

First Credential Master Plan

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Executive Summary

This **First Credential Master Plan** serves as Utah's comprehensive roadmap for implementing the First Credential program. This is a landmark statewide effort to ensure every student has the opportunity to graduate with a highly valued high school diploma and a credential of recognized value that leads to postsecondary and career opportunity.

This framework provides the structure, guidance, and system design needed to move from vision to sustained implementation. It defines the roles of state agencies, establishes a governance and accountability model, and outlines the processes required to launch, scale, and continuously improve the First Credential system.

Utah's First Credential program represents a fundamental shift in how the state connects K-12, higher education, and industry. It moves beyond individual programs to create a coherent, aligned system where credentials signal both college readiness and labor-market value. The framework is designed to embed the First Credential Program as a permanent feature of Utah's education and economic infrastructure enabling lifelong learning and economic growth.

This plan was developed under the leadership of the First Credential Oversight Committee, in partnership with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE), Talent Ready Utah, employers, regional experts, thought leaders, and facilitators from the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). It translates legislative intent into practical, actionable steps. It introduces the Master Credential List as a unified, validated reference for approved credentials, grounded in employer demand and learner readiness. The framework also establishes the necessary governance, staffing, data, and evaluation systems to coordinate implementation and monitor progress statewide.

When fully implemented, the First Credential system will:

- Create clear, supported pathways from high school to higher education and high-demand careers
- Enable students to graduate better prepared for postsecondary success
- Give families access to transparent information about credential value
- Ensure employers benefit from a reliable pipeline of skilled, job-ready talent

Collectively, these outcomes strengthen Utah's workforce, regional economies, and long-term competitiveness.

The Master Plan identifies key actions to ensure successful implementation and sustainability including:

- Clarify and coordinate governance by identifying the responsibilities and membership of the First Credential Oversight Committee responsible for leading the three-year review of the Master Plan.
- Identify a clear process to engage regional K–16 partnerships enabling feedback cycles and targeted implementation improvements.
- Empower Talent Ready Utah as the statewide intermediary to convene cross-sector partners and sustain employer engagement.
- Invest in data and evaluation systems to measure impact, track outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.
- Support employers and small businesses through incentives, compliance tools, and dedicated outreach.
- Build regional capacity and feedback loops through funded collaboration structures, advisory groups, and annual convenings.
- Advance each of the five pathways—Concurrent Enrollment, CTE, Industry-Recognized Credentials, Technical College Certificates, and Youth Apprenticeships—to ensure alignment, stackability, and mobility across the system.

This First Credential Master Plan is designed not just to launch a program, but to build a durable, adaptive system that evolves with Utah’s economy. Through shared accountability, sustained investment, and commitment to continuous improvement, Utah can ensure that every learner’s first credential becomes the first step in a lifetime of success—anchoring education and economic opportunity across the state.

Introduction: A First Credential for Every Utah Graduate

Utah is redefining what it means to graduate from high school. The state is building a future where every student earns a highly valued diploma and has the opportunity to pair it with a First Credential: a portable, stackable certification that propels graduates with confidence into college, career, and life. Together, the diploma and First Credential affirm that Utah students are ready for what’s next.

Why It Matters

Utah's economy is thriving and diversifying, creating demand for adaptable talent across every region and industry. A First Credential bridges education and employment by connecting high school learning to high-demand pathways that extend through technical colleges, community colleges, universities, apprenticeships, and the workplace. It transforms high school from an endpoint into a launchpad so that every learner graduates with visible momentum toward a meaningful career and continued education.

This vision builds on the success of Utah's PRIME program pilot, which demonstrated that when opportunity is visible and supported, students seize it. The First Credential Master Plan carries that momentum forward, transforming a pilot opportunity into a sustainable, statewide system aligned to HB 260 (GS 2025) and Utah Code 53E-10-310. The statute sets a clear expectation: every Utah student should have the opportunity to graduate with both a high-value diploma and a First Credential towards a well-informed career path.

A Master Plan to Operationalize the First Credential Program

This First Credential Master Plan operationalizes this vision through a coherent structure that unites K–12 schools, higher education, employers, and industry through clearly structured resources and a shared vision. It establishes a Master Credential List as a continuously updated, data-driven tool that identifies which credentials deliver real value to learners and the economy. Only credentials that are validated by employers, demonstrate stackability, and lead to documented high-demand pathways will be incentivized and supported statewide.

In alignment with statute, the Master Plan embeds a cycle of continuous improvement including rigorous criteria and employer validation; clear transfer and articulation into postsecondary programs; transparent funding and incentives tied to outcomes; and regular review to adapt to changing industry needs.

The Opportunity Ahead: A Shared Vision

Success depends on partnership, and there is a role and an upside for every stakeholder. Within this First Credential Master Plan, employers and industry associations communicate demand, validate credentials, and accelerate hiring. Talent Ready Utah convenes partners at scale and enables regional career pathways connections. Local Education Agencies (LEAs), inclusive of both LEAs and charter schools, deliver high quality programs in every community, including rural regions, while communicating opportunities for expanded implementation support.

Technical colleges, community colleges, and universities strengthen pipelines of students who enter better prepared to persist and stack credentials. Educators and counselors gain tools and maps to guide learners. Families see lower costs and shorter time-to-degree. And, most importantly, students graduate with confidence, armed with a credential that proves they can contribute on the job, succeed in postsecondary learning, and continue building skills as industries evolve.

This First Credential Master Plan positions Utah to lead nationally in connecting education and the economy. It aligns incentives, clarifies responsibilities, and establishes processes that have been designed with feedback from the First Credential Oversight Committee, which brings together USBE, USHE, the Governor's Office, legislators, industry, and local leaders.

Utah's vision is clear: the high school diploma remains the foundation of educational achievement, and now, paired with a First Credential, it becomes a powerful signal of readiness. Together, they mark the start of a lifelong learning journey where every Utah student can graduate prepared, confident, and positioned to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Navigating the Master Plan

The First Credential Master Plan is Utah's roadmap to make this vision real. In alignment with HB 260 (GS 2025) and Utah Code 53E-10-310, the Master Plan establishes the governance, structures, and processes needed to scale First Credential opportunities statewide and ensure every LEA can participate. It supports operationalizing the initiative across USBE, USHE, the Governor's Office, legislators, industry, and local leaders to guide design, implementation, and continuous improvement.

At its core, the Master Plan provides a coherent system for credential quality and alignment. It directs the development and maintenance of a Master Credential List built on clear definitions, rigorous criteria, and regular employer validation to ensure that every credential connects to high-demand, high-value pathways. It also guarantees transfer and stackability into postsecondary programs, strengthening coordination among technical colleges, universities, and employers. To sustain quality and access, the First Credential Master Plan establishes outcome-based incentives and student scholarships that reward attainment while promoting scalability across all Utah regions.

Equally important, the Master Plan embeds a cycle of continuous review and adaptation and recommendations for future resources necessary for scale. Through transparent data,

collaboration with LEAs, and scheduled evaluations, Utah can track enrollment, completion, and outcomes across systems, making it possible to refine offerings as industries evolve. Comprehensive by design, the Master Plan creates a living system that learns, improves, and remains accountable to the goals established in statute, ultimately ensuring that the First Credential opportunity delivers enduring value for students, educators, employers, and the state's economy.

This Master Plan outlines:

- **A process to ensure all first credential offerings are learner-ready and aligned to a clear economic value** which describes how and why credentials are included on the Master Credential List, including economic threshold tests, learner-readiness criteria, and the weighting approach used to term incentives for LEAs to launch and scale credential offerings with the most economic promise.
- **Precise definitions of all pathways to achieve a First Credential** that communicate statute requirements and guardrails for earning a First Credential in each of the five pathways, including industry-recognized credentials, CTE pathway completion, technical college certificates, youth apprenticeship, and concurrent enrollment. Definitions demonstrate how each route leads to employment with advancement and/or stackable postsecondary credit.
- **Governance and maintenance process of the Master Credential List** that identifies roles and decision rights for the First Credential Review Committee who will be assigned the leadership of enacting procedures for list creation, engaging in list maintenance processes, and reviewing the formal applications to add, modify, or remove credentials from the list.
- **Infrastructure to strengthen industry partnerships**, including defining industries' role in the employer validation, leveraging the impact of Talent Ready Utah as a central convener, and a straightforward process to facilitate consistent employer partnerships, particularly in support of small and mid-sized businesses and centralized employer engagement in rural communities.
- **Support tools and guidance for LEA implementation** that enable LEAs to track and communicate readiness and programmatic needs. These tools include readiness self-assessments, program design checklists, and compliance requirements aligned to the state statute.
- **Recommendations for funding incentives and student scholarships** to ensure that state funding, LEA supports, resources, and student scholarships are used effectively. These

recommendations define eligibility and guardrails and create precise alignment with outcome measures (e.g., completions, credit earned, placement)

- **The future of the First Credential** involves a series of recommendations and considerations to evaluate its impact, communicate with stakeholders, and adapt the effort to meet the evolving needs of Utah's learners, educators, and workforce.

As the state launches the First Credential initiative, guiding documents to support implementation will be developed, reviewed, and finalized by the First Credential Oversight Committee. These resources are at varying stages of completion and will be published during the implementation phase. Some of these documents are referenced within this guide to provide clarity and context. This document constitutes Version 1 of the First Credential Master Plan. Subsequent versions will be published in accordance with established approval timelines throughout the implementation process.

How this Plan Was Developed

The Utah First Credential Oversight Committee was established in the summer of 2025 as directed by HB 260 (GS 2025), which explicitly calls for the combined leadership of the Commissioner of Higher Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Governor's Education Advisor to establish this oversight committee. The membership and responsibilities of Utah's First Credential Oversight Committee, as outlined in HB 260 (GS 2025), stipulate that the oversight committee must include representatives from industries such as professional associations and high-demand employers, as well as leaders from public education, higher education, technical colleges, workforce development, and Talent Ready Utah.

Since its formation, the oversight committee has convened through a series of meetings and collaborative planning sessions, focusing on examining credentialing priorities, evaluating workforce alignment, and developing Utah's First Credential Master Plan, which were facilitated by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). Within these sessions, the elements of the Master Plan included here have been developed. Three complete oversight committee meetings were conducted virtually, with each of the three subcommittees convening three times to review content, provide expert feedback, and make iterative edits on all aspects of the Master Plan.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the state's starting point for this work, NCEE analyzed the PRIME Pilot Program, a series of stakeholder interviews, and a labor market scan

of the state of Utah to identify system-wide strengths and gaps to inform the success of the First Credential program. After a comprehensive stakeholder and data review process, the Master Plan was designed to include intentional system alignment, student-centric offerings, shared vision & planning, and continuous improvement.

Building from Strengths: Foundations for Utah's First Credential

Utah is uniquely positioned to lead the nation in ensuring that every student graduates ready for the future. The state's strong economic performance, deep cross-sector partnerships, proven capacity to develop a credentialing infrastructure, and strategic timing as the movement towards credentialing in high school accelerates on a national level all provide a powerful foundation for implementing the First Credential Master Plan. Together, these four pillars-economic strength, collaboration, innovation, and national alignment create the conditions for success and sustainability.

A Thriving Economy Anchored in Opportunity and Collaboration

Utah's economy continues to rank among the strongest in the nation, driven by steady job growth, high labor force participation, and rising wages across both urban and rural regions. With one of the nation's highest median household incomes and one of the lowest unemployment rates, Utah's economy offers the stability and diversity that make long-term workforce investments possible. Growth in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, technology, and education underscores the need for a talent pipeline that can adapt quickly as industries evolve.

In this environment, the First Credential initiative plays an essential role. It ensures that students' early learning and career experiences align with high-demand occupations that offer family-sustaining wages. By using labor-market data including demand indicators, wage outcomes, and regional growth trends to determine which credentials appear on the Master Credential List, Utah can guarantee that each credential earned represents real opportunity and long-term value.

Utah's history of collaboration across education, workforce, and industry provides a model other states aspire to. Through Talent Ready Utah, employers, educators, and policymakers have long worked together to close gaps between what students learn and what jobs require. From the Utah Aerospace Pathways program to partnerships in healthcare, construction, and

information technology, these models demonstrate how shared design and validation ensure statewide consistency and local relevance.

Collaboration also extends across geography and system levels. LEAs, technical colleges, community colleges, and universities work in concert to create pathways that allow students to earn and stack credentials seamlessly. This infrastructure ensures that regardless of a student's zip code, a First Credential carries equal value and opens doors to both employment and continued education.

Learning from Pilot Program Success

The PRIME pilot program laid the groundwork by demonstrating initial results that clear college and career pathways, sustained partnerships, and targeted resources can translate ambition into measurable student success. Launched in 2020, PRIME expanded access to concurrent enrollment and CTE opportunities, reaching thousands of students statewide and demonstrating the feasibility of aligning secondary and postsecondary experiences. The lessons and limitations of the PRIME pilot directly inform the First Credential Master Plan. System alignment is necessary, collaboration across state agencies needs to be clearly operationalized, and LEAs need targeted resources and critical knowledge exchanges to ensure awareness extends beyond a small subset to statewide adoption.

Where PRIME expanded the opportunity for strategic credentialing in high school, First Credential extends it universally, setting the expectation that every Utah student can graduate with both a high school diploma and a credential of real labor-market value. This evolution reflects the state's commitment to moving from pilots to policy that are embedded into the structure of the education and workforce system itself.

Positioned Within a National Movement

Utah's approach also places it squarely within a growing national shift toward coherent, quality-assured credentialing systems. Across the country, states are moving from fragmented initiatives to integrated frameworks that require employer validation, wage relevance, and stackability into postsecondary programs. Utah's First Credential Master Plan aligns with these best practices but distinguishes itself through its coherence and scale. By integrating concurrent enrollment, technical college certificates, CTE pathways, industry recognized credentials, and youth apprenticeship within one validated system, and by embedding a data-driven, three-year

refresh cycle, Utah is not merely participating in the national movement; it is defining its next frontier.

By grounding First Credential implementation in a thriving economy, trusted partnerships, a proven pilot, and alignment with national quality standards, Utah is poised to set a new benchmark for states. First Credential serves as the catalyst to align K–12, higher education, and industry into a seamless bridge from education to employment and ensuring every Utah student graduates ready, confident, and connected to opportunity.

In doing so, Utah positions itself as a national leader in designing a future-ready education system, one that transforms the meaning of a high school diploma, redefines readiness for college and career, and demonstrates how states can align policy, partnership, and performance to ensure that every learner's first credential is the start of a lifelong trajectory of success.

Defining First Credential For Utah

Utah's First Credential pathway options provide multiple avenues for learners to earn a First Credential, providing access points for all students and recognizing a critical balance for all students to explore employment, continued education, and career exploration. Each of the five pathways meets the needs of a student as they navigate both career and advanced education options.

