

Making Experience Count: Academic Credit for Prior Learning in Washington

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements i
Preface ii
Introduction 1
The Benefits of and Barriers to ACPL 2
The ACPL Policy Landscape Nationwide and in Washington 6
Advancing ACPL in Washington 9
Trends in Credits Awarded through ACPL in Washington 10
Recommendations to Continue Advancing ACPL in Washington 14
Conclusion 16
Appendix. Policy Themes from Landscape Scan 17
Endnotes 19

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We would also like to thank our colleagues at the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) for contributing to the development and review of this report.

Preface

This report was developed by the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) to highlight existing evidence around ACPL and to support state- and institution-level decision making regarding ACPL policies and practices. The report identifies opportunities to expand Washington's use of ACPL as a strategy for increasing postsecondary enrollment and credential attainment to better support Washington's workforce.

Disclaimer: The research presented here uses data that institutions submit annually to WSAC to assist with the development of our annual ACPL legislative report, which is required through RCW 28B.77.230.

Executive Summary

Academic Credit for Prior Learning (ACPL) policies govern how colleges and universities award students academic credit for experiences and knowledge acquired outside a traditional classroom. Given the benefits of ACPL, relying on it could prove vital to achieving Washington's 70% statewide credential attainment goal for adults ages 25 to 44.

This report from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) provides an overview of the broader ACPL landscape, a deep dive into ACPL policies and trends in Washington, and recommendations relating to policy changes that could help increase ACPL utilization both at a national and statewide level.

ACPL offers benefits to learners, institutions, and the labor market, yet continues to face challenges in implementation. Research links earning ACPL with higher credential completion, reduced costs, and shorter time to degree completion for learners. While more research is needed, emerging evidence suggests ACPL may also support institutional enrollment and financial sustainability and strengthen pathways to meet evolving workforce demands. Despite such benefits, challenges remain: upfront financial burdens on learners and institutions, institutional resistance to awarding credit, inconsistent policies and lack of communication, and disparities in who receives credit. These challenges point to gaps in the existing policies and regulations around ACPL.

Nationwide, ACPL policies focus on how to award credit for military training and how to assess credits for ACPL, and they require states and systems to establish an ACPL policy; however, many policies lack mention of how to collect and track data, what the costs of ACPL are, and how to evaluate effectiveness. In Washington, there are ten policies and six programs intended to increase awareness, transparency, and accessibility of ACPL.

Due in part to such initiatives, Washington is starting to see growth in ACPL awarding. In particular, the number of ACPL credits awarded has increased 44% since 2015. At the same time, however, the total number of learners earning ACPL has decreased 15%, which highlights opportunities for state policy improvements.

To expand the types of ACPL credits awarded and increase the number of learners earning ACPL, Washington could consider standardizing policies, establishing clear expectations between institutions and industry partners, improving data collection, and increasing flexibility of financial aid.

Introduction

Academic Credit for Prior Learning (ACPL)[1] policies govern how colleges and universities evaluate and award academic credit for knowledge and skills acquired outside traditional coursework, such as through work experience, military training, and informal learning. ACPL can help students complete degrees more quickly and at lower cost while strengthening the talent pipeline.[2] Given that more than 40% of full-time students and more than 70% of part-time students work, awarding ACPL can help ensure that a large number of students receive academic credit for their work experiences.[3] Furthermore, implementing ACPL strategies can help the 43.1 million people nationwide with some college but no credential earn credentials that expand their career opportunities and meet evolving workforce needs.[4]

ACPL as a concept is not new; however, it has grown in relevance in recent years, as more people have focused on improving degree completion rates, supporting veterans returning from overseas deployments, and finding innovative ways to support adult learners in their degree completion.[5] Since the 2010s, many states and institutions have started developing policies around how to assess and award ACPL. Although the specific process and cost for awarding ACPL varies by state and institution, some methods include standardized exams, departmental exams, portfolio assessments, credits for military training, credits for corporate or other external training, and institutional review of external training, licenses, or certifications.[6]

In general, a growing body of research has begun to illuminate the benefits of ACPL, including increased completion rates, increased credit attainment, decreased costs to the student, and decreased time to degree completion. Emerging evidence also suggests that ACPL benefits institutions and labor-market outcomes, but research in this area is considerably more limited. However, significant barriers to implementation remain, including financial burdens, institutional resistance to awarding credit, inconsistent policies, and disparities in who receives credit. Addressing these challenges could help make ACPL policies more comprehensive, transparent, and accessible to students.

In Washington state, ACPL awarding has increased since 2015, with expansion in both the number and types of credits awarded. The increase comes partly from expanded statewide policies around requirements for ACPL assessment and awarding as well as a jump in the number of programs focused on ACPL awarding. While Washington has numerous policies and programs in place to expand efforts around ACPL awarding, there are opportunities to improve statewide implementation. Indeed, creating and promoting effective ACPL policies and practices may prove vital to achieving the 70% statewide credential

attainment goal for adults ages 25 to 44. Increasing credential attainment can, in turn, strengthen the skilled workforce needed to meet employer demand and support economic growth across the state, while expanding individuals' access to career opportunities, higher earnings and greater economic stability.

This report begins with an overview of the ACPL landscape, including an introduction to the benefits and challenges associated with ACPL, followed by a description of current ACPL policies. It then looks specifically at Washington's policies and programs and at trends in ACPL awarding in the state over the past 10 years. Finally, it offers recommendations for expanding ACPL awarding to increase statewide credential attainment.

The Benefits of and Barriers to ACPL

Benefits

The benefits of ACPL reach three key constituencies: (1) individuals who are awarded credit; (2) institutions that award it; and (3) the labor market. Although the evidence base remains limited and additional peer-reviewed research is needed, the existing literature generally shows the positive impact of ACPL on learner outcomes. Evidence regarding institutional and labor-market outcomes is much more limited, although emerging findings point to several potential benefits.

