

# The CORE Initiative

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**Recommendations and Guidance from the  
CORE Working Group for Associate Degree Design**

**May 2022**

## INTRODUCTION

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The Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) Initiative was created under [House Bill 21-1330](#) (see Appendix C for relevant bill text). The CORE initiative enables four-year institutions of higher education in Colorado to award associate degrees to eligible students who have stopped-out from a baccalaureate program. In enacting HB21-1330, the Colorado Legislature recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic forced many students – particularly those from low-income communities – to stop attending the state’s colleges and universities before attaining a bachelor’s degree. These former students have invested a significant amount of time and money to advance their knowledge and skills through higher education, but do not have an academic credential to reflect this investment. Awarding an earned associate degree in recognition of academic credits already completed can boost earning potential, open new employment opportunities, and increase the likelihood that an individual will return to higher education and complete a bachelor’s degree. To support four-year institutions in implementing the CORE program, The Colorado Legislature has appropriated \$1 million in funding from the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).

Data gathered by the Colorado Department of Higher Education indicates over 19,000 Coloradans may be eligible for an associate degree under CORE. By offering qualifying stop-out students an earned associate degree for credits already completed, institutions participating in CORE can:

- Enable degree recipients to obtain higher paying jobs and more secure employment, which will improve economic prospects for these former students and their communities.
- Increase the number of Coloradans with academic credentials and degrees, which will strengthen the state’s workforce and support the economic recovery of the business community.
- Better position degree recipients to return to higher education to complete a bachelor’s degree or higher.
- Help ensure taxpayer money allocated to support public universities leads to positive outcomes for students and for the state overall.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education convened the CORE Working Group to interpret the legislation and identify the specific steps necessary to successfully establish and administer the program state-wide. This document represents the Working Group’s recommendations and guidance for four-year institutions that chose to participate in the CORE Initiative.

## DOCUMENT SCOPE AND CONTENTS

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The CORE Working Group is comprised of subject matter experts from four-year institutions, two-year colleges, local district colleges, and system offices. The Working Group was established to represent the views and interests of provosts, registrars, and academic affairs officers from across the state.

During the first meeting of the Working Group in December 2021, members agreed upon a set of deliverables that would help launch the CORE Initiative and guide institutions in awarding associate degrees to qualifying students. The structure and contents of this document are intended to align with those primary deliverables.

Section 1 - Student Eligibility Criteria

Section 2 - Associate Degree Types Awarded

Section 3 - Curricular and Credit Requirements

Section 4 - Institutional Authority to Award Associate Degrees

Section 5 - Reporting Requirements

### 1. Student Eligibility Criteria

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The intent of the CORE program is to award an earned credential to students who were previously enrolled in a baccalaureate program and earned enough credits for an associate degree, but stopped attending before attaining a bachelor's degree. A 4-year institution participating in CORE cannot allow a student to enroll with the intent of obtaining an associate degree. Nor can a 4-year institution offer programs designed to lead to associate degrees. This section provides an overview of each student eligibility criterion specified in the legislation, as well as interpretation and recommendations developed by the Working Group.

**Student must have earned at least 70 credit hours**

**From CRS 23-1-131.5 (5) (a) (III)**

*To receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative, a student must have earned at least seventy credit hours, which credits must include completion of the institution's general education core course requirements and completion of all other courses required for an associate degree program approved by the commission.*

### **Working Group Interpretation and Recommendations:**

- The required 70 credit hours may have been awarded by multiple institutions.
- At least 15 of the earned credits must have been earned from the awarding four-year institution, to establish institutional residency.
- For an overview of working group guidance regarding general education credit requirements - see Section 3 of this document.

### **Student cannot have been enrolled for at least two semesters**

#### **From CRS 23-1-131.5 (5) (a) (III)**

*To receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative, a student must not have been enrolled in the institution for at least two consecutive semesters.*

### **Working Group Interpretation and Recommendations:**

- Only the fall and spring terms should be counted as “semesters” for this eligibility requirement. Summer session, “Winter”, “Maymester”, etc. should not count as semesters for determining student eligibility for CORE, because these are not typically regarded as a semester by the Colorado higher education community. This definition should be used uniformly by all institutions participating in CORE.
- A student can be confirmed as “not enrolled for at least two consecutive semesters” as soon as the institution completes the main census date for the second consecutive semester (fall or spring).