A First Credential creates a clear launch point and is intentionally designed to stack into future opportunities for all. Under Utah HB 260 (GS 2025), there are five pathways to earn a First Credential including concurrent enrollment, industry recognized credentials, 300 hours of Youth Apprenticeship, a technical college certificate, and completion of a Career and Technical Education Pathway.

This Master Plan outlines the definitions, requirements and recommendations for quality design of each credential pathway. Each credential option is aligned for clear stackability ensuring that students, employers, and higher education partners are clear and aligned on opportunities and actions beyond a First Credential.

Concurrent Enrollment (CE) First Credential

According to the legislation, a **Concurrent Enrollment (CE) First Credential** is earned by completing either (i) 12–18 core general-education credits across different GE categories or (ii) a prescribed set of courses designated by the Utah Board of Higher Education. Concurrent Enrollment courses are postsecondary classes offered through USHE institutions to public-school students under contractual agreements. All courses are widely accepted and transferable statewide and apply directly to degree programs, ensuring early momentum toward higher education.

To ensure stackability and effective transitions for learners and higher education partnerships, **Concurrent Enrollment** must be positioned not only as a means of accelerating credit accumulation, but as a strategic “door opener” to future opportunities including four-year higher education degrees, skills training, and employment. Research emphasizes that concurrent enrollment works best when it is designed as the first step in a broader, intentional pathway connecting college credit that is earned in high school with stackability built into program design so that students gain confidence from their first credential, experience seamless transitions across systems, and see a clear line of sight to additional education and training. By aligning CE First Credential opportunities with Utah’s stackable credentialing strategy, the state can maximize both the immediate value of these credits and their role in propelling learners toward long-term success.

To maximize stackability and ensure smooth student transitions, the Concurrent Enrollment First Credential is organized into a Higher Education Ready bundle of course options. This bundle signals both college and career readiness by including core coursework in math and writing, aligned with two pathways elective courses. In its ideal form, a CE First Credential represents a transferable block of credits equivalent to completing a full semester at a Utah public institution of higher education. Additionally, the Concurrent Enrollment courses identified in the Higher Education Ready bundle are courses that develop in-demand employability skills such as written and verbal communication.

CE First Credential Higher Education Ready Core Courses:

It is required that students earning a CE First Credential complete two door-opening courses, one course from a selection of approved Quantitative Literacy courses and one course from the

selection of Writing courses. These categories are required because they form the foundation for many postsecondary degrees and are required by many postsecondary majors.

- **Quantitative Literacy:** Math 1030 - Quantitative Reasoning, Math 1040 - Introduction to Statistics, Math 1050 - College Algebra
- **Writing:** Engl 1010 – Intro to Writing, Engl 2010 – Intermediate Writing, Engl 2015 – Intermediate College Writing

Additional concurrent enrollment courses to fulfill the CE First Credential credit hour requirement can be found in the First Credential Master List, once finalized and approved by the First Credential Oversight Committee

A Concurrent Enrollment First Credential is designed to be more than a collection of college credit earned in high school. Rather, it is an intentional bridge into higher education and career pathways. Because of Utah’s institutional transfer guarantees, the credential stacks directly into the USHE General Education Certificate / Letter of Completion and applies seamlessly to AA, AS, or AAS programs. In many cases, it can also serve as an entry point into technical certifications, creating flexibility for students who want to pursue workforce opportunities alongside or before considering a degree.

Technical College Concurrent Enrollment

The Utah Board of Higher Education is working to expand its concurrent enrollment program to include technical colleges. This initiative builds on the existing concurrent enrollment offerings at degree-granting institutions (DGIs) and aligns with the Board’s strategic goals of access, affordability, completion, and workforce alignment. By integrating technical colleges into the concurrent enrollment framework, while respecting their unique missions and delivery models, the Board ensures that students across the state have broader opportunities to engage in higher education and earn transcribed technical college credit for qualifying coursework while earning their high school diploma.

This expansion directly supports the attainment of a student’s first credential, a critical milestone in postsecondary success and workforce readiness. By allowing high school students to earn transcribed technical college credit, the initiative accelerates their progress toward a certificate or degree, reduces tuition costs, and strengthens the alignment between high school CTE programs and industry-relevant credentials. The plan also promotes efficient use of state and institutional resources, minimizes duplication, and fosters stronger partnerships between secondary and postsecondary institutions. Ultimately, this approach helps more students

complete their first credential sooner, positioning them for continued education or immediate entry into high-yield careers.

The value of a Concurrent Enrollment First Credential extends beyond Utah's borders as well. The college-level credit it earned signified academic readiness in institutions outside the state, with transferability contingent upon individual institutional policies, but giving students additional mobility. Importantly, students who complete a Concurrent Enrollment First Credential also demonstrate academic and personal readiness for the demands of college-level coursework. This readiness not only reduces time-to-degree but also builds confidence, improves persistence, and helps ensure long-term success whether students choose to continue toward an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or additional technical training.

Industry Recognized First Credential (IRC)

An **Industry Recognized First Credential** is a credential developed and offered or endorsed by a nationally recognized industry body. To qualify as a First Credential in Utah, an IRC must appear on the state's Master Credential List and be validated by employers for recruiting, hiring, or advancement. IRCs are regularly reviewed to ensure they meet both economic thresholds and learner readiness standards. Importantly, any IRCs identified as a First Credential must represent substantial learning and academic rigor generally equivalent to at least a semester of high school coursework to ensure credibility and value-add to the student and institution. While short-term safety or compliance certificates (e.g., OSHA-10, ServSafe) remain valuable, Utah's Master List prioritizes IRCs that demonstrate academic rigor, stackability, and wage relevance. An Industry Recognized First Credential will also carry an inventory of demonstrated competencies, providing transparency around the knowledge and skills students gain.

Industry Recognized Credentials are designed to serve as both immediate launchpads into the workforce and stepping stones into continued education and training. Where alignment exists, IRCs can stack directly into apprenticeships, allowing students to transition seamlessly into earn-and-learn opportunities. Many also articulate for credit within technical college certificates or applied degree programs, reducing duplication and accelerating progress toward higher-level credentials.

In some cases, an IRC provides a direct pathway to employment, with built-in opportunities for upskilling offered by employers or industry associations. To support clarity, Utah's Master Credential List will maintain occupation-specific stacks and crosswalks so students and families

can see how each credential connects to additional opportunities. By embedding academic rigor, occupational relevance, and stackability into IRC design, Utah ensures that Industry Recognized First Credentials deliver more than a certification; they provide real value as both a first step into the labor market and a bridge to further education and advancement.

Youth Apprenticeship First Credential

A Youth Apprenticeship First Credential is earned by completing a minimum of 300 hours in an approved youth apprenticeship pathway, as established in Utah's First Credential statute. Each pathway must include structured, paid work-based learning combined with related classroom instruction that launches a student on the trajectory toward completion of a registered or approved unregistered Apprenticeship program. According to the U.S. Department of Labor and the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship (PAYA), youth apprenticeship is a program for high school students that "formally combines paid, work-based learning with related classroom instruction and leads to a postsecondary credential or advanced standing in a Registered Apprenticeship."

To maximize effectiveness, a Youth Apprenticeship First Credential is designed around a core set of experiences that signal academic, career, and personal readiness. In its ideal state, the Youth Apprenticeship First Credential provides transferable experiences toward the start of a Registered Apprenticeship, while also offering credit or stackable value within Utah's higher education system. To ensure quality, a Youth Apprentice First Credential includes:

- **Core and transferable college-level coursework** in math, writing, and communication (e.g., Quantitative Reasoning, Introduction to Statistics, College Algebra, Public Speaking, Interpersonal Communication, Technical Writing).
- **Industry-relevant credentials** that are required for entry-level employment in specific fields.
- **On-the-Job Learning (OJL)** experiences with work-based tasks that directly align to academic learning and industry competencies.
- **Workplace mentorship and career coach**, including scheduled check-ins and evaluation points to monitor student progress. It is recommended that this occurs upon entry for course and pathway selection, as a midpoint monitoring of progress and at completion of the 300-hour requirement.

All Youth Apprenticeship First Credentials must be supported by a written training plan that maps OJL tasks and related instruction to specific competencies required for credential attainment. Plans embed safety, quality standards, and professional skill development to ensure rigor and relevance.

Utah already offers a growing set of formal youth apprenticeship opportunities that provide a model for this pathway. For example, Utah Aerospace Pathways partners high schools with major aerospace employers; Talent Ready Utah's - Talent Ready Apprenticeship Connections (TRAC) Advanced Manufacturing apprenticeships connect students with advanced manufacturing firms; as an example, Stadler Rail's apprenticeship program integrates classroom learning at Salt Lake Community College with paid industry experience. These programs demonstrate how youth apprenticeships can deliver meaningful credentials that are validated by employers and aligned with high-demand industries.

A Youth Apprenticeship First Credential is designed to serve as a direct bridge into employment while preserving long-term options. For students who continue, the credential offers advanced standing in an Apprenticeship, giving them a head start on completing a formal earn-and-learn program with structured wage progression. If students opt not to continue into a full apprenticeship, the coursework and related credentials earned can still stack into technical college certificates or industry-recognized credentials, ensuring their progress counts toward other postsecondary goals.

Importantly, many youth apprenticeship programs also embed entry-level employment with wage progression plans, whether or not students pursue further pathways. This flexibility allows young people to enter the workforce quickly while preserving opportunities to advance through education, training, or industry-recognized credentials as their careers develop.

Technical College First Credential

A **Technical College First Credential** is earned by completing an approved certificate or a meaningful portion of a technical college certification (at least 300 hours) from a Utah public technical college. These certificates are competency-based, align to employer-validated program standards, and often embed industry certifications or licensure preparation. To qualify as a First Credential, a technical college certificate or pathway to certification must meet the economic and learner-readiness thresholds necessary for inclusion on the Utah Master Credential List. To maximize value and ensure consistency with Utah's other First Credential

pathways, a Technical College First Credential is defined by both rigor and feasibility for high school students.

A Technical College First Credential can serve as a direct entry point into high-demand employment, equipping students with the skills needed to step into critical workforce roles. For many students, this is only the beginning and technical colleges often offer specialty or advanced certificates within the same field, allowing learners to stack from an entry-level credential into more advanced technical roles or employer-sponsored upskilling opportunities.

These certificates also provide a bridge into higher education. Through established crosswalks, a Technical College First Credential can transfer credit toward an associate degree (AS, AAS or AAT), and in some cases extend further into bachelor's programs where alignment exists. These pathways give all students completing a Technical College First Credential an accelerated path. When program standards also align with approved apprenticeship requirements, a Technical College First Credential can satisfy apprenticeship entry requirements, giving students multiple pathways to advance without losing momentum.

Career & Technical Education (CTE) First Credential

A **CTE Pathway First Credential** is earned by completing a state-approved program of study in a career and technical education field. These programs consist of a sequence of high school courses aligned to an industry sector and often embed opportunities for work-based learning. Many pathways also integrate industry-recognized credentials and/or concurrent enrollment credits, enabling students to gain both technical preparation and early momentum in higher education.

CTE Pathways in Utah are designed and validated through the federal Perkins V framework, which requires each state-approved program of study to demonstrate alignment with labor-market demand, employer validation, and stakeholder engagement at the state and local levels. This ensures that all CTE programs already undergo a rigorous process of review before they are implemented in schools, including consultation with secondary and postsecondary educators, business and industry representatives, and community partners. By statute and design, CTE pathways provide a quality-assured foundation for the First Credential program.

As a guardrail, all existing state-approved CTE programs will be included in the First Credential Master List in the first round of implementation. Beginning in year one of the first review cycle, additional employer validation of each CTE Pathway will be facilitated by USBE in partnership with Talent Ready Utah to ensure that pathways remain both academically rigorous and economically relevant. By working collaboratively across employers and USBE, CTE First Credential opportunities can identify employer partnership plans to increase viability.

CTE pathways are designed to connect students directly to employment, particularly when an embedded industry-recognized credential is included. This combination signals to employers that students not only completed a rigorous technical program but also hold an industry-validated credential, signaling readiness to enter the workforce or next steps in their education.

At the same time, a CTE First Credential carries significant postsecondary value. Many pathways include concurrent enrollment credits that apply to both general education and technical programs, allowing students to accelerate progress toward technical certificates, associate degrees, or other postsecondary options. This dual focus on both employment readiness and academic transferability ensures that all CTE First Credentials provide flexible, stackable opportunities for students to advance in whichever direction they choose.

A Seamless System of Five Interconnected Pathways

Each of Utah's five First Credential options is intentionally designed to make a credential a launch point, not a limit. These pathways—Concurrent Enrollment, Youth Apprenticeship, Industry-Recognized Credentials, Technical College Certificates, and CTE Pathways—are not mutually exclusive but components of a coherent system. Students may complete a CTE sequence with Industry-Recognized Credentials embedded along the way or concurrent enrollment may be the springboard towards a two-year certification. Each First Credential option provides multiple entry points and on-ramps for students to earn meaningful credentials that connect directly to college and career opportunities.

By establishing clear definitions, minimum thresholds, and consistent design elements across all pathways, the First Credential Master Plan ensures that every First Credential carries both immediate value and long-term opportunity. Stackability maps, shared supports such as advising and tutoring, and transparent progression pathways help students, families, and employers see how a First Credential links to work, further training, a technical education certificate, or degree.

Implementation focuses on connection and coherence across pathways. Alignment is underway to map connections among CTE programs, industry-recognized credentials, and technical college certificates, ensuring that students can progress seamlessly without duplication of effort. Efforts exist to support transfer and articulation policies that guarantee approved technical college certifications and industry credentials count toward concurrent enrollment and are eligible for credit transfer within USHE institutions. This coordinated approach makes sure that a First Credential is not a set of parallel options, but a connected ecosystem that gives every Utah learner a clear first step today and stronger opportunities tomorrow.

Finally, Utah’s continuous review process ensures that the Master Credential List evolves with the economy and leverages the existing evaluation process across Career and Technical Education and Technical College systems to keep offerings relevant, rigorous, and responsive to labor-market demand—sustaining a system where each pathway contributes to a seamless bridge between education and employment.

Creating the First Credential Master List

The goal of the First Credential Master List is to identify and evaluate credentials of value and operationalize pathways for students across Utah to earn credentials through one of the five defined First Credential pathways.

Credentials of value are quality, affordable, postsecondary credentials (degrees, certificates, industry certifications, or licenses) that equip learners for strong career trajectories, improve earnings, and align to high-demand jobs. Credentials of value have a threshold for return on investment for learners and education systems.

