

# UCF CREDIT-BY-EXAM REVIEW & SUGGESTED RESOLUTIONS

White Paper

## Abstract

As the use of standardized credit-by-exam to meet college level requirements increases, the high volume of credit-by-exam poses significant challenges for policy communication, data management, and equitable use of test scores. This paper will review the current state of credit-by-exam use at UCF, discuss the challenges that are associated with it, and provide guidelines for the future.

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## **Introduction**

The use of standardized exams for college credit has increased greatly since the early 2000s. Accelerated credit programs (credit-by-exam and dual enrollment course work) are widely accepted tools used as part of the drive to prepare high school students for the rigors of college academics. As access to standardized exams has grown, participation in these programs has increased dramatically. In 2001, 844,741 high school students took 1,414,387 Advanced Placement (AP) exams. In contrast, 2,825,710 high school students took 5,098,815 Advanced Placement (AP) exams in 2019 (<https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/research/2020/AP-Program-Size-and-Increments-2001-2020.pdf>).

In 2019, Burns and Leu via the United States Department of Education (USDOE) published data on the outcomes of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and Dual Enrollment Courses for the 2009-2013 high school student cohort. The percentage of students earning AP or IB credits was 42.2, and students earned an average of 3.3 hours of college credit (p. 29). This number is steadily growing, as accelerated options increase for high school students and pressure to shorten time to degree grows.

Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds have access to credit-by-exam options. Bailey and Karp (2003) discuss how the use of credit-by-exam began as an acceleration mechanism for high-achieving students, but educators also saw its value as a tool for low- or middle-performing students (p. 1-2). Credit-by-exam programs can help identify struggling students so educators can provide support, and these programs can also provide academic preparation for higher education (p. 4).

In this discussion, we will use the term *credit-by-exam* in place of *accelerated credit* to differentiate between relevant exams and dual enrollment courses, as this paper will focus solely on current issues surrounding standardized exams at the University of Central Florida (UCF). We will

review the current credit-by-exam-related business processes and policies used at UCF, as well as some of the related challenges and issues. We will conclude with suggestions and guidelines for policy improvement that is clear and equitable.

### **Credit-by-Exam Use at UCF**

UCF accepts the following credit-by-exam tests based on guidelines from the Articulation Coordination Committee (ACC) at the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), in accordance with the State Board of Education Rule 6A-10.024, Section 8 and Florida Statute, Section 1007.27(2):

- a. Advanced Placement (AP)
- b. International Baccalaureate (IB)
- c. Cambridge AICE
- d. College Level Examination Program (CLEP)
- e. DANTES Examination Credit (DSST)
- f. UXCEL/Excelsior College Examinations

The business process for credit-by-exam policy begins with the annual equivalency list published by the Articulation Coordination Committee (ACC) at the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). Once UCF receives the equivalencies, decisions on their use are determined by College of Undergraduate Studies faculty administrators, with occasional input by faculty in relevant areas of study. Once the use of equivalencies is finalized, the Registrar's Office updates the Undergraduate Catalog and sets effective dates on equivalency rules in PeopleSoft based on the effective dates provided by the ACC. Degree audit staff ensure that the credit-by-exam equivalencies are used appropriately on the audit.

## **Data**

The data in this section came from a January 15, 2021 PeopleSoft query of all undergraduate students with test credit who enrolled at UCF in the 2019-2020 catalog year. Additional data on total enrollment was compiled from reports provided by UCF Institutional Knowledge Management (IKM). Both FTIC and transfer students are represented in the data. Of the 19,438 students who enrolled at UCF in that catalog year, 8,694 brought 127,777 hours of credit-by-exam with them (data reference 1/15/21, 1/19/21).

More specifically, 5,647 FTIC students brought 97,775 hours and 3,047 transfer students brought 30,002 hours of credit-by-exam. Of those students, 280 had over 45 hours each of credit-by-exam. Although this is a relatively small number of enrolled students, that is a total of 14,899 hours of credit-by-exam that UCF processes.

With such a high volume of incoming students bringing credit-by-exam with them, there are inevitable issues with the use of this credit and how it affects students. The list that follows is by no means exhaustive, but it highlights the areas of greatest concern.

