Making Experience Count: Academic Credit for Prior Learning in Washington

Report Snapshot **November 2026**

Amy Roach, Erin McConnell, KC Deane, and Inez Olive

Academic Credit for Prior Learning (ACPL) 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 has well-documented benefits for adult learners, including higher credential completion rates, reduced costs, and shorter time to degree completion. Nevertheless, significant barriers to implementation remain: financial burdens, institutional resistance to award credit, inconsistent policies, and disparities in who receives credit. Addressing these challenges could help make ACPL policies more comprehensive, transparent, and accessible to students.

As Washington seeks to achieve the 70 percent statewide credential attainment goal for adults ages 25 to 44, creating and promoting effective ACPL policies and practices may prove a vital strategy.

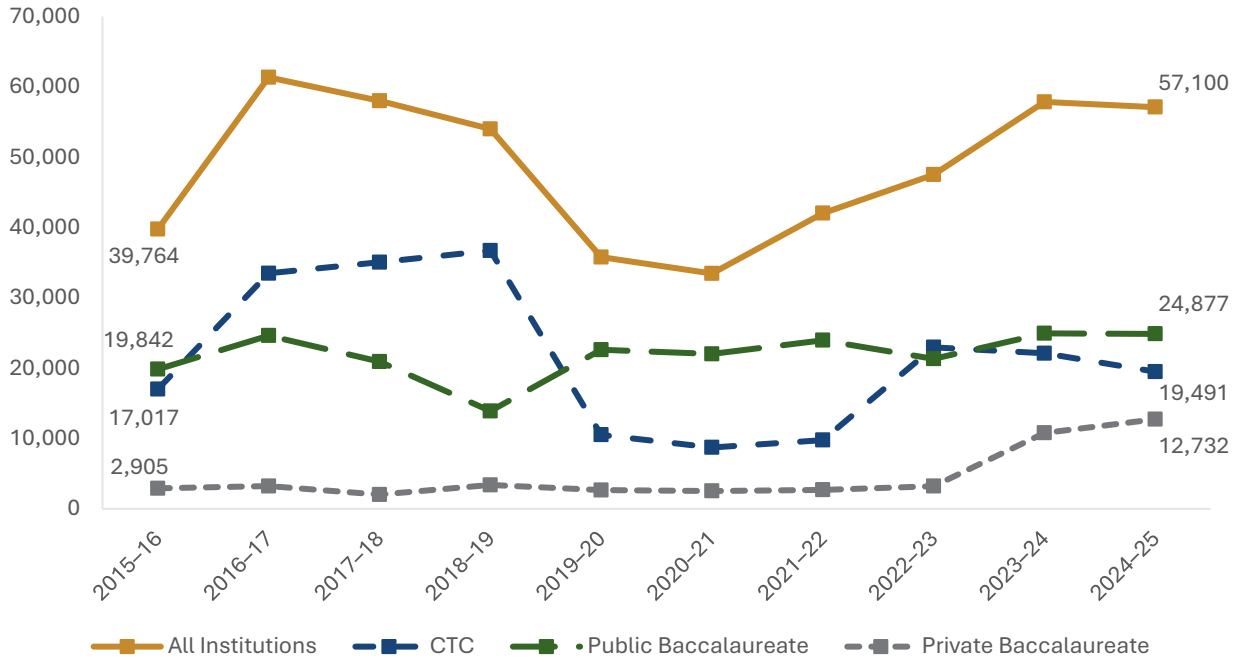
This report from the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) highlights existing evidence around ACPL and supports state- and institution-level decision making regarding ACPL policies and practices.

Nationwide and in Washington, numerous policies and regulations focus on increasing consistency and transparency of ACPL policies. Washington also has six programs that seek creative ways to increase ACPL uptake. Data from institutions across Washington show trends in ACPL awarding and point to opportunities for improvement.

Since 2015, total credits awarded through ACPL in Washington have grown nearly 44 percent.

The graph below highlights the growth in ACPL awarding at Washington's institutions of higher learning from 2015 to 2025. Increases in the public and private baccalaureate sectors are driving the current increase in ACPL, whereas the 2016–17 peak was driven by simultaneous increases at CTCs and public baccalaureate institutions.

Figure 1. Total number of credits awarded each year, by sector (2015–25)



Source: Institutional data submitted annually to WSAC.

While the total number of credits awarded has increased since 2015, the total number of learners earning ACPL has decreased since 2016. Although there have been steady increases in the total number of learners earning ACPL since 2020, there are clear opportunities to modify or create policies to improve ACPL utilization across Washington and the nation. These opportunities include:

- Encouraging institutions to adopt consistent ACPL policies
- Making ACPL policies more transparent by establishing clear expectations between institutions and industry partners
- Collecting more robust ACPL data
- Allowing state financial aid to apply to ACPL

ACPL has the potential both to strengthen individual economic opportunity and to build Washington's skilled workforce.

Awarding ACPL not only increases enrollment and completion. It also, perhaps more importantly, helps upskill workers more quickly and at a lower cost than through traditional pathways. Without improving the consistency, transparency, and accessibility of ACPL policies across Washington, however, the state will remain unable to take full advantage of the potential benefits.

See the full report: ACPL Report