Glossary of Credit Mobility Terms

This report uses terms such as “mobile student,” “credit mobility,” and “validated learning” to describe the wide range of credit and non-credit learning experiences students accumulate over time. Because these experiences extend beyond traditional transfer pathways, holistic credit mobility must account for the complexity and variation of individual learners. Below, we define several key terms as they relate to holistic credit mobility.

Articulation Agreement. A formal agreement between two or more institutions specifying how courses, programs, or credentials transfer and apply toward a degree or credential at another institution.

Catalog Year. The academic catalog whose requirements govern a student's degree program. Catalog year policies determine which degree requirements apply, particularly when students transfer, stop out, or return after an absence.

Common Course Numbering. A system in which equivalent courses across multiple institutions share standardized course numbers to simplify transfer and improve transparency.

Course Equivalency. A determination that learning completed through one course or learning experience is sufficiently comparable to another course to warrant awarding academic credit.

Credit. Academic credit, or college credit, is the unit of measurement most commonly assigned by postsecondary institutions to recognize a segment of learning completed or a competency demonstrated. Credit is typically, but not exclusively, earned by completing a college or university course.

Credit Applicability. The extent to which accepted academic credit satisfies specific degree requirements, such as general education, major, or elective requirements. Credit applicability is distinct from credit acceptance because accepted credit does not always advance a learner toward the credential sought.

Credit by Exam. Academic credit awarded based on demonstrated knowledge through standardized or institutionally developed examinations, such as AP, IB, CLEP, DSST, or challenge exams.

Credit for Prior Learning (CPL). CPL is the process or method through which academic credit is granted for college-level learning that has taken place outside of a college or university. There are many sources of learning that fall under CPL including but not limited to, exams, learning portfolios, noncredit courses or programs, skill certificates, and military service. CPL is sometimes referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA).

Credit Mobility: A broad term for the movement of academic credit and college-level learning by postsecondary students to and between educational institutions in pursuit of a degree or credential.

Degree Audit. A systematic review of a student's completed coursework and other accepted learning to determine progress toward degree requirements and identify remaining requirements.

Dual Credit. An arrangement through which high school students earn both high school credit and college credit, typically by completing coursework aligned with postsecondary learning outcomes.

Dual Enrollment. Students currently enrolled in multiple institutions of learning at the same time. This is typically seen in high school dual enrollment students.

Experiential Learning. Learning acquired through structured experiences outside traditional classroom instruction, such as employment, military service, internships, civic engagement, or other life experiences. Experiential learning may be evaluated for academic credit through credit for prior learning processes.

General Education. A set of broad educational requirements intended to develop foundational knowledge and transferable skills across disciplines, regardless of a student's major.

Holistic Credit Mobility. A learner-centered framework that recognizes validated learning regardless of its source so that learners can chart the shortest route to the credential they seek. Holistic credit mobility is supported by effective policy, supportive technology, responsive practice, active collaboration, and data and measurement.

Home-institution Credit. Academic credit earned directly from the institution awarding a student's credential, rather than accepted from external sources.

Industry-Recognized Credential. A credential awarded by an industry, professional association, or certifying body that demonstrates competency in specific occupational knowledge or skills.

Learning Outcomes. Statements describing the knowledge, skills, or competencies learners are expected to demonstrate upon completing a course, program, credential, or other learning experience.

Meta-Major. A broad grouping of related academic programs that allows students to explore a field of study before selecting a specific major.

Mobile Learner. A learner whose educational journey spans multiple learning environments, institutions, sectors, or modalities and who may move learning or academic credit between institutions while pursuing a degree or credential. This includes transfer students, dual enrollment students, returning adults, military learners, and others whose pathways extend beyond a single institution, whether credit moves laterally, vertically, or in reverse.

Noncredit Learning. Structured learning completed through educational experiences that do not initially result in academic credit, such as workforce education, continuing education, employer training, or community-based programs. Noncredit learning may later be evaluated for academic credit through credit for prior learning processes.

Portability. The ability of previously earned or awarded academic credit to be recognized and applied toward credentials at another institution. Portability of credit for prior learning includes the acceptance of credit previously awarded by another institution without requiring the learning to be reassessed.

Prior Learning. Knowledge, skills, or competencies acquired before or outside a student's current academic program through education, work, military service, training, or life experience.

Residency Requirement. An institutional policy specifying the minimum amount of coursework or credit that must be completed directly through the degree-granting institution.

Reverse Transfer. A term used in two related ways. Historically, it referred to student movement from a four-year institution to a two-year institution; today, it more often refers to transferring credits earned at a four-year institution back to a previously attended two-year institution so the student may be awarded an associate degree or other credential. This Playbook uses both meanings in different contexts, with the intended meaning indicated by the surrounding discussion.

Stackable Credential. A credential intentionally designed so that completed learning applies toward a higher-level credential, allowing learners to build educational attainment over time.

Transfer Credit. Academic credit from an outside source that a college or university accepts towards a credit certificate or degree program.

Transfer Pathway. A structured academic route that aligns courses or programs across institutions to support efficient progress toward a credential while minimizing unnecessary credit loss.

Validated Learning. Learning that has been assessed, documented, or otherwise verified as meeting established learning outcomes or competency expectations, regardless of where, when, or how the learning was acquired.

About Ithaka S+R

Through research, collaboration, and innovation, Ithaka S+R informs policy, guides strategies, and builds evidence-based tools to broaden access to postsecondary education, improve student and workforce outcomes, and advance scholarship.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a nonprofit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

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Acknowledgements

This report was made possible through generous support from Ascendium Education Group. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the funder. In developing this resource, authors drew on expertise and insights shared by members of the Holistic Credit Mobility Acceleration Cohort, which included: EDWorks of Northeast Tennessee, Eastern Washington University on behalf of a regional group of education and training organizations, Idaho State Board of Education, Louisiana Board of Regents, Minnesota State Colleges & Universities, Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development, Nevada System of Higher Education, Ohio Department of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, Shasta College/North State Together Partnership, and University System of Georgia. The authors are also grateful for excellent copyediting and design from Kimberly Lutz and Juni Ahari and thought partnership from Complete College America.