



Newsletter Issue #12, Mar. 31, 2016

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FACTS & FIGURES FROM PIAAC: First Look Update, 2012/2014

Skills of U.S. Unemployed, Young, and Older Adults in Sharper Focus: Results From the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) 2012/2014, FIRST LOOK, was released this month (March 2016) by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). It was co-authored by a team of eight authors from the Educational Testing Service, Westat, and NCES.

The PIAAC measures literacy and reading, numeracy, and problem-solving in technology-rich environments. In this new report, NCES updates and adds to the findings of the 2011-2012 PIAAC assessment, made possible by expanding the pool of unemployed adults and young adults aged 16-34, and extending

the older age group to include people aged 66–74. This second round of data collection increases the sampled base from 5,000 to 8,600. [Note: For the first time, the second round assessment also included 1,200 incarcerated adults in federal and state prisons, for which a separate report will be issued in May 2016.] In releasing this new report, NCES gives a richer meaning to the PIAAC results and enables deeper analysis of the three groups. In addition, it is now possible to compare current findings with those of the 2003 NAAL study.

Definitions: LITERACY is defined by PIAAC as *"understanding, evaluating, using, and engaging with written text to participate in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."* The primary goal of the Reading component is to *"measure the skills of adults at the lower end of the literacy spectrum."* The basic goal of the Numeracy component is to evaluate basic math and computing skills needed for everyday work and life – *"to access, use, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas, to engage in and manage mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life."* Problem solving in technology-rich environments is *"using digital technology, communication tools, and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others, and perform practical tasks."*

Highlights: The report consists of two summary pages of selected overall findings,^[1] and fifteen pages of tables and figures with details on the distribution of skills according to a wide range of criteria. A few findings are given below for illustrative purposes, but the reader is advised to refer to the report directly for a complete picture and to determine the interaction of variables. [ED: The U.S.–specific data is as sobering today as it was yesterday and clearly calls for much stronger leadership at the federal and state levels. The most cursory analysis should be jarring enough to make Adult Education a funding priority among our nation's top educational challenges.]

It is old news by now that the U.S. does not fare well in rankings with member countries participating in the PIAAC assessment and the results of the second assessment round only underscore that reality. It is also old news that U.S. minorities score disproportionately at the lowest levels on all three PIAAC measures. We continue to have the highest inequality ranking of all participating countries.

This updated report shows that:

1) **Internationally, in Literacy, for all adults aged 16–65**, the U.S. has a larger percentage of adults performing at both the top and bottom of the five proficiency levels of the assessment. (Appendix B of the report provides detailed descriptions of proficiency levels.) At Level 1 and below, U.S. adults typically cannot perform the basic Literacy skills tested for. At most, they can only "read relatively short...texts to locate a single piece of information identical to or synonymous with the information given in the question or directive" and "enter personal information into a document" when "little, if any, competing information is present." For adults aged 16–65, the U.S. scores well below the international average – lower than 13 OECD countries. Seven score "significantly higher" and six are higher but not considered "significantly different." Nine countries score "significantly lower" than the U.S. (Denmark, Germany, Austria, Cyprus, Poland, Ireland, France, Spain, and Italy).

2) **Internationally, in both Numeracy and Problem–Solving, for ages 16–65**, the U.S. also performs below the PIAAC international average. We have the largest percentage at Level 1 and below, 28% vs. 19% in Numeracy and 64% vs. 55% in Problem Solving. In Numeracy, the U.S. scores lower than 18 other OECD participating countries (outranking only Ireland, France, Italy, and Spain). In problem solving, the U.S. ranks next to the bottom. It is outranked "significantly" by all countries except Poland.

3) **Within the U.S., age group 16–65: *Employed vs. unemployed***: In Literacy, 14% of employed people score at or below level 1, compared to 24% of unemployed people. In Numeracy, 23% of employed people score at or below level 1, compared to 42% of the unemployed. In Problem–Solving, on average, 62% of employed adults score at or below level 1, compared to 73% of the unemployed. ***Education attainment***: Expectedly, there is a strong correlation between score level and educational attainment, with those at high school level or less scoring lowest. But in the area of Problem–Solving, even adults at the upper education levels score poorly. For example, 46% of people aged 16–65 holding a bachelor's degree score at or below level 1, as do some 66% of those holding an associate degree. ***Race/ethnicity***: On the Literacy scale, 36% of Hispanics score at or below level 1, compared to 34% of Blacks and 16% of Whites. In Numeracy, the relative scores are 57% Hispanic, 62% Black, and 28% White. In Problem–Solving, the scores are 80% Hispanic, 87% Black, and 63% White.

