



ABILITY TO BENEFIT

USER GUIDE



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This guide was produced with generous support from the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP). The information contained in this guide is intended to serve as an introduction to the provisions of Ability to Benefit and the steps required to successfully align college services with local and regional partners.

What is Ability to Benefit?

Ability to Benefit (ATB) is a provision in the Higher Education Act (HEA) that allows a student who has not received a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent to be eligible for Title IV Federal student aid, including Federal Pell Grants.

To gain eligibility for Federal student aid through ATB, a student who has no high school diploma or its recognized equivalent must complete one of three ATB alternatives and enroll in an ATB eligible career pathway program. The three ATB alternatives include:

1. The student receives a passing score on one of the Department of Education approved ATB tests. In Wisconsin, the ACCUPLACER is commonly used for determining ATB eligibility.
2. The student completes at least six credit hours or 225 clock hours that are applicable toward a Title IV-eligible degree or certificate offered by the postsecondary institution.
3. The student completes Wisconsin's State-defined process approved by the Secretary of Education. The Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) has received approval from the Department of Education for the Wisconsin State-defined process through April 20, 2028.

Why Should Wisconsin's Technical Colleges Expand the Use of ATB?

ATB is a catalyst for educational and workforce equity. In Wisconsin, over 339,000 adults do not have a high school diploma¹. Wisconsinites without a high school diploma experience higher rates of unemployment and are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty compared to those with a high school diploma². ATB creates inclusive opportunities for education and career advancement and benefits the Wisconsin community for several reasons including:

- **Expanded Access to Education.** ATB opens doors for individuals who have not completed high school but have the desire to pursue higher education.
- **Enhanced Financial Support.** ATB provides the opportunity for eligible students to access Federal student aid, which mitigates financial barriers to engaging in the education system. Enhanced financial support, such as need-based Federal Pell Grants to cover the cost of tuition and living expenses, provides aid to eligible students who might not otherwise afford college.
- **Accelerated Career Pathways Engagement.** ATB provides bridges to economic mobility through the attainment of high school and college credentials, making it easier for students to enter the workforce with relevant and in-demand skills.
- **Widened Workforce Pipeline.** ATB provides Wisconsinites without a high school diploma or equivalent a pathway to industry-validated credentials and the Wisconsin workforce with a talent pipeline that supports their needs.