Benefits to learners

Existing research consistently links ACPL with improved postsecondary degree completion. A large-scale study conducted by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) examined outcomes for more than 232,000 adult learners across 72 US institutions. According to that study, ACPL was associated with higher credential completion, reduced costs, and shortened time to degree completion for adult learners, as detailed below:[7]

- Between 2011 and 2018, adult students who earned ACPL had a credential completion rate of 49% compared to a rate of 27% among adult learners with no ACPL. For students who earned non-military ACPL, credential earning rates were even higher: 73%.
- Adult learners who earned ACPL saved between $1,500 and $3,794 in tuition at public two- and four-year institutions, respectively. Cost savings associated with ACPL were even more pronounced at private four-year institutions ($10,220) and for-profit institutions ($6,090).

- Adult learners who earned at least 12 ACPL reduced their time to degree completion by an average of 14 months when earning an associate degree and by an average of more than 9 months when earning a bachelor's degree.

Other research has found similar patterns. For instance, one case study by McKay and Douglas (2020) explored the impact of ACPL awarding across the Colorado Community College System (CCCS), which includes 13 unique colleges with 40 locations throughout the state of Colorado. Using a sample of over 77,000 CCCS students, they found that ACPL credit earners were significantly more likely to have earned any credential (one or more certificates or associate degrees) over a seven-year time period compared to non-ACPL earning students; credential earning rates were 35.1% compared to 31.5%, respectively.[8]

Additional evidence comes from a study by Capella University (2021), which found ACPL to be associated with increased affordability and accelerated degree attainment, lending support to the research cited above. Further, the Capella study also sheds light on an association between ACPL and higher persistence rates among adult learners; according to its findings, those with ACPL were nearly 10% more likely to continue into a fifth quarter than those without ACPL, with the strongest persistence found among ACPL earners pursuing bachelor's degrees.[9]

Finally, using a novel regression discontinuity design, Boatman et al. (2019) compared outcomes from more than 800,000 college-level examination program test takers who scored either above or below the threshold required to receive ACPL. They found that earning a credit-granting score from ACPL examinations significantly increased the probability of earning a college degree. This effect was particularly strong among adult learners at two-year colleges, and for those over the age of 24.[10] The same study highlights the potential benefits of earning ACPL on financial outcomes for adult learners (discussed in the *Benefits to labor-market outcome*s section).

Benefits to institutions

There may be some financial benefit for institutions when it comes to awarding ACPL. Results from the 2020 CAEL and WICHE study concluded that, even with the additional credits earned through ACPL, ACPL earners took more traditional course credits than their counterparts who did not earn ACPL.[11] Specifically, learners with ACPL earned an average of 50.2 traditional institutional credits, compared with just 32.5 credits earned on average among those without ACPL: a difference of nearly 18 credits. The authors note that, while the greater number of earned credits suggests a retention (and revenue) benefit to institutions that award ACPL, it is unclear whether the increased traditional credit earning supports—or hinders— affordable and efficient credential completion by students.

There is also evidence that awarding ACPL may be an effective recruitment mechanism for increasing postsecondary enrollment among adult learners. A recent survey of more than 1,000 prospective adult learners by CAEL, Strada, and Hanover Research found that, among respondents most likely to enroll in a postsecondary degree program, 84% said the ability to earn credit for prior learning would strongly influence their choice of institution. Among those who were slightly or moderately likely to enroll, over half (55%) said that knowing that ACPL was available would affect their likelihood of enrolling.[12] These findings suggest that increasing ACPL availability and making existing ACPL opportunities more visible to prospective learners could be an important tool for increasing adult learner postsecondary enrollment.

One study by RPK Group (2021) examined the financial sustainability of several institutional approaches to awarding ACPL, concluding that some models are likely to generate positive net revenue and identifying practices that can support positive financial outcomes for institutions. The authors identified five emerging best practices to improve outcomes for students while still promoting financial sustainability at the institutional level: (1) designing programs to scale and intentionally planning for student recruitment; (2) aligning programs with student and labor market demand while creating opportunities for paid credit-hour activity; (3) minimizing the need for active management of ongoing operations; (4) using technology, coordinated strategies, and routine processes to increase efficiency; and (5) offering ACPL at low or no cost to students.[13]

Overall, the emerging evidence suggests that ACPL can be financially beneficial for institutions and can increase enrollment, but financial outcomes may depend on a number of factors including ACPL policy, program design, and implementation.

Benefits to labor-market outcomes

Research is considerably more limited regarding how ACPL awarding impacts labor-market outcomes. Boatman and colleagues' 2019 study provides some evidence of a financial benefit for wage earners associated with having been awarded ACPL. In the study's analysis of credit-bureau data for ACPL exam takers, adults who passed ACPL exams subsequently had estimated annual incomes that were, on average, $1,235 higher than ACPL exam-takers who scored below the credit-granting threshold.[14] In addition to higher wages, other studies have highlighted that ACPL offers an opportunity to help reskill and upskill workers more quickly and at a lower cost than through traditional pathways, which can help prepare the workforce with the necessary skills for the high-demand jobs.[15]

Although more research is needed, examples in the literature suggest that ACPL programs can foster valuable partnerships between institutions and industry partners. These

partnerships build capacity and create new enrollment pathways while helping employers support workers' educational advancement and strengthen their talent pipelines.[16]

Barriers to ACPL implementation

Despite its potential benefits for learners, institutions, and employers, ACPL faces implementation barriers that can limit its impact.

Financial burden on learners

Although evidence suggests long-term cost savings to ACPL earners, there is often an upfront cost associated with earning ACPL. Learners may be required to pay a fee to have their prior learning assessed.[17] Moreover, learners are unable to use federal financial aid to cover those fees, leaving them to either pay out of pocket or forgo earning APCL and take courses on subjects they have already learned.[18] In such situations, learners end up spending more money and more time to earn a credential.