### **Student must have stopped-out within the last 10 years**

#### **From CRS 23-1-131.5 (4) (b)**

*An institution may award an associate degree to an eligible student through the CORE initiative for up to ten academic years after the last semester in which the eligible student enrolled at the institution.*

### **Working Group Interpretation and Recommendations:**

- Student can have stopped out from the awarding institution no more than 20 semesters prior to the current semester.
- A participating institution is obligated award an associate degree to any qualifying student who requests consideration and stopped out up to 10 years earlier. A participating institution should not establish a shorter timeframe.

## No "direct transfer" from a 2-year institution

### **From CRS 23-1-131.5 (5) (a) (I)**

*To receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative, a student must not have transferred to the institution directly from an institution governed by the state board of community colleges and occupational education.*

### **From CRS 23-1-131.5 (5) (b)**

*Notwithstanding any provision of this section to the contrary, a student who is eligible to receive an associate degree through a program authorized in section 23-1-131 [the Reverse Transfer program] is not eligible to receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative.*

### **Working Group Interpretation and Recommendations:**

- "Direct transfer", for purposes of CORE eligibility, is defined as a student who earned 15 or more credits at a Colorado community college prior to enrolling in a 4-year institution
- A student who established institutional residency by earning 15 or more credits at a community college would be eligible for Colorado's Reverse Transfer program and therefore cannot be eligible for CORE.
- Concurrent enrollment credits earned through a community college while in high school do not count toward the 15 community college credits.
- Credits earned at an out-of-state community college do not count towards direct transfer.

## 2. Associate Degree Types Awarded

The narrative of CRS 23-1-131.5 does not specify the type of associate degree(s) to be awarded under the CORE Initiative. Similarly, the statute has no requirement that all participating institutions award the same type of associate degree or that a participating institution is limited to awarding only one associate degree type.

In developing recommendations regarding the type of associate degree(s) institutions should consider awarding, the Working Group attempted to strike a balance between three important factors:

1. The flexibility to award an earned credential to as many qualified individuals as possible.
2. Ensuring students receive a credential of value - in terms of earnings, employability, and/or transferability to a baccalaureate program.
3. Demonstration of high academic standards on the part of the awarding institution.

The group considered these factors in reviewing outcomes data for different degree types, including the Associate of Arts (AA), Associate of Science (AS), Associate of General Studies (AGS), and Associate of Applied Science (AAS). AA and AS degrees with designation in an academic discipline (DwD) were also considered (such as an AA in Architectural Studies or an AS in Psychology).

	flexibility of curriculum	employability and income potential	transferability to bachelor's
Associate of General Studies			
Associate of Arts / Associate of Science			
AA or AS degree with designation (DwD)			
Associate of Applied Science			

It is important to note that, on average, individuals with an associate degree *of any type* earn more and experience a lower unemployment rate (see Appendix A) compared to individuals with only a high school diploma. This finding supports the central premise of the CORE legislation and demonstrates the value, importance, and urgency of awarding an associate degree to students who qualify.

The Associate of Applied Science is a technical and specialized degree program which typically requires more than the standard 60 credits for an associate degree and includes a large number of required courses specific to the program of study. Similarly, AA and AS degrees with distinction (DwD) programs typically have a comparatively large and rigid set of required courses. It is therefore unlikely that a stop-out student who might otherwise be eligible for the CORE program will have accrued the type and number of credits required for these degrees.

The two remaining degree types for consideration are the associate of arts or science (without designation) and the associate of general studies. Both degree options typically require completion of 60 credit hours but differ in the number and type of required courses versus electives that make up those 60 credits. By design, an AA or AS provides broad opportunities for future transfer to a baccalaureate program. However, much of this transferability stems from a statewide requirement that students complete at least 31 credits from Colorado's Guaranteed Transfer Pathways (GT Pathways) curriculum for all AA and AS degrees. In contrast, an AGS offers more limited transferability, but allows much greater flexibility in terms of required coursework - with only 15 GT Pathways courses typically required.

Each participating institution can make local decisions regarding the type of associate degree(s) to be awarded under CORE. Institutions can also decide to initially offer one type of degree option to launch the CORE program, then add additional degree type offerings later. The Working Group recommends that all participating institutions offer the Associate of General Studies degree as a "baseline" option.