The process below outlines how the 2025 Utah First Credential Master List is drafted, validated, and launched. Built in alignment with HB 260 (GS 2025) and guided by the First Credential Oversight Committee, the framework defines a three-phase process to ensure each credential included on the Master List is meaningful, accessible, and aligned with Utah’s economic and workforce priorities. Through economic thresholds that ensure relevance and learner-ready criteria to align to feasibility, this model aims for every credential included to support learner success, employer demand, and long-term return on investment. Upon approval of the process, an exemplar list will be distributed as guidance to inform LEAs, students, and employers of First Credential options.

Following the design and drafting of the 2025 First Credential Master List identification process and exemplar list, the First Credential Review Committee will be formed to finalize and launch the resources. The Master List will be reviewed continuously and officially updated on a three-year cycle. During the review process, each credential is re-evaluated, and the approval process itself is tested to ensure continued relevance of economic thresholds and learner-ready criteria. This process also identifies additions or deletions to the list itself.

All credentials on the Master List will be assessed using an evaluation rubric that was co-developed by the 2025 First Credential Oversight Committee in October 2025.

Creating the First Credential Master List



**Economic
Threshold
Review**



**Learner-Ready
Criteria
Evaluation**



**Weighted
Incentives**

The following three phase process was developed in partnership with the First Credential Oversight Committee in accordance with state statute in 2025 and was used to identify credentials of value to be included in the First Credential Master List.

Phase 1: Economic Threshold Review:

All potential First Credentials including each designated pathway to earn a credential identified by HB 260 (GS 2025) – concurrent enrollment course bundle, CTE pathways completion, technical education certification, industry-recognized credentials, and approved apprenticeship programs – are evaluated first against a set of five identified economic thresholds aligned to data points relevant to the state of Utah.

These economic thresholds ensure that all credentials included on the Master List put learners on a trajectory to a livable wage occupation, align to employer demand, demonstrate a return

on investment, are employer-validated, and demonstrate credential transferability and stackability across industry and occupation. Each potential credential is individually evaluated against a rubric that is approved by the First Credential Review Committee and updated on a three-year cycle for relevance.

Economic thresholds are determined by evaluation of quantitative, national and state recognized data sets and validated by data sources including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Utah Department of Workforce Services, and the MIT Living Wage calculator. Credentials that do not meet economic thresholds but do meet prioritized demand regionally or fill a vital community need may also be eligible for inclusion in the First Credential Master List.

Phase 2: Learner Ready Criteria Evaluation:

Credentials that meet or exceed the initial Economic Threshold evaluation are then reviewed against the six Learner Ready Criteria outlined below. The Learner Ready Criteria and evaluation rubric is agreed to by the First Credential Oversight Committee and reviewed in a cycle of three years. Learner Ready criteria review each credential for: student-ready skills outcomes; stackability; portability and transferability; alignment to rigorous standards; availability and accessibility; and time to completion and pathways visibility.

Learner-Ready criteria is evaluated by the First Credential Review Committee and may require additional conversations or review with the credential provider prior to inclusion on the First Credential Master List. Learner-Ready criteria and readiness may vary across regional needs, access to educators, and other operationalizing barriers. Individual LEAs will use the First Credential Needs Assessment outlined later in this framework to continue to evaluate Learner Readiness and, where necessary, plan for improvements.

Credentials that do not meet the baseline needs of these criteria can still be offered but are not eligible for inclusion on the Utah Master Credential List, which leads to grant funding for expansion, performance incentives for LEAs, or scholarships for learners.

Phase 3: Validation for Weighted Incentives:

Credentials that pass Phase 1 (Economic Threshold Review) and Phase 2 (Learner-Ready Criteria) advance to a final weighting and validation stage to align resources with impact and ensure market relevance.

Based on rubric results in Phase 1 and 2, each credential is identified into one of three tiers that is used to differentiate levels of funding incentives available to LEAs including performance-based incentives based on verified student completions. Tiers also indicate implementation supports available to help LEAs launch or expand offerings aligned to local capacity and demand. During this phase, Talent Ready Utah and the First Credential Review Committee convenes industry association leadership and employers to review the weighted list, confirm validity, and identify gaps based on emerging needs. Findings from this review may inform targeted adjustments to designations, supports, or future list updates prior to finalization.

Credentials on the Master List are categorized into Designations for Pathways and Progression intended to serve as supportive communications tools making pathways transparent to students, families, and guidance counselors. Designations for Pathways and Progression include Career-Launching Credentials, Foundational & Transferable Skills Credentials, Postsecondary-Aligned Credentials, Stackable Progress Credentials, Regionally Prioritized Credentials.

A Guardrail for Students Enrolled in Credentials Prior to 2026:

For students who expect to graduate in 2026, the requirements and application process remain the same as in previous years and can be found at <https://ushe.edu/first-credential-scholarship/>

Building the Master List: Conducting Phase 1 Economic Threshold Review

Economic Threshold Review



What is an Economic Threshold Indicator?

Economic thresholds are minimum labor market benchmarks rooted in data that ensure each credential on Utah's First Credential Master List delivers real economic value and aligns with workforce demand across high growth, emerging, and community vital industries. In the context of Utah's First Credential program, these thresholds help determine whether a credential leads to meaningful opportunities by measuring wage outcomes, job availability, and return on investment. By emphasizing learner growth and career progression economic thresholds serve as a forward-looking filter to ensure every approved credential supports economic mobility and meets Utah's evolving workforce needs.

Economic Indicator 1:

Livable Wage Trajectory: Credentials must document a pathway of opportunity leading to occupations that meet or exceed regional livable wage benchmark. This benchmark should utilize data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Utah Department of Workforce Services, and the MIT Living Wage Calculator.

Livable Wage Threshold Consideration: The oversight committee will set regional livable wage standards based on Utah's economic regions which using 1 adult/1 child threshold, to suggest that credentials should have a pathway that leads to an occupation earning \$40.44/hour in urban Utah or \$33/hour in rural areas, equivalent to an \$84,000 annual salary. Percentage calculations of MIT's proposed livable wages should be utilized to determine these regional thresholds. Credentials do not need to meet this threshold immediately upon completion, but they must document a pathway of opportunity for those who obtain this credential to enter this trajectory. The oversight committee should consider that credentials that upon completion align to assumed occupations with an annual salary of \$55,000, or 66% of the livable annual salary for Utah, are indicative of livable wage trajectory for the state and would pass this economic indicator review at the highest First Credential incentive tier. Credentials that upon completion align to assumed occupation with an annual salary of \$34,000 - \$54,000, or above 33% of the livable annual salary for Utah, would pass this economic indicator review at a First Credential incentive tier two.

How it is measured: To validate this trajectory, Utah relies on mean occupational wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, cross-referenced with Utah Department of Workforce Services' long-term occupational projections. This combined approach ensures that wage

benchmarks are tied to both current earnings and projected demand, making the livable wage thresholds economically grounded and forward-looking

Economic Indicator 2:

Employer Validated: Employers confirm the credential's relevance, value in hiring or promotion, and alignment with real workplace skills and industry standards. Employer validation ensures credentials are demand-driven, not solely education-driven, and provides evidence that completers have a realistic chance of being hired or advanced in their field.

Employer Validated Threshold Consideration: Strongest evidence includes validation by employers located across multiple regions in Utah or by national/global employers with documented local hiring demand. Ongoing employer engagement in credential review or updating processes is demonstrated. For baseline consideration, at least one employer with a demonstrated connection to Utah's labor market either through in-state operations, active recruitment of Utah residents including remote roles, or industry association representation, provides formal validation of the credential's relevance.

How it is measured: In Utah, employer validation is documented through program and initiative reviews, stakeholder engagement strategies, and descriptions of employer feedback processes, ensuring that the Master Credential List reflects not only academic design but also current and projected industry demand. Technical colleges, industry recognized credentials, and CTE programs with embedded employer validation are considered by the First Credential Review Committee according to rubric standards.

Economic Indicator 3:

Demand-Aligned (Current or Emerging): Each credential has an assumed associated occupation that is evaluated to determine if it demonstrates sufficient and sustained labor-market demand, either current or emerging. Demand is measured through projected job openings, including both new and replacement positions, and evidence of growth above state averages or credible emerging industry signals. This ensures that credentials lead to opportunities in fields with realistic hiring prospects and long-term viability in Utah's economy. These indicators are determined through Utah Department of Workforce Services and national Bureau of Labor Statistics data and take credential supply and demand into consideration to avoid oversupplied credentials.

Demand-Aligned (Current or Emerging) Threshold consideration: Occupations tied to the credential meet or exceed Utah labor-market benchmarks (≥ 100 annual openings in urban regions or ≥ 20 in rural/specialized statewide roles). For emerging occupations not yet meeting thresholds, credible evidence of future growth such as inclusion in state-prioritized industries, documented sector expansion, or multi-year projections above the state average, must be provided.

How it is measured: These indicators are determined through Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) occupational projections and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) national data and are cross-referenced with Utah's priority and targeted industry clusters to confirm alignment with state economic strategy.

Economic Indicator 4:

Credential Return on Investment (ROI): The credential must offer a positive return on investment within a reasonable timeframe, considering earning gain relative to the cost (time, tuition, and resources) required for completion.

Credential Return on Investment Threshold consideration: ROI can be measured by state wage records or leveraging a national ROI data source. Students should experience a clear ROI with a five-year timeframe of completion which can be measured by measuring the cost of completion against annual earnings. Return on Investment evaluation will require longitudinal data systems to be developed and expanded across the state.

Economic Indicator 5:

Credential Transferability and Stackability Across Industry and Occupation: The credential must connect to further education or training and be recognized across systems (e.g., K–12, postsecondary, industry) or regions. This ensures the credential is not a terminal credential, but part of a pathway that allows learners to continue advancing whether into higher-level credentials, apprenticeship, degrees, or employment in multiple settings.

Credential Transferability and Stackability Threshold Consideration: A credential must meet at least one of the following: postsecondary transfer aligned to a Utah technical college or USHE credit-bearing path; industry pathway with clear continuity sequence toward further certification/licensure; multi-employer or industry association recognition.

How it is measured: Utah measures this through established CTE Articulation Agreements published by the Utah State Board of Education, the Utah CTE Career Pathways Portal, the

Concurrent Enrollment master list, and formal transfer maps created by technical colleges and USHE institutions, which document how certificates and pathways apply toward higher-level credentials.

Additional Economic Indicators Used for Special Evaluation:

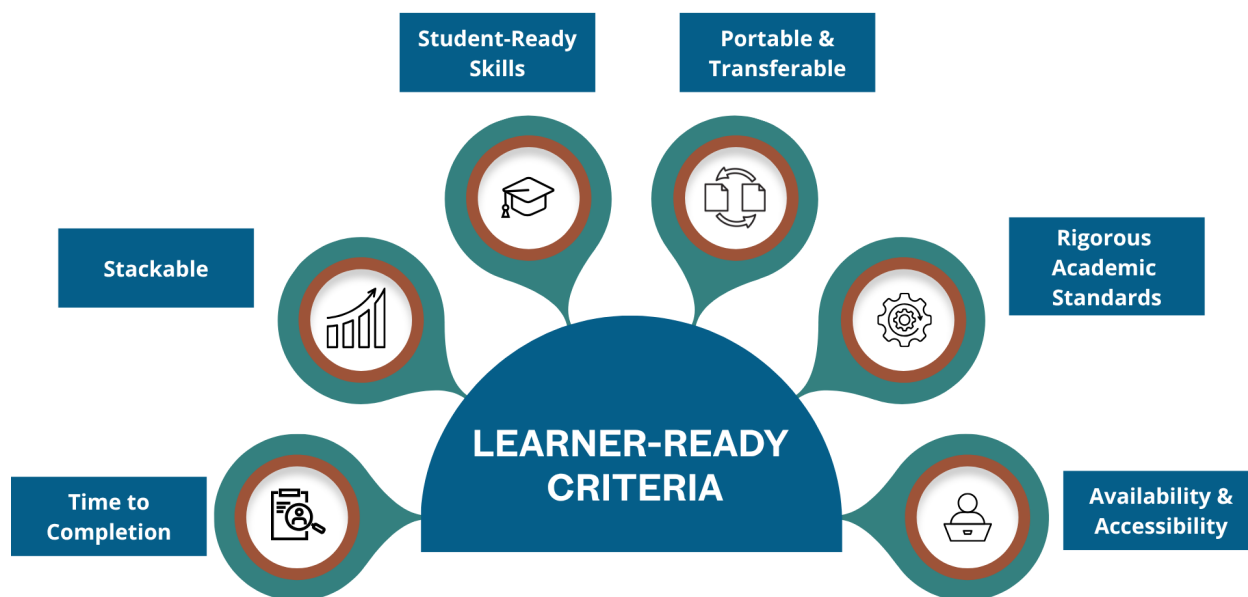
Community Vital Services and State Priority Sectors: Credentials that are tied either to (a) occupations within sectors identified by the state as critical to Utah’s economic growth and workforce development strategy, or (b) essential services that are vital to community function, resilience, and well-being. This includes roles that ensure legal compliance, public safety, and social cohesion, even when traditional labor-market demand indicators are limited. Together, these categories ensure the First Credential framework supports both Utah’s long-term economic competitiveness and the stability of community life.

Community Vital Services and State Priority Sectors Threshold consideration: These are occupations providing essential community services necessary for safety, legal compliance, or community well-being, even if traditional demand or growth indicators are not met or occupations are not identified on the Utah Workforce High-Demand Occupation list or sector-priority documentation in Talent Ready Utah or other strategic state workforce plans. This requires documentation of roles serving vulnerable populations or ensuring community function (e.g., public safety, education, healthcare, infrastructure).

Building the Master List: Conducting Phase 2 Learner Ready Criteria Evaluation

What are Learner-Ready Criteria?

Learner-Ready Criteria are high-level guidelines that ensure each credential on Utah’s First Credential Master List is relevant and achievable for high school students, clearly connected to future opportunities, and feasible for delivery within Utah’s LEAs. In contrast to economic thresholds, which measure labor-market value, these criteria focus on learner readiness and system design: whether a credential is accessible to students, stackable into further education or employment, aligned to rigorous standards, and supported by the infrastructure needed for statewide implementation. Learner-Ready criteria are evaluated both by the First Credential Review Committee and reviewed by individual LEAs as they complete their implementation needs assessment and planning processes.



Defining Learner-Ready Criteria

Student-Ready Skills: The credential is appropriate for high school students with content complexity, skill requirements, and time-to-completion that match their developmental readiness. It provides meaningful opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills through project-based learning, capstones, or other applied assessments that mirror real-world expectations. Credentials meeting this criterion not only validate knowledge but also foster problem-solving, critical thinking, and skill-building at a level that is achievable and relevant during high school.

Stackable: The credential leads to additional education or training opportunities, including more advanced credentials, degrees, or certifications within a clearly defined pathway. It contributes to a sequenced progression that enables learners to build on prior learning without duplication and achieve higher-level qualifications over time.

