Awarding Credit Where Credit is due: Effective Practices for the Implementation of Credit by Exam

Credit by Exam Task Group:

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I. Introduction

Credit by exam is a mechanism employed in the California community colleges as a means of granting credit for student learning outside of the traditional classroom. In some instances, credit by exam is the means used to award college credit for structured learning experiences in a secondary educational setting, while in other instances knowledge is obtained in non-traditional environments or an individual is self-taught. The Academic Senate for California Community College's position is that colleges should seek to maximize the opportunities available for credit by exam as is appropriate to meet the needs for their student populations, while maintaining academic excellence.

Although the relevant Title 5 regulation (§ 55050) states that the credit by examination process must adequately measure the "mastery of the course content as set forth in the outline of record", the course outline of record delineates not only the course content, but the objectives to be achieved and the rigor of the coursework. Furthermore, student learning outcomes may be an integral component of the course outline and a component of the expected "mastery" that awarding of course credit should affirm. As such, it is necessary that any end of course assessment that is intended to be the basis for course credit be designed in a manner that ensures it is measuring not only "mastery of the course content," but achievement of any delineated objectives and outcomes.

09.08 Credit by Exam Processes Fall 2010

Whereas, National and state interest in decreasing time to degree completion and increasing degree production has resulted in an interest in finding novel ways to meet these goals;

Whereas, The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges has been active in determining whether and how existing competency-based exams (e.g., College Level Examination Program, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement) can be translated into course credit; and

Whereas, "Credit by exam" is a mechanism long in existence that can be used to award credit for demonstrated learning;

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community develop and disseminate information to local academic senates regarding effective practices for using credit by exam to recognize learning gained through alternative mechanisms;

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges encourage local academic senates to ensure that students are aware of the existing mechanisms for earning credit through exam processes; and

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges recommend that local academic senates consider the needs of their local communities and strive to ensure that all appropriate exam opportunities are available.

Not only is it important to ensure that credit by exam is available to students, but it is critical to safeguard that both the assessment employed and the credit by exam process have integrity and that no credit is awarded if a student has not achieved the outcomes and objectives specified for the course. As the transcription of credit ensures the mobility of that credit and its acceptance by other higher education institutions, the processes employed for the awarding of credit must be well-documented and able to withstand any scrutiny.

09.05 Ensuring the Integrity of Credit by Exam Processes Fall 2008

Whereas, Title 5 55050 Credit by Examination establishes the following:

- (a) The governing board of each community college district shall adopt and publish policies and procedures pertaining to credit by examination in accordance with the provisions of this section;
- (b) The governing board may grant credit to any student who satisfactorily passes an examination approved or conducted by proper authorities of the college. Such credit may be granted only to a student who is registered at the college and in good standing and only for a course listed in the catalog of the community college; and
- (c) The nature and content of the examination shall be determined solely by faculty in the discipline who normally teach the course for which credit is to be granted;

Whereas, Resolution 9.07 F07 encourages "credit faculty to consider developing credit by exam options for credit courses that have noncredit equivalents"; and

Whereas, Credit by examination processes must be developed and evaluated by the appropriate discipline faculty;

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges assert the right of discipline faculty to establish the content of credit by examination processes, including the use of exams administered at high schools and assessments based on portfolios; and

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for the California Community Colleges research and share effective practices for credit by exam processes with local senates.

In the Spring of 2013, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges adopted a paper, Alternative Methods for Awarding of College Credit: Credit by Examination for Articulated High School Courses. This paper provided guidance for one method of earning credit by exam, the use of credit by exam to award college credit for structured learning experiences in secondary educational settings, such as articulated courses taken in high school. The reader is referred to that prior paper for more details on this form of credit by exam. The focus of this paper is on credit by exam more generally and aims to provide a complete overview that can inform local development of policies and practices regarding credit by exam.

