Academic Credit for Prior Learning:
2016 Progress Report

January 2017
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students come to college with skills and knowledge acquired through work, military, and other experiences. Academic credit for prior learning is awarded when a student’s prior learning is assessed and found to be the equivalent of specific college course outcomes, and when the award of credit is consistent with the policies of the institution.

Awarding academic credit for prior learning:
- Honors students’ knowledge and skills.
- Strengthens connections between work and college.
- Accelerates students’ progress toward career pathways.
- Helps Washington meet statewide educational attainment goals.

For the 2015-16 academic year, Washington public and independent colleges and universities awarded 224,998 academic quarter credits based on prior learning, which applied toward certificates or degrees. This represents 5,000 annual full-time equivalent students.

The Washington Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup recommends the following actions to improve consistency, transparency, and recognition of prior learning:

1. **Expand use of data**
   - Increase consistency in implementation of coding.
   - Establish an automated data-collection process.
   - Analyze data to inform policies and practices.

2. **Improve awareness and access**
   - Ensure that students are advised of the several ways that they may have their prior learning assessed for award of academic credit.
   - Ensure that students with prior military training are advised of specific veteran support services and policies.
   - Provide ongoing training to faculty, advisors, and staff to ensure:
     - Consistent advising.
     - Appropriate assessment methods.
     - Consistent awards of academic credit for prior learning.

3. **Streamline processes**
   - Develop consistent statewide policy on acceptance of American Council on Education (ACE) guide recommendations for award of academic credit for prior military training.1
   - Expand development of crosswalks between industry certificates and training and college courses by Centers of Excellence, and increase adoption of crosswalks by institutions.
   - Develop competency-based modules to fill gaps between existing industry training and college courses, and to fill gaps between military training and college courses.

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1 American Council on Education (ACE) provides credit recommendations for formal courses and occupations offered by all branches of the military.
4. Align policies

- Strengthen collaboration among education groups to ensure alignment of policies and practices, particularly in transfer.

- Ensure broad representation of stakeholders in Washington's Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup.
INTRODUCTION

Awarding college credit based on assessment of a student’s prior learning in the workplace, in the military, or through other life experiences can have positive impacts on increasing educational attainment in Washington. Implementing effective policies to assess and award academic credit for prior learning may:

- Improve access by helping to make college more affordable, reducing the cost and time to a degree through the award of course credits for knowledge and skills developed through prior learning.
- Inspire confidence in future learning potential by recognizing the skills and knowledge adults have acquired through military and other training and education.
- Launch students more quickly into their chosen career pathways, fulfilling their own needs while meeting the needs of communities and employers.

WHAT IS ACADEMIC CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING?

Prior learning is defined in statute as the knowledge and skills gained through:

- Work and life experience.
- Military training and experience.
- Formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions, including foreign institutions.

Colleges and universities use a variety of assessment methods to determine:

- What prospective students know and can do.
- Whether students’ prior learning is equivalent to what they would have learned if they had completed a specific college course.

Assessments of prior learning can be accomplished through standardized tests, course challenge examinations, portfolio assessment, and crosswalks between military and work-based learning and college courses. ²

Some assessment methods cost a student more than others, but the cost of an assessment is less than the cost of tuition to enroll in the equivalent course. In addition, when students earn credit, they may be able to enroll in or advance to higher-level courses.

Colleges and universities award academic credit for prior learning when:

- Prior learning outcomes are assessed and found to be equivalent to specific college course outcomes.
- Awarding credit is consistent with the policies of the institution.

² A crosswalk refers to a matrix used to compare industry- or military-based learning outcomes with outcomes for specific courses in a college. (Example: Basic Law Enforcement Academy training compared to Criminal Justice coursework).
FOUNDATIONAL LEGISLATION

In 2011, the Washington State Legislature created legislation\(^3\) to increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning and the number and type of credits earned, ensuring that credit is awarded only for college course-level competencies. The Legislature also established a workgroup on academic credit for prior learning.

