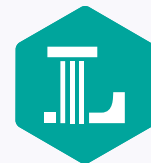# CREDIT RECOVERY

INTRODUCTION

The social and financial repercussions of dropping out of high school are striking. In adulthood, students who do not earn a high school diploma face limited job opportunities, decreased wages, shorter life expectancies, and increased rates of incarceration (Stevens et al., 2016). The restricted potential to earn a living wage is not the least among these consequences.

Thus, to ensure that they reach their maximum potential financially and otherwise, students must continue to progress on their paths to graduation. Those withdrawing from or failing a class tend to experience a snowball effect wherein they struggle to make up lost credits and begin to fall behind in other courses. The weight of such a mounting challenge can leave students dejected, leaving them vulnerable to dropping out of school entirely. The national dropout rate in 2020 was 5.3 percent. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Just as it is unreasonable to expect students to thrive in all courses at all times, it is irrational to expect schools to graduate those struggling to understand course concepts. Ostensibly, schools may combat dropout rates by making courses less rigorous or giving students an automatic pass, but those actions are clearly detrimental. At present, the most popular and promising solution for ensuring struggling students' progress toward graduation is credit recovery.

WHAT IS CREDIT RECOVERY?

The U.S. Department of Education defines credit recovery as a strategy that encourages at-risk students to retake a previously failed course required for high school graduation and earn credit if the student successfully completes the course requirements. It should not be confused with remediation, which is intended to help students catch up.

With even more advantages than the traditional summer school model, such as flexibility and accessibility, online credit recovery courses have exploded in popularity in recent years. At face value, these programs have the potential to be a saving grace for struggling students:

> "Such programs offer students greater flexibility and choice, which results in more opportunities to make up classes and a greater likelihood that students will stay in school and stay on track to graduate" (Stevens et al., 2016).

In the realm of education, the journey doesn't always end when a course concludes. Watson (2015) emphasizes that while students enrolled in credit recovery courses have already fulfilled the original course seat-time requirements in person or online, they must now focus on mastering course concepts, as well as the state and national standards with which they struggled.

CREDIT RECOVERY BY THE NUMBERS

5.3% Dropout rate in 2020
(National Center for Education Statistics, 2020)

89% High schools nationwide offered at least one credit recovery course to students who needed them
(U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

93% Overall completion rate between graduating and earning a GED in 2017
(U.S. Department of Education, 2019)

51% Credit recovery students taught by an online instructor
(U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

71% Students who took credit recovery courses online
(U.S. Department of Education, 2018)

CREDIT RECOVERY IN AN ONLINE SETTING

Influenced by the rapid growth of technology and accessible media—and harnessing the potential for enhanced education practices and cost-saving opportunities—online K-12 education has experienced an unprecedented surge, particularly through the COVID-19 pandemic. Many public and private schools now offer some type of virtual option to prevent mass transfers to online schools. Traditional schools are purchasing online curriculum at greater rates in order to offer options for students to learn remotely.

As such, there has been an increase in online credit recovery enrollment. Districts and students find online credit recovery options appealing for their practical nature and flexible, competency-based structure; nonetheless, such online credit recovery programs are not without their detractors (Hughes et al., 2015). DePaoli et al. (2016) surmise that, as schools across the nation diversify their credit recovery options, their performance and results must be monitored to determine whether schools are "part of the solution or a wrong turn on the path" to graduation.

PROBLEMS & PROMISE OF ONLINE CREDIT RECOVERY

Problems

According to Hughes et al. (2015), although online credit recovery is a thriving sector of education, little research exists to analyze the effectiveness of these courses. The limited research that exists is not exactly glowing, however.

Because they do not necessarily equate to improved postsecondary preparedness, rising high school graduation rates have inspired skepticism about how schools are calculating student progress. These rates also draw concerns regarding struggling students being transferred to credit recovery programs—including those online— that may lack rigor and accountability (DePaoli et al., 2016).

"Among the worst offenders in this regard are some products and programs that call themselves 'online.' These are often computer-based software programs that are low-cost, have very low levels (if any) of teacher involvement, and require very little of students in demonstrating proficiency. They are used primarily because they are inexpensive, and they allow schools to say students have 'passed' whether they have learned anything or not." - Watson et al. (2015)

In "Raising the Bar: The Promise and Pitfalls of Online Credit Recovery," Terrence Falk (2017) notes that although 75 percent of high schools have integrated online credit recovery options and graduation rates are soaring, some lesser online credit recovery programs have shown to have a considerable negative impact on students' education.

Discouraging higher education institutions from accepting students with online recovery credits, these problematic programs shortchange students by:

Lowering the Bar for Passing

In Los Angeles, one online credit recovery program proved to be ineffective. It required students to gain a grade of just 60 percent to pass a course. Students enrolled in the program could skip through content sections and avoid answering the more challenging or time-consuming questions (Falk, 2017).

Sacrificing Rigor for Cost

Schools frequently "get what they pay for" in online education. Low-cost alternatives lack the rigor, interactivity, and ultimately the effectiveness of a more robust credit recovery program (Watson et al., 2015).

