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PIAAC: Comprehensive New Look at Adult Skills in the U.S. and Abroad

On November 29-30, the American Institutes of Research held the first of four invitational meetings with U.S. stakeholder groups to explain the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).

PIAAC is a comprehensive household survey carried out under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It is based on research methodology and subject matter developed by experts in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Germany, and several other OECD member countries. The survey has been conducted in 24 countries including the U.S. during the past 2-3 years, each of which paid a part of the project costs. The findings will be released in October 2013 - in the form of international data comparisons and individual country reports in 32 languages, including English and Spanish.

OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría has characterized the PIAAC (which has important links to the NALS, the IALS, and ALL*) as a "breakthrough survey on adult competencies [that] will provide

governments with a unique and effective tool to assess where they stand in terms of the quantity and quality of the knowledge and skills of their workforce." PIAAC will also show how the skills assessed relate to individuals' and nations' social and economic well-being and it will provide insight into how well education and training systems are meeting skill demands. The findings for each country will be on a national basis, largely in the form of online data tables rather than printed narrative reports. But in the U.S., national, state, and local entities, businesses, and other groups may be able to plan their educational services and investments more effectively, at all competency levels, through use of the online resource described below.

This latest assessment has a larger and more comprehensive scope than past assessments of adult skills. It has a heavy workplace/workforce orientation. The findings will give the U.S. and other participating countries rich new data on the nature and demographics of adult skills at all competency levels -- in literacy, reading, numeracy, and technology skills in the workplace. (*Note: The literacy measure replaces the former Document and Prose scales of the NALS and the new numeracy measure replaces the Quantitative literacy scale.*)

Findings relevant to the U.S. will be posted on the website of the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), as well as OECD's site. In the U.S., it is likely that some government and/or philanthropic funding will become available to generate policy papers and analyses for our own domestic purposes. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education is planning to link the PIAAC findings to its ongoing Career Pathways activities to align adult education more to the labor market. Major leadership groups have been asked to contribute to the "messaging" for their stakeholder or constituent groups, as a way to help foster understanding of the data's significance.

PIAAC will give information on individual participants' education/ training and employment, as well as requirements of jobs. One of its most remarkable features is a first-ever tool, called PIAAC Online, that will become available by early 2014 from OECD's website, where it will be offered for a modest fee. Through links to the PIAAC scales, educational institutions, employers, and others in the U.S. and other countries will be able to directly input their own "local" information in "real time" and generate assessment results unique to their particular circumstances and population groups. Tutorials will explain how to navigate the resource.

CAAL will provide periodic updates on the unfolding of the collaborative PIACC initiative as well as the Online resources. In the meantime, for information on the Background Questionnaire, PIAAC's history, and other aspects of the effort, visit the [NCES website](#). A link is provided there for those who want even more information. Also get a copy of [Literacy, Numeracy and Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments: Framework for the OECD Survey of Adult Skills](#), from OECD Publishing.

* NALS (*National Adult Literacy Survey*), IALS (*International Adult Literacy Survey*), and ALL (*Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey*). Note that PIAAC will be able to generate a trend line for the U.S. that goes all the way back to the NALS.



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OTHER NEWS

▶ ["It's Never Too Late to Learn"](#) is the latest posting on the U.S. Department of Education's Blog. This piece, by deputy assistant secretary John White of the Department's rural outreach staff, discusses the positive changes that have occurred through education in the lives of two formerly incarcerated men. After serving their sentences, they went on to success in Kirkwood Community College's [Kirkwood Pathways for Academic Career Education and Employment](#) (KPACE) program. The essay also provides a few current facts on incarceration and links to some useful Department resources.

▶ Those considering the greater use of technology to expand and enhance Adult Education may be interested in a recent Blog posted by Stanford University's Charles Taylor Kerchne for Policy Analysis for California Education. In "[Education Technology Policy for a 21st Century Learning System](#)," Prof. Kerchne begins his provocative piece this way: "Educational technology has always overpromised and underdelivered. Despite the glitz and hype of technology, no one has figured out a more efficient and effective way of educating students than placing a teacher in front of a bunch of them. Technology has largely been subject to this existing production system: at most, it has been a valuable adjunct. Until now." And then Mr. Kerchne goes on to explain the capacity he thinks educational technology has to change our traditional classroom-based system.

▶ **Health Literacy Innovations** in Maryland has put out the "first interactive health literacy software tool," called [The Health Literacy Advisor](#). It is designed to help medical institutions eliminate medical mistakes and confusion due to low health literacy. Using plain language principles, institutions and their medical personnel can assess the readability level of their medical documents and adjust them for low-skilled patients. The program operates in interaction with Microsoft Word, and offers a Spanish language version. Fees vary by number of licenses per computer, and volume and duration of intended use. A brief video overview demonstrates the Advisor's features.

▶ Penn State's **Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy** recently issued an updated database containing an Annotated Bibliography of new research and writings in family literacy. The resource is available in [overview form](#) and in the form of a [searchable database](#).

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