



UTAH SYSTEM OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Credit for Prior Learning at USHE Degree-Granting Institutions

The Utah Board of Higher Education has implemented a strategic plan to increase access to higher education and facilitate students' pathways to meaningful careers. A key initiative of the plan allows students to earn college credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside traditional college settings, such as through rigorous academic study before enrolling in college, employer training programs, or military service. The Board's Credit for Prior Learning initiative streamlines degree progression as a completion strategy but also serves as an affordability tool. The strategy is based in [Utah Code 53B-16-107](#) and [Board Policy R472, \*Credit for Prior Learning\*](#); the System's Prior Learning Assessment Quality Standards and Best Practices Handbook provides detailed guidance for institutions.

### Impact on timely completion

National research demonstrates a strong correlation between students receiving credit for prior learning (CPL) and their likelihood of completing a degree. Studies by the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education found that credit for prior learning was especially significant for adult students, and adults comprise close to 30% of USHE's student body. A national study of more than 230,000 adult students at 72 colleges and universities revealed that 49% of students who received credit for prior learning completed a degree or certificate compared to only 27% of their peers (<https://www.cael.org/pla-impact>). Adults need efficient means of reskilling and upskilling in a shifting economy, and assessing the skills they bring with them to higher education helps them move quickly through their chosen program. High school students also benefit from CPL if they meet required scores on national standardized exams like those offered through the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. They can start on degree completion before graduating from high school.<sup>1</sup>

### Key principles of the Credit for Prior Learning Initiative

Certain key principles underlie the Board's initiative on credit for prior learning.

- 1. Meaningful application of credit:** The Board intends for credits awarded for prior learning to count meaningfully toward degree programs. Prior learning should be reflected on students' transcripts as equivalent credit to specific commonly numbered courses so that the credit can

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<sup>1</sup> High school may also directly earn college credits through the Concurrent Enrollment program; Concurrent Enrollment is not a form of credit for prior learning, since students enroll in a USHE institution, take college classes from the institution, and their class grades are automatically transcribed.

apply toward major coursework, general education, prerequisite fulfillment, or other requirements.

- 2. College-level competencies:** Credit is only granted for assessments that measure college-level competencies, as determined by college faculty (either within the USHE or national pools of faculty who design and assess standardized exams) that are aligned with the essential learning outcomes of specific courses, as determined by USHE Faculty Major Committees.
- 3. Standardization and transferability:** Wherever possible, course alignment for specific prior learning assessments should be to a particular course, so students receive the same credit at all USHE degree-granting institutions. For the most commonly used learning assessments, systemwide Faculty Major Committees determine the minimum scores required to earn credit and the commonly numbered courses and credit amounts that students will receive across the System. Credit earned through prior learning assessments is transferable between all USHE degree-granting institutions.
- 4. Multiple assessment options:** Students have access to multiple routes for earning credit for prior learning, including:
  - a. Standardized national exams like the Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), College Level Examination Program (CLEP), and military exams (DSST, DD4, etc.)
  - b. Institutionally designed course challenge exams
  - c. Workplace training evaluations and licensures
  - d. Military Joint Services Transcripts
  - e. Portfolio assessments or individualized assessments of students' work
- 5. Transparency and access:** Information about options for earning credit for prior learning should be accessible on institutional websites, via advisors, and through USHE's website and communications with the Utah State Board of Education, high school counselors, and UCAC advisors. As the faculty committees determine the alignment of exam scores with commonly numbered courses, the Commissioner's Office updates information for institutions' chief academic officers, admissions offices, registrars, and other groups; publishes exam equivalencies online for students and in the Utah Transfer Guide; and shares them with the Utah State Board of Higher Education and high school and college advisor organizations and through professional development webinars.
- 6. Affordability:** Institutions do not charge students tuition for the course credits they receive through prior learning assessments and may only charge minimal fees to cover the costs of individualized assessments. (The costs for national standardized exams are determined by the companies providing the exams.)
- 7. Shared efforts:** Wherever possible, the degree-granting institutions will work together to construct credit for prior learning policies, create and share professional development for faculty and staff, design shared assessment and intake tools for students, and, if possible, determine a process for sharing a pool of faculty assessors.

**8. Professional development and training:** Board policy requires institutions to provide ongoing training for faculty and staff, such as advisors, so that they will be familiar with the benefits of credit for prior learning and with institutional and System policies related to it. For the last two years, Utah Valley University and the Prior Learning Committee have hosted a cross-USHE conference on credit for prior learning for teams of faculty and staff from all eight degree-granting institutions.