Key Performance Indicators to Track Learner Success

Use this tool when

Identifying credit mobility metrics and prioritizing data collection, analysis, and use.

What you should leave with

A prioritized list of credit mobility key performance indicators, why they matter, what they measure, and how to disaggregate them, with immediate next steps identified to support the data collection and monitoring necessary to use those KPIs for decision making.

Our holistic credit mobility framework centers on helping learners chart the shortest path toward the credential they seek. To understand whether credit mobility reforms are achieving this goal, institutions must be able to measure their impact. This tool is designed to support that work. It includes two resources: a reference table of recommended key performance indicators (KPIs) and a data planning worksheet to help institutions assess their current data capacity and identify next steps for improving data collection, monitoring, and use in strategic decision-making. These KPIs are intended to help institutions and systems monitor whether the five principles of holistic credit mobility are being realized in practice: whether validated learning is counted, whether students avoid repeated learning, whether learning moves across sectors and institutions, whether students receive usable guidance, and whether program structures allow accepted learning to apply efficiently toward credentials.

There are several reasons to begin collecting KPIs related to holistic credit mobility. First, establishing baseline measures allows institutions to track progress over time as reforms are implemented. Second, disaggregating these metrics, especially by source or type of validated learning, helps identify where students may face barriers and where targeted interventions may be needed. Third, using common metrics enables comparisons across institutions and systems, supporting shared learning, coordinated improvement efforts, and perhaps even some friendly competition.

Traditional measures of transfer student success are necessary but not sufficient for assessing holistic credit mobility. Unsurprisingly, traditional measures tend to focus on traditional pathways: they typically measure success along vertical transfer pathways and often overlook the wide range of learning that students bring from other sources. They may also fail to disaggregate in ways that reveal meaningful differences across student populations or types of validated learning. At the same time, institutional data systems are typically designed to support these traditional measures, which means that tracking the broader set of KPIs recommended here may require additional effort to collect, organize, and analyze new types of data.

Using this Tool

The KPI reference table organizes recommended measures into four categories: 1) mobility and validated learning volume; 2) acceptance and applicability; 3) progress and student success; and, 4) transfer-out and downstream outcomes. Together, these categories provide a more complete picture of how well institutions are supporting mobile learners.

Four Categories of Holistic Credit Mobility KPIs

A concise guide to what the measures reveal and where to start

KPI Category	What These KPIs Tell Us	Example Core KPIs
Mobility and Validated Learning Volume	Whether institutions are recognizing the range of learning students bring, and the scale of the population their credit mobility infrastructure must serve.	• Share of incoming students bringing accepted validated learning • Total validated-learning credits accepted
Acceptance and Applicability	Whether policies and practices are translating previously accomplished learning into meaningful progress toward credentials.	• Share of presented credits accepted • Share of accepted credits applied to degree requirements
Progress and Student Success	Whether students bringing validated learning are persisting and completing credentials, the ultimate goals of effective credit mobility.	• Fall-to-fall retention rate • Graduation rate
Transfer-Out and Downstream Outcomes	Whether learning remains portable across institutions and supports students' beyond the institution.	• Transfer-out rate • Graduation rate of transfer-out students

Identify the highest priority measures across categories: disaggregate by source of validated learning where feasible.

While this tool is written primarily for institutional leaders and practitioners, most KPIs can be adapted for use at the system level with minor adjustments, and anyone designing a state longitudinal data system (SLDS) should consider whether their data system supports the calculation and reporting of these KPIs. The KPIs are also designed to be sector-agnostic. Community colleges, often thought of as "sending

institutions," serve many students who bring in validated learning from a variety of sources, including prior college coursework, workforce training, and military experience. Similarly, four-year institutions, often viewed as transfer destinations, should also consider the outcomes of students who leave their institution and continue their education elsewhere. In practice, nearly all institutions both send and receive students and should consider metrics across the full range of mobility pathways.

Because the full set of KPIs may be extensive, this tool highlights a smaller group of core KPIs to prioritize, denoted by a star. For each KPI, the reference table provides a brief rationale, an indication of time horizon (leading, intermediate, or longer-term), and suggested categories for disaggregation. Considering time horizon is important: leading indicators can often be calculated shortly after transfer or enrollment and provide early signals of progress, while longer-term outcomes require additional follow-up but offer insight into ultimate student success. The categories for disaggregation are also essential to thoughtful measurement: much of the value of tracking these KPIs comes not just from the KPI itself, but understanding how the KPI varies across the varied sources of validated learning that students bring. The sections that follow also provide guidance on how to approach disaggregation, particularly by source or type of validated learning, to support more meaningful analysis.