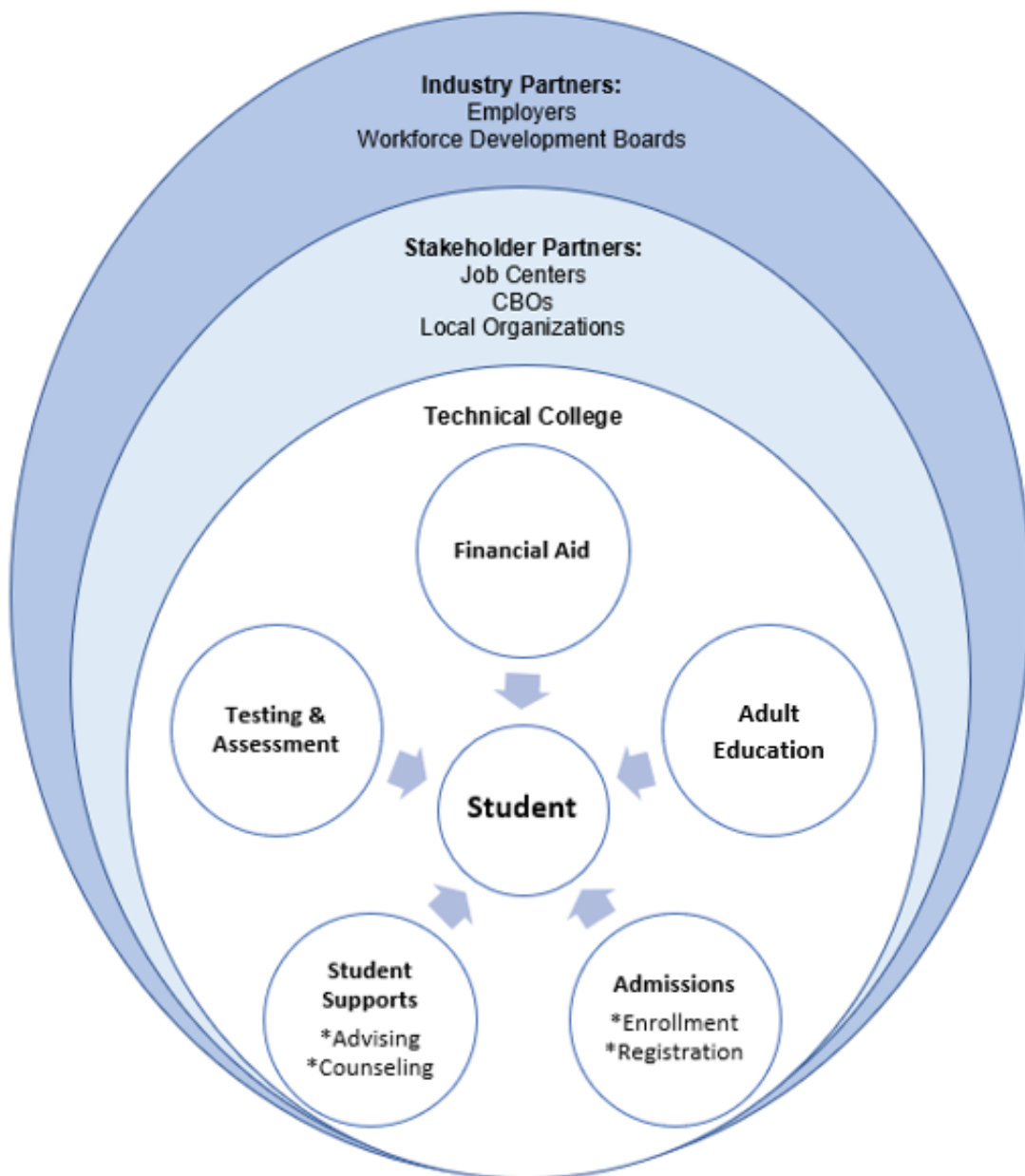
¹ S1501 – US Census Bureau Table

² B17003 – US Census Bureau Table

Developing an ATB Steering Committee

Institutional support is key to the success and sustainability of ATB. An ATB steering committee can support local implementation, scaling, and improvement of ATB processes. When building an ATB steering committee, it is important to consider the student experience, and which internal and external partners will contribute to a successful ATB student experience. As presented in Figure 1, an ATB steering committee might include representatives from Financial Aid, Adult Education, Admissions, Student Supports, Testing & Assessment, existing students, and various external partners. Prospective ATB students are likely to interact with one or more areas of the college. A diverse cross-functional approach can create a united institution that ensures students have access to consistent information and positive experiences as they begin or continue their education.

Figure 1: ATB Steering Committee Representation



ATB Planning Tool

The ATB Planning Tool has been developed to help colleges establish a baseline for alignment of their internal and external processes related to ATB. The tool presents a series of practices, which are organized as internal and external considerations. Colleges are encouraged to convene their local ATB steering committee (see Figure 1 of the ATB User Guide) and use the ATB Planning Tool as a resource to facilitate dialogue related to the current status of ATB implementation and next steps for enhancement.



ATB Planning Tool

Internal Considerations	Current State: <i>Note the current state of this element.</i>	Not Applicable	No Action Yet	In Progress	Implemented	Next Steps: <i>Note next action steps for enhancing this element.</i>
<i>Internal Elements to Consider</i>						
a. The college has leadership support to fully utilize the provisions of Ability to Benefit (ATB).						
b. The college has a mechanism to engage all parts of the institution around a collaborative strategy to expand the use of ATB.						
c. The college offers academic support services such as tutoring, study skills training, and mentoring to support ATB students.						
d. The college has a mechanism to inform ATB students of available support services.						

Internal Considerations	Current State: <i>Note the current state of this element.</i>	Not Applicable	No Action Yet	In Progress	Implemented	Next Steps: <i>Note next action steps for enhancing this element.</i>
e. The college's processes are aligned in such a way that all potential ATB students can quickly and efficiently find the information they need to achieve their educational goals (i.e. internal and external support services).						
f. The college has a process to monitor ATB student progress toward completing their high school equivalency and program requirements.						
g. The college has connections with community and/or workforce partners to assist ATB students in accessing wrap-around support services outside the college such as financial support, scholarships, childcare assistance, transportation assistance, food assistance, and healthcare assistance.						