Institutional resistance to award credit

Despite emerging evidence that ACPL can benefit institutions financially, some remain concerned that awarding credit for prior learning could reduce tuition revenue.[19] Furthermore, some institutional staff doubt the rigor of learning taking place outside a traditional classroom setting.[20] Although these concerns about rigor are not isolated to ACPL,[21] they limit learners' abilities to earn ACPL.[22] To effectively implement ACPL, states and institutions must garner buy-in and support from multiple stakeholders, particularly faculty and administrative leadership.

Inconsistent policies and limited communication

Because ACPL policies are established at the state and institutional levels, their availability and requirements vary widely. The resulting inconsistencies, compounded by limited institutional communication about ACPL, create barriers for learners.[23] For one, learners may struggle to understand their options, potentially discouraging them from seeking credit. In a 2020 study of 72 institutions, only 11% of learners earned ACPL, and just 4% earned non-military credit.[24] In addition, differences in institutional policies can complicate credit transfers: Credits awarded by one institution may not be accepted by another or count toward credential requirements, potentially delaying completion.[25]

Inequities in ACPL attainment

Barriers to earning ACPL may pose greater challenges to certain groups of learners. National research has identified disparities in ACPL attainment, finding that lower-income adults and Black adults were less likely to have earned ACPL than other adult students.[26] These disparities have been attributed to several of the barriers discussed above, including

the cost of ACPL, limited outreach about policies, and restrictions on the types of experiences eligible for credit.

Many of these barriers can be addressed through policy changes. Although a number of ACPL policies exist, there are opportunities to improve the existing policies to ensure reduced cost burden, increased transparency, and more equitable attainment. These opportunities are discussed in the recommendations section of this report.

The ACPL Policy Landscape Nationwide and in Washington

National trends in ACPL policies

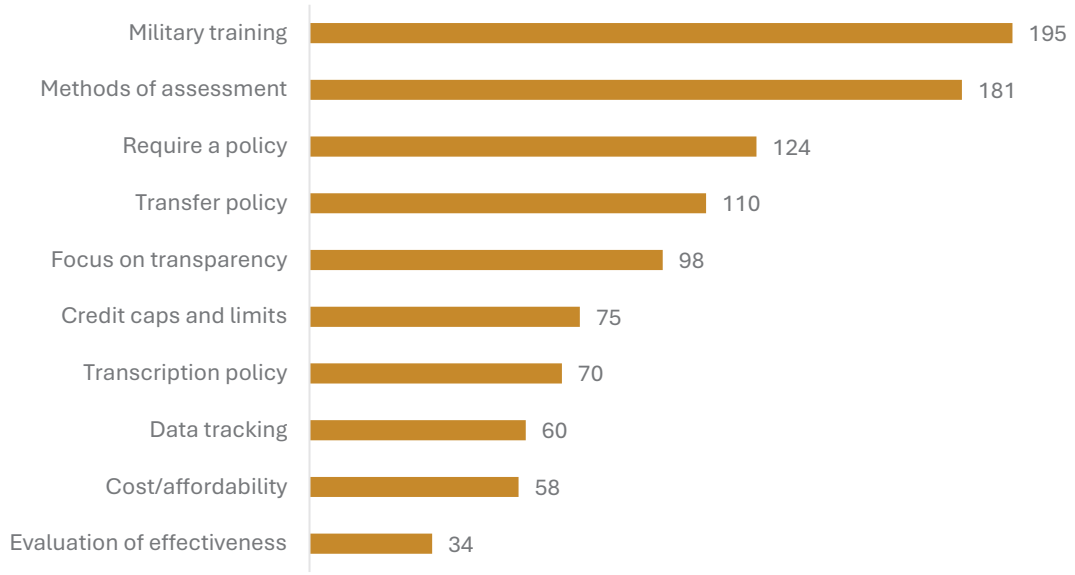
In 2024, CAEL and the American Council on Education (ACE) released a national landscape scan on ACPL policies, in which they identified 362 polices and regulations around ACPL across the 50 states and the District of Columbia.[27] The organizations aimed to provide an overview of how states have approached creating and implementing ACPL policies to help inform future policy development and expansion (see *Appendix* for more details on the methodology).

Across all the policies identified by CAEL and ACE, more than a third require states and systems to establish an ACPL policy (124), half concern how to assess credits for ACPL (181), and more than half concern awarding credit for military experience (195) (Figure 1). On the other hand,

- Only 60 of the 362 policies examined require states and systems to track and report on ACPL data
- Only 58 address affordability concerns with ACPL fees
- Only 34 call for formal evaluations to understand the impact of ACPL on learners and institutions

The limited attention given to data tracking, affordability, and evaluation in state ACPL policies suggests that states have yet to fully address how to measure the effectiveness of ACPL strategies. These gaps reflect common implementation challenges: identifying which learners receive ACPL credit, addressing the financial burdens of earning credit, and determining whether investments in ACPL lead to increased postsecondary attainment and economic mobility. States could strengthen ACPL implementation by incorporating provisions for data tracking, affordability, and evaluation into their policies.

Figure 1. Prevalence of policy themes across all ACPL policies



Source: Recreated from Soler, M. C., Klein-Collins, R., Swirsky, E., Seidel, K., & Hirsch, R. (2024). The National Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning: Effective State and System Policies for Success and Equity. American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/National-Landscape-CPL-2024.pdf.

ACPL policies in Washington state

Although there is no statewide policy in Washington that dictates how institutions must assess and award ACPL, there are ten policies that aim to improve statewide alignment and transparency around ACPL and that help institutions build out and implement their own policies. Included in many of these policies are details on the four categories of ACPL that institutions award and the eight mechanisms that fit within those categories (see the text box on this page for more information).

How Do Washington Institutions Award ACPL?

