

Transfer of Credit, Prior Learning, and Articulation Agreement Guidelines

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Contents

- I. Purpose
- II. Best Practices in Transfer of Credit Policy and Procedures
- III. Definitions

I. Purpose

The Mid-Atlantic Region Commission on Higher Education (MARCHE), doing business as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE or the Commission) seeks to ensure that institutions are responsible for consistency, fairness, and transparency in the evaluation and acceptance of credit earned at another institution or through experiential learning, prior non-academic learning (including military service), competency-based assessment, and other alternative learning approaches. The purpose of these guidelines is to describe best practices for development, enhancement, and implementation of policies related to transfer of credit, prior learning, and articulation.

II. Best Practices in Transfer of Credit Policy and Procedures

Although the extent to which transfer, prior learning, and articulation issues apply to each institution will vary, the following usually characterize effective policies for the recognition of transfer of credit, experiential and prior learning (including military service), articulation agreements, and their implementation. These best practices are intended to recognize the increasing complexity of transfer, assure consistency in transfer of credit decisions, encourage appropriate transparency about transfer policy and practice, and minimize loss of credit for students.

- A. The institution's policy and procedures are well-articulated and accessible to the public. The institution's basic principles regarding transfer of credit and credit for prior learning are clear.
- B. The institution makes transfer of credit and experiential or prior learning decisions that provide maximum consideration for the student who has changed institutions or objectives or has demonstrated learning in non-traditional formats.
- C. The institution's student learning outcomes, academic goals, and strategic priorities guide the formulation of policies and procedures for transfer of credit and prior learning experiences.
- D. The institution evaluates courses, programs, and other learning experiences on their learning outcomes and the existence of valid evaluation measures.

- E. The institution utilizes third-party review by appropriately qualified reviewers and recommendations from organizations experienced with such evaluations (e.g., ACE, CAEL).
- F. The institution provides students with a reasonable explanation about how work for which students seek credit is or is not comparable with curricula and standards to meet degree requirements.
- G. The institution is clear about what degree requirements may or may not be met by prior or experiential learning, including major requirements, general education, core course requirements, and electives.

III. Definitions

The following definitions are used in this policy and/or procedures:

- A. Articulation agreement.** An agreement between or among institutions of higher education that specifies the acceptability of courses in transfer toward meeting specific degree or program requirements.
- B. Clock hour:** (1) A period of time consisting of (i) A 50- to 60-minute class, lecture, or recitation in a 60-minute period; (ii) A 50- to 60-minute faculty-supervised laboratory, shop training, or internship in a 60-minute period; (iii) Sixty minutes of preparation in a correspondence course; or (iv) In distance education, 50 to 60 minutes in a 60-minute period of attendance in (A) A synchronous or asynchronous class, lecture, or recitation where there is opportunity for direct interaction between the instructor and students; or (B) An asynchronous learning activity involving academic engagement in which the student interacts with technology that can monitor and document the amount of time that the student participates in the activity. (federal definition in 34 § 600.2).
- C. Competency Based Education (CBE).** A program that organizes content according to what a student knows and can do, often referred to as a “competency.” CBE programs also generally have very clear claims for student learning, stress what students can do with the knowledge and skills they acquire and have assessments that provide measurable evidence of competency. Student progress is determined by mastery of each competency. Because CBE focuses on whether students have mastered these competencies, there is a focus on learning outcomes rather than time spent in a classroom. Direct assessment is a subset of competency-based education (CBE).
- D. Credit for prior learning.** Academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as portfolios.

(definition from American Council on Education and Center for Education Attainment & Innovation).

- E. Credit hour.** An amount of student work defined by an institution, as approved by the institution's accrediting agency or State approval agency, that is consistent with commonly accepted practice in postsecondary education and that reasonably approximates not less than (i) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different period of time; or (ii) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in (i) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours; and permits an institution, in determining the amount of work associated with a credit hour, to take into account a variety of delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels. (federal definition in 34 CFR § 602.3)
- F. Direct assessment.** Alternative means to measure student learning in lieu of clock or credit hours.
- G. Direct assessment program.** An instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others and meets the conditions of 34 CFR § 668.10. Direct assessment of student learning means a measure of a student's knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide evidence of the student's proficiency in the relevant subject area. Direct assessment is a subset of competency-based education (CBE).
- H. Distance education.** Education that uses one or more of the following technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor or instructors and to support regular and substantive interaction between students and the instructor or instructors, either synchronously or asynchronously: (i) the internet; (ii) one-way or two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; (iii) audio conference; or (iv) Other media used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed above. Please see the complete federal definition of distance education, including substantive interaction in the Substantive Change Guidelines. (federal definition in 34 CFR § 600.2)
- I. Educational program.** A legally authorized postsecondary program of organized instruction or study that: (i) Leads to an academic, professional, or vocational degree, or certificate, or other recognized educational credential, or is a comprehensive transition and postsecondary program, as described in 34 CFR part 668, subpart O; and (ii) May, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilize direct assessment of student learning, or recognize the direct assessment of student learning by others, if such assessment is consistent

with the accreditation of the institution or program utilizing the results of the assessment and with the provisions of § 668.10. (federal definition in 34 CFR § 600.2) The Commission may also use the terms certificates and/or degree levels (Standard III – Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience).

- J. Prior learning assessment.** The process for recognizing and awarding credit for college-level learning acquired outside of the classroom. There are several ways in which students can demonstrate this learning and earn credit, including but not limited to, standardized examination, program challenge exam, portfolio-based or other individualized assessment, evaluation of non-college programs, etc. (definition adapted from the Center for Law and Social Policy).

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Revisions:

Federal Regulations: 34 CFR Part §602 The Secretary’s Recognition of Accrediting Agencies, §602.24(e)(1-2) Transfer of credit policies; §602.23 Operating procedures all agencies must have; 34 CFR Part §600.2 Definitions; 34 CFR Part §668.43(a)(11) Institutional information;

Standards: Standard IV, criterion 2;

Related Documents: *Accreditation Actions Policy; Accreditation Actions Procedures: Substantive Change Policy; Substantive Change Procedures; Transfer of Credit, Prior Learning, and Articulation Agreements Policy; Transfer of Credit, Prior Learning, and Articulation Agreements Procedures; Verification of Compliance with Accreditation-Relevant Federal Regulations; AACRAO-CHEA/CIQC, ACE Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit(2021); Statement on Principles on Acceptance of Credit (April 16, 2020);*