External Considerations	Current State: <i>Note the current state of this element.</i>	Not Applicable	No Action Yet	In Progress	Implemented	Next Steps: <i>Note next action steps for enhancing this element.</i>
External Elements to Consider						
a. The college has a community engagement process and has identified the key stakeholders in the workforce, industry, and the community that benefit ATB students.						
b. The college has a process in place to engage stakeholders for outreach and referral of students who could benefit from ATB.						
c. The college has a strategy or plan to strengthen and maintain partnerships with external stakeholders that benefit ATB students.						
d. The college has a strategy or plan to engage business and other industry stakeholders to ensure that ATB options align with in-demand career pathways.						
e. ATB options are promoted externally and in collaboration with the college marketing department.						

Example Resources to Support ATB Processes

Wisconsin's technical colleges are actively implementing ATB. The following resources (i.e., ATB Checklist and ATB Student Agreement) have been retrieved from a state scan of ATB processes and may be helpful to college ATB steering committees as they enhance ATB at their institution.

ATB Checklist

Student Name: _____ Email: _____

Student ID: _____

Advisor: _____ HS Completion Option: 5.04 5.05 5.06 5.07 5.09

Activity	Who's Responsible	Initials & Date Completed
Complete AE First Steps to Success Orientation	Student	
Determine Eligible Career Pathway Program:	Student and Advisor	
Apply for Admission (fee waiver form)	Student and Advisor	
Determine path to apply for Ability to Benefit: Six (6) credits OR ATB Test OR State Option	Student and Advisor	

ATB Alternative – Six Credit Option

ATB – six (6) credits of post-secondary coursework	Who's Responsible	Initials & Date Completed
Determine if prior six (6) credits of post-secondary coursework qualify	Student and Advisor	
Print and attach unofficial transcript with classes that qualify	Student and Advisor	
Review documentation with Financial Aid office representative	Student and Fin Aid	
Print and attach proposed student schedule	Student and Advisor	

ATB Alternative – Pass ATB Approved Test

ATB Test	Who's Responsible	Initials & Date Completed
Meet with Financial Aid Specialist	Student	
Apply for Financial Aid	Student & Fin Aid staff	
Notify Assessment Center of student taking ATB test	Financial Aid Office	
Schedule ATB test	Student	
Take ATB test	Student	
Notify Financial Aid office of ATB test scores	Assessment Center	
Schedule appointment with Advisor	Student	
Review of ATB test results with advisor	Student and Advisor	
Confirm eligibility for ATB with Financial Aid office	Student	

ATB Test Information:

- Must pass all three (3) tests in one sitting.
- If one or more tests is/are not passed, must wait two (2) weeks to retest and must take all three (3) tests again.
- ATB Scores, if high enough, will count towards regular Accuplacer scores but not vice versa.

Subject area	Assessment Center			Student Scores
	General Education Score Requirements	Program Requirements	ATB Requirements	
Arithmetic	250*		230	
Algebra	250*			
Reading	250		233	
Writing	250		235	

*Some program courses require Accuplacer Scores higher than 250.

ATB Alternative – State Option

State Option Required Services	Who Provided the Service	Initials & Date Completed
Orientation regarding the institution’s academic standards and requirements, and student rights		
Assessment of each student’s existing capabilities through means other than a single standardized test		
Connecting academic goals to career pathways and educational goals		
Counseling and advising, including advisement regarding the appropriate class level for that student		
Tutoring/Academic support for basic verbal and quantitative skills, if appropriate		
Measuring progress and student follow-up by teachers, advisors, and counselors regarding the student’s classroom performance and satisfactory progress toward program completion		

ATB Required Check-Ins		
Date	Comments	Advisor Initials

ATB Student Agreement

Student Agreement

- I will spend a minimum of three (3) hours each week in an Adult Education course.
- I will attend required check-ins with a Transition or Program Advisor a minimum of twice during the semester.
- I understand that in order to obtain my high school credential, I must complete all GED/HSED _____ requirements (see below high school completion options).
- It is my goal to complete _____ eligible career pathway program.
- In order to maintain my financial aid, I will comply with all other Financial Aid requirements.