While this tool focuses on quantitative KPIs to track learner success, this is not the only data that institutions should consider. Institutions may also wish to pair these KPIs with student feedback from surveys, interviews, or focus groups to add texture and nuance to the results. Student feedback can be especially helpful to understand whether guidance is clear, whether credit decisions feel transparent, and where students experience friction that is not visible in administrative data alone.



Download the KPI sheet here: https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/KPI-Tool.xlsx

Recommended Key Performance Indicator Reference Sheet

	KPI	Why it matters	Time horizon	Useful disaggregation(s)
Mobility and Validated Learning Volume				
	Number of students bringing any accepted validated learning	Establishes the scale of the learner population engaging in holistic credit mobility. Unlike share, the raw number reflects overall volume independent of enrollment trends. Increases may indicate stronger recruitment of mobile students and/or improved processes for recognizing prior learning. Disaggregation by sending institution helps identify top sources of students and track common transfer pathways over time.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; sending institution, where applicable; sector of sending institution, where applicable
★	Share of incoming degree-seeking students bringing any accepted validated learning[1]	Shows how common validated learning is among newly entering students and helps institutions understand the scale of intake, advising, and evaluation needs. Increases may reflect stronger recruitment of mobile students and/or more consistent recognition of prior learning. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning is essential to understand the distribution of learning sources, while disaggregation by entering student type highlights that "first-time-in-college" students may still be bringing in some validated learning, such as dual enrollment, AP/IB, military credit, or credit for prior learning.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; sending institution, where applicable; sector of sending institution, where applicable
★	Total number of validated-learning credits accepted	Captures the overall volume of previously earned learning being recognized and accepted. Increases may reflect higher levels of student mobility and/or broader or more consistent acceptance of validated learning across sources.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; sending institution, where applicable; sector of sending institution, where applicable

[1] In calculating the share, the denominator could either reflect all degree-seeking students or be limited to incoming degree-seeking students (that is, first-time-in-college and transfer-in students). Institutions may wish to focus on incoming degree-seeking students to better align the measure with the point at which validated learning is typically presented and evaluated, but may also consider all degree-seeking students if the institution is strategically working to continuously validate additional external learning throughout students' enrollment.

	Average number of validated-learning credits accepted per student	Indicates how much accepted learning mobile students typically carry forward and helps identify differences across learning types and student groups. For example, students transferring from other postsecondary institutions often bring more credits than those with exam-based or prior learning credit. Increases within a given source/type may signal strengthened pathway alignment and improved policies or practices.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type

	KPI	Why it matters	Time horizon	Useful disaggregation(s)
Acceptance and Applicability				
★	Share of presented validated-learning credits accepted	Measures the proportion of prior learning that is formally recognized by the institution. Increases may reflect broader or more consistent acceptance of validated learning across sources. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning is essential to identify where acceptance remains uneven. In some cases, data systems may not record presented credits that are not accepted; this highlights an opportunity for data collection improvement.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; sending institution, where applicable; sector of sending institution, where applicable
★	Share of accepted validated-learning credits applied to any degree requirement at transfer[2]	Distinguishes credit acceptance from degree applicability by showing whether accepted learning actually advances students toward a credential. Increases may reflect stronger alignment between incoming learning and program requirements, as well as improved evaluation policies and practices. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning and by program or major helps identify where accepted credits are most and least likely to count meaningfully. Institutions may also wish to monitor the share of accepted credits that apply only as electives, since high elective-only applicability may indicate	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; program/major; sending institution, where applicable; sector of sending institution, where applicable

[2] For applicability KPIs, the timing of measurement matters. One useful approach is to calculate these metrics shortly after the census date of the term in which a student enters the institution, allowing them to function as leading indicators for a given transfer cohort. Institutions may also wish to calculate secondary versions of these metrics at the time of graduation for students who complete, in order to understand how applicability changes over time and how efficiently accepted learning ultimately contributes to degree completion.