The AGS degree requires a lower number of general education credits (typically 15) and allows greater flexibility in terms of required elective courses and program-specific courses. Therefore, CORE-eligible former students are much more likely to fulfill the requirements for an Associate of General Studies than any other type of associate degree. <sup>[CITATION]</sup> In terms of the value of the degree, DHE data show only marginal differences in annual wages for AGS recipients compared to AA or AS recipients. This is true for wages 1-year, 5-years, and 10-years after receiving the degree (see Appendix A).

If a participating institution determines that offering an associate of arts and/or associate of science option - in addition to the AGS - would benefit a significant number of students who could qualify for such a degree, the statute provides the option to award multiple associate degree types under the CORE initiative.

### 3. Curricular and Credit Requirements

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Statute calls for the seventy credit hours required for CORE eligibility to “include completion of the institution’s general education CORE course requirements and completion of all other courses required for an associate degree program approved by the Commission.” The Working Group has interpreted this to mean that four-year institutions will need to specify the following before seeking authorization to award any new associate degree type under the CORE initiative:

- The number of General Education credits required
- General Education credits required by category (Written Communication, Mathematics, etc.)
- Any other course or credit requirements beyond General Education minimums

Working Group recommendations for setting these requirements for each degree type are presented below.

#### **Associate of General Studies**

##### General Education Credits

- To be eligible for an AGS degree under CORE, at least 15 of the former student’s earned credits should have been earned by completing state-recognized General Education courses with a grade of C- or higher. Participating institutions are encouraged to also specify, within the 15 General Education credits, the number and type of credits required by category. For example: # written communications credits, # mathematics credits, # natural & physical sciences credits, etc.)
- Nothing in the statute or in these guidelines requires that all 15 of the General Education credits must have been earned from the institution awarding the degree.
- Nothing in the statute or in these guidelines requires that all 15 of the General Education credits must be from guaranteed transfer (GT Pathways) courses.

##### Other course or credit requirements

- Other specific courses or credits for the AGS (beyond the 15 general education credits) can be stipulated at the discretion of the awarding institution but are not required under the statute.

## Associate of Arts or Associate of Science - without designation

### General Education Credits

- To qualify for an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree under CORE, a student must have earned a minimum of 31 credits from GT Pathways-designated courses. This requirement aligns with current minimum standards for all AA and AS degrees in Colorado. These state standards also specify the number and type of GT Pathways courses and credits required by category, including Written Communications, Mathematics, History, Arts & Humanities, Social & Behavioral Sciences, and Natural & Physical Sciences. A full listing of GT Pathways requirements is available at:  
[https://highered.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/2020-03/gt-pathways-checklist\\_0.pdf](https://highered.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/2020-03/gt-pathways-checklist_0.pdf)
- Nothing in the statute or in these guidelines requires that all 31 of the GT Pathways credits must have been earned at the institution awarding the degree.

### Other course or credit requirements

Additional course or credit requirements for an AA or AS, such as a minimum number of credits from an institution-approved elective list or additional GT Pathways or General Education credits, can be stipulated at the discretion of the awarding institution. However, these are not required under the statute and are not recommended by the Working Group.

## 4. Institutional Authority to Award Associate Degrees

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### **Authorization from the Higher Learning Commission**

Any four-year college or university planning to participate in the CORE initiative must obtain authorization to grant associate degrees from the institution's accrediting agency. The Working Group and CDHE staff have met with a representative from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) to discuss how the authorization request process will apply to the CORE Initiative:

- The Higher Learning Commission recently introduced an Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation which can reduce the time from application to initial accreditation to as little as six months. Eligible institutions can use this new accelerated process to apply for the authorization to award associate degrees under the CORE program (see Appendix B for eligibility requirements).
- HLC has agreed to allow Colorado to submit a "batch application" for all institutions planning to participate in CORE. This batch application approach will allow CDHE staff to pre-populate or develop suggested content for many of the questions on the program application. CDHE will also cover all related HLC fees for institutions that apply for Initial Accreditation during the 2022-23 academic year.
- An institution can request the authority to award multiple associate degree "types" through HLC. Once the first associate degree type is approved (the Working Group recommends the Associate of General Studies as the initial degree offering), a second degree can be added through a relatively simple panel or desk review. A third degree requires an HLC panel or desk review approval and a change of mission form.

### **Institutional Residency Requirement**

A student stop-out must have earned at least 15 credits from a single 4-year institution for that institution to award a CORE associate degree. This is consistent with existing state requirements to establish institutional residency for associate degree-seeking students. In cases where a former student has completed 15 or more credits at multiple 4-year institutions in Colorado, the 4-year institution where the student most recently demonstrated institutional residency should award the associated degree.