### **Unpredictability of Credit-by-Exam Equivalencies**

Equivalencies are published annually, but do not necessarily change from year to year. Changes depend on the content of each exam, which is determined by the testing administrators. Because there is such uncertainty in exam content, as well as the prospect of new exam development, state equivalencies may change from year to year. Changes to exams can be minor, but they can also be dramatic departures from previous years. For example, in 2014, there were three Cambridge AICE exams for History (Addendum B, p. 8-9):

1. History – The History of the USA, c. 1840-1968

2. History – Modern European History, 1789-1939
3. History – International History, 1945-1991

By 2016, there were six Cambridge AICE History exams (Addendum C, p. 9):

1. US History, 1840-1941 (AS-Level)
2. US History, 1941-1990 (A-Level)
3. European History, 1789-1917 (AS-Level)
4. European History, 1850-1941 (A-Level)
5. International History, 1871-1945 (AS-Level)
6. International History, 1945-1991 (A-Level)

The ACC did not finalize these new equivalencies until 2017. The 2017 UCF Undergraduate Catalog lists not only the six new exam equivalencies, but also the previous three (Addendum D, p. 69). Combining equivalencies for old exams along with the new equivalencies increases the potential for student and advisor confusion. Students may not always remember which exam they took, so they may assume they are getting one equivalency over another one. Advisors may be unfamiliar with new equivalencies, and find it unclear how they differ from the old ones.

The modifications to the Cambridge AICE exams provide an instructive model for how changes to standardized tests can affect how state lawmakers, administrators, educators, and students can apply test scores to degree requirements as effectively as possible.

### **Equivalency Expectations**

Students might expect to use an equivalency in a certain way when they take an exam but experience a different policy when they attend a college or university. There are several reasons for this, and one of the most significant is the unpredictability of equivalency effective dates.

Equivalencies are not finalized by the ACC on the same date each year, making it harder for institutions to include changes in their catalog and decide how to apply equivalencies. The 2020 equivalency list was finalized in October, partly due to the interference of COVID-19. In 2019, the list was finalized in June, and in 2018, May. Equivalency effective dates have a direct impact on how credit is used—particularly when they are inconsistent.

Students take multiple exams, hopeful that the credit they earn will shorten time to degree. Although credit-by-exam does not count toward excess hours, students may end up taking more courses than they expected if they cannot use their credit-by-exam equivalencies as planned. This is an area of research that needs further study to gain a clear grasp of how excess credit-by-exam hours may affect time to degree.

Each Florida public institution is free to use the state equivalencies toward the degree requirements they determine are in the best interests of their students. Thus, institutions use equivalencies differently, and that causes confusion for transfer students. For example, Florida International University (FIU) provides the following credit for Cambridge AICE English Language A: Literature:

*LIT 1000 (3) and GRW UCC1 (3)*

*Score 4: Humanities*

*Score 5-7: Humanities & GRW (Gordon Rule Writing)*

FIU offers generic Gordon Rule Writing credit (UCC1) for students while UCF provides the following guidance for the same exam equivalency:

*ENC 1101 and ENL 2012*

*COM Found 1 and CUL & HIST Found 2*

ENL 2012 is both a Gordon Rule Writing course and a GEP course (Humanities area 2).

### **Credit-by-Exam Hour Limits**

Section 1007.27(2), Florida Statutes, provides guidelines for the determination of Credit-by-Exam equivalencies. It also provides guidelines on how to use these equivalencies:

*Up to 45 total credit-by-exam credits may be awarded for guaranteed transfer.*

*Credits earned through Credit by Exam that exceed 45 semester credit hours*

*may be transferred at the discretion of the receiving institution...*

*...Institutions should carefully consider what is required for students' degree*

*plans before awarding additional credit.*

UCF does not currently limit the number of credit-by-exam hours students can use. However, it is worth the discussion about how many credit-by-exam hours will truly benefit students, and at what point is there a law of diminishing returns. In other words, how many of these hours can be used for specific degree requirements, and how many are not providing an added benefit to students? Are extra credit-by-exam hours really shortening time to degree? This is an area of study that deserves further exploration.

### **Catalog and Document Inconsistencies**

Lack of consistency leads to confusion for students and for advisors. Because equivalencies and their use toward degree requirements are subject to change, and due to the similarities in exams, the information in the UCF Undergraduate Catalog has not always been consistent with the state equivalency document. It has also not consistently provided clear and accurate guidelines for how the equivalencies are used.

The catalog is one of several resources that are used by university employees when communicating credit-by-exam information to students. At FTIC and Transfer Orientation, advisors provide students with the Expected Credit Evaluation Form (Addendum F), which they compiled based on the state document and the catalog. This document specifies the equivalencies a student would receive as well as where in the degree program a student could expect to use them. For the current catalog year, this form has been moved online into a Qualtrics questionnaire.