		misalignment between incoming learning and program requirements or limited program flexibility.		
	Share of accepted validated-learning credits applied to major requirements at transfer	Shows whether accepted learning is helping students make direct progress in their intended field of study rather than counting only in general education or elective categories. Increases may reflect stronger pathway design, better curricular alignment, and more flexible major requirements. Disaggregation by program/major is especially important because applicability often varies substantially across programs.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; program/major; sending institution, where applicable
	Share of accepted validated-learning credits applied to general education requirements at transfer	Shows the extent to which accepted learning satisfies core or foundational requirements that are widely applicable across programs. Increases may reflect stronger alignment between incoming learning and general education frameworks and more flexible requirements. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning enables tracking of applicability across diverse learning pathways.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; program/major; sending institution, where applicable
★	Share of transfer-in students receiving a credit evaluation before enrollment[3]	Measures whether guidance is available early enough to inform course and program decision-making for transfer-in students. Increases may reflect improved advising, evaluation processes, and transparency for mobile learners.	Leading	Sector of sending institution, where applicable; sending institution, where applicable

[3] For ease of interpretation and calculation, institutions may define the pre-enrollment credit evaluation KPI using transfer-in students as the denominator. This captures a major category of students for whom pre-enrollment credit evaluation is often most relevant and most readily measured. Institutions that evaluate other forms of validated learning before enrollment, such as dual enrollment, military learning, or credit for prior learning, may wish to develop supplemental measures to capture those processes as well. In these cases, disaggregation by source/type of validated learning can help institutions identify where early guidance is strongest and where students may still be navigating without sufficient information.

	Average time from receipt of transcript or documentation to credit evaluation	Captures the operational efficiency of providing students with usable information about their prior learning. Decreases may reflect more efficient workflows, better staffing, or stronger use of technology. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning may reveal where more complex forms of learning take longer to evaluate.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning
	Share of transcripted CPL or other validated external learning from a sending institution subsequently accepted at this institution	Measures the portability of previously recognized learning across institutions. Increases may reflect stronger cross-institution alignment, clearer policies, and reduced duplication in evaluation processes. This metric is especially useful for understanding whether validated learning continues to count when students move between institutions.	Leading	Source/type of validated learning; sending institution; sector of sending institution, where applicable

	KPI	Why it matters	Time horizon	Useful disaggregation(s)
Progress and Student Success[4]				
	Fall-to-spring retention rate	Provides an early signal of whether students are persisting after entry. Increases may reflect stronger alignment, clearer guidance, and more effective application of validated learning toward a credential. Because it can be calculated sooner than fall-to-fall retention, this metric may provide earlier insight into whether changes in policy or practice are improving student progress.	Intermediate	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type
★	Fall-to-fall retention rate	Tracks medium-term persistence and provides a stronger signal of sustained enrollment than fall-to-spring retention alone. Increases may reflect stronger alignment, clearer guidance, and more effective application of validated learning toward a credential. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning is important because students bringing different forms of external learning may have different patterns of persistence.	Intermediate	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type
★	Graduation rate[5]	Measures longer-term student success. Increases may reflect more effective recognition and application of validated learning, stronger pathway design, and better support for mobile students. While graduation rate in some external reporting is only calculated for first-time-in-college students, which can be interpreted most easily, it is important to include transfer-in students as well. Disaggregation by source/type of validated	Longer-term	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type

[4] For *Progress and Student Success* KPIs in particular, many of these measures are already reported for traditional student populations; however, disaggregation by source/type of validated learning for mobile learners who are frequently excluded from these calculations is especially important for assessing the effectiveness of credit mobility efforts.

[5] For graduation rate (and implicit to the other KPIs observable only for graduates), the follow-up period should be clearly defined and interpreted with care. Traditional reporting windows such as 100 percent and 150 percent of expected time may be less informative for students bringing varied amounts of validated learning. Institutions may wish to calculate multiple versions of these metrics using different follow-up windows or to interpret results in light of the amount and type of learning students brought at entry. Shorter follow-up periods provide actionable insights earlier, but longer follow-up periods more fully capture the range

		learning is especially important because completion outcomes may vary across forms of mobility and validated learning.		
	Time to degree among graduates[6]	Indicates whether students are progressing efficiently from entry to completion. Decreases may reflect stronger applicability of accepted learning, clearer pathways, and more timely guidance. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning can help identify where some forms of external learning contribute more efficiently to completion than others. Because this metric is observable only among students who graduate, it should be interpreted alongside graduation rates.	Longer-term	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; program/major; whether student changed program/major since initial enrollment
	Average excess credits accumulated at graduation	Directly captures inefficiency in students' pathways by showing how many credits beyond program requirements are accumulated at completion. Decreases may reflect stronger credit applicability, more flexible program design, and better advising. Because this metric is observable only among students who graduate, it should be interpreted alongside graduation rates.	Longer-term	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; program/major; whether student changed program/major since initial enrollment
★	Average home-institution credits accumulated after entry	Shows how many credits students complete at the institution after bringing in validated learning. This metric can help institutions understand whether mobile learners continue to generate substantial demand for home-institution coursework and may support economic casemaking when improved recognition of prior learning is associated with stronger retention and continued enrollment. Disaggregation by source/type of validated learning can help identify where this pattern is strongest.	Intermediate to longer-term	Source/type of validated learning; entering student type; program/major

[6] Metrics calculated at graduation are observable only for the subset of students who complete. Institutions should interpret these measures alongside retention and graduation rates to avoid drawing conclusions based only on completers.