Signature

Date

High School Completion Options:

- 5.04 GED: Individual passes four (4) timed subject area tests and Wisconsin Civics exam.
- 5.05 HSED: Individual passes four (4) timed subject area tests, Wisconsin Civics exam, and completes health test/course requirement, and employability skills.
- 5.06 HSED: Individual earns twenty-two (22) high school credits in certain subject areas and passes Wisconsin Civics Exam.
- 5.07 HSED: Individual earns twenty-four (24) post-secondary credits in a program, including credit in subject area not completed in high school, and passes Wisconsin Civics Exam.
- 5.09 HSED: Individual demonstrates competency in academic areas by completing Adult Education or program level coursework and passes Wisconsin Civics Exam.

Frequently Asked Questions About ATB

What is an eligible career pathway program under ATB?

- The WTCS utilizes the definition of a career pathway provided under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Carl D. Perkins Act (Perkins V). The Higher Education Act (HEA) also utilizes this definition where it defines a career pathway as: A combination of rigorous and high-quality education, training, and other services that:
 - A. Aligns with the skill needs of industries in the economy of the State or regional economy involved;
 - B. Prepares an individual to be successful in any of a full range of secondary and postsecondary education options, including apprenticeships registered under the Act of August 16, 1937;
 - C. Includes counseling to support an individual in achieving the individual's education and career goals;
 - D. Includes, as appropriate, education offered concurrently with and in the same context as workforce preparation activities and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster;
 - E. Organizes education, training, & other services to meet the needs of an individual in a manner that accelerates the educational and career advancement of the individual to the extent practicable;
 - F. Enables an individual to attain a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, and at least one recognized postsecondary credential; and
 - G. Helps an individual enter or advance within a specific occupation or occupational cluster.

Who approves eligible career pathway programs?

- The WTCS Office approves new *curriculum* and *credential* creation, in addition to program/credential revisions.
- Institutions using the ATB alternatives to establish student eligibility for Title IV funds must be able to document that each ATB eligible career pathway program offered by the institution meets the federal eligibility requirements. That documentation must be provided to the Department of Education when obtaining initial approval for the ATB eligible career pathway program or when requested by the Department of Education.
- Institutions that offered one or more ATB eligible career pathway programs prior to July 1, 2024, must apply to the Department of Education to have one of its career pathway programs certified as eligible for Title IV purposes by the earlier of:
 - The submission of any update the institution makes to the Electronic Eligibility Application (E-App) on or after January 1, 2025; or
 - The submission of the institution's recertification application on or after January 1, 2025.At that time, institutions will need to upload documentation using the E-App to demonstrate that one of its CPPs meets the eligibility requirements. The institution will also be expected to provide a list of all other ATB CPPs and certify that they meet the regulatory requirements (34 CFR 668.157(b)(2)). Additional information can be found in the Department of Education's [Dear Colleague Letter GEN-24-08](#).

What documentation should my college maintain regarding an eligible career pathway program?

- Colleges must maintain documentation that each of its eligible career pathway programs meet the requirements in the definition of an eligible career pathway program in section 484(d)(2) of the HEA and described in [Dear Colleague Letter GEN-24-08](#). Please view World Education's [Ability to Benefit Eligible Career Pathway Program Documentation Template](#) to assist in fully documenting each ATB eligible career pathway program.

To use the 6 credit ATB alternative for student eligibility, does remedial or developmental coursework satisfy the ATB requirement that the student has completed at least six credit hours that are applicable toward the degree or technical diploma?

- No, the requirement is that the six credit hours (or 225 clock hours) must be applicable to a degree or other credential offered by the Title IV eligible postsecondary institution. The completion of remedial or developmental coursework does not qualify.

Is an ATB student required to be concurrently enrolled in both a component that enables them to attain a high school diploma (or its recognized equivalent) and postsecondary coursework throughout the student's enrollment in an eligible career pathway program?

- Within the overall scope of the program, a student is concurrently enrolled; however, there may be times (e.g. between semesters, during summer break) when a student is participating in either the adult education or the postsecondary education but not both simultaneously.
- Note that the eligible career pathway program must include a Title IV eligible postsecondary program component as defined under 34 CFR 668.8, and provide a component that enables an individual to attain a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent under 34 CFR 600.2. Therefore, the eligible career pathway program must be designed in such a way that students participate in both the Title IV eligible postsecondary program component and the component that enables an individual to attain a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent. However, the attainment of a postsecondary credential is not contingent on obtaining a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent. Similarly, a student who has met the requirements of the secondary component of the eligible career pathway may be awarded a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent even without completing the full program.