II. What is Credit by Exam?

Traditional course offerings include class sessions or other means of delivering course content, learning activities, assignments, study, and other structured activities intended to facilitate achievement of the course objectives. Students then demonstrate their knowledge of the course content and the achievement of course objectives through examinations or other assessment methods. Credit by Exam (CBE) is an alternative method for students to earn credit for a college course by providing students the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the

course content and objectives through a comprehensive assessment without first participating in the traditional structured learning process. In other words, CBE is a way for students who have already mastered course content and objectives through prior education or experience to earn credit for the course without "sitting through" the class sessions. The college faculty determines whether or not to offer CBE for particular courses; students do not have the right to take an exam for course credit unless that option is approved by the faculty. A course for which credit is awarded via CBE fulfills the same certificate, degree, transfer/articulation, and other requirements as it would if passed via the traditional method (although the student's transcript must be annotated to indicate that credit was earned via CBE – See Title 5 §55050(e)).

Title 5 § 55050 has several requirements designed to ensure the structure, quality, and integrity of the CBE process. These include the following:

- Only students who are registered and in good standing at the college may take the college's classes via CBE
 - § 55050(b): The governing board may grant credit to any student who satisfactorily passes an examination approved or conducted by proper authorities of the college. Such credit may be granted only to a student who is registered at the college and in good standing and only for a course listed in the catalog of the community college.
- The nature and content of the exam must be determined solely by faculty in the discipline who normally teach the course for which credit is to be granted
- The course itself has been approved through the local curriculum committee process
 - § 55050(c): The nature and content of the examination shall be determined solely by faculty in the discipline who normally teach the course for which credit is to be granted in accordance with policies and procedures approved by the curriculum committee established pursuant to section 55002....
- The examination must adequately measure mastery of the course content as set forth in the course outline of record.

§ 55050(c): The faculty shall determine that the examination adequately measures mastery of the course content as set forth in the outline of record. The faculty may accept an examination conducted at a location other than the community college for this purpose.

- A separate examination must be conducted for each college course that is offered via CBE.
 - § 55050(d): A separate examination shall be conducted for each course for which credit is to be granted. Credit may be awarded for prior experience or prior learning only in terms of individually identified courses for which examinations are conducted pursuant to this section.
- The student's grade for a course taken via CBE must follow the regular grading system used by the college, including "pass-no pass" if that option is normally available to students who take the course in the traditional manner [55050(f)].
 - § 55050(f): Grading shall be according to the regular grading system approved by the governing board pursuant to section 55023, except that students shall be offered a "pass-no pass" option if that option is ordinarily available for the course.

The complete Title 5 language pertaining to Credit by Exam is included in Appendix A.

It should be noted that "credit by exam" may not involve an actual "exam." As faculty are empowered to determine the nature of the assessment employed, faculty may opt to use means other than a traditional exam to verify that the course objectives and outcomes are achieved. In some disciplines, for example, a portfolio or skill demonstration using a rubric may be the appropriate means of verifying that the learning that would have been accomplished in the course for which credit is to be awarded has occurred. The means used to determine student mastery of the course content, objectives, and outcomes should be documented and approved by discipline faculty.

CBE and Other Sources of Credit

The fundamental difference between CBE and alternative sources of credit such as military credit or national exams (e.g., AP, IB, CLEP, etc.) is that CBE is a means for students to demonstrate they have mastered the learning that would have been achieved in the college's own courses, while alternative sources of credit are the result of assessments external to the college. In other words, the source of credit from CBE is the college itself rather than an outside agency or service. Therefore, colleges should be as scrupulous in maintaining the quality and integrity of the CBE method of earning credit for their courses as they are of the traditional method.

If a college's course is articulated to a university's course, and credit for the college's course can be earned via CBE, the university is obligated to accept that transcripted credit, treating the credit earned via exam in the same manner that credit earned by taking the course would be treated. In contrast, a university is under no obligation to treat credit awarded by the college for an external exam in the same way as the college. For example, while a community college may award course credit for a specific AP score, the university faculty is not obligated to treat that AP-based credit in the same manner as they would the community college course. But for CBE, if the course in question has been articulated by the university, the university is <u>obligated</u> to accept the exam in lieu of their course because of the articulation agreement. This situation underscores the need to maintain high quality standards in the implementation of CBE. Because the local university may not accept the AP score in lieu of the course, a best practices recommendation is that colleges not establish AP/IB practices that are inconsistent with the universities to which they commonly send students.