Portable and Transferable: The credential is recognized and valued across different educational institutions, industries, and geographic regions. It can be used in a variety of settings without the need for re-certification or retraining and demonstrates broadly applicable, employer-validated skills.

Aligned to Rigorous Academic Standards: The credential reflects recognized academic or technical standards (e.g., industry certifications, high school curriculum standards, postsecondary credit), ensuring high instructional and content quality.

Credential Availability and Accessibility: The credential can be delivered within Utah’s current or scalable infrastructure, with access to qualified instructors, necessary equipment, and flexible delivery models. It is feasible to offer across diverse regions, including rural areas, and is aligned to existing course codes or credential reporting systems to ensure statewide tracking, transparency, and scalability. In the case that it is not immediately feasible, there is an implementation plan supplemented by state-supports identified.

Time to Completion and Pathways Visibility: The credential can be earned during high school or with minimal additional postsecondary time, increasing feasibility and access. It clearly signals the next step in a learner’s educational or career pathway and is supported by advising, coursework, or planning tools that help students understand how the credential connects to long-term opportunities.

Additional Criteria to add to credential value-add, if needed:

Embedded Supports: The credential includes access to advising, coaching, or mentorship that supports student readiness, completion, and informed next steps.

Real-World Opportunities: The credential is integrated into work-based learning experiences (e.g., youth apprenticeships, internships, cooperative education) and real-world skills demonstrations.

Phase 3: Validation for Weighted Incentives

Upon successful evaluation in Phase 1 and 2, credentials that pass both qualifications are sorted into three-tiers based on the scores received on First Credential Master List **evaluation rubric** which was co-developed by the 2025 First Credential Oversight Committee in October 2025. Each tier is aligned to a designation of funding and support for LEAs for program launch and student completion.

- **Tier 1 Eligibility** is reserved for credentials that score above 73% on economic thresholds and exhibit learner readiness. Tier 1 credentials receive the highest student grants, launch funding, equipment resources, and coordinated support from higher education, employers, Talent Ready Utah, and USBE.

- **Tier 2 Eligibility** applies to credentials meeting at least two criteria (e.g., 60% on economic thresholds, 66% on learner readiness, prioritized industry designation, or grandfathered CTE pathway). Tier 2 credentials receive student grants at 75% of Tier 1 value and strong state and local support for implementation.
- **Tier 3 Eligibility** is for credentials meeting at least two criteria such as scoring at or above 8 on the economic threshold evaluation, having a support plan to strengthen rubric results, or meeting regional/community vital service needs. Tier 3 credentials receive 50% of the full student grant value and targeted launch support.

Credentials that score below thresholds or require fewer than one semester of instruction are not eligible as standalone First Credential, though they may be embedded within a broader pathway.

Three-Year Review and Renewal Cycle for the Master Plan

In accordance with HB 260 (GS 2025), the First Credential Master Plan including the Master List must be updated on a three-year cycle by the First Credential Review Committee. The comprehensive update will re-evaluate (a) the Master Plan itself including incentive and tiered funding structures (b) all economic indicators and threshold evaluation, (c) the Phase 1–2 rubrics and designations of the First Credential Master Credential List approved by the First Credential Oversight Committee initially in the fall of 2025. The review will culminate in a list of recommendations and an actionable process to update the Utah First Credential Master Plan.

Three Year Review Cycle for Continuous Improvement of the First Credential Master Plan

First Credential Master Plan | 3 Year Review Cycles



To sustain quality, drive adoption, enable scalable statewide access, and minimize implementation barriers, the First Credential Oversight Committee will establish and pursue targeted annual improvement priorities and recommendations over each three-year review cycle. These interim priorities do not replace the statute’s three-year list update; rather, they build the evidence base, strengthen delivery systems, and inform targeted refinements for the next formal update.

Year 1: Establish Data Systems, Capacity Building, and Feedback Loops for LEA Implementation

Success of the First Credential program relies on the strength of its data and systems that enable impact measurement. In the first year after the Master List is updated, the oversight committee will focus on building systems for credible, timely enrollment and completion data to verify incentives. Additionally, the first year will focus on the clear processes that help LEAs and charters stand up offerings and create an early feedback loop to surface barriers, especially in rural and small school contexts. This early feedback will be used to elevate opportunities for supports, resources, or policy changes that may be necessary. Building this foundation creates trust in the numbers that drive funding, spotlights access gaps early, and sets up smoother scaling in Years 2 and 3.

During Year 1 of every review cycle, it is recommended that the oversight committee and identified partners:

- Review the statewide data systems and methods of tracking for enrollments, completions, and early outcomes for all Master List credentials, aligned to existing USBE/USHE reporting.
- Launch an ongoing LEA feedback loop informed by the Needs Assessment to identify equipment, staffing, scheduling, transportation, and access barriers (including rural delivery). Feedback loops will identify what is working, identify opportunity, and embrace a model of flexibility to encourage growth.
- Define and refine data-exchange and longitudinal linkage requirements among education and workforce systems to inform credential return on investment and demand analyses for the next update cycle.

As a result of these efforts, the First Credential Program will be supported with increased data to understand participation, completion, and outcomes trends.

Year 2: Guidance, Student & Family Communication, and Program Alignment

After a foundational year of data and implementation learning, the second year ensures that First Credential options are visible and navigable for students and families while tightening program coherence across secondary and postsecondary. Clear guidance and aligned sequences increase informed uptake, persistence, and stackability; coordinated communications also help LEAs recruit and plan offerings with confidence. This focus also supports the translation of designations into student-facing guidance and aligned delivery across USBE and USHE.

During Year 2 of every review cycle, it is recommended that the oversight committee and identified partners:

- Publish and update student/family-facing messaging materials to support understanding and demonstrate the value of First Credential opportunities.
- Collaborate with guidance counselors and advisors to identify tools and training necessary for enhanced access, barrier reduction, and successful student transitions to education and the workforce.
- Conduct a CTE program alignment review to ensure employer relevance, stackability and portability. This evaluation also aligns programs with any updates to Perkins requirements and Workforce Pell Federal policies.

- Draft policy recommendations and infrastructure supports to be elevated to the state policymakers to reduce barriers or support new efforts needed based on previous findings from LEAs, higher education, students, and industry.

Year 3: Comprehensive Statutory Update Engaging Higher Education & Employer Validation in Necessary Master Plan and List Updates

Year 3 includes executing the HB 260 (GS 2025) mandated three-year update to the First Credential Master Plan that is grounded in data, higher education alignment, and employer validation.

In Year 3 of every review cycle, the First Credential Oversight Review Committee will leverage the efforts of the previous two years including evidence on participation, completions, and early outcomes to inform the statute-required update to the Utah First Credential Master Plan. This cycle will validate market relevance with employers, strengthen postsecondary integration, revisit thresholds and rubrics based on real data, and make targeted additions/removals so the Master List remains high-value and feasible to deliver statewide.

During Year 3, the oversight committee will:

- Convene postsecondary partners to review articulation, credit mappings, and program integration for postsecondary-aligned and stackable credentials; recommend updates to improve transfer and completion.
- Through Talent Ready Utah, convene employers, industry associations, and utilize existing industry advisory boards/councils to validate demand signals, confirm economic relevance, and identify gaps or emerging needs; integrate feedback before finalizing updates.
- As an official First Credential Review Committee, re-examine economic thresholds and the Learner-Ready rubric using accumulated evidence (ROI, demand, completions, access) and update where warranted.
- Apply the updated framework to add and remove credentials, adjust weighted tiers that align to funding incentives for LEAs (based on verified student completions), and finalize designations for clarity in advising and communications
- Understand student incentives and re-evaluate scholarships and other incentives
- Evaluate roles and membership of the First Credential Review Committee and appoint new or replacement members as needed.

- Develop and disburse a draft application for industry partners, technical colleges, or LEAs to submit a credential to be added to the First Credential to the Master List in 2028.

At the completion of Year 3, the oversight committee will deliver a set of formal recommendations for actionable updates to the Master Plan to USBE, USHE, Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS), the Education Interim Committee, and the Economic Development and Workforce Services Interim Committee.

Accessing the Official First Credential Master List

As a result of this evaluation process, the First Credential Review Committee will publish the First Credential Master List. The **Utah First Credential Master List is the official, statewide inventory of credentials approved by the First Credential Review Committee and maintained by the Utah State Board of Education (USBE).** Housed on the USBE website, the Master List is designed to provide LEAs, educators, students, and families with clear guidance on which credentials qualify as a First Credential. The cover page of the list includes important instructions and considerations, including specific guidance on eligibility for the graduating class of 2026 and beyond. The Master List is a living resource, with edits to the official list on a three-year cycle. Edits are made to ensure alignment with Utah's labor market needs and student opportunities.

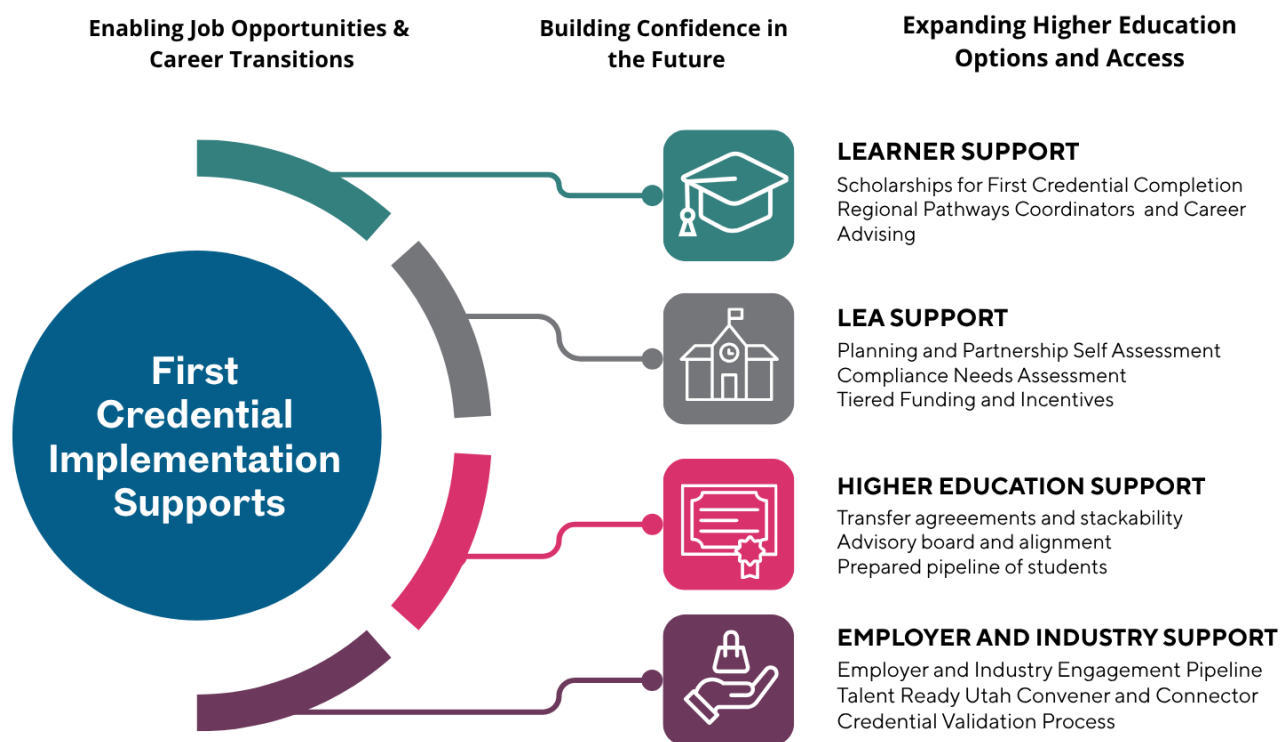
The Master List will be publicly visible to LEAs and intended to support consistent advising, program planning, and access across the state. As updates are made, USBE will provide guidance and training to support effective use of the list. LEAs and other stakeholders are encouraged to work directly with the USBE for clarification, implementation support, and questions related to credential eligibility or future updates.

Making the First Credential Program Work for All Stakeholders

To succeed, Utah's First Credential program must work for everyone including learners, employers, higher education, and local education agencies alike. Each plays a distinct and essential role in building an ecosystem where a credential is both a launch point and a bridge to

future opportunity. The following section outlines the core implementation supports designed for these key stakeholders. Together, these resources spanning learner scholarships and advising, LEA planning tools, higher education transfer and alignment efforts, and employer engagement and validation form the foundation of a coordinated system that enables job opportunities and career transitions, builds confidence in the future, and expands access to higher education.

First Credential Ecosystem



Implementation: Making the First Credential Program Work for LEAs

Utah's First Credential program will succeed when the vision is translated into clear, usable guidance that LEAs and state staff can act on. This section offers that guidance. It is written for the USBE, district and charter leaders, higher education partners, and legislative leaders who

want a straightforward account of how the program moves from idea to delivery without prescribing the day-to-day mechanics that USBE already manages well.

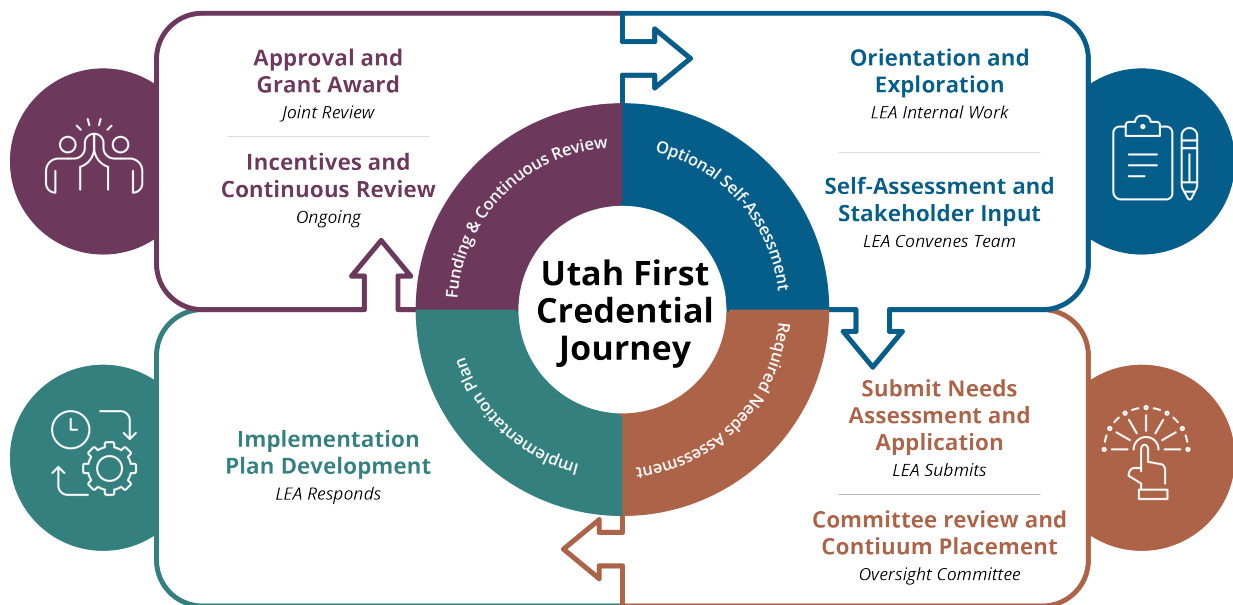
Per [Utah Code §53E-10-310](#), the First Credential Oversight Committee establishes the needs assessment and continuum, specifies what an Implementation Plan must include (goals, steps and timeline, and a cost projection), reviews and approves qualifying plans, directs technical assistance, and awards implementation grants. The statute also provides for incentive grants that are paid later, by rule, on verified completions of credentials on the Master List. Read together, these provisions set the “what”; USBE determines the “how” through existing systems and processes.