There are eight ways in which institutions in the state award ACPL; these can be grouped into four broad categories:

- Credit by Testing
  - DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DANTES)
  - College Level Exam Program (CLEP)
- Prior Experiential Learning
  - Portfolio Review
- Extra-Institutional Learning
  - American Council of Education (ACE) (military training and education)
  - Joint Services Transcript (JST)
  - Occupational Crosswalks
  - Individual Industry Certification
- Course Challenges
  - Credit by Exam (CBE)

Policies aimed at improving statewide ACPL alignment and transparency

- RCW 28B.77.230 (passed in 2012) established a workgroup to collaborate on achieving specific goals around ACPL.[28] This workgroup includes representatives from state agencies, higher education institutions, and business and labor; it aims to expand the number of learners receiving ACPL as well as increasing and diversifying the amount and type of ACPL earned.

- Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6032: Chapter 299, Section 117 (passed in 2018) set aside funding to implement the Complete Washington Program, which engaged labor, industry, and higher education institutions to develop pathways that lead to high-wage and high-demand careers.[29] A key element of these pathways is the awarding of ACPL and the aim to increase the number of adults in Washington with college degrees.[30]

- RCW 28C.30.040 (passed in 2019) requires the career connected learning cross-agency work group to make annual budget recommendations to the legislature that include specific recommendations around how to expand the number of portable credits and ACPL for career launch programs.[31] While focused specifically on ACPL for career launch programs, this requirement provides an opportunity for policymakers to reflect on what is accepted as ACPL and create stronger alignment on ACPL policies.

- RCW 28B.124.020 (passed in 2022) requires WSAC to contract with the Ruckelshaus Center to evaluate paths to credentials for apprentices and can include an evaluation of ACPL assessments.[32] This report can help inform where there are opportunities to better align ACPL policies across institutions to more seamlessly award ACPL to apprentices and increase credential attainment.

Policies with specific ACPL requirements for institutions

- RCW 28B.10.057 (passed in 2014) required all institutions to adopt an ACPL policy for military training by December 2015.[33]

- The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) established updated standards of accreditation in January 2020 and included Standard 1.C.8, which requires institutions to be more transparent about their ACPL policies, both in terms of how they define their policies and how accessible their policies are.[34]

- WAC 250-61-110 states that on learners' transcripts, institutions shall clearly distinguish between credits awarded by transfer, credits for prior learning experience, and credits by examination.[35]

- The State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC)'s Policy Manual Section 4, aims to help CTCs in awarding ACPL,[36] and there is an accompanying ACPL Policy resource to clarify how CTCs should transcribe ACPL.[37]

- The Washington State Community and Technical College (CTC) Inter-College Reciprocity Policy outlines requirements around accepting credits—including ACPL— from other CTCs to facilitate the transfer process for learners.[38]

- The Intercollege Relations Commission Handbook (Appendix K) outlines the different approaches that CTCs and baccalaureate institutions take with ACPL awarding to help improve the transfer process.[39]

In addition to these statewide policies, several programs across the state are being implemented with the goal of expanding ACPL, as discussed in the following section.

Advancing ACPL in Washington

Across Washington, there are six programs that seek creative ways to increase ACPL uptake. Each of these programs aim to increase the consistency, transparency, and accessibility of ACPL, and to expand ACPL awarding across Washington; the hope is to, in turn, increase enrollment, improve credential completion rates, and enhance workforce alignment.

Three programs that address inconsistent ACPL policies

- Empowering Learners to Excel through Vocation Advancement, Training, and Education (ELEVATE) *(ongoing)*. As a recipient of one of WSAC's Regional Challenge Grants, ELEVATE focuses on supporting adult learners in obtaining a credential.[40] This work aims to guarantee consistent ACPL awarding for coursework completed at Evergreen Goodwill, and to support learners with credentials from other countries in getting their credentials translated, evaluated, and transferred to Everett Community College.[41]

- Machinists Institute's registered apprenticeship program *(ongoing)*. In collaboration with CAEL and Renton Technical College, the Machinists Institute developed a pathway that allows apprentices to complete their machinist apprenticeship and simultaneously earn an Associate of Applied Science in Multi-Occupational Trades (MOT).[42] By cross-walking the various requirements of the registered apprenticeship program and the MOT degree, this work identified what learning is taking place in the apprenticeship program and how that learning connects to the courses required for the MOT degree to proactively award credit for learning taking place outside a traditional classroom setting. This program intends to facilitate and streamline the process to earn ACPL.

- Paraeducator credentialing pilot *(planned)*. In collaboration with the Professional Educator Standards Board, WSAC is working with participating institutions to promote alignment on ACPL awarding for paraeducator certificates. Since there are a variety of paraeducator certificates that learners can obtain across multiple

sectors, this work seeks to ensure that the learners getting those certificates obtain the same types of credits and achieve the same standards of knowledge and skill attainment.

A program that addresses lack of communication about ACPL policies

Constellation of support *(completed)*. In collaboration with Student Ready Strategies (SRS) and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), WSAC supported eight institutions[43] in formalizing and implementing their ACPL policies.[44] This work aimed to increase awareness of ACPL policies and reduce administrative barriers associated with awarding ACPL.

A program that addresses inequitable attainment of ACPL

Enrollment pilot for learners with no college, no degree *(planned)*. In collaboration with CollegeAPP, WSAC is planning a pilot that will conduct outreach to learners who have no college and no degree, and who have a strong intent to enroll. One part of this work will include working with this group to identify opportunities to award ACPL and encourage credential completion. This pilot seeks to increase the number of adult learners enrolling in postsecondary institutions and increase awarding of ACPL.