To understand CBE, it is helpful to clarify what CBE is <u>not</u>, as described in the following list:

 CBE is not the same as national or international external exams (AP, IB, CLEP, etc.). While both may be used to fulfill requirements for a degree or certificate, CBE is a method of earning credit for the college's own

- courses while external exams may not be aligned with the college's own courses.
- CBE is not the same as military credit or credit from other nontraditional sources, such as life or career experiences. While both may be used to fulfill requirements for a degree or certificate, CBE is a method of earning credit for the college's own courses while military credit or other nontraditional coursework is not the college's own courses.
- CBE is not the same as waiving or substituting degree requirements.
 Waivers or substitutions are methods to relieve a student from completing a particular course or requirement, while CBE is a method to earn credit for the actual course.
- CBE is not typically the same as a prerequisite challenge exam, although
 there may be instances where credit by exam may be awarded for the
 successful challenge of a prerequisite. Prerequisite challenges provide
 the means for students to enroll in a course without passing the required
 prerequisite but still demonstrating the necessary prerequisite
 knowledge and skills. CBE provides the means for a student to earn
 credit for the course.
- CBE is not the same as high school articulation, although credit by exam could be available for courses at the high school that have been articulated. High school articulation, absent CBE, is a way to fulfill major requirements for an associate degree or certificate using previously completed high school coursework; it does not result in college credit. CBE is a way for a currently enrolled college student to demonstrate that they have mastered what they would have learned in a college course; it does result in college credit. (See Alternative Methods for the Awarding Of College Credit: Credit by Examination for Articulated High School Courses. See also Section IV below in local determination and definition of "currently enrolled college student" and "in good standing.).

The California State University system has a policy that considers CBE. See http://www.calstate.edu/EO/EO-1036.html. The relevant paragraph is 2.3: Verification and Evaluation of Learning, Knowledge, or Skills Acquired through Experience

If campus policy permits award of such credit, the experience must be verified through written examinations, portfolios, personal interviews, demonstrations, and/or other appropriate means of documentation and must be evaluated in accord with legitimate academic standards by faculty who are competent in the appropriate disciplines. Supporting information may be supplied by a field supervisor and/or employer.

For further information, explanation, and clarification about these other forms of credit, please go to the ASCCC's California Community College curriculum website at http://www.ccccurriculum.net/.

III. New Trends and Credit by Exam

Interest in ensuring access and increasing efficiency in higher education is always present, but reached a new high during the 2013 legislative session. As a consequence, a bill was passed allowing for the offering of community college courses "at cost" during intersessions (AB 955, Williams, 2013) and new mandates related to associate degrees for transfer were introduced (SB 440, Padilla, 2013). In addition, another proposed bill would have ensured college credit for online educational experienced offered by 3rd parties. Despite diminishing issues with access and new efforts to operate as a coordinated system, finding new ways to move students through the system more quickly to meet accountability targets is likely to continue to be a challenge faced by all segments of education.

While there has long been interest in awarding credit for non-traditional learning experiences, the pressure to offer or identify mechanisms for doing so reached a new high in 2012 when massive open online courses or "MOOCs" began to be touted as a means of making a college education available to anyone with a

computer. MOOCs can offer a high-quality self-directed learning experience and may be designed to align with a community college course. The existence of CBE at the California community colleges was noted as an existing means of awarding credit for non-traditional learning experiences, be that learning from a MOOC or a book. It is imperative that the colleges ensure that CBE is appropriately available and that the exam process is designed to award credit fairly and accurately, as opposed to creating a process that is difficult or onerous for students to complete. The interest in awarding CBE is unlikely to subside in the near future, making it critical that colleges have appropriate opportunities available.

Not only must colleges ensure the availability of appropriate exams, but also the existence of policies regarding credit by exam is critical. Absent limits on credit by exam, for example, the only requirement that a student actually takes any courses at the college is the 12-unit residency requirement established in Title 5 §55063; §55050(g). (See section IV. Local Implementation of Credit by Exam for local considerations in determining a college's Credit by Exam policies.)