The pages that follow organize the program as a practical flow for LEAs and the state:

- An optional on-ramp to help LEAs get organized.
- The First Credential Needs Assessment (FC-NA) and continuum placement to establish a decision-useful starting point.
- An Implementation Plan that turns placement into a feasible launch story.
- A USBE decision with targeted assistance and an implementation grant that funds startup work.
- Incentives paid on verified completions.

Each stage clarifies what the statute requires and what supports are recommended, and we point to illustrative tools that show one way the ideas can be expressed while leaving room for USBE to use its own workflows. Our aim is a system that is simple to navigate, fair and consistent across LEAs, transparent to the public, and auditable over time—so funding follows real work and real results. The recommendations provided are design choices leveraged by high-performing systems. With those principles in view, Utah can build a world-class First Credential program that preserves flexibility for implementers while keeping a clear line of sight from plan, to launch, to verified outcomes.

The visual below outlines the First Credential process for implementing LEAs seeking grant and incentive funding.



Pre-Application: Orientation / Readiness

While there is no statute that mandates USBE to support activities that orient LEAs to the program, a successful First Credential application rarely starts from scratch. The LEAs that move fastest and win approval on the first pass are the ones that organize early: they engage stakeholders, align programming to the Master Credential List and local demand, and collect the handful of artifacts they'll later reference. A short, optional orientation phase helps them do exactly that.

For LEAs, the payoff is practical. A brief team huddle to name a program lead, identify likely sites, and set a light cadence reduces rework later. A quick look at local labor signals and student interest sharpens the candidate list so the needs assessment isn't a fishing expedition. Capturing early artifacts such as emails or letters from employers or IHE partners, means those items can be referenced rather than recreated during the statutory steps.

For the state, orientation materials are an efficiency engine. When LEAs share a common mental model of the journey, submissions arrive more complete, staff spend less time on basic

clarifications, and timelines are easier to keep. Clear, plain-language resources also widen access: small and rural LEAs can get started without bespoke coaching, and families and partners understand the plan from the outset. The result is higher quality, broader participation and a record that's easier to audit.

This phase is a short on-ramp that answers three questions for every LEA:

1. **What are we trying to launch and why here?** (2–5 candidate credentials and likely sites, each with a sentence or two on fit.)
2. **Who is doing the work and when will we check in?** (A named lead, a minimal cross-role team, and a recurring touchpoint.)
3. **What proof already exists and where is it stored?** (A simple artifact list with file names/locations for later reference.)

USBE and the First Credential Oversight Committee can support this without prescribing local workflow by publishing optional resources for LEAs that show 1) what's required at each stage and how the requirements connect to funding; and 2) a self-assessment tool that mirrors later expectations. USBE and the First Credential Oversight Committee should develop resources that achieve early clarity, light coordination, and reusable evidence.

Application Phase 1: First Credential Needs Assessment & Continuum Placement

Per [Utah Code §53E-10-310](#) Section 17, the First Credential Oversight Committee must establish a needs assessment tool and a continuum of need; LEAs submit a completed needs assessment with their application which is reviewed, assigned a continuum placement, and an Implementation Plan is specified with requirements tied to the LEA's needs and context.

This phase turns “good idea” into a documented starting point the state can understand, compare, and support. A well-designed First Credential needs assessment (FC-NA) balances two aims: (1) it gives LEAs space to describe local realities and early plans, and (2) it yields comparable, scorable information so USBE and the First Credential Oversight Committee can make consistent decisions. The goal is to collect only what's essential for decision making. Done right, the FC-NA will help an LEA confirm demand, surface capacity gaps, and name the partners and supports that will make launch real. It should be short, plain-language, and auditable: ask for the minimum evidence that proves readiness and let LEAs reference existing

artifacts (rather than re-uploading) wherever possible. The continuum placement that follows should set the form and timing of what will be asked in the Implementation Plan so that small pilots aren't burdened like large rollouts, and large rollouts get the assurance they warrant. Continuum placement should not be designed as a badge or penalty or impact funding awards.

Two guiding principles that can help keep this phase achieve maximum impact are consistency and flexibility. Consistency comes from using clear anchors and “floor rules” so the same inputs yield the same placement across reviewers. Flexibility can be supported by establishing an equivalency rule—if a different document does the same job, it counts (with a brief note in the record). Committing to these principles will reduce back-and-forth, speed up decisions, and protect fairness across LEAs of very different sizes and capacities.

Design choices for FCOC & USBE

The First Credential Oversight Committee should weigh as they shape the LEA application experience. The process should be kept simple, fair, fast, transparent, reusable, and auditable while ensuring space remains for USBE to leverage existing systems. Each choice asks, “What is the minimum information needed to place an LEA on the continuum and set clear plan requirements?” The aim is to make the experience predictable across LEAs of all sizes, reduce rework, and uphold evidence standards without adding unnecessary burden. These choices produce a clean handoff into implementation planning and funding while protecting program integrity.

- **Name the evidence minimums.** Publish “what counts” examples for each domain (demand, capacity, partnerships, barriers/supports, goals, procurement) and allow functionally equivalent artifacts with a one-line rationale.
- **Right-size by scope.** Define how small/medium/large launch scopes affect form/timing of later asks never as a placement penalty.
- **Offer comparability without rigidity.** Use a simple Reviewer Aide with anchors and floor rules so reviewers converge on the same placement; include sample decisions for calibration.

Application Phase 2: Implementation Planning

Per [Utah Code §53E-10-310](#) Section 17, every participating LEA must submit an Implementation Plan that includes **(1) specific goals, (2) steps & timeline, and (3) a detailed cost projection**; the First Credential Oversight Committee may identify additional elements based on the LEA's

needs and context. When designed and executed well, this requirement accomplishes several important jobs:

- It creates a shared, executable launch story so the LEA and the state are acting on the same plan.
- It connects dollars to delivery through a transparent funding picture, which strengthens award decisions and makes year-end reconciliation a confirmation exercise rather than a reconstruction project.
- It establishes a predictable pace, and proportionate confidence checks so small pilots are not treated like large rollouts while larger efforts provide firmer confirmations where complexity is higher.
- It reduces rework by focusing on relevant information and reusing documents that already exist, which shortens reviews and lowers burden.
- It produces a public-legible record that supports verification, payment, and scheduled program reviews.

To help Utah realize these outcomes while preserving flexibility for USBE and local design, the pages that follow provide recommendations grouped into six areas of consideration that high-performing systems routinely address: Purpose & Fit; Evidence (Standards, Reuse, and Transparency); Time; Funding & Data; Consistency & Integrity; and Planning for Improvement.

Purpose & Fit

Implementation plans in high-performing systems read like a clear story: they identify what outcomes are targeted, what work will happen when, and what resources make it possible. When plans stay lean and relevant, LEAs move faster, reviewers converge more reliably, and the public record is easier to explain. Designers should keep the statutory trio (goals, steps & timeline, cost) at the center and resist the temptation to collect nice-to-haves. Ask only for information that a reviewer needs to make an approval or funding decision.

To govern any requests beyond the trio, adopt a simple logic leaders can stand behind: Law to Need to Scale. In practice, a requested item appears because (a) law requires it, (b) the evidence still has a specific gap to close, or (c) the launch's scale warrants a different form or timing of confirmation. This logic keeps requests predictable across LEAs and prevents checklist sprawl. It also creates a transparent rationale for each ask, which reduces appeals and speeds decisions.

Finally, the most effective systems calibrate assurance to scope, not placement. A small pilot should not be treated like a multi-site rollout, and larger launches deserve firmer confirmations because risk and complexity are higher. Continuum placement should influence form and timing and not be indicative of overall workload for the LEA.

Evidence: Standards, Reuse, and Transparency

Evidence standards set the workload and the rhythm of review. In high-performing systems, plans prove readiness with the lightest credible verification and do not ask LEAs to retype or resubmit what already exists. The aim is relevant evidence—the minimum information a reviewer needs to judge feasibility and move the plan forward. Clear, plain-language examples of what counts for common elements (staffing, partner confirmation, potential coursework, testing or proctoring arrangements, procurement), acceptance that is function-based rather than brand-specific, and short proofs instead of long narratives deliver faster first-pass clearance, fewer clarification cycles, and an approval record that is easy to explain. High-performing systems make rules about reusing evidence explicit in policy. One way this can be achieved is by asking LEAs to maintain a simple artifact index from orientation into the plan. This prevents duplicate uploads, transcription errors, and undue administrative burden for LEAs.

Finally, for each requested item, the basis for asking (Law, Need, or Scale) and the standard for judging should be visible, with a short rationale. When evidence is light but legible, and when references and equivalents are handled consistently, reviewers stay calibrated, appeals drop, and the program can learn from its own decisions without adding new forms.

Calendars should serve the work

Implementation Plans move without friction when dates are tied to real milestones. Considering staffing, procurement, course starts, and testing window enable a common cadence turns planning into efficient execution. In this approach LEAs can stage tasks confidently, reviewers know when to expect evidence, and funding events line up with events on the ground. Predictability is the first anti-friction tool.

Timelines should be anchored to milestones, and one canonical lead-time logic should be established for the state. The key design principle here is to choose a single way to translate milestones into due dates so reviewers a) aren't negotiating calendars case by case and b) can avoid micro-managing LEA delivery schedules. When a staffing date or first-instruction date

shifts, the related due dates shift consistently. This reduces missed submissions, eliminates “local variants,” and makes it far easier for USBE to coordinate volume.

Design Principles for Funding & Data

Money and information move best when they tell the same story. Implementation Plans should make dollars traceable to plan lines and use the same “data language” that the system will rely on later for verification and reporting. There are two design principles that keep awards defensible, operations lean, and year-end reconciliation straightforward.

The first principle is to ensure funding traceability. A strong funding map shows at-a-glance, what resources enable which activities. When reviewers can follow the path from a planned activity to its cost (and see the braided funding sources that contribute) grant sizing flows from the plan instead of subjective metrics, and later monitoring becomes a matter of confirming what was already agreed. To operationalize this principle, funding map design should a) separate startup (one-time launch) from ongoing costs, and b) link every dollar to a specific plan line.

The second design principle is to avoid double-pay and opaque lumps. Unlabeled “lump” requests and unclear braiding create audit risk and confusion for LEAs. A well-designed plan will require visibility into other funds contributing to the same activity and discourage unlabeled aggregates. When the map shows which dollars cover which costs, it’s far easier to prevent duplicate payment across programs and to adjust if assumptions change. A system built on these two principles gives everyone the same, simple story to follow. Awards are sized from what is planned and reviews can move faster with fewer disputes. Most importantly, clear lines between activities, dollars, and definitions make the program easier to run, easier to explain, and easier to scale.

Consistency and Integrity

A high-functioning system makes judgment shared and visible. The role of design here is to help different people reach the same call on the same facts. Consistency comes from aligning people and developing the capacity among them to exercise shared judgment. Some of the actions high-performing systems take to achieve this are developing resources that create process and decision-making clarity for reviewers (what “sufficient” looks like, how to use equivalents, how to write plain-language rationales), creating opportunities to calibrate on real cases, and keeping a record of rationale for non-standard rulings. Those habits reduce “it depends who

you got” outcomes, raise first-pass clearance, and create an appeal-ready record without dictating local workflow.

Application Phase 3: Decision, Technical Assistance, and Implementation Grant Awards

Per [Utah Code §53E-10-310](#) Section 17, The First Credential Oversight Committee reviews the Implementation Plan, provides feedback, directs technical assistance (TA), approves qualifying plans, and awards implementation grants. Here, the focus is the up-front dollars that help LEAs launch what they just planned. The statute gives the oversight committee clear authority to award these grants and to set expectations for plans and evidence; USBE determines the operational “how.” Incentive grants are authorized separately, paid later by rule, and addressed in the next section.

Interpreted in the flow of the program, this phase does three jobs at once. First, it converts a verified plan into a clear approval decision with any dated conditions. Second, it ties an up-front grant to the plan itself—so dollars follow the work LEAs just committed to do, not reputation or negotiation. Third, it directs technical assistance to the specific, documented gaps that stand between plan and launch, keeping the focus on delivery rather than paperwork. The statute’s separation of implementation grants (to launch) from incentive grants (paid on verified completions by rule) creates a bright line: startup is supported now; outcomes are rewarded later.

What a well-run grant decision looks like (and what to guard against)

In a well-run system, the same facts lead to the same call, awards are sized directly from the plan’s funding map, and conditions are dated and tied to real milestones such as staffing, space, procurement, and testing windows. LEAs know what was approved, why any conditions exist, when those items are due, and who to contact for help. A plain-language and reconstructable public record will ensure that appeals are rare and audits are straightforward.

Less effective systems fall into predictable traps: awards drift from the plan and get negotiated case-by-case; conditions are open-ended, which slows launch; and rules are implicit rather than visible, which invites inconsistent treatment and back-and-forth. Grantmaking for all First

Credentials should avoid those traps for a simple reason: this program funds concrete offerings tied to a Master Credential List and then pays outcomes later under a separate authority. That structure rewards speed with integrity—launch now, pay for completions later—so decisions at this stage must be traceable, proportional, and easy to reuse across many files.

Year 1 Implementation Grant Recommendations

The list below reflects a light-but-clear Year 1 approach that keeps awards defensible, gives LEAs a clear runway to launch, and lets USBE manage volume on existing systems.

- State the approval and any conditions in plain language. Issue a decision letter that records the approval, the calculated award, any dated conditions (each tied to Law, Need, or Scale), and the USBE point of contact for support.
- Size awards from the plan with a few visible rails. Anchor awards to the plan’s funding map; distinguish one-time startup from ongoing costs; and apply a small, named set of guardrails everyone can see (for example, category ceilings and “no double-pay” with adjacent state/federal funds).
- Match payout rhythm to the work. Use one statewide rhythm for predictability. For example, an initial disbursement at approval and a readiness-to-launch release tied to dated conditions, so the same rules apply everywhere.
- Aim assistance where the evidence points. Direct support to the specific conditions in the approval letter and align touchpoints to the same milestone calendar LEAs are using.