### **Technical and Software Issues**

The bigger issue is the challenge these changes pose to our current student records system in PeopleSoft. UCF sets credit-by-exam rules based on the start dates of the catalog year when any equivalency changes go into effect. A student is assigned an equivalency based on the credit-by-exam rules in place when the test is taken. If a state equivalency for AP English Language is ENC 1101 on the day the student takes the exam, the student will get an ENC 1101 equivalency.

The degree audit, however, works differently. Once the student has an equivalency from the credit-by-exam rules, that equivalency is used on the degree audit according to the articulation term when the credit-by-exam was submitted. The student who earned an equivalency of ENC 1101 will be able to use it on the degree audit wherever that course is accepted. However, if a student is admitted to UCF in the 2018 catalog year, and does not send test scores until 2020, the student will get an equivalency that is relevant to the date it was taken, but the degree audit will use that equivalency according to the policies in the 2020 catalog. If ENC 1101 is used differently in 2018 and 2020, that conflict can have a dramatic effect on what requirements are satisfied and which ones are outstanding—and certainly hamper the student's expectations of its use.

Technology issues can especially affect transfer students. Each public institution uses the state equivalencies according to their own institutional guidelines for the best interests of the



students. A course used for a General Education requirement at Valencia will not necessarily be used identically at UCF. Because the use of equivalencies can vary annually, transfer students are further removed from their test dates and may find that their ability to use credit-by-exam as they expected conflicts with current institutional policy.

There are multiple test guidelines provided by the ACC that offer institutions a choice of equivalencies. For example, the Cambridge AICE English (A-Level) exam has an equivalency of ENC 1101 and either ENC 1102 or LIT 1000, with a guideline:

*If credit already awarded for ENC X101 or ENC X102, may award ENC X121 and ENC X122*

This equivalency offers institutions multiple options for one exam. However, PeopleSoft credit-by-exam rules cannot be programmed with an OR functionality that allows for a different equivalency to be awarded if a student already has credit for the first option. In this example, rules cannot be programmed to convert the credit for ENC 1102 into LIT 1000 if a student already has credit for ENC 1102 from another exam. It also cannot be programmed to convert ENC 1101 and ENC 1102 into ENC 1121 and ENC 1122. If students see the equivalencies as an either/or opportunity in the catalog or on a university chart, they will be confused if their audit does not follow those policies.

In 2016, the International Baccalaureate (IB) split the English A1 exam into an English Language A: Language & Literature exam and an English Language A: Literature exam. The equivalencies for the English A1 exam were ENC 1101 (score of 4) and either ENC 1101 & ENC 1102 or LIT 2100 & LIT 2110 (score of 5-7). The ACC decided that the new exams would provide equivalencies for LIT 1000 (score of 4) and LIT 1000 & ENC 1141 (score of 5-7). Because ENC 1141 is not a commonly used course—only the University of Florida (UF) and Florida State University (FSU) offer it—there were many faculty and administration discussions regarding its use at UCF (<https://flscns.fldoe.org/PbCourseDetails.aspx>, accessed 1/14/2021). Faculty determined it could not

be equated to ENC 1101. In the 2016-17 and 2017-18 catalogs, students could not use ENC 1141 for anything other than generic credit toward unduplicated hours. In the 2018-19 catalog year, faculty decided that students could use ENC 1141 to fulfill the Cultural/Humanities Area I in the General Education Program. In the 2019-20 catalog year and going forward, UCF allowed students to use this equivalency for GEP 1, Gordon Rule Writing, and as a prerequisite for ENC 1102 without equating it to ENC 1101.

### **Solutions for Success**

How can UCF provide straightforward, consistent, and fair information on credit-by-exam equivalency use for all students? This is a critical question for administrators to answer. The following suggestions are only a beginning to the conversations we need to have to resolve outstanding credit-by-exam issues.

#### **Finalize State Equivalencies**

Finalize equivalencies at the state level by a firm deadline each year, which will allow institutions to update their catalogs in an appropriate and timely manner. Once equivalencies are determined, communicate this information efficiently to Florida public institutions and high schools. While drafts of new equivalency documents can be used in the short term, it is not advisable to rely on a document that may be modified prior to the finalization of equivalencies.

This process is largely out of UCF's control, but the university can do its part in the communication chain by working with Florida high school guidance counselors and educators to make sure they have the most up-to-date information on how equivalencies work at UCF. Administrators can also maintain strong relationships with members of the Articulation Coordination

Committee (ACC) at the Florida Department of Education to ensure efficient and timely communication of new policies.

