	Public	Y	\$30	Language proficiency tests pay the fee: \$15.00 per course plus \$5.00 per credit hour.	x
Higher Education Institution 7	Public	Y	\$30-\$90	Proficiency test, each exam costs \$30 per course credit hour, portfolio or exam costs \$30 per course credit hour. Methods for earning Credit Proficiency Credit can be earned by one or a combination of the following methods: Comprehensive Exam - A exam that tests the student's understanding of the course's learning outcomes. Testing methods include, but are not limited to multiple-choice exams (paper/pencil or computer-based), written submissions/essays, short answer tests, etc. Portfolio Review - An assemblage of relevant materials such as industry credentials, certificates, licenses, physical artifacts such as works of art, etc. Practical - A "hands-on" demonstration of the necessary skills required to meet the core learning outcomes of the course.	x

2-year ECACE Institutions	Private/ Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/ Evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 8	Public	Y		\$50 per PLA assessment student fee in the English department, we had been paying our faculty \$100 ,	x
Higher Education Institution 9	Public	Y	\$100	Proficiency exams , students must pay a non-refundable administrative fee of \$25 and non-refundable tuition of \$25/ credit hour before taking the test	
Higher Education Institution 10	Public	y	Unknown	There are charges for proficiency exams and portfolio reviews (amount of fee was unstated but exists).	x
Higher Education Institution 11	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 12	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 13	Public	y	Unknown	Fees are required but not published	Students should be aware that transferability of credit awarded through these criteria is not guaranteed and is subject to review by other institutions of higher education.
Higher Education Institution 14	Public	y	unknown	Costs to students are allowed by policy but not stated	Credit for prior learning is not guaranteed and considered on a case by case basis. Credit for prior learning will only be granted for the purpose of satisfying graduation requirements of the institution's Certificates and degrees. These credits might not transfer to other colleges.
Higher Education Institution 15	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 16	Public	n	x	No costs to students	Students should be advised that some educational institutions may not accept non-traditional credit as transferable coursework.
Higher Education Institution 17	Public	y	\$15	\$15 per proficiency exam	x
Higher Education Institution 18	Public	Y	Unknown	Portfolios and Proficiency Exams: A non-refundable evaluation fee equal to fifty percent (50%) of the current in-district tuition per credit hour is required for a proficiency examination and must be paid in advance	x
Higher Education Institution 19	Public	n	x	No costs to students	A person seeking credit for prior learning at the institution must be enrolled prior to awarding credit for prior learning. These credits might not transfer to other colleges.
Higher Education Institution 20	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x

2-year ECACE Institutions	Private/ Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/ Evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 21	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 22	Public	n	x	No costs to students	"Do APL Credits Transfer? Check with the registrar of the transfer school to verify acceptance of APL credits."
Higher Education Institution 23	Public	y	unknown	A fee for each course must be paid when a student applies for a proficiency examination or portfolio evaluation. This fee covers the cost associated with taking the examination or being evaluated. (amount not published)	Transferability of prior learning credit is not guaranteed.
Higher Education Institution 24	Public	y	\$50	Portfolio: when the plan is approved, you must submit a nonrefundable \$50 assessment fee to the Registrar's Office.	Other transfer institutions may not accept credit awarded for alternate learning. Some academic programs may require grades of A or B in specific courses required for certificate or degree completion
Higher Education Institution 25	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 26	Public	n	x	No costs to students	Most institutions treat proficiency credit in the same manner as regular course credit. Therefore, if the course itself is transferable, proficiency credit in the course is generally transferable. However, each institution has its own transfer policies. It is always best to check directly with the receiving institution to determine how proficiency credit will be evaluated.
Higher Education Institution 27	Public	n	x	No costs to students	x
Higher Education Institution 28	Public	y	\$60	To apply for proficiency credit, students must obtain a "Required for Proficiency Credit by Advanced Course" form from the Student Success Center or from the appropriate Dean. A fee of \$20.00 per semester hour will be charged for consideration of the student's request and may be refunded only if the student is not eligible to receive such college credit. Also Credit for Professional Experience: A fee is associated with this option. A student interested in this credit should contact the Dean of the division responsible for the course. Amount not stated.	x
Higher Education Institution 29	Public	n	x	No costs for students	x
Higher Education Institution 30	Public	y	unknown	If the student is allowed credit by evaluation, he/she will be required to pay a fee for the number of semester hours requested. Amount of fee not known.	Students should be aware that acceptance of credit for prior experience varies among transfer institutions.
Higher Education Institution 31	Public	y	\$8	\$8.00 per credit hour must be paid to post Educational/Competency credit	x