Year 1 should prioritize simplicity and stability: establish the baseline approach and use it consistently so LEAs and staff learn the rhythm together. In Year 2, the focus should shift toward calibration by using what the files reveal—cycle time, clarification patterns, common edge cases—to align reviewer judgment while keeping the core approach steady. In Year 3, FCOC and USBE can prepare for the scheduled review by assembling comparable, roll-up information that links credentials, plans, awards, conditions, and launch milestones to delivery, cost, and outcomes. Those findings will be critical in guiding conversations about what to keep, what to simplify, and where rulemaking or infrastructure upgrades would materially improve speed and integrity as well as the Master List of Credentials itself. This framing keeps the First Credential Oversight Committee in a leadership role while giving USBE the flexibility to operate on the systems it already runs.

Incentive Grants and the Path to an Outcomes-Based System

Utah's First Credential statute authorizes incentive grants that are paid on verified student completions of credentials on the Master Credential List. It also directs the First Credential Review Committee to establish tiers for incentive awards based on the List's weighting, and to set the associated performance metrics and reporting by rule. Read in sequence with the earlier phases, incentive grants are the outcome side of the bargain: implementation grants help LEAs launch; incentive grants reward verified results. Tiering is the tool for signaling labor-market value; rulemaking is the lever for defining what evidence counts and how payments are administered.

A well-run incentive system pays for facts that are easy to verify, uses one statewide logic that everyone understands, and moves on a predictable cadence. LEAs can see, in advance, what a completion is worth and what proof will be accepted; reviewers apply the same standard everywhere; and the public can follow the money from a credential on the Master List to a payment in the ledger. Less effective systems drift toward chasing easy credentials, inconsistent rulings, and budget surprises as volumes grow.

Incentives for the First Credential program differ from many state grants in three ways. First, they are outcome-triggered, not application-scored—payments follow verified completions, not proposals. Second, they must be auditable at the student level, so the same completion is not claimed twice, and vendor attestations are treated consistently. Third, they operate alongside other funding streams (e.g., CTE, concurrent enrollment), so double-pay risks must be addressed up front. Those nuances call for clear rules and visible guardrails rather than complex formulas.

Key Takeaways on Implementation for LEAs

Orientation / Readiness (optional on-ramp): A brief, optional orientation helps LEAs name a lead, convene a small cross-role team, identify a short list of candidate credentials, and start an artifact index, so the statutory steps begin with fewer surprises and less rework.

- **First Credential Needs Assessment (FC-NA) and Continuum Placement:** Keep the FC-NA short and decision-useful by asking only for the minimum evidence needed to place the LEA and set plan expectations; reference existing documents where possible, allow functional equivalents with a one-sentence note, and use placement to shape the form and timing of later asks rather than the overall workload.

- **Implementation Plan:** Center the statutory trio—goals, steps and timeline, and cost—and use the Law to Need to Scale logic for any request beyond that trio; anchor dates to real milestones, keep evidence light and reusable, and make funding traceable to specific plan lines so decisions are faster, clearer, and easier to defend.
- **Plan Decision, Technical Assistance, and Implementation Grant:** Issue approvals in plain language, size awards from the plan with a few visible guardrails, set dated conditions tied to milestones, align assistance to those conditions, and use a predictable payout rhythm so LEAs can launch on time and staff can apply the same call everywhere.
- **Incentive Grants (path to outcomes):** Pay on verified completions from the Master Credential List using a single statewide logic and published “what counts” examples; keep rules steady across the year, learn from the files, and phase in additional sophistication only where evidence shows it improves value.

The First Credential plan offers a simple bargain the public can understand: LEAs propose work they can deliver, the state funds launch against that plan, and incentives follow based on verified completions. It runs on the rails Utah already has and it gives leaders a clear line of sight from idea to delivery to results.

Implementation: Making the First Credential Program Work for Higher Education

The Utah First Credential initiative represents an unprecedented opportunity to align secondary and postsecondary education in service of a single goal: ensuring that every credential earned in high school counts toward a meaningful career and a continuing pathway of learning. Utah’s universities, community colleges, and technical colleges are co-architects of the system. Their active involvement ensures that a First Credential is academically rigorous, portable across institutions, and stackable toward degrees. The First Credential program enables K-12 and higher education to operate as a system where learners move seamlessly from one experience to the next, accumulating skills, credit, and confidence along the way.

Utah’s First Credential program will succeed when the vision is translated into clear, usable guidance that higher education leaders can act on. This section offers the guidance of how higher education participation moves from intent to impact and elevates the operational details that colleges and universities already manage well.

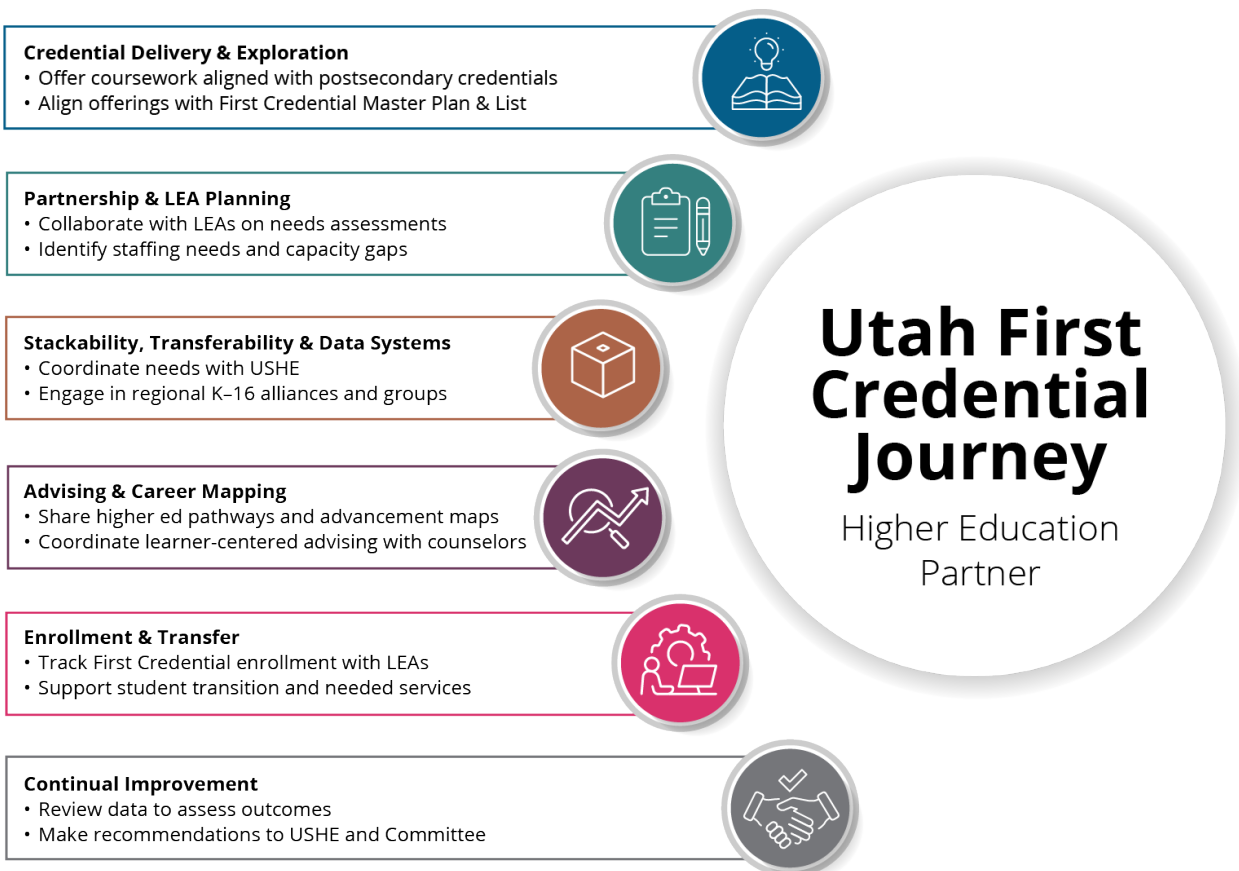
As LEAs complete their needs assessments and implementation plans, higher education partners also support implementation to translate goals into practice. This requires aligning all five First Credential options with existing programs, data systems, and advising structures to ensure stackability, portability, and transferability across Utah's postsecondary institutions.

The pages that follow organize higher education's role as a practical journey from internal alignment to partnership, data integration, and continuous improvement:

- **Credential Delivery & Exploration:** Institutions review the Master Plan and Master Credential List, aligning with advisory groups and existing offerings.
- **Partnerships and LEA Planning:** Higher education collaborates with local education agencies on needs assessments and capacity planning.
- **Stackability, Transferability and Data Systems:** Institutions coordinate with USHE and regional K-16 Alliances to communicate transfer and stackability pathways.
- **Advising and Career Mapping:** Colleges integrate credential pathways into advising and learner-centered guidance.
- **Enrollment and Transfer:** Institutions track First Credential learners' enrollment, support transfer into postsecondary programs, and identify wraparound supports.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Data on outcomes and impact inform systemwide refinements and incentive recommendations.

Each stage clarifies what the statute requires and what supports higher education to function as an active co-producer of Utah's talent pipeline. With aligned data, articulation, and advising, Utah can ensure that every First Credential earned in high school is a navigable first step toward a degree and continued lifelong learning.

The visual below outlines how higher education partners engage in design, feedback, and improvement of the First Credential program in a way that supports partners and meets their enrollment and growth goals.



Credential Delivery and Exploration

The Credential Delivery and Exploration phase invites higher education partners to locate their role within Utah’s existing credentialing infrastructure. Institutions review the First Credential Master Plan and Master Credential List, mapping where current certificates, concurrent enrollment offerings, and technical college programs already align. This process enables higher education institutions to collaborate with existing industry advisory councils and Talent Ready Utah to validate relevance, ensure academic rigor, and provide structured feedback that refines and strengthens the Master List. During this phase, institutions begin identifying the data systems and reporting processes needed to track participation, outcomes, and alignment across programs.

This phase is about connection, not reinvention. Higher education partners recognize how their ongoing work already advances the First Credential vision and help shape a unified system where each credential builds toward meaningful postsecondary certificates, degrees, and careers. By honoring existing strengths and leveraging shared expertise, Utah reinforces a statewide infrastructure that connects learning, work, and opportunity.

Partnership and Planning with LEAs

In this phase, higher education partners collaborate with LEAs to turn shared goals into actionable plans. While LEAs complete the required needs assessment, they must rely on higher education to contribute strengths. This includes expert faculty, specialized facilities, and robust postsecondary course offerings. Postsecondary institutions help align curriculum across secondary and postsecondary systems, ensuring the course content, credential requirements, and instructional strategies reflect industry standards and programmatic rigor. This collaboration in the needs assessment phase guarantees that credential programs align with secondary priorities and meet postsecondary and workforce expectations.

Higher education's participation in the First Credential Needs Assessment ensures their resource needs and existing institutional capacity to assist captured alongside those of LEAs. This joint planning step lays the groundwork for sustainable implementation and clarifies staffing, instructional, and infrastructure supports that will later inform grant funding and technical assistance. Through this collaboration, Utah builds a unified launch plan that honors the leadership of LEAs while leveraging higher education partners to deliver on shared goals.

Stackability, Transferability, and Data Systems

This phase strengthens the connective tissue of Utah's First Credential system by ensuring that information, programs, and credit move seamlessly across institutions. Higher education partners coordinate with USHE to communicate needs, clarify transfer and articulation pathways, and identify where stackable credentials can build toward degrees. Regional K-16 Alliances and Talent Ready Utah hubs serve as conveners for this work—aligning education and workforce data, identifying shared resources, and helping institutions respond to regional economic priorities.

Through these collaborations, higher education institutions establish shared data systems to track enrollment, credential completion, and transfer outcomes. This infrastructure not only supports reporting and accountability but also enables real-time advising and program

improvement. When data flow freely between partners, Utah’s system can recognize every First Credential as a verified milestone on a longer path of learning and career advancement.

Advising and Career Mapping

Advising and career mapping translate the promise of earning a First Credential into tangible outcomes for students and institutions alike. Higher education partners play a critical role in helping learners see how early credentials connect to future education and career opportunities. By collaborating with guidance counselors, college advisors, and LEA partners, higher education institutions help design clear, stackable pathways that link a First Credential to certificates, degrees, and employment in high-demand fields.

For higher education, this work builds both access and alignment. When students understand the next steps beyond high school and see visible connections to college programs, they are more likely to enroll, persist, and complete. Clear guidance, transparent transfer maps, and consistent advising tools strengthen recruitment and retention—ensuring that more Utah learners view higher education not as the next hurdle, but as the natural continuation of their First Credential journey.

Enrollment and Transfer

As students earn First Credentials, higher education partners play a central role in ensuring that each credential leads to meaningful next steps. Institutions collaborate with LEAs to track enrollment and completion patterns, confirming that First Credential students can move smoothly into postsecondary programs without credit loss or duplication. When new credentials or articulation agreements emerge, higher education partners coordinate with USHE to review, adjust, and update articulation and transfer pathways. This ongoing feedback loop keeps the system responsive and current, enabling students to continue seamlessly from high school into certificates and degrees that count toward their goals. By strengthening alignment between systems, Utah ensures that First Credential completers see higher education not as a restart, but as the next step on a coherent path of learning, earning, and advancement.

Continuous Improvement and Convenings

Continuous improvement ensures that Utah’s First Credential system remains responsive to learners, employers, and institutions. Higher education leaders contribute directly to this process through participation in the First Credential Review Committee, K-16 Alliances, and Talent Ready Utah convenings. These venues give colleges and universities a formal voice in

evaluating outcomes, refining credential alignment, and identifying new opportunities for credit transfer and program design.

This feedback loop empowers higher education to shape policy and practice in real time. By analyzing enrollment, completion, and workforce data, institutions help identify what is working, where gaps exist, and how pathways can evolve to meet emerging industry needs. The result is a living system—one that values higher education not just as a participant, but as a co-designer of Utah’s statewide talent strategy, ensuring credentials remain relevant, rigorous, and connected to opportunity.

Key Takeaways for Higher Education Implementation of the First Credential Program

Higher education is essential to the success of Utah’s First Credential program. Technical colleges, community colleges, and universities serve as the critical connection points that translate credentials into continuing education and career advancement. Through the needs assessment process, institutions have the opportunity to identify both the support and resources they need and the innovative programs they wish to grow. This system is not about redistribution, but expansion—creating the space for new students, new programs, and new partnerships to flourish. By elevating existing strengths while opening pathways for collaboration with LEAs, Utah is building an infrastructure where higher education remains a central, well-supported driver of opportunity and economic mobility.