## 5. Reporting Requirements

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Subsections 4 and 6 of CRS 23-1-131.5 establish a set of basic requirements for institutions participating in the CORE initiative:

- Providing to the Department of Higher Education contact information for eligible students, if available
- Issuing an associate degree upon the request of an eligible student and advising the student of opportunities to re-enroll at the institution to complete the baccalaureate degree program
- Reporting to the Department, by August 1 each year:
  - The number of eligible students to whom the institution awarded an associate degree
  - The types of associate degrees awarded
  - The number of students who re-enrolled in the institution after receiving an associate degree through the CORE initiative.

The CORE Initiative is funded by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA). Federal ARPA requirements stipulate that all individuals receiving funding under the Act must attest to have experienced negative economic impact due to COVID 19. An affirmation statement, developed by the Office of State Planning and Budgeting (OSPB), must be signed by any individual who receives an associate degree through the CORE initiative:

"I attest that I have experienced an economic loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as lost or adverse changes in employment, increased food or housing insecurity, had to withdraw from college after March 13, 2020 or suffered another form of economic loss."

The signed attestation statements should be collected and stored by the awarding institution. Rather than requiring copies of the individual affirmation statements, CDHE will require a single signed form from each institution to accompany the August 1 reporting listed above. This form will confirm that all students awarded a CORE degree met the ARPA requirements.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Associate Degree Types

### **Associate of Applied Science (AAS)**

For students who plan to enter the workforce upon completion of program. Prepares students for a career in a technical, occupational or professional occupation. Emphasis is placed on technical, professional and career training throughout the program.

### **Transfer Degrees (AA: Associate of Arts and AS: Associate of Science)**

For students intending to continue at a four-year college or university. Allows a student enroll with junior status at a Colorado university and complete the bachelor's degree in no more than an additional 60 credits (a total of 120 credits).

### **Associate of General Studies (AGS)**

For students who wish to pursue a broad program of career and transfer coursework without the constraints of subject specialization. There are also emphasis areas within the AGS degree which enable students to pursue a particular academic interest in greater depth. While the A.G.S. degree is not designed specifically to enable transfer to a four-year institution, it can be used for that purpose. Transferability depends upon the courses taken and the requirements of the receiving institution. All community colleges in Colorado offer an AGS degree.

Source: Colorado Community College System <https://www.cccs.edu/new-students/degrees-and-certificates/>

## Appendix A: Associate Degree Types

Number of Associate Degrees Awarded by Colorado Community Colleges in 2020-21, by Degree Type

	Number of Awards 2020-2021	Degree Type as Pct. of All CCCS Assoc. Degrees
<b>Associate of Applied Science</b>	2,982	37.1%
<b>Associate of Arts</b>	2,764	34.4%
<b>Associate of Science</b>	1,088	13.5%
<b>Associate of General Studies</b>	1,203	15.0%
<b>total</b>	<b>8,037</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Adapted from Colorado Community College System data:  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b4NUd39Zibgp7yGagoYRhQbSGSC8pR7V/view>

# Appendix A: Associate Degree Types

How do different associate degree “types” benefit recipients in terms of median annual earnings?



Source: CDHE Postsecondary Degree Earnings Outcomes Tools  
<https://higher.ed.colorado.gov/postsecondary-degree-earnings-outcomes-tools>  
 Retrieved February 9, 2022

# Appendix A: Associate Degree Types

How do different associate degree types benefit recipients in terms of employment opportunities?

Unemployment Rate by Educational Attainment



U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate - Bachelor's Degree and Higher, 25 Yrs. & over [LNS14027662], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=50&eid=1197512#snid=1197521> Retrieved February 14, 2022.

## Appendix B

### Recent Change: Accelerated Process

HLC's Board also voted to create an Accelerated Process for Initial Accreditation for certain institutions. An institution is eligible for the accelerated process if it:

- Is accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the US Department of Education and historically known as a regional accreditor
- Has been accredited by its current institutional accrediting agency for at least the past 10 years or has undergone a reaffirmation of accreditation review with its current institutional accrediting agency in the past 2 years that did not result in a sanction or similar negative action
- Has not been placed on a sanction, show-cause order, or other similar negative action with its current institutional accrediting agency for at least the past 10 years.