Community colleges are experiencing a significant increase in the enrollment of veterans as well as active duty and reserve military personnel. These students have often completed a significant amount of valuable training and education during their military service. In recognition of that fact, all CSU campuses and a large majority of CCC campuses have policies in place to recognize and award credit for military coursework. The military's Joint Service Transcript (JST) and the American Council on Education's Military Guide (the "ACE Guide") are invaluable resources in doing this work; they "translate" military coursework into language easily understood in the field of education. However, a significant challenge remains in determining how to apply military credit toward specific degree requirements. In other words, while most California public institutions recognize and accept military coursework, it usually only applies as general elective credit. This is the case primarily because 1) military training is often

focused on the practical application of course content while college courses usually emphasize the conceptual understanding and critical analysis of course content; and 2) the JST and ACE Guide, while invaluable evaluation tools, often lack the specificity needed to fully determine the comparability of military and college courses. It may well be the case that veterans and service members have, in fact, mastered the content of a specific college course through their military training and subsequent occupational experience, but that fact is not readily apparent in existing ACE documentation.

CBE provides a powerful tool that can address this problem because it provides an alternate means of assessing and documenting student mastery of a college course without the need for the student to "sit through" the class for a semester. In this scenario, the JST and ACE Guide would be used to identify appropriate courses for the student to take CBE; if passed, the student would receive college credit that fulfills the same certificate, degree, transfer/articulation, and other requirements as if the student passed the class via the traditional method.

For example, consider a veteran who completed the Department of Defense Advanced Electronic Journalism course. The ACE Guide description for this course is unlikely to closely match the COR for the college's *Newswriting for Digital Media* course for the reasons stated above. However, the student might still have mastered the content, objectives, and outcomes in the college course through the combined experience of the military course and subsequent work as a military video journalist. In this case, the student might be encouraged to take the CBE examination for the college's course. Upon passing the examination the student would receive college credit that fulfills all degree and transfer requirements met by *Newswriting for Digital Media*. Applying CBE in this way, the student's military coursework and experience can be used to fulfill specific degree requirements rather than just general elective credit.

IV. Local Implementation of Credit by Exam

When implementing credit by exam, faculty and the curriculum committee and the local academic senate, working with the appropriate administrators, must establish local policies and practices that are consistent with the relevant sections of Title 5, while also keeping in mind that Credit by Exam falls under the "10 + 1" areas given the academic senate, including curriculum and grading policies. For example, Title 5 § 55050 (b) states that, "The governing board may grant credit to any student who satisfactorily passes an examination approved or conducted by proper authorities of the college. Such credit may be granted only to a student who is registered at the college and in good standing and only for a course listed in the catalog of the community college." As is often the case, the regulatory language is open to interpretation, allowing for local variations in its implementation. Colleges offering credit by exam must determine how both "registered" and "in good standing" will be defined locally. Varying interpretations of such language have resulted in varied practices across the state.

Title 5 § 55050 does not, however, offer any guidance with respect to a wide array of policy considerations including whether or not students can seek to earn credit by exam for a class in which they were previously enrolled, the number of times a student can attempt credit by exam for the same course, and the maximum number of units that may be attempted and/or completed using credit by exam. The college also needs to establish whether or not credit will be given for a course at a lower level than a course that a student has taken for credit either at that college or another accredited institution. For example, would the college allow a student who has already passed second semester Spanish to later attempt first semester Spanish via CBE? The college needs to determine deadlines as to when a student can request CBE, such as, if the request can only occur during regular semesters or quarters and not in intersessions and up to what point in the semester or quarter can the request be made. The college must also make information about credit by exam publicly available. While this has

always been a best practice, recent legislation (AB 1025, Garcia, 2013) now mandates that community colleges "shall provide information about credit by examination opportunities wherever course and class information is available." [Education Code, 66027.5 (a)]. Finally, the faculty at the college needs to determine the courses for which CBE will be available. It should be noted that the means of assessment may be something other than a traditional exam, especially in areas where demonstration of a skill is a more appropriate means of demonstrating that the course's objectives have been achieved.

In implementing CBE, colleges should pay attention to particular populations, their needs, and necessary processes that can ensure students get the credits they have earned. For example, students who have completed articulated high school career technical education (CTE) courses may be well-prepared for CBE or may have already engaged in a CBE process for which they should be awarded credit. Local practices should be designed to identify such students and either facilitate access to the exam process or ensure that awarded credit is earned. As addressed elsewhere in this paper having the means to award credit for a degree or transfer for military veterans and others could also be furthered through CBE.