Which tests are approved under the ATB test alternative?

- As described in the [Department of Education's guidance](#), the following tests and passing scores are approved under the ATB test alternative:
 - Combined English Language Skills Assessment (CELSA), Forms 1 and 2
 - ACCUPLACER (Reading Comprehension, Sentence Skills, and Arithmetic)
 - Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Assessment

What is the process for testing students for ATB eligibility using the ACCUPLACER?

- The ACCUPLACER testing process for ATB is different from regular ACCUPLACER testing because it must be done through the College Board ACCUPLACER ATB account, 004592. This is a specific testing site reserved only for ATB eligibility testing. Accuplacer Tests taken through an alternative site are not valid. Tests can only be administered by a certified ATB Test Administrator. Tests must be completed in one testing session. Students must pass all parts of the test in a single session. More information can be found in the [Accuplacer ATB test policy](#).

What score must a student achieve on the ACCUPLACER exam?

- Passing scores can be found in the [Department of Education's guidance](#). Scores set as the qualification for ATB are one standard deviation below the mean for test takers graduating from high school who have taken ACCUPLACER in the last three years. The approved passing scores shown below apply to both the computer-adaptive and COMPANION versions of each test:

ACCUPLACER Test	Passing Score
Reading	233
Writing	235
Arithmetic	230

A candidate must meet or exceed the minimum scores on each of the three approved tests in a single test administration. Candidates who do not meet or exceed all three passing scores must retake the complete set of three tests and pass all three tests in that administration. Scores from two different administrations cannot be mixed or combined. A student must pass all three tests during a single test session. More information can be found in the [Accuplacer ATB test policy](#).

When is a student no longer considered an ATB student?

- A student who gained Title IV eligibility under one of the ATB alternatives is an ATB student until the student obtains a high school diploma or its recognized equivalent. At that time, the student would no longer be subject to restrictions placed on ATB students, including the requirement that the student continue to be enrolled in the eligible career pathway program and the student could enroll in any Title IV eligible postsecondary program and receive Title IV assistance, assuming all other eligibility requirements are met.

How can we share ATB opportunities with potential students?

- Potential students could be briefed on ATB opportunities when they:
 1. Connect with Adult Education departments and other community programs to learn more about getting their GED or HSED.
 2. Apply for entrance to a college program.

Colleges may also find value in external ATB marketing to support referrals or building community awareness. These approaches include but are not limited to direct marketing and communication with:

- Job Centers/One-Stop Agencies
- Staffing Agencies and local businesses
- Social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, and SnapChat)
- Visual marketing (e.g. flyers, posters, billboards, brochures)

- High Schools - particularly school officials (guidance counselors and social workers) who work with students 18 and older and are at risk for not graduating from high school
- Community Centers - Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, YWCA
- Community Agencies - Social Services, Workforce and Job Centers
- Local churches and community-based organizations

All potential candidates should be guided to a face-to-face meeting with college staff to determine their eligibility for ATB.

Some colleges use a student navigator to coordinate the ATB process. What does a student navigator do?

- The Student Navigator connects current and prospective students to the appropriate Student Support Services experts in the areas of the application process, financial aid, programs of study, program qualifications, course content, course selection, advising, registration, admissions, and college pathways opportunities.
- The Student Navigator also assists students in the identification of career goals, including career exploration, decision making, college choices, and targeting jobs using a variety of resources based on the needs of the student.
- Some institutions have employed the use of an Academic Transition Specialist (ATS) that works closely with Adult Basic Education staff to identify potential ATB candidates as a best practice. The ATS will typically meet with the candidate, assist them to navigate the eligibility process, connect them with an ATB financial aid representative, and meet with the candidate multiple times throughout the program period to make sure they remain ATB compliant and are making progress. Upon completion of the GED or HSED, the ATS notifies the financial aid office to remove the student from ATB when they become financial aid eligible on their own.

Who should be involved with this work outside of my institution?

- Stakeholder partners in your community include workforce boards, job centers, community-based organizations, and others who may have contact with potential students and support referrals to the college ATB options. Colleges are encouraged to use the **ATB Planning Tool** to explore opportunities for alignment with internal and external partners.