2-year ECACE Institutions	Private/Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/Evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 32	Public	y	\$180	Students authorized to take proficiency examinations will be required to pay a nonrefundable 50 percent tuition charge. Tuition = \$120 per semester credit hour.	Please understand that it is the student's responsibility to check with transfer institutions regarding transferability of proficiency credit.
Higher Education Institution 33	Public	y	\$150	The fee to have a portfolio reviewed is \$50 per credit hour.	x
Higher Education Institution 34	Public	n	x	No costs for students	x
Higher Education Institution 35	Public	y	\$70	Proficiency Attempt Fee \$70.00 each	x
Higher Education Institution 36	Public	y	\$10	PLA: A transaction fee of \$10 may be assessed.	x

4 Year Institutions					
4-year ECACE institutions	Private/Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 1	Private	n	x	no student costs listed	Institution does not accept proficiencies earned at other institutions
Higher Education Institution 2	Public	n	x	no costs listed	"Web site: The Public Act that created the Consortium calls for the creation of new standard methods to provide credit for prior learning, and although the institution may offer additional pathways in the future for defining PLA credit, will maintain the common new standard set by the Consortium.  The Gateway competencies are intentionally aligned with Illinois Professional Teaching Standards, the InTASC standards and the former and newly updated NAEYC standards"
Higher Education Institution 3	Private	y	\$300	School of Continuing and Professional Studies has pre-approved the following learning assessments by competence and undergraduate quarter credit hours. There is a fee of \$300 per submission. Federal Financial Aid (Title IV) can not be used to pay PLA processing fees. However, there is a PLA scholarship that students can apply for in order to cover the PLA processing fee.	x

4-year ECACE institutions	Private/ Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 4	Public	y	\$90-\$300	"Undergraduates: Departmental proficiency exams The non-refundable fee for a proficiency examination is \$30/semester hour. Graduate students: 1. The non-refundable fee for a proficiency examination is \$30/semester hour. 2. Graduate Students: Regardless of portfolio evaluation outcome, students will be responsible for all fees associated with the CPL portfolio submission and review process. (Waivers cannot be applied to any CPL fees.) These fees include: Portfolio Evaluation fee: \$100 Course Credit fee: \$300"	x
Higher Education Institution 5	Public	y	unknown	To assess your portfolio, timelines and costs may vary based on availability and area of expertise, No specific cost found	x
Higher Education Institution 6	Private	n	x	x	x
Higher Education Institution 7	Public	n	x	no costs listed	x
Higher Education Institution 8	Private	n	x	x	x
Higher Education Institution 9	Private	y	\$1,875	All students interested in earning college credits by completing a Prior Learning Portfolio are required to register for the 3 credit hour, PROF 21000 – Learning From Experience: PLA. No other costs listed	x
Higher Education Institution 10	Private	y	\$25-\$860	"Credit for Prior Learning Rate per quarter/ semester hour, ACL 301 Fees, Tuition for the course (2QH) \$860 Essay Reviews 1st essay \$0, 2nd and all subsequent essays \$400 per essay, Undergraduate Credit by Credential for LTC and Elective Credits \$30 per QH, Major Credit by Credential for Graduate level, Major Credit for MHA \$100 per SH, Major Credit for (MHA) - LTC Concentration \$100 per SH, Major Credit for MS HRMD and MS IOP \$100 per SH, Major Credit for M.Ed. and Ed.S.- for EDL 529 \$100 per SH, Major Credit for MSOL and MS IOP-Military Leadership Training \$100 per SH, Major Credit by Credential for Undergraduate level \$50 per QH, Major Credit by Portfolio for Undergraduate courses, UG Major Credit for BSM courses, \$115 per QH, UG Major Credit for CSJ courses, \$115 per QH, UG Major Credit for ECE- Competency Based courses \$115 per QH, UG Major Credit for Hospitality Management courses \$115 per QH, (Fee recommendations are based on current tuition for UG of \$430 X 1.5 QHs), Major Credit by Portfolio for Graduate and Doctoral courses, Major Credit for MPA \$759 per course, Major Credit for Ed.D. and Ed.S. Educational Leadership, \$774 per course, Major Credit for Ed.D. and Ed.S. Higher Education Leadership, \$774 per course, Major Credit for Ed.D. Teaching and Learning (PTIL) \$774 per course (fee recommendations are based on one-third the cost of current tuition for the individual programs), Major Credit by Portfolio for Endorsement Credit only, Endorsement Credit for LBS1 \$450 per course, UG Elective Credential credit 0.5- 2 elective hours \$50, 3- 5 elective hours \$100, 6- 8 elective hours \$200, 9 or more \$300, Credit by Examination (CLEP and DSST) Administrative fee to proctor exam \$25"	x
Higher Education Institution 11	Public	y	\$275	To submit a portfolio to a faculty member for review, there is a fee of \$275	x
Higher Education Institution 12	Public	n	x	There are no fees for proficiency exams	x
Higher Education Institution 13	Private	n	x	no student costs listed	x