A program that addresses financial burdens of ACPL

Pipeline for paraeducators conditional scholarship adjustment *(planned)*. WSAC currently administers the pipeline for paraeducators conditional scholarship, which provides up to $4,000 per academic year to current paraeducators who wish to become teachers and who are completing an Associate of Arts degree. Through this pilot, WSAC seeks to include ACPL fees as part of the cost of attendance so that paraeducators can use the funds from the conditional scholarship to cover costs associated with earning ACPL. Since many paraeducators have prior learning experience from earning their paraeducator certificate, they comprise a group that stands to benefit from receiving ACPL. Through this work, WSAC aims to reduce the financial burden for earning ACPL with the hope of increasing the number of learners seeking out ACPL.

Between the existing policies, and the partnerships and pilots listed above, Washington is making strides to expand ACPL utilization across the state. The next section leverages existing data to highlight trends in ACPL awarding and point to where there are still opportunities for growth.

Trends in Credits Awarded through ACPL in Washington

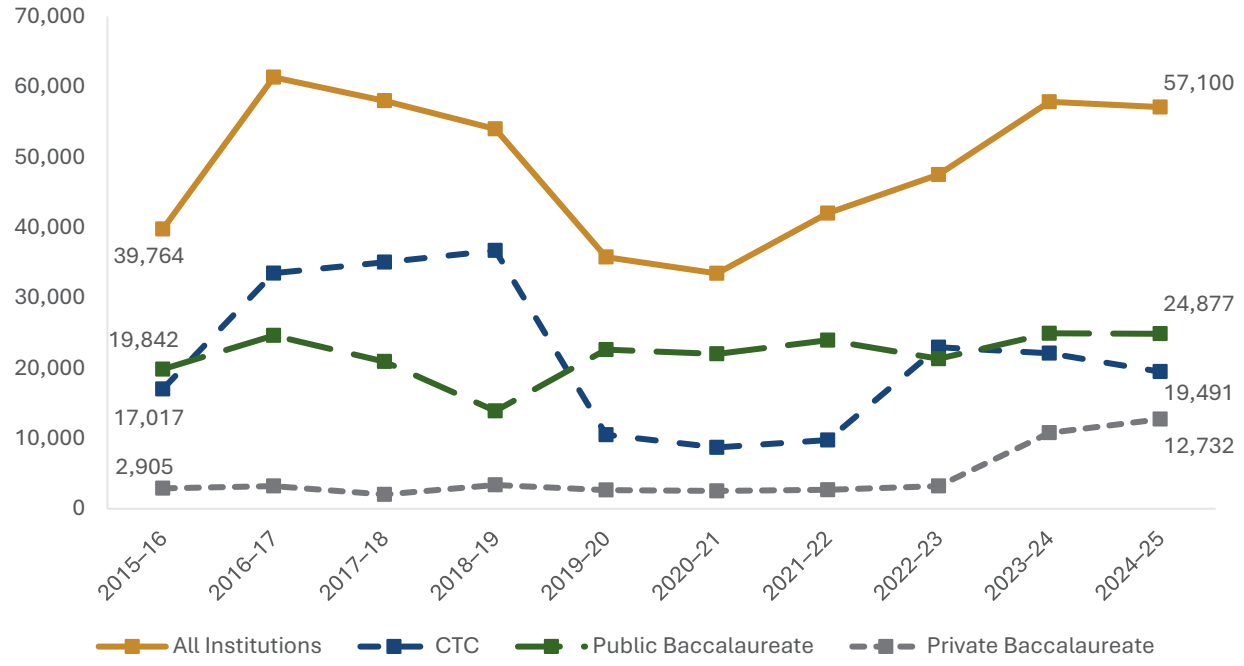
Every year since 2015, more than 40 Washington institutions provide WSAC with information on how many credits have been awarded through ACPL, the types of ACPL

awarded, and how many learners have received ACPL. These data inform the annual ACPL report, which WSAC publishes.[45] Because of the annual submission cadence, they also afford an opportunity to explore ACPL awarding trends over time.

Total credits awarded rose in 2025, but not to peak levels.

Across Washington's institutions of higher learning, the total number of credits awarded for prior learning has grown from 39,764 credits in 2015 to 57,100 credits in 2025, reflecting a nearly 44% growth rate (Figure 2). However, the increase has not been consistent over time, and the number of credits awarded in 2025 is still below the total number awarded in 2016–17 (61,341 credits).

Figure 2. Total number of credits awarded each year, by sector (2015–25)



Source: Institutional data submitted annually to WSAC.