	KPI	Why it matters	Time horizon	Useful disaggregation(s)
Transfer-Out and Downstream Outcomes[7]				
★	Share of an entering cohort that transfers out within a defined time period[8]	Measures the prevalence of outbound mobility from the institution. This metric can help institutions understand how frequently students continue their learning elsewhere and whether transfer-out is a common part of students' pathways. Disaggregation by destination institution helps identify common transfer routes, useful for prioritizing work on inter-institutional partnerships.	Intermediate	Destination institution; sector of destination institution; source/type of validated learning; entering student type
★	Graduation rate of transfer-out students, where data are available	Measures whether students who leave the institution ultimately complete a credential elsewhere. Increases may reflect stronger downstream pathways and more effective portability of learning across institutions. This metric is often available through National Student Clearinghouse data, though coverage may vary.	Longer-term	Destination institution; sector of destination institution; source/type of validated learning; entering student type; program/major at destination institution, where available; number of credits accumulated at time of departure
	Time to degree after transfer-out, where data are available	Indicates how efficiently students who transfer out progress to completion after leaving the institution. Decreases may reflect stronger downstream applicability of learning, more efficient transfer pathways, and better alignment between sending and receiving institutions. This metric is often	Longer-term	Destination institution; sector of destination institution; source/type of validated learning; entering student type; program/major at destination institution, where available;

[7] Data on downstream enrollment, graduation, and time to degree are often available through the National Student Clearinghouse, though coverage may vary. More detailed downstream measures, such as the percentage of credits accepted and the percentage of credits applied to degree requirements at destination institutions, typically require direct data-sharing partnerships or a statewide/systemwide longitudinal data system.

[8] For transfer-out KPIs, institutions should clearly define the cohort and follow-up period used in calculation. One useful approach is to track the share of an entering cohort that transfers out within a defined time window, rather than using all enrolled students as the denominator. However, transfer volume that calculates the share of all enrolled students who enroll in another institution in the following major term is a valid alternative metric that could sometimes be

		available through National Student Clearinghouse data, though coverage may vary.		number of credits accumulated at time of departure
	Average percentage of credits accepted by destination institutions, where data are available	Measures the extent to which students' earned learning continues to be recognized after they leave the institution. Increases may reflect stronger downstream portability of learning and improved alignment between sending and receiving institutions. Disaggregating by specific course could highlight opportunities for improved articulation agreements. This metric typically requires direct data-sharing agreements or system-level longitudinal data infrastructure.	Intermediate	Destination institution; sector of destination institution; source/type of validated learning; specific course
★	Average percentage of credits applied to degree requirements at destination institutions, where data are available	Distinguishes transferability from applicability in downstream outcomes by showing how much of students' previously earned learning actually advances them toward a credential after transfer-out. Increases may reflect stronger pathway alignment and more efficient downstream mobility. Disaggregating by specific course could highlight opportunities for improved articulation agreements and pathway alignment. This metric typically requires direct data-sharing agreements or system-level longitudinal data infrastructure.	Intermediate	Destination institution; sector of destination institution; source/type of validated learning; program/major at destination institution; specific course
	Share of transcripted CPL or other validated external learning at this institution that is subsequently accepted by destination institutions, where data are available	Measures whether validated external learning that has already been recognized and transcripted by this institution remains portable when students continue elsewhere. Increases may reflect stronger transcription practices, improved institutional partnerships and alignment, and reduced duplication in evaluation processes. This metric is especially useful for understanding whether transcripted learning continues to count across multiple institutional transitions.	Intermediate	Source/type of validated learning; destination institution; sector of destination institution

	Share of students whose validated learning is documented in portable ways that support applicability beyond the institution	An emerging metric that encourages institutions to think beyond traditional transfer pathways. This may include industry-recognized credentials, transcripted milestones, or learning and employment records that allow students to carry validated learning into new educational or workforce contexts. Increases may reflect stronger institutional efforts to make learning more visible and portable beyond traditional postsecondary pathways.	Leading to intermediate	Source/type of validated learning; documentation type

Recommended disaggregation categories

Whenever possible, institutions and systems should disaggregate KPIs to better understand how patterns of credit mobility, applicability, and student success vary across different learner groups and forms of validated learning. The most important disaggregation for this tool is **source or type of validated learning**, but several additional categories may also be useful depending on the KPI and data available.