Implementation: Making the First Credential Program Work for Employers and Industry

Collaboration by Design: An Intentional Partnerships Among Education and Industry

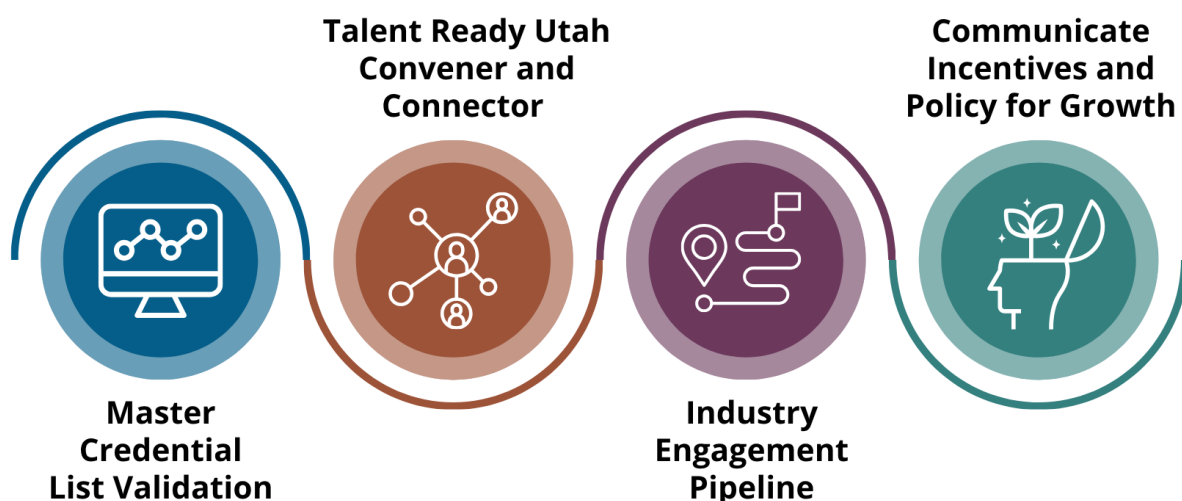
Utah’s First Credential program marks a pivotal shift in how the state connects education, training, and career advancement. By design, the program places employers and industry at the center. Credential pathways are developed with input from local businesses, industry associations, and economic development partners to ensure that what students learn aligns with Utah’s workforce needs. This approach transforms how education systems and employers work together, creating seamless links between classrooms and careers and positioning credentials as launchpads into high-demand, high-wage fields.

This integration reflects global best practice. Leading systems like Switzerland’s dual-track model and Singapore’s SkillsFuture initiative show what’s possible when education and industry co-design pathways that make learning and work mutually reinforcing. Students graduate ready to contribute immediately and adapt as the economy evolves. Through programs such as the Stadler Rail apprenticeship, which combines paid work, college coursework, and industry-recognized certifications, Utah’s growing strength in employer collaboration, stackable pathways, and scalable access to opportunity.

Utah’s First Credential Master Plan ensures employers are not occasional reviewers but continuous partners from signaling demand and defining competencies to validating wage benchmarks and documenting how credentials translate to hiring and advancement. As these partnerships deepen, Utah continues to stand out as a model of how states can build dynamic, future-ready systems that keep talent and opportunity thriving at home.

The visual below illustrates critical and intentional connection points to ensure that employers and industry leaders are not casual informers of First Credential implementation, but co-designers of an opportunity that benefits students and workforce alike.

Intentional Employer and Industry Engagement



Employer Validation: An Essential Role in Creating and Updating the First Credential Master List

After credentials have completed the rubric driven phase evaluation approach of Economic Threshold Review and Learner-Ready Criteria evaluation, Talent Ready Utah, in participation with the State Talent Board, acts to organize targeted employer engagement in phase 3. At this point industry engagement shifts from input to confirmation. Employers are identified to review the weighted list, validate the economic thresholds and flag any gaps tied to occupational demand and hiring opportunities. Their findings may prompt targeted adjustments to the First Credential Master List, elevating credentials into different tiers based on industry insights.

This process is a final validation stage of review before the Master Credential List is released. Enabling this synthesis surfaces coherent, statewide guidance from employers, identifies any gaps, and kickstarts employer engagement.

This same discipline carries into list maintenance where industry partners support the three-year comprehensive review and annual updates by reaffirming demand, re-validating wage thresholds, and advising on shifting economic needs. **In short, employers and industry are not occasional reviewers; they are continuous co-producers** of the Master List. They play an important role in identifying opportunities, aggregating sector input, validating the economics and the weighting system, and ensuring that Utah's First Credential pathways remain relevant, transparent, and built to endure.

Employer engagement extends beyond establishing the initial Master List into the previously outlined phased cycle of continuous evaluation and action. Beginning in spring 2026, industry partners will collaborate with CTE leaders to develop a concrete implementation plan that maps high-value credentials to course sequences, work-based learning, and credit crosswalks so students can see—and earn—clear progression. This work deepens with an apprenticeships action plan, developed with employers, technical colleges, and labor partners to align youth and registered apprenticeship pathways with the Master List. These phases ensure that validation is not a one-time event; employers remain at the table to refine offerings, confirm wage and demand signals, and translate credentials into real placements and advancement.

Establishing Talent Ready as a Core Convener and Connector

The success of Utah's First Credential program depends on clear leadership and shared ownership across education, workforce, and industry partners. Leadership must be intentional

and continuous to actively align efforts with Utah’s economic goals and maintain steady progress. Without this coordination, the program risks fragmentation and diminished impact.

To convene and connect employers for First Credential success, Talent Ready Utah will serve as the essential intermediary connecting employers, educators, and policymakers. As a statewide convener, it ensures that credential pathways are responsive to labor market needs and that vital efforts—such as apprenticeships and skills training—translate directly into opportunity for Utah students. Through regular, neutral convenings, Talent Ready Utah builds trust among partners, surfaces insights that enable the system to move forward toward shared goals.

Supported by existing structures such as technical college and CTE industry boards, Talent Ready Utah anchors collaboration across regions and sectors. Its dedicated staff, and Regional Pathways Coordinators, sustain communication, facilitate employer engagement, and advance policy discussions. This coordination is particularly critical in rural regions, where connecting smaller employers to statewide networks expands access to resources and strengthens local economies.

As Utah’s core connector, Talent Ready Utah maintains focus on the program’s statewide vision by elevating leading employers, collecting and sharing data on participation and outcomes, and managing day-to-day implementation functions such as outreach, training, and stakeholder engagement. These responsibilities form the backbone of Utah’s First Credential system, ensuring that education and industry remain aligned, responsive, and ready to meet the state’s evolving workforce needs.

Communicate an Employer and Industry Engagement Pipeline

Utah’s First Credential program is designed to ensure employers are not only at the table from the start, but remain integral partners throughout the education, employment, and upskilling pipeline. To operationalize employer engagement throughout education, onboarding and upskilling, an Employer and Industry Engagement Pipeline resource will identify multiple entry points for collaboration and provides employers of all sizes clear, practical ways to strengthen Utah’s workforce and ensure that credentials lead to skilled, prepared, and engaged talent.

The pipeline resource will outline concrete engagement actions at three levels including what employers, industry associations, and the state-level workforce system can do to support and shape Utah’s First Credential program. Each stage of the pipeline will clarify how different actors contribute to Utah’s long-term talent development system with First Credential as a catalyst for connections.

- **Employers** engage through organizational leaders (e.g. HR and hiring managers) who verify demand, align job descriptions, and recognize credentials in hiring processes, as well as through subject-matter experts who co-develop learning experiences, inform competencies, and support mentorship and assessment.
- **Industry associations** aggregate employer voices to define entry-level competencies, maintain statewide career maps, and expand access to work-based learning and educator externships.
- **The workforce system** connects the data, policy, funding, and advising infrastructure that sustains the pipeline—supporting review cycles for the Master Credential List, aligning incentives, and ensuring statewide visibility and access.

The Employer and Industry Engagement Pipeline will be designed as a menu, not a mandate. It will be flexible and opt-in so regions, sectors, and employers can engage where value and capacity is greatest. The shared framework will reduce complexity for schools and training providers and strengthen employer alignment.

Incentives and Continuous Improvement Infrastructure

The First Credential program offers tangible incentives that make employer participation both practical and rewarding. Employers gain direct access to job-ready candidates whose skills have been developed and validated in collaboration with industry itself as a result reducing onboarding time, turnover, and overall hiring costs. These benefits strengthen workforce stability and are especially valuable for small and midsize firms with limited in-house training capacity.

Employers also have a direct voice in shaping the Master Credential List, regularly nominating new credentials, identifying equipment and skill needs, and recommending updates to ensure alignment with Utah’s evolving economy. This partnership keeps credentialing relevant and responsive for employers of all sizes and sectors, including rural and emerging industries.

At a systems level, Utah’s existing workforce programs provide additional support. Custom Fit Training through technical colleges covers up to 40% of employer training costs. Utah Works grants fund short-term, employer-driven training—including curriculum, tools, tuition, faculty, and marketing. Talent Ready Apprenticeship Connections (TRAC) helps employers launch or expand apprenticeships and earn-and-learn programs, providing a scalable model for growing businesses.

Together, these incentives create a strong foundation for employer engagement ensuring that participation in the First Credential system is both feasible and beneficial across Utah’s diverse industries and regions.

Implementation: Making the First Credential Program Work for Students

Earning a First Credential Scholarship

The purpose of the First Credential Scholarship is to support Utah students who earn their First Credential by providing financial assistance to enable continued learning. Funded through legislative appropriations and awarded by the Utah Board of Higher Education, the scholarship can be used at eligible degree-granting institutions and technical colleges for tuition, fees, books, and other approved educational expenses. It is valid for three years after high school graduation and can be combined with other state-sponsored scholarships.

A Guardrail for 2026 Graduates

For students who expect to graduate in 2026, the First Credential Scholarship requirements and application process remain the same as the [PRIME Scholarship](#).

Projected Student Eligibility

Students who complete any of the five credentialing pathways (completing CE courses, completing a CTE pathway, completing a youth apprenticeship, earning a state-approved IRC, or earning a technical college certificate) will be eligible to earn a First Credential Scholarship beginning with the high school graduating class of 2027. Current state data were utilized to estimate the approximate number of students expected to earn the First Credential Scholarship from SY25 - 32, displayed in the table below.

The growth in completion rates will likely look different across the five pathways and will depend on robust data collection and reporting systems as well as LEA adoption of First Credential. The model used to calculate the number of students earning a First Credential and the costs associated with the scholarship does not account for overlap across the pathways; for example, if a student completes a CTE pathway and earns an IRC, they would be counted twice

in the number of students earning a credential. As more robust data are collected, this model can be finetuned to support planning for future years.

Indicator	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030	2031	2032
Anticipated Graduating Cohort	47,441	48,210	48,962	49,726	50,497	51,259	52,007	52,736
Anticipated FC Completion Rate (sum of all pathways)	30.51%	36.51%	42.51%	48.51%	54.51%	60.51%	66.51%	72.51%
Anticipated # of Students Earning a Credential (sum of all pathways)	14,474	17,601	20,814	24,122	27,526	31,017	34,590	38,239

First Credential Scholarship Design Options

The First Credential Oversight Committee is exploring models for students who earn a First Credential Scholarship that provides students with a tangible financial resource, is a valuable incentive, and is financially feasible for the state and education systems. The First Credential Oversight Committee will continue to explore options to most effectively use existing funding or align with additional state aid programs. One option being explored in depth is for all students who earn a First Credential to be automatically awarded a \$625 First Credential Scholarship. The design and costs for the scholarship will need to be further discussed in partnership with USBE, USHE, and legislators to determine the best option to incentivize students considering available funding. This decision will be finalized in year 1 of implementation to inform scholarship awards for students graduating in 2027.

While receipt of scholarship funds is tied to completion of a First Credential upon graduation from high school, it is essential to provide students with strategic recognition of their progress and clear awareness of the steps required to remain eligible. This approach requires

collaboration between USBE and USHE to reinforce persistence, help students stay on track, and ensure they understand the pathway to earning the scholarship. By making expectations transparent and celebrating progress, the program also serves as a recruitment tool, demonstrating a clear and achievable route to success.

LEAs may choose to offer additional incentives to students to supplement the scholarship, including offering incentives that scale with the tier of credential earned. Because students will select their credential pathway in partnership with their guidance counselor, creating training opportunities and resources for guidance counselors will be critical to the success of the scholarship program. Counselors should be able to support students in choosing a credential pathway and completing steps required to accept their scholarship.

Together, these scholarship design elements and strategies create a strong foundation for student participation and persistence in First Credential pathways. By simplifying access, embedding data systems, and ensuring flexibility in how funds are used, Utah can build a scholarship model that is scalable, sustainable, and responsive to student needs. The next phase of implementation will depend on clear governance, coordinated leadership, and robust cross-agency collaboration to bring these commitments to scale statewide.

Strategic Recommendations: First Credential Implementation Imperatives

As Utah launches the First Credential program, sustaining momentum will require continued collaboration, investments, and a long-term commitment to embedding the First Credential program as part of Utah's culture of lifelong learning and economic growth. The following recommendations draw on the First Credential Oversight Committee discussions and identified needs to guide Utah's next phase of work. These implementation imperatives are considered a year 1 priority resourced by staffing and statute where possible to reinforce as actionable priorities.

Establish Clear and Coordinated Governance Structures

- The first step in implementation is to formalize the First Credential Review Committee with defined term limits, operating procedures, and balanced representation across education, workforce, and industry. This structure ensures continuity, transparency, and regular rotation of members to sustain momentum and fresh perspectives.

- Building on that foundation, the oversight committee can leverage existing K–16 Alliances as regional coordination hubs, expanding and replicating them to align local education and workforce efforts with statewide priorities.
- This governance model begins with existing infrastructure and grows over time, prioritizing flexibility, collaboration, and responsiveness as Utah scales the First Credential program statewide.

Prioritize Talent Ready Utah’s Statutory Role as the Central Convener

- Talent Ready Utah will lead annual statewide and/or regional convenings to connect LEAs, higher education partners, and employers, creating consistent touchpoints for collaboration and shared learning. The organization will assess and build capacity to strengthen employer and industry engagement, including identifying where staffing needs to be dedicated to cross-sector coordination and relationship management.
- Talent Ready Utah will partner with USBE, and the USHE Access Team to manage statewide communication and training to elevate awareness of the First Credential opportunity, ensuring that educators, employers, and communities understand how to participate and benefit. These supports position Talent Ready Utah to anchor implementation and respond to the needs of employers. Resources will need to enable timely response.