All community college faculty members want to help students reach their educational goals. Given the potential for CBE to assist in this effort, local senates have the opportunity and obligation to foster discussion about whether CBE will be used on their campuses, and if so, how. If the local academic senate determines that CBE is appropriate, it or college curriculum committee (if delegated to do so) should set policy and specify procedures for proposing and approving courses for which CBE will be available. Some colleges may agree to leave final approval to discipline faculty while others may choose to require that discipline faculty request a final approval from the college curriculum committee.

In determining which courses discipline faculty might choose to offer CBE, the faculty should also consider criteria or instances when CBE might not be appropriate for certain courses. For instance, if the course structure is an inherent aspect of assessment, then CBE might be inappropriate. Courses with both lecture and lab would need serious discussion as to the means of assessment if discipline faculty chooses to offer CBE. Students should also be made aware of possible negative consequences of CBE, such as the accumulation of too many units or the possibility of earning a less than satisfactory grade in the course based on the CBE results. (NOTE: Title 5 §55050 (f) regarding grading of CBE implies that the CBE grade will be part of the student's GPA.)

In addition, senates should work with their local Board of Trustees to write or update board policy and procedures permitting faculty to grant CBE as appropriate. District and campus CBE policies should be easily accessible on the college web site. These policies should include possible fees. Title 5 § 55050(h) specifies that a fee can be charged for CBE up to the cost of enrollment for the class itself.

The most efficient place to begin may be to simply make sure faculty know Title 5 permits granting CBE to students. Discipline faculty should review their active courses and deliberate which ones' objectives and outcomes could potentially be met through previous life experience as opposed to those with objectives and outcomes that can only be reached in a college classroom environment. It is imperative to use the Course Outline of Record as a central focus of discussion. Per Title 5 the assessment used must measure mastery of content as set forth in the Course Outline of Record, so discipline faculty should come to consensus about whether or not to allow students to earn CBE for a course and the means of assessment. In other words, the nature and content of the assessment used cannot be specific to an individual instructor teaching a particular section of a course.

In terms of the assessment used, time factors need consideration. While a portfolio would not require a specified time allotted, the time provided for a student to take and complete a written exam needs to be thought out. Since the exam needs to be cumulative to incorporate the specified course content, objectives, and outcomes, a traditional two or three-hour final exam time frame may be inadequate. A different time frame may need to be considered if the assessment is based on observation of skills using a specified rubric.

Faculty must also agree on who will administer and grade the assessment, with the goal of consistency from student to student. Because local exam administration and grading will take a significant amount of time and effort, when setting CBE policy senates may wish to require the student to enroll in the course and speak with the instructor or dean about earning CBE before being permitted to take the exam. The policy might also include providing students with a copy of the Course Outline of Record to help them determine whether or not they should attempt taking credit by exam. This may help to avoid large numbers of students requesting to take the local exam on the off chance that they might be able to pass it even though they have no demonstrable prior learning or life experiences to suggest they may have mastery.

Once the courses for which CBE may be earned are identified and approved, this information should be published in the class schedule or on-line. Counselors can also assist by informing students about CBE options when they meet with students who may have adequate prior learning or life experience to demonstrate mastery of a course in their education plan.

Although determining which courses and exams are appropriate for local CBE is the primary responsibility of the faculty, administrators can also facilitate the process for students. For example, faculty may ask deans to assist in reviewing

student requests to take a local exam for credit to verify the student can indeed demonstrate some appropriate prior learning or life experience.

V. Recommendations to local senates and discipline faculty

- Local senates, particularly colleges with large population of students with prior learning from non-collegiate experiences such as military service, need to recommend policy regarding the use of Credit By Exam as a means for students to earn course credit.
- Discipline faculty are the experts who need to determine which courses for which Credit by Exam may be offered and the nature and content of the assessment tools used to determine if students have mastered the course content, objectives, and outcomes.
- Credit by Exam processes must be applied consistently to all students.
- The college should provide students with a copy of the Course Outline of Record to aid them in making the decision whether or not to attempt taking the credit by exam test.
- Credit by Exam processes must be held to the same high standards of quality as the traditional method of passing a course.