Source/type of validated learning

A recommended starting point is to distinguish among three high-level categories:

- **No external validated learning**
- **Traditional transfer**
- **Other sources of validated learning**

These categories can then be broken down further. For **traditional transfer**, useful subcategories may include:

- Vertical transfer (2-year to 4-year)
- Horizontal transfer (2-year to 2-year or 4-year to 4-year)
- Reverse transfer (4-year to 2-year)

For **other sources of validated learning**, useful subcategories may include:

- High school dual enrollment[9]
- AP and IB
- Military credit
- CLEP
- Other credit by exam or challenge exam
- International credit
- Industry-recognized credentials or corporate training certifications
- Portfolio review or portfolio assessment
- Non-credit-to-credit pathways
- Credit for prior learning where used as a broader umbrella category

[9] In some data systems, dual enrollment credit may be difficult to distinguish from traditional transfer credit if transcript records do not clearly identify the source of the learning. Institutions may wish to review how such credits are coded and whether more specific categorization is feasible.

Including **no external validated learning** as a category can be especially useful for interpreting student success metrics by providing a comparison group.

Entering student type

Where relevant, institutions may also wish to disaggregate by **entering student type**, typically distinguishing between:

- First-time-in-college students
- Transfer-in students

This aligns with categories many institutions already maintain for IPEDS and other reporting purposes. This disaggregation can be particularly useful when interpreting the extent to which first-time students may still arrive with validated learning through dual enrollment, AP/IB, military learning, or other sources.

Sending and destination institutions

For KPIs related to mobility across institutions, disaggregation by **sending institution** or **destination institution** can help identify common pathways and where stronger alignment may be most needed. Institutions may also wish to group institutions by **sector**.

Use of the Carnegie classification[10] is recommended, but other disaggregations (such as by 4-year, 2-year, or less-than-2-year; or by public, private not-for-profit, or private for-profit) are also possible.

When collecting data on sending or destination institutions, it is preferable to capture a stable institutional identifier, such as IPEDS **UNITID** or **OPEID**, rather than relying only on institution names, which can be difficult to match consistently across datasets. The College Scorecard crosswalk file matches IPEDS UNITID to OPEID for each year.

Program or major

For KPIs related to applicability, time to degree, or excess credits, institutions may wish to disaggregate by **program or major**. This may be

[10] "Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education," American Council on Education, 2026, https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/.

done at the level of a specific academic program or by grouping programs into broader fields of study using CIP codes or another classification scheme.

Data Readiness and Prioritization Worksheet

How to use this worksheet

Use the KPI reference table above to first identify the metrics most relevant to your goals, learner population, and current stage of work, and fill these metrics into the first column of the planning worksheet (a downloadable Excel version is available here: https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/KPI-Tool.xlsx). For each KPI you prioritize, note the current status of the data: "Collected" refers to whether the data exists in your systems' information systems; "monitored" refers to whether the metrics are tracked and centrally organized into a report, table, or dashboard; and "used to inform decisions" refers to whether the metric's levels and trends are actively referenced to inform strategic decision-making and drive continuous improvement processes. Note any important gaps, such as the need for data cleaning, standardization, disaggregation, new collection, clearer ownership, or stronger integration into strategic planning and continuous improvement. If you have baseline data available or a target value of the KPI set, also note it in the worksheet. Then identify the most important immediate next step needed to strengthen your capacity to track, analyze, or act on the metric. Teams may wish to begin with a small set of core KPIs and expand over time.

Before you begin, consider:

- Which forms of validated learning are most common in your context?
- Which questions about student mobility are most important for your institution or system to answer right now?
- Which indicators could inform action in the near term, and which longer-term outcomes do you want to build toward?
- For each KPI selected, should the metric be disaggregated by source or type of validated learning?
- Are the data for this KPI merely collected, or are they also monitored and used to inform strategic decision-making and continuous improvement?

Data Readiness and Prioritization Worksheet

Priority KPI	**Why this KPI matters in our context**	**Time horizon** (Leading / Intermediate / Longer-term)	**Data status** (Not currently available / Collected only / Collected and monitored / Collected, monitored, and used)	**Priority level** (Highest / High / Medium / Low)	**Baseline value (if available)**	**Target value**	**Immediate next step**

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.

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