The Legislature tasked the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC), the Council of Presidents (COP), the four-year institutions of higher education, the private independent higher education institutions, and the private career schools with collaborating to achieve the following:

1. Increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning.
2. Increase the number of credits awarded for prior learning.
3. Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning.
4. Improve prior learning assessment practices.
5. Create professional development tools and means of sharing exemplary policies and practices among institutions.
6. Develop articulation agreements for programs and pathways.
7. Develop outcome measures to track progress on the above goals.

The Washington Student Achievement Council was tasked with:

- Convening the Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup.
- Submitting an annual report to the Legislature on progress toward achieving the goals and outcome measures listed above.

Veterans

Too often, military veterans arrive on a college campus with college-level learning that isn’t recognized through existing assessment systems. This issue contributed to the legislation on awarding academic credit for prior learning. In 2014, legislation specifically providing for awarding academic credit for military training was enacted,\(^4\) requiring each institution of higher education to:

- Adopt a policy to award academic credit for military training applicable to the student’s certificate or degree requirements.
- Develop a procedure for receiving the necessary documentation to identify and verify the military training course or program that an individual is claiming for academic credit.
- Provide a copy of their policy to award academic credit for military training to any applicants who listed prior or present military service in their application.
- Develop and maintain a list of military training courses and programs that qualify for academic credit.
- Submit its policy on awarding academic credit for military training to the workgroup.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Full bill language: [http://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1795&Year=2011](http://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1795&Year=2011)  Additionally, E2SHB1795 built upon related legislation passed in 2009 (SHB1328) and 2010 (SSB6357 and ESSB6359).


\(^5\) Links to institutions’ policies are posted on the WSAC policy page: [http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning](http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning)
WORKGROUP

The Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup has been meeting quarterly since 2011. Workgroup membership has fluctuated, as agency and group representatives have changed over time. WSAC staff convene the group.

The foundational legislation lists specific groups which should be represented in the workgroup:

- WSAC, one representative
- SBCTC, one representative
- COP, one representative
- Faculty from two-year institutions, two representatives
- Faculty from four-year institutions, two representatives
- Private career colleges, two representatives
- Business, two representatives
- Labor, two representatives

WSAC is working to ensure that all required groups are represented. In addition, a core group of stakeholders from a variety of institutions, agencies, and organizations regularly attend Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup meetings. These participants contribute a broad range of perspectives and expertise, and also serve as conduits of information to and from other groups such as the Workforce Education Council and the Joint Transfer Council.

PROGRESS ON LEGISLATIVE GOALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Summary</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 1</strong> Increase number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning.</td>
<td>In progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 2</strong> Increase number and type of credits awarded.</td>
<td>In progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 3</strong> Develop transparent policies and practices.</td>
<td>Complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 4</strong> Improve prior learning assessment practices.</td>
<td>Complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 5</strong> Create tools to develop faculty and staff expertise and to share exemplary policies and practices.</td>
<td>Complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 6</strong> Develop articulation agreements when patterns of credit for prior learning are identified for particular programs and pathways.</td>
<td>Complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 7</strong> Develop outcome measures to track progress on the goals outlined in this section.</td>
<td>In progress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goals 1 and 2

*Increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning and the number of students who receive credit for prior learning that counts towards their major or towards earning their degree, certificate, or credential—while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies.*

*Increase the number and type of academic credits accepted for prior learning.*
## Outcomes

The community and technical college sector has developed and implemented clear coding guidelines. Current data collection tools incorporate these codes and categories. Improved consistency in coding will improve the accuracy in data; however, not all institutions report data. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately determine change over time for the state as a whole.

In July of 2016, WSAC staff distributed data collection tools and a request for data through COP, SBCTC, the Independent Colleges of Washington, and the Northwest Federation of Career Colleges. Twenty-six community and technical colleges, all six public baccalaureate institutions, and all ten Independent Colleges of Washington member institutions submitted data in time to be included in this report.