VI. Conclusion

Credit by Exam is a viable way for students to earn college credit. Discipline faculty must be the ones to determine the courses for which Credit by Exam is available and the means of assessing student mastery of the course content, objectives, and outcomes. Credit by Exam is a particularly useful tool for students who have already mastered college course content through previous non-collegiate experiences such as work, life experiences, or military training. Finally, in helping students reach their goals and attain success, it is critical to create pathways whether to four-year institutions, careers, or better jobs, and Credit by Exam is one possible option.

Appendix A – Title 5 Regulations

§ 55050. Credit by Examination.

- (a) The governing board of each community college district shall adopt and publish policies and procedures pertaining to credit by examination in accordance with the provisions of this section.
- (b) The governing board may grant credit to any student who satisfactorily passes an examination approved or conducted by proper authorities of the college. Such credit may be granted only to a student who is registered at the college and in good standing and only for a course listed in the catalog of the community college.
- (c) The nature and content of the examination shall be determined solely by faculty in the discipline who normally teach the course for which credit is to be granted in accordance with policies and procedures approved by the curriculum committee established pursuant to section 55002. The faculty shall determine that the examination adequately measures mastery of the course content as set forth in the outline of record. The faculty may accept an examination conducted at a location other than the community college for this purpose.
- (d) A separate examination shall be conducted for each course for which credit is to be granted. Credit may be awarded for prior experience or prior learning only in terms of individually identified courses for which examinations are conducted pursuant to this section.
- (e) The student's academic record shall be clearly annotated to reflect that credit was earned by examination.
- (f) Grading shall be according to the regular grading system approved by the governing board pursuant to section 55023, except that students shall be offered a "pass-no pass" option if that option is ordinarily available for the course.
- (g) Units for which credit is given pursuant to the provisions of this section shall not be counted in determining the 12 semester hours of credit in residence required for an associate degree.
- (h) A district may charge a student a fee for administering an examination pursuant to this section, provided the fee does not exceed the enrollment fee which would be associated with enrollment in the course for which the student seeks credit by examination.

NOTE: Authority cited: Sections 66700 and 70901, Education Code. Reference: Sections 70901 and 70902, Education Code.

APPENDIX B: Implementing Credit by Examination (CBE) Glossary

Credit by Examination (CBE)

Assessments that are "internal" to the college

resulting in college credit fulfilling all requirements associated with the course.

such as a portfolio and/or skill demonstration.

Credit by Examination vs. High
School Articulated Courses

CBE is a way for currently enrolled college student to pass a college course and earn

college credit. Whereas, High school articulation

is a way to fulfill community college

requirements with previously completed high

school courses, but does not result in

college credit.

resulting in college credit granted by a noncollege agency or service; Advance Placement, College Level Examination Program, International

Baccalaureate or military credit.

Mastery of Course Content CBE assessment must reflect mastery

course objectives and student learning outcomes as well as course content.

Prerequisite Challenge A method by which allows a student to

enroll in a class without passing the

required prerequisite. Could be instances where prerequisite challenge

could be awarded CBE credit.

Transcript Annotation CBE credit must be annotated on

transcripts.

Waivers or Substitutions Methods to relieve a student from

completing a particular course or

requirement.

APPENDIX C: Implementing Credit by Examination (CBE) Checklist

Faculty Awareness Are the discipline faculty aware that they

have the ability and responsibility to determine if courses are appropriate for

CBE?

Board Policies Do Board Policies need to be reviewed,

modified and/or developed?

Faculty Determination Discipline Faculty identify which, if any, of

their courses are appropriate for CBE.

CBE Development CBE process must assess course content,

objectives and learning outcomes.

CBE Considerations Negative consequences must be

considered such as too many units and/or

earning less than satisfactory grade.

CBE Decisions College policy needs to address how

administered, grading assessment,

approval process, whether student needs to register for the course, how many times a

course can be taken via CBE, etc

College Documentation Courses available for CBE must be

published in a college document; class schedule, online and/or in the catalog.