4) **Within the U.S., age group 16–34**: Relative scores in Literacy for this age

group by race/ethnicity are: Hispanic 27%, Black 24%, and White 7%. The scores for Numeracy are Hispanic 42%, Black 52%, and White 14%. Problem-solving scores are: Hispanic 72%, Black 83%, and White 48%.

5) **Within the U.S., older adults aged 66–74:** For those still employed, 22% scored at or below level 1 on Literacy; 30% on Numeracy, and 74% on Problem-Solving in technology-rich environments. In this age group, by self-reported health status, some 47% who tested at or below level 1 on the Literacy scale reported only fair health, as did 63% of those testing at or below level 1 on the Numeracy scale. Too few low-skilled people in this age group took the Problem-Solving assessment to provide useful results.

This report provides an array of useful items apart from the assessment findings. Included are a table on the percentage of U.S. adults in selected populations groups, by selected characteristics, for 2012 and 2014. For each age group and for unemployed adults, it shows the highest level of education attainment, race-ethnicity, gender, highest level of parental education, whether or not born in the U.S. (the vast majority of test takers are), self-reported health status, and whether or not the test-taker was learning disabled (the vast majority are not).

This First Look 2012/2014 report is available at the [PIAAC website](#) (or see links below).

[1] Detailed PIAAC results are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/results/makeselections.aspx> and <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac>



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NEWS IN BRIEF



The work of the **UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning** has been discussed in prior NCAL newsletters. One of the Institute's many activities is publication of the ***International Review of Education***, a Journal of Lifelong Learning. A recent special issue (Volume 61, Number 6, December 2015) focuses on Workplace Learning. The introduction notes that "learning in and through work not only corresponds to an employee being competent in his/her work but also focuses on constructing a worker's identity which is built through experiencing the personal and social aspects of work as a subject." These "identify transformation processes" are all the more important in today's world, where employing "organizations feel less responsible for supporting their employees in their career path" but where "people have to learn more intensively and more frequently." A central part of the discussion in this special issue has to do with configuring workplaces as learning spaces and policy development related thereto. Among the original papers in the volume are "Implementing an innovative workplace learning culture through professional development" (a Thailand case study) and "The role of work-related learning in the identify transformation of Canadian workers with low literacy skills." The entire issue or individual chapters can be purchased [HERE](#). On another front, following from a February membership meeting in France, the UIL recently launched the Global Alliance for Literacy among Member States as a way to achieve its worldwide literacy goals as part of its 2030 Education Framework for Action. For more information, click [HERE](#).



In 2010, Jobs for the Future (JFF) established a **National Network of Student Success Centers**, consisting of centers in CA, TX, AR, MI, OH, CT, and NJ. With funding of \$2.5 million from the Kresge and Gates Foundations, JFF recently expanded the Network to include HI, NY, NC, VA, and WA. Each new state will be awarded a \$500,000 start-up grant. JFF manages the centers,

which reportedly serve more than half of the nation's community college students. They are described by JFF as "state intermediary organizations that provide vision, support, and a shared venue for a state's community colleges as they work in partnership on a collective student success agenda." The Network is a multistate collaboration that identifies and advances state policies to foster community college success and completion. The goal is to help more low-income, minority, and first-generation students get a college credential. For detailed information, go [HERE](#).



[Peer 2 Peer University](#), founded in 2009, is a national nonprofit lifelong learning center that fosters learning "outside of institutional walls." It was developed with funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Kresge Foundation. Based and registered in San Francisco, it operates with a small core staff located in England, the U.S., New South Wales, and South Africa. It is participatory in nature, an open education forum in which any individual or community of interest can sign up to provide course and materials development or take part in group interactions. Its offerings are available online, usually without cost, to both educators and students. Peer 2 Peer works routinely through project partnerships with such diverse organizations as New York University, MIT, College Unbound, and the Chicago Public Library. For the past year, the University has been engaged in a pilot project with the Chicago Public Library to create [Learning Circles](#), "lightly facilitated study groups for learners who want to take online courses together." A few weeks ago, Peer 2 Peer announced the free availability of resources to anyone who wants to start a Learning Circle of their own in a library, community center, school, church, or even at home. The resources include a [Learning Circles website](#), a toolkit, and a Facilitator Handbook.