Ensure that the catalog is updated with changes in a timely manner and provide a link to the state equivalency document for reference. The UCF administration has moved the publication of the 2021-22 Undergraduate Catalog to July 1, a departure from previous years when the publication date was May 1. While there were many reasons for this change, a primary one was to allow more time for the ACC to finalize annual credit-by-exam equivalencies.

### **Use of Equivalencies**

Once the ACC finalizes equivalencies, UCF must determine how to use them in an expedient manner. Currently, a faculty member in each related discipline may be consulted for input, but Undergraduate Studies administrators have also made decisions on how to use the equivalencies. There should be a faculty committee consisting of a representative from appropriate disciplines, along with Undergraduate Studies administrators, who can review the equivalencies to decide how to use them in the best interest of students as well as how to implement the equivalencies accurately in PeopleSoft.

UCF should determine how many hours of credit-by-exam to accept for all students. If administrators decide to limit total credit-by-exam hours to 45, technology options should be explored to limit the number of hours used on the degree audit.

One of the barriers to this solution is that students will not be able to decide which 45 hours of credit-by-exam they can use upon admission. The University of Florida (UF) allows advisors to work with students to decide how to best use those 45 hours to satisfy as many requirements as possible. Advisors are then able to adjust the use of credit-by-exam hours in their data management system. This model may be a good one for UCF to follow.

### **Use of Technology**

Implementation of credit-by-exam rules in PeopleSoft should continue as needed annually, with clear instructions for effective dates. Faculty must be aware of the limits of technology and decide on the use of equivalencies accordingly—in particular, for those equivalencies that provide multiple options. If we return to our Cambridge AICE example, the English (A-Level) exam has an equivalency of ENC 1101 and either ENC 1102 or LIT 1000, with a guideline:

*If credit already awarded for ENC X101 or ENC X102, may award ENC X121 and ENC X122*

Faculty should decide whether to use ENC 1101 and ENC 1102, OR ENC 1101 and LIT 1100, OR ENC 1121 and ENC 1122, which will implement an equitable policy that applies to all students.

Degree audit staff will need to explore options for the technical setup in PeopleSoft that provide accurate and efficient restrictions on credit-by-exam use. This setup should include a credit hour limit, as discussed above.

There have been ongoing discussions for years with no resolution about the modification of PeopleSoft software and how to use equivalencies. It is important to continue these discussions to move toward a resolution that is fair and equitable for all students. Eventually, PeopleSoft will be replaced by Workday but since that replacement is a few years away, we must find a solution soon.

### **Communication Policies**

There are a few ways to improve the communication of credit-by-exam policies. Use clarity in the catalog as much as possible: specific course equivalencies should be listed on a clear, easy to read chart in addition to information on how these equivalencies apply to degree requirements. With so

many similar tests and course equivalencies, errors are inevitable. Decide whether catalogs can be updated retroactively if errors are discovered.

Adopt one document only for university wide use. The Registrar's Office (RO) should distribute copies of the equivalency list in the catalog for advisors to use in Orientation and in regular advising sessions. This list can be used for prospective students as well. Alternatively, the RO can create a new chart that combines the state equivalencies with UCF's use of these equivalencies.

Review of credit-by-exam policies should be a critical part of advisor training. The Office of Student Success and Advising provides regular orientation training sessions for new advisors, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities. Credit-by-exam policy discussions should be implemented as a key component of all university policies and offered as a separate training session.

Determine consistent effective dates for equivalencies and how they are used on the audit. This issue is the most critical and time sensitive. The longer we wait to finalize a coherent policy, the greater the confusion among students and advisors, and the greater chance that existing policies will not be applied equitably to all students.

This suggested catalog language might bring more clarity to the policy:

*Credit-by-exam equivalencies are awarded based on when the test is taken, but that equivalency is applied according to the published policy at the time the student is admitted.*

An overhaul of credit-by-exam policy creates many challenges but also opportunities. The primary goal to solving these challenges should be to determine how to use the equivalencies in the best interests of students. However, an added benefit is to provide clear guidance for university staff who work with these students so they can communicate credit-by-exam information effectively and confidently.

### **Addenda**

- A. 6A-10.024 Articulation Between and Among Universities, Florida Colleges, and School Districts
- B. Articulation Coordination Committee (ACC) Credit-by-Exam Equivalencies, 2014
- C. Articulation Coordination Committee (ACC) Credit-by-Exam Equivalencies, 2016
- D. [2020-2021 Accelerated Credit Equivalencies](#) (UCF Undergraduate Catalog)
- E. Current state equivalency document
- F. 2019-20 Expected Credit Evaluation form
- G. [2020-21 Expected Credit Evaluation form](#)

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