Limiting Student-Instructor Interaction

Possibly the most critiqued facet of poor online credit recovery programs is the missed opportunity for enrolled students to have active instructors who provide timely, satisfactory feedback. Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, and Barbour (2013) determined that the quality and frequency of teacher-student interaction have a "significant impact" on course completion.

Accountability in Credit Recovery Programs

Programs lacking in accountability do not have to tarnish all online credit recovery options, however. In "Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery: Getting Back on Track to Graduation," Watson et al. (2015) discuss the benefits of rigorous, engaging online credit recovery programs, noting that a stark contrast exists between those aforementioned problematic options

and programs of quality. Top-tier programs leading students to genuine credit recovery take advantage of an innovative learning environment and the potential for truly personalized learning.

Promise

Although its road to legitimacy has been a rocky one, online credit recovery has promise. Rigorous, interactive programs that hold themselves, their instructors, and their students accountable can enhance student learning and promote higher graduation rates.

More than ever, the student population enrolled in online courses is varied, and no single approach to credit recovery can satisfy the needs of all at-risk students (Watson et al., 2015). DePaoli et al. (2016) suggest, "It should be noted that many of these schools exist to serve a vulnerable student population, and therefore deal with significant challenges that can make it difficult to get students on track to graduation in four years." Watson et al. (2015) concur, suggesting that, as the online student body evolves and diversifies, so too must the online credit recovery system.

Bucking the trends of problematic programs, quality credit recovery options must raise the bar for student performance, provide a challenging and engaging curriculum at a reasonable price, and encourage interaction between students and instructors, which includes the sharing of extensive and timely feedback. In "Using Online Learning for Credit Recovery: Getting Back on Track to Graduation," Watson et al. (2015) note that quality online credit recovery programs must flourish in two areas: student support and academic rigor.

Student Support

- Encourages student structure, motivation, and inspiration
- Provides academic interventions, tailors content, and identifies skills gaps
- Monitors student progress and provides regular interaction with skilled, knowledgeable professionals and mentors
- Offers extended support hours

Academic Rigor

- Encourages student accountability
- Engages student-to-student interaction
- Uses multimodal content and various instructional strategies to encourage deep learning and practice
- Allows students to advance to increasingly difficult material and develop readiness for college

LINCOLN EMPOWERED CREDIT RECOVERY

Brittany Janectic (2023), Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs at Lincoln Learning Solutions, explained that the organization's credit recovery program drives efficient content proficiency and increased graduation rates. Lincoln Learning Solutions' goal, she said, is to enable struggling students to "revisit the content, spend an appropriate amount of time on the content, focus on those concepts that were either too complex or complicated at first exposure, and offer a means for successful obtainment of both the content and the credit."

To ensure successful credit recovery, the Lincoln Empowered program uses objective-based assessment items to provide pre-mastery and post-mastery verification. Designed to expedite the credit recovery process, these multimodal courses give students the opportunity to skip known material and focus their time and effort on problem areas. After students complete the validated pre-mastery assessments, they are able to tailor their courses to address individual needs, bypassing—or being excused from—all course material corresponding to content anchors or standards for which they earned a grade of 80 percent or higher.

To complete the course, students must earn a passing score on all post-mastery assessments, demonstrate deep critical thinking, and show accountability for their academic achievement. Furthermore, exhibiting the student support characteristics put forth by Watson et al. (2015), Lincoln Learning Solutions' certified teachers monitor progress, conduct academic interventions, and provide substantial feedback at all points along students' credit recovery journeys.

CREDIT RECOVERY COURSE LIST

Lincoln Learning Solutions offers a diverse selection of credit recovery courses.

English Language Arts

- English Language Arts 9
- English Language Arts 10
- American Literature
- British Literature
- Short Stories
- Technical Writing

Mathematics

- Pre-Algebra
- Algebra I
- Algebra II
- Applied Mathematics
- Business Mathematics
- Calculus
- Consumer Mathematics
- Geometry
- Pre-Calculus

Science

- Astronomy
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Earth Science
- Environmental Science
- Fundamentals of Ecology
- Physics
- Physical Science

Social Studies

- 1960s America
- Civics and Government
- U.S. History I
- U.S. History II
- World Cultures
- Economics
- World History

State History Content

- Pennsylvania History

Wellness and Nutrition

- Health

Click here to see our most up-to-date Credit Recovery course list.

CONCLUSION

To lower national dropout rates, credit recovery programs must ensure that students quickly and effectively master concepts and standards, recover course credits, and stay on track toward graduation. Despite its detractors and the inferior programs that have damaged its reputation, online credit recovery remains the most flexible, cost-effective, and promising option for students to obtain lost credits.

Selecting an online credit recovery curriculum demands schools' discernment to achieve authentic content mastery. The ideal programs should embody rigor, multimodal approaches, and personalization while maintaining accountability for the student and the program toward achieving student success. Moreover, these programs excel in providing unmatched student support, consistently monitoring and motivating students throughout every phase of the credit recovery journey. With exceptional offerings such as Lincoln Empowered Credit Recovery, online credit recovery emerges as a valuable tool in unlocking and maximizing student potential, paving the way for their success.

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