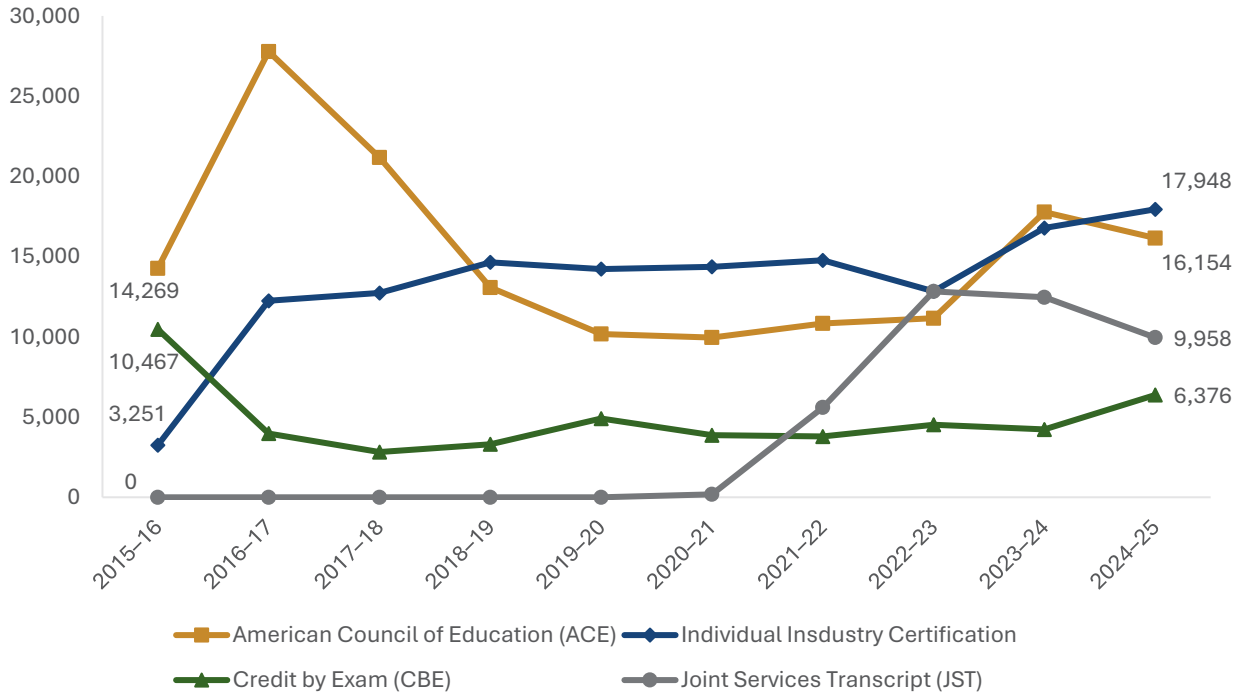
Moreover, increases in the public and private baccalaureate sectors are driving the current increase in ACPL awarding, with public baccalaureate institutions awarding the highest total volume of ACPL credits (nearly 25,000 in 2025). By contrast, the 2016–17 peak was driven by simultaneous increases at CTCs and public baccalaureate institutions. This peak might have been caused by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which was signed into law in July 2014,[46] and which, in Washington specifically, led to stronger partnerships between industries and institutions.[47] Credits awarded at CTCs then decreased drastically in 2019–20, which might have been because of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in how ACPL data were reported by SBCTC (see endnote for more details).[48]

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, total credits awarded at public baccalaureates increased during the 2019–20 academic year, possibly because the Complete Washington program took effect in 2018. This program created pathways that award ACPL and that aim to increase the number of adults in Washington with a college degree and that are pursuing pathways leading to high-wage and high-demand careers.[49]

In recent years, the types of credits awarded have been more varied.

Examining the types of ACPL credit awarded helps explain the growth in total credits since 2021 (Figure 3). Although awards have increased across most categories in recent years, Figure 3 focuses on those with more than 5,000 credits awarded in the 2024–25 academic year. These credit types are predominantly credits awarded through extra-institutional learning credits, which includes credits awarded for military training (ACE & JST), individual industry certification credits, and occupational crosswalk credits. Notably, this is a category of ACPL that typically has no fees, or relatively low fees.[50] This suggests that students may be more interested in earning ACPL when there are no fees – or low fees – associated with earning the credits.

Figure 3. Changes in types of credits awarded (2015–25)



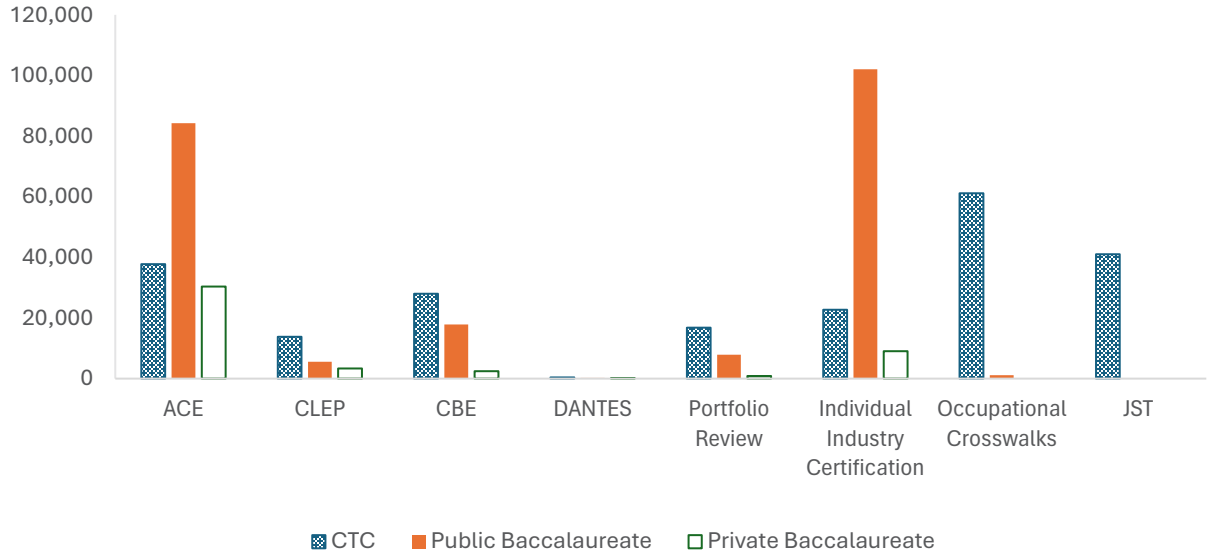
Source: Institutional data submitted annually to WSAC.
Note: If there were fewer than 5,000 credits awarded through a specific type within the past year, those credit types were excluded for visibility purposes. The excluded credit types are: college level exam program, DANTES subject standardized test, portfolio review, and occupational crosswalks.

To better understand the ACPL awarding trends, it is helpful to look at the sectoral breakdown of the number of credits awarded (Figure 4). Doing so provides context that explains the types of credit the different sectors are more likely to award; it also helps explain the sectoral trends shown in Figure 2. For more information on the types of credits, see the *ACPL policies in Washington state* section.

