



# JOINT STATEMENT ON THE TRANSFER AND AWARD OF CREDIT<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Today's students are increasingly taking nonlinear paths toward completing a college degree or credential. They are more likely to attend multiple colleges and universities and to bring with them postsecondary learning acquired outside of a traditional higher education setting. These trends will only continue to accelerate in the coming years, with students becoming ever more mobile and pursuing their education through a variety of institutional and extra-institutional settings. Students who take nonlinear paths through postsecondary education are also the ones at greatest risk of failing to complete a degree and are disproportionately nontraditional, low-income, and students of color. Unfortunately, many of these students find it difficult to receive credit for learning they have already acquired. It is imperative that colleges and universities take a close look at their transfer and award of credit policies and practices to determine whether changes are needed to better serve students.

This statement was developed by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) and is directed to college and universities concerned with the award of academic credit for learning acquired elsewhere. It sets forth the principles and key considerations that should serve as the foundation for sound, equity-minded institutional policies and practices for the award of credit. An essential principle is that every institution is responsible for determining its own policies and practices with regard to the award of credit, consistent with its individual mission and academic standards. As such, the principles and key considerations outlined below should be used as a tool to help develop specific institutional policies and practices and not in lieu of such institutional policies. By ensuring that these principles and key considerations are reflected in institutional-level policies, in a manner consistent with the missions of individual campuses, colleges and universities can make a degree more affordable, increase equity, and spur student success.

Higher education has a key role to play in driving upward social mobility and boosting individual well-being and economic prosperity. But transfer of credit policies and practices that hinder students' ability to achieve success will worsen existing inequities that have already been exacerbated by the recent pandemic. For many students, sensible transfer and award of credit policies that recognize a student's prior learning are essential to making a college degree accessible and affordable. Failure to award credit for learning already acquired doesn't just increase the cost of a degree in terms of time and money, but it can also end the student's pursuit of postsecondary education entirely, with lifelong ramifications.

It is no longer uncommon to see state policies encouraging, or even mandating, colleges and universities to award more credit for learning already acquired. However, the fundamental principle of academic autonomy remains critical and is a key reason that the diversity and quality of U.S. higher education is the envy of the world. In the spirit of preserving this autonomy and better serving students, we believe that now is the time for all institutions to carefully review their own policies against this framework—to conduct a self-audit—in order to remove impediments that prevent timely and appropriate awarding of credit for learning already acquired. Only through careful and in-depth self-study can institutions ensure that they are putting students' needs first.

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<sup>1</sup> AACRAO, ACE, and CHEA first issued a joint statement on the transfer and award of credit in 2001 and revised it in 2017.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TRANSFER AND AWARD OF CREDIT

Many colleges and universities already have award of credit policies and practices in place that comport with these principles. However, we encourage all institutions to review their policies for consistency with the key considerations outlined below and adjust them as needed, with the goal of driving greater equity and success for students.

Fundamental to every decision about whether to award credit for learning acquired elsewhere are three factors:

- The educational quality of the acquired learning for which the student seeks credit
- The comparability of the content, scope, and rigor of the acquired learning to that offered by the receiving institution
- The appropriateness and applicability of the learning experience to the programs offered by the receiving institution, in light of the student's educational goals

While these considerations have historically, and more commonly, guided the transfer of credit from one college or university to another, they also guide decisions about the award of credit for extra-institutional learning opportunities that have expanded dramatically over the past decade. There are also a variety of third-party assessments of learning occurring outside a traditional higher education setting that institutions can use to understand the learning objectives acquired and ensure that the content, scope, and rigor of the learning fits with their own institutional requirements. These include, for example, the American Council on Education's military credit recommendations, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's portfolio assessments, and others.

Institutional autonomy, particularly the right to set the academic standards that the conferral of a degree from an institution represents, is at the heart of these considerations. However, denial of credit without a reasonable basis and clear rationale undermines both students' and the public's trust in our system of higher education as a societal good and a driver of upward mobility.

Mindful of the importance of the content, scope, and rigor of the acquired learning and the right of institutions to set standards regarding academic quality, we offer these key considerations to help colleges and universities implement credit award policies that lead to greater student success and reflect equity-minded practice.

**First**, the standards for evaluating and awarding credit for prior learning should be the same, regardless of where the prior learning took place. This is true whether the learning was acquired at another institution, as part of a high school dual-enrollment program, during on-the-job training at an employer or in the military, or through experiential learning. The award of credit also needs to be independent of the learning modality by which it was acquired.

**Second**, credit award decisions must be applied consistently and equitably for all students. The process for evaluating and awarding credit for prior learning should be standardized, to the maximum extent practicable, across the receiving institution. Also, in general, policies for how credit award decisions are made should be consistent across the institution, regardless of the particular school, college, department, or program of study.

**Third**, policies should aim to maximize the amount of credit applied to fulfill requirements on the path to a student's chosen degree or credential. Awarding credit for students' prior learning to fulfill electives or even to simply acknowledge their success with prior college-level learning, while sometimes helpful, must not be the focus of our efforts. Credit for prior learning is most beneficial when it is applied to fulfill a specific degree or credential requirement.

**Fourth**, policies and practices must be reasonable, transparent, and easily understood. Prior to enrollment, colleges and universities should make clear what credits will be awarded and how they will be applied to a student's degree pathway. It is incumbent on institutions to provide quality advising to students to help them navigate learning pathways in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Whenever possible, cross-institutional advising approaches among frequent sending and receiving partner institutions should be used. Creating a culture of cooperation between frequent sending and receiving institutions, as well as extra-institutional learning partners, is key.

**Fifth**, institutions should remove unnecessary obstacles that prevent students from accessing their transcripts. Withholding transcripts to collect on such things as relatively small unpaid bills and other institutional charges owed by a student puts students in a bind—unable to obtain a transcript to allow them to continue their progress toward a degree or get a job that would allow them to pay off these debts.

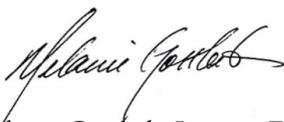
**Sixth**, the award of credit should not be denied based on the type of accreditation of the sending institution, provided that the institution’s accreditor is, and remains, recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation or the U.S. Department of Education.

**Seventh**, accreditors should ensure their accreditation standards are consistent with efforts to create more transfer friendly institutional policies and with the principles of this joint statement. They should seek to incorporate and elevate these principles in their review standards, policies, and practices. Accreditors should be flexible and should make clear that their accreditation standards do not preclude an institution from considering and awarding credit from other institutions or from alternative sources. This includes learning acquired and demonstrated through competency-based approaches.

**Finally**, institutions should leverage innovative technologies to facilitate the review, awarding, and application of credit to the educational credential sought in order to provide greater consistency across credit award determinations and to maximize efficiency, transparency, and the timeliness of the process. These technologies include the sending and receiving of machine-readable digital transcripts; the consistent use of a trusted degree-audit system; a platform for prospective students to determine how their prior learning would be applied toward a credential; and technology that supports the efficient, timely, and consistent evaluation of prior learning that has not previously been reviewed by the institution.

## CONCLUSION

Given the rapidly evolving higher education landscape and the increase in student mobility and extra-institutional learning, it is critical that higher education leaders support credit award policies based on equity-minded practice and principles. We strongly encourage institutions to conduct an audit of their own credit award policies and practices, including surveying transfer students to learn about their experiences navigating these policies at their institution. Armed with this information and the framework outlined above, colleges and universities can help students increasingly relying on nonlinear paths to successfully earn a college degree or credential.



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