



Utah Higher Education Community Embraces Credit for Prior Learning

The Utah System of Higher Education's newly formed Prior Learning Committee will be setting quality standards and creating a best practices guidebook for awarding credit for prior learning. This committee was formed partially in response to recent Utah Legislation ([HB45, 2019](#)) and to forthcoming [Regent Policy R472](#), both of which require transparency and consistency in the ways USHE institutions award credit for prior learning. The law and subsequent Regent policy also require that credit earned for prior learning be transferable.

What does it mean to give credit for prior learning?

Prior learning refers to the knowledge, competencies, and skills acquired through formal and informal education outside a traditional academic environment or at the initiative of the individual learner. For example, if a current or potential student participated in an employee training program, military service, or took standardized exams such as [Advanced Placement \(AP\)](#), [DANTES Standardized Subject Tests \(DSST\)](#), or [College Level Examination Program \(CLEP\)](#), they may have earned college-level credit.

USHE institutions already allow students to earn college credit through prior learning assessments; however, not all students know the different options available to challenge courses they may already have mastered through their own experience or studies. The goal going forward will be to ensure that students know their options, that faculty and key staff (like advisors) are trained on the types of prior learning assessments available for students at their institution, and that institutions consider ways they might expand the kinds of assessments available to students. It is also imperative that minimum standards are set for the application of credit and that there is consistency in awarding credit, particularly for standardized exams.

What counts?

- Credits earned through extra-institutional settings, including military service;
- Nationally recognized, standardized exams, including:
 - [Advanced Placement \(AP\)](#);
 - [College-Level Examination Program \(CLEP\)](#);
 - [DANTES Subject Standardized Tests \(DSST\)](#);
 - [International Baccalaureate \(IB\)](#);
- Knowledge and skills recognized by national organizations, including:

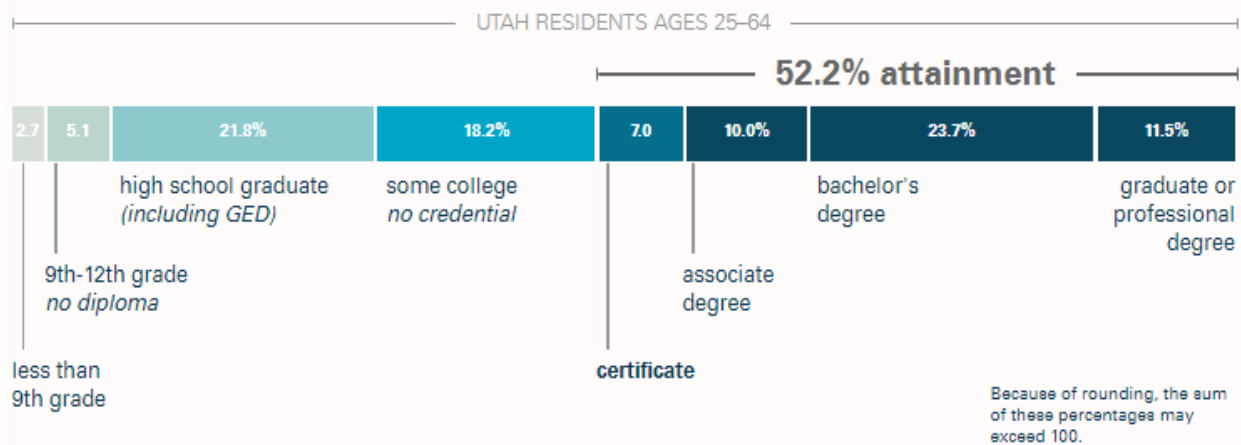
- [American Council of Education \(ACE\)](#);
- [National College Credit Recommendation Service \(NCCRS\)](#);
- Board-approved postsecondary associations;
- Knowledge and skills that demonstrate college-level learning and competence as determined by faculty/subject matter experts, including:
 - Challenge exams;
 - Portfolio assessments;
 - Individual performance assessments;
 - Locally-evaluated industry and workplace credit.

Why focus on credit for prior learning?

Providing credit for prior learning acknowledges and honors adult learners like military veterans and dislocated workers for the knowledge and skills they bring with them to our institutions. Given the increasing number of Utahns who have some college and no degree, it is in the state’s best interests to rethink the way it recruits and retains students.

The [Lumina Foundation reports](#) that in 2017, 15.4% of U.S. Residents ages 25–64 have some college, no credential.¹ While [more Utahns have a postsecondary credential](#) (4.6% higher than the national average), there is still 18.2% of the Utah population with only some college, no credential, which is higher than the national average.²

Utah education levels



<http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/UT>

Bottom line: The state benefits when more Utahns earn a postsecondary credential; one way to increase statewide attainment is to invite students back to higher education and to let them know that USHE

¹ <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#nation>

² <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/UT>

values the knowledge and skills they bring with them by offering them the opportunity to have their prior learning assessed and transcribed.

A recently-released [National Student Clearinghouse study](#) digs more deeply into the *some college, no degree* population and finds that 10% of the nearly 36 million Americans in the National Clearinghouse Database are “potential completers” who have at least two years’ worth of credits; this is the population that is “more likely to re-enroll and finish college.”³ While previously stopped-out students may not re-enroll at the institution that they left, they are more likely than not to re-enroll and finish in the same state where they last enrolled.

Many USHE institutions have already begun to reach out to this population to try to bring them back. Communicating the types of prior learning assessments available and sharing how that credit would be applied and awarded is a good way to recruit this population back to college. Matt Bergman, program director and research faculty member at the University of Louisville, argues that campuses should consider offering more prior learning assessment opportunities for four reasons—institutions that award credit for prior learning see:

- Increased graduation and retention rates;
- More engaged and assimilated adult learners;
- Students taking 9.9 more credits than students who matriculate without any credit earned through prior learning;
- Students immersed in the research and area of study for their major.⁴

Next steps:

The USHE Board of Regents has prioritized credit for prior learning and has drafted policy R472 to support it. USHE is in the process of creating public-facing webpages that explains prior learning assessment to interested students and will link to institutional contacts and policies related to prior learning. [Regent policy R472](#) charges the Prior Learning Committee with providing minimum standards regarding:

- Accepted forms of PLA;
- Awarding credit for prior learning;
- Transferability of credit for prior learning between institutions;
- Transcription of credit for prior learning;
- Institutional procedures for maintaining transparency and consistency in awarding credit for prior learning.

³ From “Highlights 2019” <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-degree-2019/>

⁴ Bergman, Matt. *The Four Reasons Your Campus Should be Offering Prior Learning Assessment Credit*. <https://evollution.com/programming/applied-and-experiential-learning/the-four-reasons-your-campus-should-be-offering-prior-learning-assessment-credit/>

This committee will also be responsible for creating quality standards and a best practices guidebook to train faculty and staff on how to implement and expand prior learning assessment opportunities on each campus.