Map Staffing and Capacity Gaps

- Conduct a statewide capacity and staffing analysis to identify gaps in project management, data coordination, and cross-agency implementation support. This process will inform decisions about dedicated administrative staffing to sustain coordination, communication, and accountability. Mapping will include identifying administrative roles and assessing guidance counselor capacity to determine whether current staffing levels meet student advising needs and identify policy options to expand access to high-quality career guidance statewide.
- In partnership with Talent Ready Utah and USHE, engage Regional Pathways Coordinators who will play a critical role in connecting schools with employers, organize teacher externships, and expand employer engagement strategies that deepen understanding of real-world workforce needs.
- Review federal and state funding streams, including opportunities through Workforce Pell and other workforce development programs, to ensure the resources needed for long-term implementation.

- Within the launch of the First Credential program, sample roles, responsibilities, and timelines have been drafted to clarify expectations across state agencies and critical implementation stakeholders. All guiding reference documents will be reviewed and finalized by the First Credential Oversight Committee.

Fund Early Training and Support for Counselors and Advisors

- Provide targeted training and resources for guidance counselors and advisors to ensure students receive clear, accurate information about First Credential pathways. Training will align with CTE clusters and regional career maps, helping counselors guide students toward high-demand, high-wage opportunities.
- Support counselors and advisors to understand the impact and potential of student incentives including the First Credential Scholarship, credit transfer, and employer pipeline connections.

Establish a Statewide Data Systems Working Group

- A working group representing higher education, K-12, workforce development, and national data subject matter experts is charged with conducting an inventory of existing data systems, including Utah's Data Research Center to understand current capacity and interoperability. The group will recommend strategies to automate reporting and implementation tasks, reducing administrative burden and improving real-time access to data. The final step is to develop and expand longitudinal data systems that connect enrollment, credential attainment, and employment outcomes across agencies.
- The working group will ensure a minimum viable product as a centralized database that houses all the First Credential data in one place and is accessible by state agencies and LEAs. The working group will explore the ideal dashboard that would allow for connections with existing databases—such as Perkins, USHE, USBE, and Talent Ready Utah and create customized views targeted to different audiences including public-facing data for families and communities.
- Consider how this centralized database or an additional technology infrastructure can be leveraged to auto-enroll, complete, and award First Credential scholarships upon completion.
- This work may require statutory authority to ensure integration, data-sharing, and privacy protections aligned with best practices from other states.

Implement a Statewide Evaluation Plan

- The evaluation plan will include systematic analysis of wage and employment outcomes to determine metrics of economic mobility and refine living wage trajectory thresholds. These findings will guide decisions to improve, replace, or sunset low-value credentials and to introduce new First Credentials tied to high-demand, high-wage pathways.
- Embedding a formal evaluation plan ensures First Credential investments meet intended outcomes. Tracking participation, costs, attainment, and postsecondary outcomes is essential, and incorporating feedback from students, educators, and employers will enhance understanding of First Credential’s programmatic impact.
- Evaluation findings will be reported regularly to inform state and local decision-making, ensuring that resources flow to the most effective strategies and that the First Credential program continues to evolve based on evidence and impact.

Strengthen Continuous Improvement and Build Feedback Loops

- Codify regional collaboration by adding language and funding to support LEA partnerships with higher education and employers, ensuring coordinated implementation across the state. Existing K–16 Alliances and Catalyst Centers can serve as regional hubs for shared delivery, hybrid learning models, and sustained employer engagement mirroring existing effective practices established through CTE.
- To promote ongoing learning and accountability, the state will formalize feedback loops that connect policy, practice, and learner experience. This includes establishing a Learner Advisory Board and a Higher Education Workgroup, along with structured opportunities such as statewide and regional road shows, listening sessions, and convenings to gather early feedback from LEAs and inform refinement at the state level, particularly through USBE. Convenings could be written into statute to ensure consistency and sustainability.

Strengthen Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

- Upon completion of the First Credential Master List, a proactive statewide strategy should ensure consistent messaging about the initiative’s value and opportunities. In the first year, Utah should invest in communications and messaging resources that leverage storytelling to build visibility and support, sharing real-world success stories that highlight how a First Credential opens doors to college, careers, and higher wages.

- Communication materials should be tailored to each audience. Students and families need clear information about First Credential scholarships, how credentials translate into college credit and job opportunities, while counselors and advisors require toolkits and training to guide students effectively. Teachers and school leaders benefit from implementation examples and peer learning, and employers and higher education partners need regular updates and partnership opportunities. Celebrating early wins and reinforcing the initiative’s purpose will build long-term trust and enthusiasm across Utah’s education and workforce communities.

Strategic Recommendations: Expand Incentive Models for both LEAs and Students

Utah’s First Credential incentive system should be simple, transparent, and consistent, rewarding verified credential attainment while maintaining fiscal integrity. The following recommendations outline how to operationalize a sustainable, outcomes-oriented model that grows in sophistication as data capacity and confidence increase.

It is important to maintain consistent value signals tied to credential tiers and workforce priorities, and use uniform payout criteria and a concise set of acceptance examples so that similar cases are treated consistently and reviews do not become negotiations. Furthermore, First Credential should ensure auditability and transparency by defining who provides evidence, what documentation is accepted, and how equivalency is verified.

Implementation must use simple, public budget guardrails and update incentive rules only on a scheduled review cycle, not midyear. Phased Implementation path includes:

- **Short-Term (Year 1):** Keep the model straightforward and auditable. Pay per verified credential completion using published tiers and uniform payout cadence. Make budget rules visible and use light safeguards (e.g., random sampling or verification reserve).
- **Medium-Term (Years 2–3):** Use participation and cost data to calibrate tier amounts, refine verification rules, and publish an annual Incentive Performance Brief showing volumes, costs, and patterns to drive adjustments.
- **Long-Term / Innovation Horizon:** With enhanced data systems, explore outcomes-based incentives such as progression bonuses for stackable pathways, banded cost caps, or optional metrics recognizing employment and continued education outcomes

Incentivize and Streamline Student Completion

Ensuring that every eligible student can access and benefit from the First Credential Scholarship will be critical to the program's long-term success. Utah can build on lessons from the PRIME program by streamlining scholarship access, embedding strong data systems, and expanding flexibility to support diverse learner pathways.

- Auto-award First Credential scholarships to students who meet all requirements to reduce administrative burden and ensure consistent distribution of awards.
- Broaden allowable uses of scholarship funds to include other indirect academic costs such as, transportation, and essential career-related expenses such as uniforms, tools, and technology.
- Lead by USHE's financial aid team, convene key stakeholders to provide recommendations to the First Credential Oversight Committee to incentivize student participation while making the scholarship fiscally sustainable in the long-term. Consider strategically streamlining existing state-level supports for students and offering tax credits for employers who contribute to the scholarship fund.

Strategic Recommendations: First Credential Pathways Design Improvement

The five First Credential pathways serve as a starting point for launch, with opportunities to refine and expand as implementation advances and stakeholder feedback informs continuous improvement. The following recommendations address opportunities to foster improvement and strengthen alignment and collaboration across the five First Credential pathways. A seamless system will ensure that students can progress fluidly between pathways, earning stackable credentials that build toward degrees and careers.

Concurrent Enrollment First Credential Considerations:

To ensure employer validation and workforce relevance, Utah will add a communications course to the Concurrent Enrollment (CE) First Credential bundle. Courses such as *Comm 1010 – Elements of Effective Communication*, *Comm 1020 – Public Speaking*, or *Bus 2200 – Business Communication* could be considered to build durable written and verbal skills consistently identified by employers as top priorities across industries. A CE First Credential signals higher education readiness and launches students on clear career pathways. Aligning CE bundles with

career clusters—such as Business and Entrepreneurship, STEM, and Humanities, Leadership, and Global Studies—will help students connect coursework to occupational goals. Each pathway includes foundational CE courses, such as:

- STEM: CS 1030, CS 1400, CHEM 1010, PHYS 1010, BIOL 1010
- Business and Entrepreneurship: BA 1010, FIN 1050, ECN 1500, BUSN 1010
- Humanities, Leadership, and Global Studies: ECN 1500, HIST 1100, EDU 1010, HU 1010

A Concurrent Enrollment Higher Education Ready bundle would provide transferable credits equivalent to roughly one semester at a Utah public institution, giving students a tangible head start. To support successful participation, students should receive career-aligned advising and transfer guidance throughout course selection, pathway enrollment, and completion.

Review opportunities to include early college credit earned through Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate

Concurrent Enrollment Higher Education Ready bundle should consider legislation to review other pathways to early college credit, primarily evaluating First Credential eligible Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate Diploma course sequences that pass the economic threshold evaluation and learner ready criteria review. By adding these pathways to college credit in high school to a First Credential bundle, Utah can ensure that students electing into postsecondary coursework is directional, intentional, and informed.

Considerations for Industry Recognized First Credential (IRCs)

An Industry Recognized First Credential is designed to prepare completers for direct entry into occupations. However, enabling transfer credit across USHE institutions will ensure that students earning IRCs have a clear view on how to advance in their education.

Additionally, IRCs likely have high stakes exams as part of the credentialing process. Success will be increased if students have access to tutoring, exam preparation, scheduling coordination, and financial assistance for assessments or skill demonstrations. Each IRC on the Utah Master List will include accompanying resources for students and LEAs, such as career ladders, occupation profiles, and sample job descriptions that illustrate wage outcomes and advancement opportunities tied to credential attainment.

Considerations for Youth Apprenticeship First Credential

A comprehensive, long-term apprenticeship plan will ensure these pathways become a lasting, integral part of Utah’s education and workforce ecosystem. Policymakers should invest in long-term apprenticeship system development, ensuring sustainable funding and coordination across education and industry. In order to operationalize this, investing in messaging successful examples can inspire participation. Enabling policies such as addressing liability, aligning HR and compliance requirements, providing transportation supports, and recognizing seat-time flexibility will remove barriers for employers and students.

Considerations for Technical College First Credential

To ensure consistency and strengthen alignment across pathways, the First Credential Review Committee, in collaboration with higher education advisors, should refine the existing recognition of technical college coursework as a First Credential by establishing clear criteria for programs that meet the 300-hour threshold. These refinements should consider technical education concurrent enrollment expectations outlined in the master plan, which recognize substantial progress toward a credential through both college credit and technical coursework.

CTE First Credential Considerations

CTE is a proven, federally supported pathway that already prepares thousands of Utah students for in-demand careers. Many CTE completers also earn industry-recognized credentials (IRCs), which must be fully recognized within the First Credential framework and aligned with concurrent enrollment opportunities to ensure stackability and seamless progression. In the first year of implementation, USBE in partnership with Talent Ready Utah will lead statewide employer awareness efforts, prioritizing local employer validation of CTE pathways to ensure programs remain relevant, high-quality, and connected to regional workforce needs.

Strategic Recommendations: Improving Employer and Industry Engagement

Employers are central to the success of Utah’s First Credential program. By shaping credentials, expanding work-based learning, and investing in training partnerships, employers ensure that programs reflect real workforce needs while gaining access to skilled, job-ready talent. The following recommendations enable employers to more effectively participate with First Credential success.

Conduct a needs assessment with local employers

- An effort led by Talent Ready Utah and the Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity (GOEO) can collaborate with current and perspective employers to identify targeted incentives (e.g., tax credits, grants, or recognition programs) for businesses that participate in apprenticeships, work-based learning (WBL), or credential validation. One aspect of the needs assessment is to address regulatory barriers to apprenticeship and WBL and draft legislative recommendations related to liability, youth employment, and seat-time requirements to expand employer participation in youth apprenticeship programs. In the needs assessment process, small and midsize businesses should be supported in participation to surface unique needs.

Standardize industry participation tools and expand existing resources

- Working in collaboration with USBE and Talent Ready, finalize and disseminate standard MOUs, vetted WBL agreements, and compliance tools to streamline employer engagement and ensure legal clarity. Existing efforts such as Custom Fit Training (covering up to 40% of training costs), Utah Works grants, and Talent Ready Apprenticeship Connections (TRAC) should be considered as tools to be replicated to help employers launch or scale training and earn-and-learn programs.

Utah's First Credential Promise: A Launchpad for Learners, A Legacy for the State

The First Credential Program represents more than a new initiative. It is designed to be a long-term opportunity for Utah's future. By embracing First Credential as a sustainable, integrated part of our education and economic strategy, the state has the opportunity to lead the nation in redefining how we prepare students for success. Utah's vision is simple yet bold: every student should graduate not only with a diploma, and with the opportunity to earn a meaningful industry-aligned credential that carries real value upon high school graduation. This is a chance to set a new national standard in talent development, showing how a coherent credentialing system can strengthen both individual opportunity and statewide prosperity. The First Credential program knits together K–12 schools, higher education, and industry into one united effort, ensuring that learners, educators, and employers are all working in concert toward shared goals.

As the First Credential program matures, Utah's focus will shift from building initial infrastructure to creating a durable system that can evolve with the state's economy and learners. In doing so, Utah can ensure that a First Credential is not viewed as a single achievement, but as the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning and growth along the career ladder.

Sustaining the system will also require refinements in funding and resource allocation. Over time, Utah will need to transition from start-up grants toward stable, long-term funding streams that support LEAs and ensure access for all students, especially in rural communities. Transparent policies, combined with thoughtful adjustments to funding models, will allow the program to scale without sacrificing quality or inclusion.

Equally important is building a culture of public awareness and shared ownership. A sustained communications campaign, highlighting compelling stories of students, educators, and employers, can position the First Credential program as part of "the Utah way" of aligning education with economic growth. These narratives will not only celebrate successes but also demonstrate the broad and lasting value of the program to families, businesses, and communities.

Finally, the long-term durability of the program will depend on continuous oversight and innovation. The First Credential Oversight and Review Committees must be empowered to regularly review and refresh the Master Plan and Master List, update tools, and adapt processes to new industries and technologies. This iterative approach will allow Utah to remain agile and forward-looking, embedding First Credential pathways into the very fabric of its education and workforce systems. Over time, the program will become more than a policy initiative—it will be a defining feature of Utah's culture of lifelong learning, resilience, and economic vitality.

This integrated approach will cultivate a culture of lifelong learning and a skilled, resilient workforce for Utah. In a rapidly changing economy, the ability to continually upgrade skills is essential, and the First Credential program is the first step in that journey. Students who earn a certificate or credential in high school gain early momentum and confidence to persist in college and adapt as the world of work evolves. Employers benefit from a reliable talent pipeline of young professionals who are equipped with job-ready skills and understand the importance of continued learning over one's career. Over time, this cycle of education and upskilling will make Utah's workforce more agile and its economy more competitive. By weaving the First Credential Program into the very fabric of Utah's education and economic

systems, we can create an “on-ramp” to opportunity for every student and a stronger, more resilient engine of talent for the state. In short, Utah is positioned to not only meet the needs of today’s learners and industries, but to lead with vision securing the state’s prosperity for decades to come.

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