For the 2015-16 academic year, Washington public and independent colleges and universities awarded 224,998 academic quarter credits based on prior learning, which applied toward certificates or degrees. This represents 5,000 annual full-time equivalent students.

### 2015-16 Summary of Academic Credit for Prior Learning Student FTE and Credits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Student FTE(^6)</th>
<th>Total Quarter Credits(^7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credit by Testing</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Placement (AP)</td>
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<td>3,569</td>
<td>160,607</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Baccalaureate (IB)</td>
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<td>423</td>
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<td>Cambridge A-Level Examinations</td>
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<td>DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST)</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>College Level Exam Program (CLEP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2,305</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Prior Experiential Learning</strong></td>
<td>Portfolio Review (college level credits)</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>5,438</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Course Challenges</strong></td>
<td>Generally a faculty or department-created course-specific assessment</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>10,467</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Extra-Institutional Learning</strong></td>
<td>American Council of Education (ACE) (military completion courses)</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>14,269</td>
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<td>Occupational Crosswalks (Military MOS, other)</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>3,987</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual Industry Cert (e.g. NCLEX-RN)</td>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3,251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of FTEs and Credits</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>5,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>224,998</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: WSAC staff analysis of Academic Credit for Prior Learning data collected from institutions (Fall 2016).

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\(^6\) Based on 45 quarter credits equating to one full-time student.

\(^7\) Semester credits were converted to equivalent quarter credits.
The data received to date do not allow measurement of progress over time because 1) definitions and coding processes were in development and in early stages of implementation, and 2) not all institutions reported data in any given year. Also, data collection is cumbersome. Academic credit for prior learning is not included in the data currently collected centrally for research purposes. Data collection requires individual institutional data requests.

**Goal 3**

*Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning.*

**Outcomes**

The Academic Credit for Prior Learning workgroup has developed and provided sample policies, which are included in the handbook. Institutions were asked to provide links to general policies on assessing and awarding academic credit for prior learning, as well as links to policies on credit for prior military training. See Appendix B for web links to institutional policies, where available.\(^8\)

**Goals 4 and 5**

*Improve prior learning assessment practices across the institutions of higher education.*

*Create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding credit for prior learning and to share exemplary policies and practices among institutions of higher education.*

**Outcomes**

An annual workshop, a handbook, a listserv\(^9\) and a wiki site\(^10\) serve as conduits of information across institutions and agencies. The wiki site also houses artifacts such as meeting notes and resources gathered during the lifetime of the workgroup. The Academic Credit for Prior Learning Handbook provides sample policies and examples of crosswalks and other assessment models.\(^11\)

For the sixth year, a day-long workshop was held to encourage sharing of effective practices and to ensure a common understanding of coding practices and policies.\(^12\) A highlight of the workshop was the panel of veteran students who shared their experiences with the prior learning process and affirmed that work is needed to ensure consistent advising and award of credit for military training. Almost one hundred participants reviewed the Academic Credit for Prior Learning Handbook and suggested revisions for this year. Institutional representatives led a review and discussion of definitions, coding, and transcription.

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\(^8\) Links to institution policies: [http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning](http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning)

\(^9\) Link to sign up for the listserv and access previous postings: [http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?A0=W-PLA](http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?A0=W-PLA)

\(^10\) Workgroup wiki: [https://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/](https://wa-priorlearningassessment.wikispaces.com/)


\(^12\) Workshop materials: [http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning](http://wsac.wa.gov/assessments-prior-learning)
Other workshop session topics included:

- Using Canvas to host prior learning information and an application process
- The role of prior learning in competency-based education
- Washington State data collection process
- A veterans’ center showcase
- How to use ACE guides (military training)
- Developing crosswalks and portfolio assessments
- Prior learning in applied baccalaureate degree programs

**Goal 6**

_Develop articulation agreements when patterns of credit for prior learning are identified for particular programs and pathways._

**Outcomes**

Crosswalks, or articulations, have been developed by institution staff and faculty, and by Centers of Excellence\(^\text{13}\) for specific careers, to articulate connections between industry certificates and training and college courses. Example crosswalks are included in the Academic Credit for Prior Learning handbook to facilitate expansion of this assessment method.

