

Online Credit Recovery

Problems and Promise in K-12 Education



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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, Frazelle, Bisht, & Hamilton, 2016). Not least among these consequences is the restricted potential to earn a living wage. Although the nation reached a record high graduation rate of nearly 83 percent in 2014 (DePaoli Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016), the high school dropout rate was approximately 6 percent the following year (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). From a single graduation cohort, these dropouts “can represent \$150 billion in lost wages” (Stevens et al., 2016).

Thus, to ensure they reach their maximum potential – financial 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 crush students, leaving them vulnerable to dropping out of school entirely. According to Allensworth and Easton (2007), “a student who fails just two semester courses during grade 9 has little more than a 50 percent chance of graduating in four years.”

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 battling to cognize course concepts. Ostensibly, schools may combat dropout rates by making courses less rigorous or giving students an automatic pass, but those actions are of clear detriment to both parties. At present, the most popular and promising solution for ensuring struggling students progress towards graduation is credit recovery.

What is Credit Recovery?

Credit Recovery by the Numbers

6%	Students who dropped out of high school in 2015
50%	Students who graduate in 4 years after failing 2 or more courses in 9 th grade
83%	Graduation rate of national high schools in 2014
88%	Schools that offer a credit recovery program
75%	Schools that offer credit recovery courses online
600%	Increase in online enrollment in the last decade

Credit recovery, as defined by the Georgia Credit Recovery Program, is “an opportunity for a student to retake a course in which he or she previously was not academically successful in earning credit towards graduation” (2017). Students enrolled in credit recovery courses have already fulfilled the original courses’ seat time requirements in person or online; now, they must focus on mastering those course concepts and state and national standards with which they struggled the first time around (Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). According to Hughes, Zhou, and Petscher (2015), “As of 2011, 88 percent of U.S. school districts offered some type of credit recovery program or course that employs various approaches, including alternative school models, extended learning time programs (for example, after school), traditional face-to-face summer school, and online learning options.”

At face value, credit recovery 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). With even more presumed advantages (e.g., flexibility, accessibility) than the traditional summer school model, online credit recovery courses have exploded in popularity in recent years.

Credit Recovery in an Online Setting

Influenced by the proliferation of technology and accessible media — and harnessing the potential for enhanced education practices and cost-saving opportunities — online K-12 education has experienced a boom in recent decades. “Nationally, online course enrollment increased almost sixfold in 10 years, from 317,000 in 2002/03 to more than 1.8 million in 2009/10 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and there is no reason to expect that trend to reverse” (Hughes et al., 2015).

Among the most popular reasons for increased online enrollment is credit recovery. Districts and students find online credit recovery options appealing for their practical nature and flexible, competency-based structure (Hughes et al., 2015); nonetheless, such online credit recovery programs are not without their detractors. DePaoli et al. (2016) surmise that, as schools across the nation diversify their options, it is imperative that their performance, options, and results are monitored to determine whether are “part of the solution or a wrong turn on the path” to graduation.

Problems of Online Credit Recovery

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 regarding how schools are calculating their 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).

In “Raising the Bar: The Promise and Pitfalls of Online Credit Recovery,” Terrence Falk 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 (2017).

“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.” - Powell et al. (2015)

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 proving to be ineffective required students to gain a grade of just 60 percent to pass a course. Students enrolled in the program were able to skip through sections of content 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 rigorousness, interactivity, and ultimately the effectiveness of a more robust credit recovery program (Powell 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. Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler, and Schneidmiller (2007) found that teachers who work directly and daily with students are “key to the success” of an online program, and Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, and Barbour (2013) determined that quality and frequency of teacher-student interaction has a “significant impact” on course completion.

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,” Powell 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 for Online Credit Recovery

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 place struggling students back on the path to graduation.

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 (Powell et al., 2015): “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” (DePaoli et al., 2016). Watson and Gemin (2015) concur, suggesting that, as the online student body evolves and diversifies, so too must the online credit recovery system.

Bucking the trends of those problematic programs, quality credit recovery options must raise the bar for student performance, provide rigorous 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,” Powell et al. note that quality online credit recovery programs must flourish in two areas: student support and academic rigor (2015).

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

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

Source: Powell et al. (2015)

Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery

One such program that boasts accountability, a rigorous curriculum, meaningful assessments, and tailored educational pathways is Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery. Its unique design exemplifies the characteristics of a top-tier educational program and allows the diverse population of online students to work in a personalized, flexible learning environment.

Brittany Janectic, Director of Secondary Curriculum 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 allow 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" (2017).

To ensure successful credit recovery, the Lincoln Empowered™ program uses validated assessments 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 their specific 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 Powell 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.

Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery Courses

Currently, Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery features 15 targeted courses addressing common student credit recovery needs.

Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery Course List	
Mathematics 7 Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
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Pre-Algebra Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Algebra I Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Algebra II Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Geometry Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Business Mathematics Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
English Language Arts 7 Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
English Language Arts 8 Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
English Language Arts 9 Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
English Language Arts 10 Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
American Literature Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Biology Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Earth Science Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course
Middle School Life Science Credit Recovery	Full-Year Course

Conclusion

To combat national dropout rates, credit recovery programs must ensure that students quickly and effectively master concepts and standards, recover course credits, and stay on track for 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.

To ensure genuine content mastery, schools desiring online credit recovery offerings must be discerning when selecting a curriculum. Ideal credit recovery programs are rigorous, multimodal, and personalized, and they hold themselves and their students accountable for student success. Additionally, these programs exhibit unparalleled student support, monitoring and encouraging student progress at each step in the credit recovery process. With the availability of top-notch, burgeoning programs like Lincoln Empowered™ Credit Recovery, online credit recovery can begin to prove itself as a worthwhile tool for maximizing student potential and placing students back on the path to graduation.

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