[Proliteracy](#) recently completed an annual survey of its 1,000 member programs across the country. The data gathered shows an "ongoing decline in the percentage of adult literacy programs [in the Proliteracy network] that receive federal and/or state funding." Only 38% of Proliteracy's programs received any government funding in 2015, reflecting a continuing decline and a drop by 10% in just the past six years. During the same time, demand for services has increased, with programs now serving some 244,000 students and struggling to serve more. They provide ABE services, high school equivalency, English language programs, and a range of other literacy services. Some 68% of these community-based programs report waiting lists of three months on

average. Nearly 70% of them operate on annual budgets of \$150,000 or less. The critical need for more funding is evident, in Proliteracy settings and throughout the field. For more information, go [HERE](#).



For its meeting in May, the **Roundtable on Health Literacy** of the Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is now gathering input to inform strategic planning of future activities and workshops. NCAL readers who work to integrate health literacy into their ABE programs may wish to urge more attention to the role of adult education by joining Roundtable discussants on the Health Literacy Discussion listserv on April 5th and 6th. The stated goal of the Roundtable's mission is "to develop activities designed to inspire, inform, and activate...stakeholders to develop and implement evidence-based health literacy practices and policies with the goal of improving the health and well-being of all people." To participate, register [HERE](#).



The [Commission on Adult Basic Education](#) (COABE) has published the *Journal for Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, Secondary, and Basic Education* since the mid-70's. COABE is currently conducting a survey to gather suggestions on ways to improve the Journal. Participants can enter to win a free registration to COABE's annual conference in Orlando in 2017. Go [HERE](#) to take the survey.



Two researchers at **The University of Arkansas** are carrying out a research project aiming to describe the skills and abilities that adult education leaders think are needed to effectively administer an adult education program. Up to 2,000 adult education programs/agencies are expected to participate. The University offers M.Ed degrees in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning, as well as Adult Education licensure. Go [HERE](#) to access the survey.



The **Nellie Mae Education Foundation is partnering with Jobs for the Future on a first-ever collaborative** to build, define, apply, and share "evidence-based" information **on student-centered learning**. This fall, a group of scholars, school officials, policymakers, practitioners, and funders will come together to investigate what is known about student-centered learning in

and beyond schools, and Nellie Mae/JFF will then seek to bring about change based on the findings. The initiative is already seeking proposals from researchers and research institutions on the topic, according to specified criteria. It will also include a distinguished competitive fellowship program for up to nine students who must reside and work in the New England area. In addition, two RPFs (requests for proposal) will be issued in May 2016, one for an exploratory study in student-centered learning, and one for a "practice-grounded improvement science implementation study." To apply for participation, view proposal criteria, learn more about the initiative, and/or follow its development, go [HERE](#).



In the February 16 issues of The Hechinger Report and The Huffington Post, Meredith Kolodner argues that "**Outdated Pell rules may discriminate against low-income students**" because Pell funds can't be used for short-term college or certification programs that do not require 600 hours of class time. She emphasizes, as has long been known, that most jobs today require some postsecondary education, and this will increasingly be the case. Thus low-skilled adults, among others, should aspire to college-going, and community colleges and credentialing initiatives are trying to serve them. The article notes that "as many as 600,000 middle-skilled jobs in manufacturing are currently unfilled because of a lack of trained workers," jobs that require training provided by short-term programs. At one college cited, students are enrolling in two-year general studies programs instead of shorter-term programs more likely to set them on career paths because Pell grants are available for the former but not the latter. Ms. Kolodner recognizes that the federal government is not insensitive to the problem and is currently piloting programs that relax the current class time requirements, including an effort in which 40 colleges are participating. To access the article, go [HERE](#).



In a recent Education Week feature, Elisha McNeil interviews former reading teacher and long-time school consultant Susan Craig about her new book, [Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning Communities Transforming Children's Lives, K-5](#) (Teachers College). The book deals with a growing body of research that shows a hot connection between childhood abuse and academic problems. Among other things, persistent trauma can impair a child's cognitive functioning, and an unstable or dysfunctional home life can cause a child to misbehave or tune out in class. Craig indicates in the McNeil interview

article ([To Reach Struggling Students, Schools Need to Be More 'Trauma-Sensitive'](#)) that she is concerned by lack of awareness. She says that when she raises questions about lack of school attention to the relation between childhood abuse and achievement in schooling, a typical response is "Well, teachers teach, they don't deal with mental health." She suggests there is a need to require teacher-training programs to take courses on the effects of trauma on children's development because of the implications for program management, curriculum design, classroom teaching, and support services. The book has relevance not only for schools but for family literacy programs and the formation and implementation of adult education services for low-skilled adults and related professional development programs.