Creating crosswalks is time-consuming. Because course outcomes are not consistent across institutions, each crosswalk must be created (or similar crosswalks may be adapted) by faculty or departments for adoption at each institution.

**Goal 7**

_Develop outcome measures to track progress on the goals outlined in this section._

**Outcomes**

A method has been developed to track progress on Goals 1 & 2, using commonly agreed-upon definitions and coding. This requires establishing a statewide baseline for award of credit (number of students and number of credits awarded). To date, WSAC has not received data from all institutions. Measuring progress is not possible without a full data set as a baseline to which data for subsequent years can be compared.

**Assessment categories and coding**

The development of clear coding for the variety of types of prior learning and the types of prior learning assessments has mitigated one of the difficulties in providing accurate and complete data on the award of credit for prior learning. The community and technical college system adopted the following categories and codes in 2015.\(^\text{14}\) These categories and codes are included in the Academic Credit for Prior Learning Handbook, and the workgroup used them as the standard for data collection for the 2015 and 2016 progress reports to the Legislature.

\(^{13}\) Centers of Excellence are funding through the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and link business, industry, labor and educational systems. Each Center represents the needs and interests of a specific industry sector. Details: [http://www.sbctc.edu/for-employers/centers-of-excellence.aspx](http://www.sbctc.edu/for-employers/centers-of-excellence.aspx)

Credit by Testing

Standardized and commonly accepted higher education equivalency exams include:

- Advanced Placement (AP)¹⁵
- International Baccalaureate (IB)¹⁶
- College Level Examination Program (CLEP)¹⁷
- Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES)¹⁸
- Subject Standardized Tests (DSST)
- Cambridge International¹⁹

Extra-Institutional Learning

- Industry-related certificates of completion of training.
- Occupational crosswalks developed to demonstrate the equivalency of industry training to college course outcomes.
- American Council on Education (ACE) guide recommendations for college course equivalencies to specific military training and education, usually as it relates to a specific military occupational specialty (MOS).²⁰

Course Challenges

Comprehensive exams are developed by faculty for a specific course. When students successfully complete a course challenge, they demonstrate that the course learning objectives have been met.

Prior Experiential Learning

Student portfolios are reviewed and evaluated by faculty. Faculty identify achievement of learning outcomes that are equivalent to those student would achieve by completing one or more college courses. Portfolio development may be completed independently by a student and submitted for faculty evaluation, or an institution may offer a portfolio development course, culminating in a review of the portfolio. When faculty review portfolios, they determine which, if any, college course learning outcomes have been met and the number and type of credits to award.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) accreditation standards establish a cap on prior experiential learning.²¹ Credit within this category must be limited to a maximum of 25 percent of the credits needed for a specific degree. The category of prior experiential learning is noted on the college transcript as PEL.

Community and technical colleges accept academic credit awarded by other colleges within the CTC system. To ensure this transferability, a statement regarding reciprocity of acceptance of prior learning is included in the SBCTC Inter-College Reciprocity Policy.²²

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¹⁵ College Board, Advanced Placement: https://apstudent.collegeboard.org/home
¹⁶ International Baccalaureate Organization: http://www.ibo.org/
¹⁷ College Board, College-Level Examination Program: https://clep.collegeboard.org/
¹⁹ Cambridge International Examinations: http://www.cie.org.uk/
RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Washington Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup recommends the following actions to improve consistency, transparency, and recognition of prior learning:

Expand use of data

- Increase consistency in implementation of coding.
- Establish an automated data collection process.
- Analyze data to inform policies and practices.