A few key facts are important to understand:

- Because CTCs are the only sector that provided data on JST credits (Figure 4), the increases in credits awarded at CTCs since 2021 probably come from JST credits.
- The recent growth in ACE credits coincides with growth in credits awarded at private baccalaureates. The majority of credits awarded at private baccalaureates are ACE credits; as such, it is likely that the growth in credits awarded at private baccalaureates comes down to increases in the awarding of ACE credits.
- The increase in awarding of Individual Industry Certification credits correlates with the increase in credits awarded at public baccalaureates. Given that nearly half of all ACPL awarded at public baccalaureates is through individual industry certification credits, it is likely that the recent growth in credits awarded at public baccalaureates can be ascribed to increased awarding of individual industry certification credits.

Figure 4. Number of credit types awarded, by sector (2015–25)



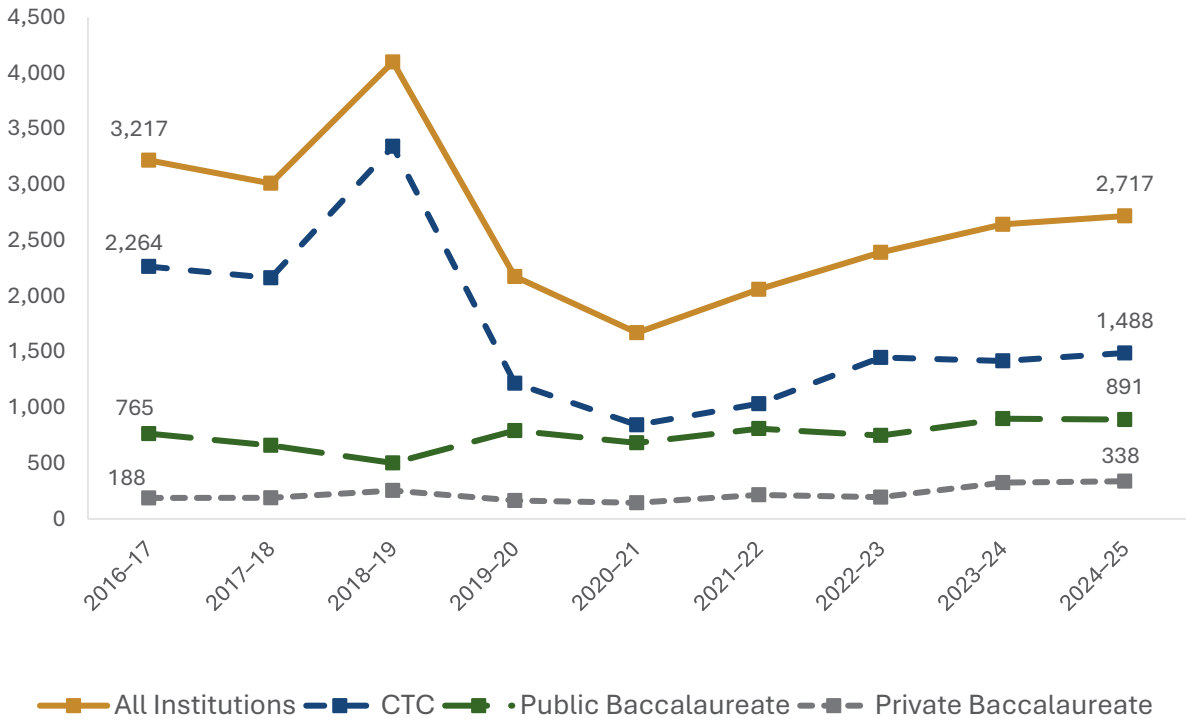
Source: Institutional data submitted annually to WSAC.

The total number of learners awarded ACPL has decreased since 2016.

Although more credits—and more types of credits—were awarded in 2025 than in prior years, the total number of learners who received ACPL has decreased. Between 2016 and

2025, the number of learners awarded ACPL dropped by about 15% (from 3,217 to 2,717; Figure 5). This decrease was largely driven by the CTC sector, which saw a large drop in the number of learners during the 2019–20 academic year, mirroring the trends noted above regarding total ACPL credits awarded. Moreover, the total number of learners peaked during the 2018–19 academic year, two years after the total number of credits awarded peaked. It is possible that the peak in learners awarded occurred because of the Complete Washington program, but additional data would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Figure 5. Total number of learners awarded ACPL, by sector (2016–25)



Source: Institutional data submitted annually to WSAC.
Note: Data on the number of learners awarded ACPL during the 2015-16 AY is not available.

Understanding the trends in ACPL awarding can help Washington identify where additional investments and policy changes may be needed to expand ACPL utilization.

Recommendations to Continue Advancing ACPL in Washington

Although Washington has taken steps to expand ACPL through policies, partnerships, and pilot programs, as of December 2025, 45% of adult learners in Washington do not have an initial credential, and only 2.7% of adults without a postsecondary credential were enrolled in postsecondary education.[51] Expanding ACPL could help Washington engage more adult learners, increase postsecondary credential completion, and strengthen economic opportunities for both individuals and the state's workforce. The following

recommendations focus on standardizing policies, establishing formal expectations between institutions and industry partners, improving data collection, and increasing financial aid flexibility. Some may require statutory or legislative changes.

Encourage institutions to adopt consistent ACPL policies.

Research has highlighted the benefits of more consistent ACPL policies, especially in regard to assessment, awarding, and the transfer of credits across institutions.[52] While Washington state helps guide ACPL policy development at institutions, there is still variation in the institutional policies, which creates challenges for learners. Clearer guidelines promoting consistent institutional policies would help increase the number of learners who seek out and receive ACPL, which would in turn increase overall institutional enrollment. The paraeducator credentialing pilot, for example, seeks to increase consistency around ACPL policies and will help provide preliminary data on the impact of consistent policies on ACPL uptake. Washington should evaluate the effectiveness of this program and use the findings to identify opportunities to scale up this work with the goal of having consistent ACPL policies at all institutions across the state.

Formalize ACPL expectations for common licensures or certificates required by Washington employers.