### Seeking Accreditation With HLC: Two Processes



# Appendix C

CORE Initiative text from HOUSE BILL 21-1330

**SECTION 6.** In Colorado Revised Statutes, **add** 23-1-131.5 as follows:

**23-1-131.5. Commission directive - Colorado Re-Engaged (CORE) initiative - four-year institutions - associate degrees - report - definitions.**

(1) as used in this section, unless the context otherwise requires:

(a) "Colorado re-engaged initiative" or "CORE initiative" means the initiative created in this section to authorize institutions to award associate degrees to eligible students.

(b) "eligible student" means an undergraduate student who meets the criteria specified in subsection (5) of this section.

(c) "institution of higher education" or "institution" means a local district college operating pursuant to Article 71 of this Title 23 or a state institution of higher education as defined in section 23-18-102 (10)(a), but not including an institution governed by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education.

(2) there is created in the Department the Colorado Re-Engaged, or CORE, initiative to authorize institutions of higher education to award associate degrees, notwithstanding an institution's role and mission, to eligible students who enroll in baccalaureate degree programs and earn at least seventy credit hours in the programs, but withdraw from the institutions before attaining the baccalaureate degree. The goal of awarding an associate degree through the CORE initiative is to increase a student's earning potential by granting the student a degree, making it more likely the student will re-enroll and complete a baccalaureate degree or higher.

(3) the Commission shall collaborate with the institutions of higher education to develop and coordinate a process to identify eligible students and award associate degrees through the CORE initiative. To implement the CORE initiative, the role of the Department is to:

(a) publicize the CORE initiative, including the eligibility requirements that a student must meet to obtain an associate degree through the CORE initiative as described in subsection (5) of this section; and

(b) work with the institutions to identify eligible students and notify those eligible students of their eligibility to obtain an associate degree through the CORE initiative and the process for doing so.

Definitions

Authorization & Purpose

CDHE Role

(4) (a) the role of an institution that chooses to participate in the CORE initiative is limited to:

- (i) providing to the department contact information for eligible students, if available;
- (ii) determining whether an eligible student qualifies for an associate degree based on earned credits and courses taken;
- (iii) issuing an associate degree upon the request of an eligible student and advising the student of opportunities to re-enroll at the institution to complete the baccalaureate degree program; and
- (iv) submitting to the department the information described in subsection (6) of this section.

(b) an institution that chooses to participate in the CORE initiative must obtain approval from the institution's accrediting agency to grant associate degrees through the CORE initiative. An institution may award an associate degree to an eligible student through the CORE initiative for up to ten academic years after the last semester in which the eligible student enrolled at the institution.

(c) an institution that chooses to participate in the CORE initiative shall not allow a student to enroll in the institution to obtain an associate degree and shall not offer programs that are designed to lead to associate degrees; except that this subsection (4)(c) does not apply to a local district college, Adams State University, Fort Lewis College with regard to the authority granted in section 23-52-101 (2)(a), and Colorado Mesa University. the associate degrees issued by institutions through the CORE initiative shall not be considered in determining an institution's funding pursuant to part 3 of Article 18 of this Title 23.

(5) (a) to receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative, a student must:

- (i) not have transferred to the institution directly from an institution governed by the State Board of Community Colleges and Occupational Education;
- (ii) not have been enrolled in the institution for at least two consecutive semesters; and
- (iii) have earned at least seventy credit hours, which credits must include completion of the institution's general education CORE course requirements and completion of all other courses required for an associate degree program approved by the Commission.

(b) notwithstanding any provision of this section to the contrary, a student who is eligible to receive an associate degree through a program authorized in section 23-1-131 is not eligible to receive an associate degree through the CORE initiative.

(6) each institution that chooses to participate in the CORE initiative shall, by August 1, 2022, and by August 1 each year thereafter, report to the department the number of eligible students to whom the institution awarded an associate degree through the CORE initiative, the types of associate degrees awarded through the CORE initiative, and the number of students who re-enrolled in the institution after receiving an associate degree through the CORE initiative. the department shall review and compile the annual reports and, by January 15, 2025, submit to the education committees of the senate and the house of representatives, or any successor committees, a report concerning implementation of the CORE initiative, including, to the extent discernable, the degree to which students who receive associate degrees through the CORE initiative re-enroll in an institution to complete a baccalaureate degree. the department may also include in the report recommendations for changes to the CORE initiative, including recommendations for incentives to encourage institutions to participate in the CORE initiative.

[CORE fact sheet from CDHE](#)

[Full HB21-1330 Bill as approved](#)