

New Path to Federal Student Aid for Those with No High School Diploma or GED

NOTE TO READERS: As of July 1, 2012, newly-enrolled students without a high school diploma or equivalency are no longer eligible for federal financial aid under any of the “Ability-to-Benefit” provisions described in this report. These provisions were eliminated by Congress in December 2011 as part of the passage of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of Fiscal Year 2012. Please consult the Department of Education’s official guidance on the implementation of these changes to federal financial aid at <http://ifap.ed.gov/dpccletters/GEN1209.html>. If any Ability-to-Benefit provisions are reinstated or new provisions adopted, the examples described in this report may be applicable. Sign up for CLASP updates to receive new information.

New policy allows students without a high school diploma or GED to qualify for federal student aid if they successfully complete six credits in lieu of passing an Ability-to-Benefit test. Basic skills bridge programs could be designed to help students earn the critical six credits.

After successful pilots, Congress adopted a new Ability-to-Benefit option in 2008. The Department of Education issued final rules implementing the policy in October 2010.

Students without a high school diploma or GED long have had the opportunity to show they have the “ability to benefit” from federal student aid by passing a federally approved test for which the federal government sets pass scores and defines testing procedures. More recently, Congress created a new Ability-to-Benefit (AtB) option, which allows these students to qualify for financial aid after successfully completing six credits toward a certificate or degree, instead of taking an AtB test.¹

This change was based on successful pilots² conducted through the Department of Education’s Experimental Sites Initiative. In those pilots, students without high school diplomas or GEDs who received financial aid after completing six credits (without federal aid) went on to earn higher grades and to complete more credits than students with high school diplomas. The new AtB option, adopted by Congress in 2008, went into effect in July 2009 and the Department of Education issued final rules³ implementing the provision in October 2010. Key elements of the new AtB option are:

- The courses must be completed satisfactorily (typically a C or higher) and must total six semester hours, six trimester hours, six quarter hours or 225 clock hours.
- The hours completed must be applicable toward a degree or certificate; however, the rule does not require students to subsequently enroll in that specific program since student interests may change.

Basic skills bridge models could be one path to earning the six credits needed to demonstrate Ability-to-Benefit under the new option.

Basic skills bridge courses aim to ease the transition to postsecondary education for adult basic education, English language, or developmental education students by combining basic skills instruction with higher-level academic or occupational instruction. (For more information on bridge models, see C-PES briefs *Beyond Basic Skills: State Strategies to Connect Low-Skilled Students to an Employer-Valued Postsecondary Education* and *Farther, Faster:*

Career Pathways Credentials for Basic Skills Students, forthcoming March 2011.) Sometimes this is through concurrent enrollment in separately taught, jointly planned basic skills and college academic or occupational classes. Sometimes the basic skills and postsecondary content is integrated within the same class or series of classes. Basic skills bridges could help students qualify for federal student aid under the new Ability-to-Benefit option if the bridge model enables students to complete at least six credits or the equivalent toward a certificate or degree.

For example, South Texas College in McAllen, Texas, offers basic skills students the opportunity to earn college credits and occupational certificates through concurrent enrollment in contextualized English language and math classes, Technical Spanish classes (which cover occupational knowledge and vocabulary in the students' native language), and college occupational courses. Through this dual language bridge model, basic skills students without a GED at South Texas College can complete three occupational courses in the Green Construction pathways (which include HVAC/Refrigeration, Plumbing, and Electrical). The credits earned in these courses qualify students for federal student aid through the new Ability-to-Benefit option. Students move through these courses in cohorts and, as they move into higher level courses in each pathway, students also take a college success course. Recruitment for the bridges and support services for students are coordinated by VIDA, a community-based workforce development group. The program also includes a partnership with the local workforce board which, together with VIDA, pays the cost of tuition and fees along with other support services such as childcare, textbooks, and gas vouchers. It is only through these partnerships that the college can provide the wrap-around services required to serve this population. Though these bridges are relatively new, retention and completion in the initial cohorts has been very high. South Texas College hopes to expand this bridge model to other occupational programs in the future.

Washington State's I-BEST program, Wisconsin's RISE career pathways bridge initiative, and Minnesota's FastTRAC initiative all support bridge models that integrate basic skills content with occupational content, often through team teaching. For example, Western Technical College in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, offers three technical certificates in machining, each carrying six credits and all embedded within a one-year technical diploma in [CNC/Machine Tool Operation](#). Basic skills students can earn those first three certificates in the career pathway through integrated bridge courses that combine technical content with pre-college math, reading, and study skills. These classes feature team teaching of the integrated course, with additional basic skills instruction supplementing it.⁴

Because bridge models such as those in Texas and Wisconsin carry college credit, basic skills students without a high school diploma or GED could use them to earn the six credits needed to demonstrate Ability to Benefit and qualify for federal student aid. While they earn these credits, students also will be improving critical reading, writing, math or English language skills needed to succeed in college and careers, and they will be making progress toward a postsecondary certificate or degree.

Other basic skills courses might count toward the six credits needed to show Ability-to-Benefit, but only if they are a required part of a student's program.

Other kinds of basic skills classes, beyond the bridge model, might count toward the six credits students without a high school diploma or GED need to demonstrate Ability-to-Benefit. Such classes can count, however, only if the postsecondary institution first determines that preparatory courses are a required part of the student's certificate or



degree program. If the basic skills courses are required, then successfully completing six credits in preparatory courses would meet the new ATB standard, based on existing federal regulations regarding when student aid can be used to cover remedial coursework.⁵

¹ Section 484(d)(1) of the Act and 34 CFR 668.32(e)(1).

² *Analysis of the Experimental Sites Initiative, 2006-07 Award Year*, U.S. Department of Education, June 2008, <https://ecdrappeals.ed.gov/exp/pdf/0607ExSitesReportFINAL.pdf>.

³ *34 CFR Parts 600, 602, 603, et al. Program Integrity Issues; Final Rule*, Federal Register, October 29 2010, <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/pdf/2010-26531.pdf>.

⁴ <http://www.cows.org/pdf/bp-WTCBridge-casestudy.pdf>.

⁵ 34 CFR 668.8.