Improve awareness and access

- Ensure that students are advised of the several ways that they may have their prior learning assessed for award of academic credit.
- Ensure that students with prior military training are advised of specific veteran support services and policies.
- Provide ongoing training to faculty, advisors, and staff to ensure:
  - Consistent advising.
  - Appropriate assessment methods.
  - Consistent awards of academic credit for prior learning.

Streamline processes

- Develop consistent statewide policy on acceptance of American Council on Education (ACE) guide recommendations for award of academic credit for prior military training.  

- Expand development of crosswalks between industry certificates and training and college courses by Centers of Excellence, and increase adoption of crosswalks by institutions.

- Develop competency-based modules to fill gaps between existing industry training and college courses, and to fill gaps between military training and college courses.

Align policies

- Strengthen collaboration among education groups to ensure alignment of policies and practices, particularly in transfer.

- Ensure that required representation on the Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup is met, and continue to encourage broad representation of stakeholders at workgroup meetings.

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23 American Council on Education (ACE) provides credit recommendations for formal courses and occupations offered by all branches of the military.
CONCLUSION

Colleges and universities that award academic credit for prior learning recognize and respect the skills and knowledge that students bring with them when they enter the college classroom. This award of credit moves students closer to achieving their education goals. It also moves Washington toward the statewide educational attainment goal of at least 70 percent of Washington adults (ages 25-44) holding a postsecondary credential.

LEAD AUTHOR CONTACT INFORMATION

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Washington Student Achievement Council
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NoreenL@wsac.wa.gov

Acknowledgement of Contributors

WSAC recognizes the contributions of the education agencies, groups, and public and private institutions who contributed to the information and data contained in this report. WSAC extends particular appreciation to those who have participated in the Academic Credit for Prior Learning Workgroup.
APPENDIX A: RCW 28B.77.230

RCW 28B.77.230

Academic credit for prior learning—Goals—Work group—Reports.

(1) The council, the state board for community and technical colleges, the council of presidents, the four-year institutions of higher education, the private independent higher education institutions, and the private career schools shall collaborate to carry out the following goals:

(a) Increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning and the number of students who receive credit for prior learning that counts towards their major or towards earning their degree, certificate, or credential, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies;

(b) Increase the number and type of academic credits accepted for prior learning in institutions of higher education, while ensuring that credit is awarded only for high quality, course-level competencies;

(c) Develop transparent policies and practices in awarding academic credit for prior learning;

(d) Improve prior learning assessment practices across the institutions of higher education;

(e) Create tools to develop faculty and staff knowledge and expertise in awarding credit for prior learning and to share exemplary policies and practices among institutions of higher education;

(f) Develop articulation agreements when patterns of credit for prior learning are identified for particular programs and pathways; and

(g) Develop outcome measures to track progress on the goals outlined in this section.

(2) The council shall convene the academic credit for prior learning work group.

(a) The work group must include the following members:

(i) One representative from the council;

(ii) One representative from the state board for community and technical colleges;

(iii) One representative from the council of presidents;

(iv) Two representatives each from faculty from two and four-year institutions of higher education;

(v) Two representatives from private career schools;

(vi) Two representatives from business; and

(vii) Two representatives from labor.

(b) The purpose of the work group is to coordinate and implement the goals in subsection (1) of this section.

(3) The council shall report progress on the goals and outcome measures annually by December 31st.

(4) For the purposes of this section, “prior learning” means the knowledge and skills gained through work and life experience; through military training and experience; and through formal and informal education and training from in-state and out-of-state institutions including foreign institutions.
APPENDIX B: LIST OF INSTITUTIONS


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Institution Name</th>
<th>Prior Learning – General Policies</th>
<th>Prior Learning – Military Policies</th>
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24 Links to policies were verified on December 8, 2016.
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<tr>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Institution Name</td>
<td>Prior Learning – General Policies</td>
<td>Prior Learning – Military Policies</td>
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