Another recent book by Maggie Feeley of the University College of Dublin spoke to the issue of how childhood trauma and persistent abuse and neglect affects the learning of individuals in adult literacy settings. That book, **Learning care lessons: Literacy, love, care and solidarity**, was [reviewed in 2015](#) by NCAL's Gail Spangenberg for the UNESCO Lifelong Learning Institute. The book offers some model adult literacy program approaches and measures to provide supportive learning spaces for formerly traumatized learners.



CALL TO ACTION

The last issue of the NCAL ENews observed that the Administration's proposed funding for 2017 treats Adult Education as second class. Core parts of WIOA Title I program would be at authorized levels, although still not enough, while the basic state grants program of Title II would be frozen at the FY16 level (\$581,955 million) instead of the \$635,198 authorized. (See proposed budget [HERE](#).) This despite the fact that Adult Education funding, when adjusted for inflation, has dropped by nearly 25 percent over the past 15 years,

forcing declines in enrollments at a time when the PIAAC results make the need for major expansion clear. And this despite the essential role of Adult Education in achieving both national employability and community development goals.

Considering the magnitude of the adult basic skills problem in America -- at a minimum the 36 million low-skilled adults reported by the PIAAC assessments -- these declines point to a weak federal and state understanding and commitment. They also signal a high-priority need to lift the profile of Adult Education both publicly and throughout government at all levels so as to generate resources adequate to meet the challenge of PIAAC.

NCAL ENews readers can help by writing to the House and Senate Subcommittees on Labor, HHS, Education, and Related Agencies, urging Adult Education funding *at least* at the WIOA authorized level of \$635,000 million. Letters may be sent by email or fax to the Committee Chairs and/or Ranking Members. For the Senate, they are the Hon. Roy Blunt and Hon. Patty Murray respectively. For the House, they are the Hon. Tom Cole and Hon. Rosa DeLauro. Addresses can be located at www.thomas.gov. Alternatively, formal testimony may be given following instructions given by the [House](#) and [Senate](#) Appropriations Committees. In both cases, communications should arrive no later than April 15, 2016. Those who speak now will be adding strength to a recent [letter by some 27 Senators](#) to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for stronger investments in various education programs, including the adult education programs of Title II.



RESOURCES & EVENTS



From the National Governors' Association – The NGA has issued an update to its 2013 publication about tracking top trends in state economic development. The update, [*Revisiting Top Trends in State Economic Development*](#), came out following the NGA Center's 2015 Institute for Economic Policy Advisors. Among the best practices emphasized are workforce development strategies that respond to private sector demands and linking K–12 and postsecondary systems of education. Cited in the publication are examples of recent action by specific states. For example, Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin takes a holistic approach to economic development, including linkages between economic entities and the workforce and education systems.



From the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) – One important new report out from OCTAE is the [*Reentry Education Framework: Guidelines for Providing High-Quality Education for Adults Involved in the Criminal Justice System*](#) (Framework). This report is intended for those who design reentry education programs that seek to provide a "seamless path for their students by connecting education services offered in correctional facilities with those in the community." The Framework is based on OCTAE lessons learned from its "Promoting Reentry Success Through the Continuity of Education Opportunities" initiative (PRSCEO), which was summarized in a separate report called [*Reentry Education Model Implementation Study: Promoting Reentry Success Through Continuity of Education Opportunities*](#). A [tool kit](#) is also available as a result of the PRSCEO work. Among many other recent education reports from OCTAE, the Department of Education, and the White House are: [*The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015: Students from Low-Income Families*](#), [*Developing Next Generation Assessments for Adult Education*](#) (October 2015), [*America's College Promise*](#), [*Connecting Young Americans with Jobs and Skills*](#), and [*Pell for Accelerated Completion*](#).



From the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) –
(1) [*Narrowing the Gender Gap: Empowering Women Through Literacy Programmes*](#) presents 23 case studies from Africa, the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and North America (the latter including Turkey and the United Kingdom). UNESCO has been giving more recognition to empowering women through literacy in recent years, based on the Gender Equality principle of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A

foreword to the publication notes that women make up two-thirds of the world's non-literate adults, and its Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2015 names this problem "one of the persistent challenges in adult literacy and education." (2) A catalogue of UIL publications, most of them available free and online, can be accessed [HERE](#).



From the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) and CLASP – [Connecting Credentials: A Beta Credentials Framework](#) has been developed by CSW and CLASP with funding from the Lumina Foundation. What is the Framework? How was it established? For what purpose? Who needs it? This new guidebook answers these questions and more. Among many other things it translates credentialing program expectations into competencies, compares credentials within and across professions, and aligns credentials with work functions and tasks. You may also wish to sign up for the Connecting Credentials newsletter.