Washington could build on efforts to standardize ACPL policies by clarifying how institutions assess and award credit for prior learning related to licenses and certifications commonly required by employers. Partnerships between higher education institutions and industry could help align ACPL assessments with workforce expectations. Clearer standards would simplify the assessment process for institutions, help learners understand how their prior experience can count toward credentials, and give employers confidence that awarded credit reflects relevant skills and competencies. Washington could draw on initiatives such as ELEVATE and the Machinists Institute's registered apprenticeship program to identify effective partnership practices and expand their use.

Collect more robust ACPL data.

The data that WSAC currently receives from institutions provide a valuable baseline for tracking ACPL trends over time. Building on this foundation, more consistent and detailed data collection across institutions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of ACPL access, outcomes, and impact across Washington. Although WSAC receives demographic data on ACPL recipients from the CTCs, private and public baccalaureates do not provide comparable information. In addition, ACPL data are reported only in aggregate, and individual-level records of credits earned are not included in the state's P20W system, preventing longitudinal analysis of ACPL's impact on learners.

Washington could consider statutory changes requiring institutions to report consistent data on student demographics, ACPL costs, enrollment rates for ACPL recipients compared with nonrecipients, and time to degree completion.[53] Representatives from Washington workforce and education organizations have also emphasized the need for more student-level data on ACPL awards, credential completion, and employment outcomes.[54] More comprehensive data could help the state identify who benefits from ACPL, what barriers other learners face, and how to expand equitable access. It could also help Washington assess longer-term outcomes, such as job placement, for ACPL earners.

Allow state financial aid to cover ACPL costs.

Under current financial aid rules, Washington students generally cannot use federal or state aid to cover ACPL assessment fees.[55] As a result, students must either pay these costs out of pocket or take courses covering material they already know.[56] Research suggests that allowing financial aid to cover ACPL fees could increase utilization, save students time and money, and improve completion rates.[57] Although expanding federal aid eligibility would require national policy changes, some states allow students to use state financial aid for ACPL.[58] Washington is exploring a similar approach through its pipeline for paraeducators conditional scholarship adjustment pilot. The state could use the results to assess whether covering ACPL costs increases utilization and consider expanding the approach to other credentials and institutions.

Conclusion

ACPL can help adult learners earn postsecondary credentials more quickly and at lower cost by recognizing skills and knowledge they have already acquired. Washington has taken steps to expand ACPL through policies and programs, but opportunities remain to make ACPL more consistent, transparent, and accessible. Clearer policies could help more learners understand and pursue ACPL, while improved data collection could help the state identify gaps and target investments. As Washington works toward its 70% attainment goal, continued investment in ACPL could help more adults earn credentials and strengthen the state's workforce.

Appendix. Policy Themes from Landscape Scan

In 2024, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) conducted a scan of all policies related to ACPL, identifying the source of each policy (e.g., legislation, state board, state systems, etc.) as well as how the policies align with 11 pre-identified themes that are often found in ACPL policies. These 11 themes aim to identify what aspects of ACPL the policies touch on. For example, if a policy is coded with the theme "focus on transparency," it means that the ACPL policy mentions a requirement to make ACPL-related information publicly accessible. Most of the themes focus on advancing ACPL: for example, more transparency, more data tracking, and more evaluation efforts. However, some themes identify aspects that might limit ACPL, such as limitations on how much ACPL can be applied toward a degree. The following table defines each policy theme used in the landscape scan.

Table 1A. ACPL Policy Themes from ACE/CAEL Policy Scan

Policy Theme	Definition
Require a Policy	Policies that provide a mandate for all state or system institutions to establish a policy on CPL.
Focus on Transparency	Policies that require CPL-related information to be made public, such as published on a website or made accessible to students.
Military Training	Policies that concern the awarding of credit to service members or veterans for their military training or experience, such as boot camp credits, advanced standing for military medics, or ACE-recognized military credits.
Credit Caps and Limits	Policies that set limits on how much CPL can be applied toward a degree (e.g., CPL cannot exceed 25 percent of degree requirements) or require a minimum number of credits to be completed at the institution.
Cost/Affordability	Policies that address the costs of CPL, including the setting of fees or fee limits and offering scholarships or waivers for certain student populations.
Transfer Policy	Policies that specifically address the transfer of CPL credits between institutions; this includes guidelines for accepting CPL credits awarded by other institutions.

Transcription Policy	Policies that provide guidance on how CPL credits should be recorded on student transcripts; this may include recommendations for institutions to merely establish a formal policy on the treatment of CPL credits.
Methods of Assessment	Policies that outline policies and procedures related to specific methods for assessing CPL, such as CLEP exam credits, portfolio assessments, ACE credit recommendations, or the conversion of noncredit learning into college credits.
Data Tracking	Policies that require the collection and reporting of data related to CPL, such as tracking the number of students using CPL, the number of CPL credits awarded, or related metrics.
Evaluation of Effectiveness	Policies that call for a formal evaluation of CPL program effectiveness, including the analysis of key metrics or outcomes to assess the impact of CPL on students and institutions.
CPL for Professional License Requirements or Apprenticeship	Policies that address how prior learning can be applied toward occupational license requirements or apprenticeships, such as recognizing work experience or CPL credits to fulfill specific professional or licensing criteria; policies that referenced the review of licenses and apprenticeship for awarding college credit toward degrees were categorized under Methods of Assessment.

Source: Recreated from Soler, M. C., Klein-Collins, R., Swirsky, E., Seidel, K., & Hirsch, R. (2024). *The National Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning: Effective State and System Policies for Success and Equity*. American Council on Education. https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/National-Landscape-CPL-2024.pdf
Note: The landscape scan did not include an examination of the 11th theme (CPL for Professional License Requirements or Apprenticeship) in the main analysis due to the nature of the category.

Endnotes

[1] This brief will use ACPL, but it should be noted that there are many other terms that mean the same thing, including: Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), and Recognition of Prior Learning.
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