4-year ECACE institutions	Private/ Public	Student Cost Y/N	Amounts per course/ evaluation	Notes on student costs	Transferability of PLA language published
Higher Education Institution 14	Private	n	x	x	x
Higher Education Institution 15	Private	n	x	no student costs listed	x
Higher Education Institution 16	Public	n	x	no student costs listed	x
Higher Education Institution 18	Private	y	\$300	Students are billed a \$300 evaluation and processing fee. Students are charged \$150 for additional reviews	x
Higher Education Institution 19	Public	n	x	x	x
Higher Education Institution 20	Public	n	x	x	x
Higher Education Institution 21	Public	y	\$30	portfolio review: \$30.00 for each course request submitted	x



## STATEMENT ON AWARDING CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING IN ILLINOIS

In the 2021 strategic plan for higher education in Illinois, *A Thriving Illinois*, increasing prior learning assessment of students to award credit for prior learning (CPL) was identified as a critical way to recruit, retain, and graduate adult students. This recommendation is supported by extensive national research into the effects on students when they're offered prior learning assessment (PLA) opportunities such as professional credential review, academic program challenge exams, or portfolios that lead to awarding course credit. In their set of PLA 'boost' reports issued in 2020, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) pointed directly to how receiving CPL saved students considerable money and time in pursuing their education. Students awarded CPL also pursued more overall credit hours and demonstrated higher levels of persistence and program completion, compared to students at institutions without PLA systems or offering limited PLA options (Klein-Collins, Taylor, Bishop, Bransberger, Lane, & Leibrandt, 2020). Yet while recently conducting a large-scale project on developing a competency-based PLA instrument for use by Illinois' early childhood teacher preparation programs, Donovan and Brennan (2022) learned in focus groups with Illinois registrars and academic affairs officers from community colleges and universities that relatively minor amounts of PLC are being awarded statewide, across all majors.

The main theme of *A Thriving Illinois* is a call for all institutions to examine their practices through an equity lens and to redesign them accordingly. The national PLA 'boost' report (Klein-Collins et al., 2020) also points to how when BIPOC and low-income adult students had equitable access to PLA methods, their program completion rates were significantly higher than those of their non-PLA receiving peers. These

higher rates were seen especially among Hispanic (71% vs. 24%), Black (40% vs. 17%), and low-income (55% vs. 27%) adult students. Given these national findings, the Faculty Advisory Council Working Group on Prior Learning Assessment and Credit urges the IBHE to work in coordination with the ICCB to develop a task force of faculty and administrators that engages Illinois institutions in the following:

- Conducting a review of their extant PLA/CPL-awarding practices and policies, including their rates of awarding prior learning credit for each major, according to student demographics;
- Analyzing their acceptance of CPL in transfer, by major and student demographics; and
- Creating a statewide system of policies and practices that mandate transferability of CPL awarded through processes similar to those of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI).

The Illinois Department of Employment Security (2022) forecasts that through 2030, jobs in Illinois requiring postsecondary education will grow faster than those that do not. Considering the projected initial college enrollment cliff for institutions of all types (Boeckenstedt, 2022), creating and implementing robust, integrated PLA and CPL approaches within and among institutions will be a way to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation of the educated workforce Illinois needs. More importantly, the Illinois higher education system will be demonstrating its recommitment to the work of equity called for in *A Thriving Illinois*.

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