From the Health Literacy Listserv – (1) The Affordable Care Act (ACA) mandates that insurance companies issue "easy-to-read" explanations of benefit statements. Some "patient friendly billing" resources are available [HERE](#). (2) The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) provides plain language information about the benefits and coverage forms requirements of the ACA. (3) For Canadian resources for accessible documents for people with print disabilities, go [HERE](#).



From the California Department of Education and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office – [Practices With Promise](#) is a new feature of California's comprehensive adult education and workforce skills development effort. This resource from the AEBG Adult Education Regional Consortium Program showcases successful practices of programs. One section of the site also profiles emerging practices in a wide variety of areas: e.g., alignment, seamless transitions, articulation pathways, partnerships and collaborations, data collection, assessment, curriculum development, outreach, and professional development. *Practices With Promise* is an evolving enterprise. Model program approaches shared at the site are based on submissions that meet specified criteria and reflect the results of planning required in California's new adult education context.



From The Center for Law & Social Policy (CLASP) – (1) In her recent review of Saru Jayaraman's new book, [*Forked: A New Standard for American Dining*](#), CLASP's Anusha Ravi says that [*the nation's tip-based wage system has racial and gender implications*](#). (2) [*The Supreme Court Should Allow Executive Action on Immigration to Go Forward in the Interest of Millions of Children*](#) from CLASP is about an amicus brief filed in the Supreme Court on behalf of 76 children's and educators groups who want to safeguard the health, educational opportunity, emotional well-being, and economic stability of children in the U.S. The brief argues that the Court should "lift the current injunction preventing implementation of President Obama's executive action on immigration, known as the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA) and the expansion of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programs." (3) In [*It's Not 1996 Anymore: TANF Cash Assistance Doesn't Go Far Enough*](#), CLASP reports that families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are struggling with benefits that are "stuck at 1996 levels." In 23 states the levels have either decreased or remain unchanged since the enactment of welfare reform in 1996. (4) In [*2017-18 FAFSA Proposes Significant Change for Low-Income Students*](#), Lauren Walizer and Amy Duke-Benfield of CLASP analyze the gains that will result from FAFSA's recent addition of an applicant's receipt of Medicaid as a qualification for meeting the Simplified Needs Test. (Note: FAFSA=Free Application for Federal Student Aid)



From the National Skills Coalition (NSC) – (1) The NSC keeps an eye on governors' activities in workforce and basic skills development. It recently published two blogs analyzing recent legislative proposals by some of the states. [*Blog One*](#) highlights the plans of CA, NY, VA, and ID. [*Blog Two*](#) highlights MA, TX, KY, MD, AL, RI, and DE. (2) In NSC's ongoing [*Skills Blog*](#), the Workforce Data Quality Campaign recently analyzed an effort by the SNAP Employment and Training Program to report national data for the first time on participant outcomes. Included in the reporting will be the results of measures to identify programs that improve participants' skills, employment, and earnings. (3) Also on the NSC Skills Blog is information about a new Department of Agriculture initiative called [*The SNAP to Skills project*](#), in which 10 states are participating. That effort, which involves NSC, is being led by the Seattle Jobs Initiative and includes the states of AZ, AR, CA, MD, MA, MI, MN, MO, NC, and TN.



Upcoming Conferences & Workshops

1) **TESOL's annual convention**, this year themed "Reflecting Forward," will be held in Baltimore from April 5–8. Among the conference speakers is Aziz Abu Sarah, National Geographic explorer and cultural fellow, and a TED Fellow. TESOL is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year. For details and to sign up, go [HERE](#).

2) This year's **WE LEARN Conference** (WE LEARN is dedicated to fostering empowerment of women through literacy) will be held April 30 from 9am to 6pm at Lehman College in New York City (the Bronx). The theme is "Women's Self-Esteem & Confidence." A pre-conference will be offered on the 29th and the day will include a walking tour of the New York Botanical Garden. For details, go [HERE](#).

3) The **Center for Plain Language's ClearMark Awards Banquet and Ceremony** is given every year to recognize outstanding plain language programs. This year's event on May 10th will include a workshop on accessibility, given at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. from 12pm to 3:30pm that day. David Berman, whose work includes numerous award-winning projects in the application of plain language to website design will lead the session. For details and to register, go [HERE](#). Note that registration ends April 10th.

4) **The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) Institutes** – CAL has scheduled a new series of some 18 Institutes in Washington, D.C. between May and December 2016. The Institutes aims to advance the professional development of classroom teachers and other educators, and focuses on the language demands of college and career readiness. For a schedule of the topics and dates, and to register, go [HERE](#).

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National Council for Adult Learning

(formerly Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy)

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