


# The Seal of Biliteracy: College Credit and Placement

By Kristin J. Davin

As more and more students across the United States earn a Seal of Biliteracy (SoBL), institutions of higher education (IHEs) are finding creative ways to leverage the award. Although the idea of awarding college credit to SoBL earners was initially viewed by many as a potential threat to enrollment in post-secondary language classes, evidence suggests that such credit policies are actually boosting enrollment.

In this article, I describe how modern language departments at the post-secondary level are using the SoBL to recruit students and to inform placement decisions, and I share initial evidence related to the impact on enrollment, potential hurdles, and recommendations for IHEs wishing to implement similar procedures.

## What is the Seal of Biliteracy?

The SoBL is awarded to high school graduates who are bilingual and biliterate in English and another world language. It began as a grassroots movement in California in 2008 to combat restrictive English-only policies and to change deficit-based views of bilingualism. Formally adopted in California in 2011, the SoBL has since spread across the United States, with more districts and schools joining implementation efforts each year.

As of May 2021, high school graduates in 42 states and the District of Columbia (DC) can earn a SoBL, which is represented by an emblem placed on the high school diploma or transcript. Typically awarded by a state Department of Education, the SoBL is intended to be a clear symbol of multilingualism and multiliteracy for future employers and universities.

The SoBL is a powerful tool for IHEs because it is typically associated with a proficiency rating, most commonly Intermediate Mid or Intermediate High. In most states, to earn a SoBL, students must pass an approved language exam such as the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), Standards-based Measure of Proficiency (STAMP), or Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and Writing Proficiency Test (WPT).

As a result, many students arrive at college from programs like the ones described in this special topic issue with a valid and reliable proficiency rating that signifies what they can do with the world language.

## Use of the SoBL by Institutions of Higher Education

In recent years, colleges and universities have begun to leverage the SoBL. For example, Illinois and Minnesota legislate that IHEs in their respective state systems award credit to SoBL earners. The same occurs in Maine through a partnership between the Maine Department of Education and the state's IHE system.

Other colleges and universities are voluntarily following suit. A recent internet search yielded 44 IHEs that award credit to SoBL earners, including Denison University in Ohio, Fordham University in New York, Grand View University in Iowa, Pittsburg State University in Kansas, Southern Connecticut State University, and the University of Northern Colorado.

Offering college credit to students who have earned the SoBL benefits students. Such policies may increase students' motivation to attend college and can reduce tuition costs. Moreover, because many students who earn the SoBL were previously labeled as English Learners, they may not have had the same access to Advanced Placement courses as other students. Thus, SoBL attainment may be one of few opportunities for them to earn college credit in high school.

## Awarding College Credit

Just as the SoBL policy varies from state to state, so too do the ways in which IHEs recognize SoBL earners. The amount of credit awarded by IHEs to SoBL earners varies across institutions. Some institutions, such as Lake Land College and Kaskasia College, both in Illinois, award credits for two semesters of world language to SoBL earners.

Others, such as Southern Illinois University, award as many as 16 credit hours. Still others award credit based on the level of proficiency that students demonstrated to earn the SoBL. For example, the University of Maine awards nine credits to students who scored Advanced Low on the ACTFL Proficiency scale and six credits to students who scored Intermediate Mid.

The ways in which students can request or are awarded credit also vary. For example, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, students who earned the SoBL in any language and from any state can request eight credits. The university awards these as transfer credits, so they do not count toward students' grade point average.

Most IHEs instead have a ***retroactive*** or back ***credit*** policy that requires students to first complete a course in the modern language department before they can earn credit for their SoBL. For example, at Kansas State University, a student who earned a Gold SoBL (for Intermediate Mid proficiency) is placed automatically into Spanish IV (Spanish 301) and a student who earned a Platinum SoBL (for Advanced Low proficiency) is automatically placed into ***Spanish Composition and Grammar*** (Spanish 410). Once the student completes the course, they receive retroactive credit for the previous Spanish courses, Spanish I to Spanish III. A similar procedure exists at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, where students can request up to 12 back credits once they pass a modern language course with a grade of C or higher.

Variations also exist related to the languages in which students can earn college credit for SoBL attainment. At some institutions, such as the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, students can request college credit for a SoBL in any language. More variation exists across institutions with retroactive policies. For example, at Pittsburg State University in Kansas, students can currently only earn credit for the SoBL in languages offered by the university.

Other IHEs have more flexible policies. At Grand View University in Iowa, students can receive up to eight Spanish credits, the language offered at the university, by completing any course in the modern language department. For students who earned the SoBL in a language not taught by the department, students can earn eight elective credits, also by taking any course in the modern language department. Therefore, if a student got the SoBL in Hmong, he or she could take Spanish I and get eight elective credits for the Hmong SoBL.

## Use of the SoBL for Placement Decisions

Because the SoBL offers modern language departments a clear symbol of what a student can do with language in the three modes of communication, it offers a powerful tool for placing students into the appropriate language course. In addition to conserving departmental resources used to test students for placement, use of the SoBL can improve placement accuracy.

Occasionally, some students might perceive it to be in their best interest to place themselves in a lower-level course than their language skills merit. However, if students can earn retroactive credit for courses that they place out of, they might be more motivated to request credit for the SoBL and enroll in an appropriately leveled course.

## Impact on Enrollment

Some individuals at IHEs fear that offering credit to SoBL earners might hurt language course enrollment. However, initial evidence suggests that this is not the case, especially in IHEs with a retroactive credit policy. It is too soon for a quantitative analysis because most IHEs have only had this procedure in place for a couple of years, yet qualitative evidence is hopeful.




For example, Dr. Grant Moss, a Professor of Spanish at Pittsburg State University in Kansas, explained that offering credit to SoBL earners has actually increased enrollment in modern language courses. Dr. Moss and colleagues developed a process through which students with a SoBL could enroll in fifth semester Spanish. Upon successful completion of this course, students earned 15 credits for the completed course and the previous four courses, more than half of the required 24 credits for a minor and almost half of the required 33 credits for a major. As a result, many students decided to continue on to earn a modern language minor or major.

Dr. Resha Cardone at Southern Connecticut State University and Dr. Amy Schumann at Grand View University in Iowa related similar experiences. At Southern Connecticut and Grand View, as with Pittsburg State, students who earn credit for the SoBL already have half of the credits required for a language minor. Therefore, the majority of students who request the credit choose to continue on for a minor.

At Grand View University, Dr. Schumann explained that the university has a high Latinx student population. The SoBL credit policy encourages students to take a modern language class in the department, which gives faculty the opportunity to express to students the value of their heritage language. She explained that faculty use this opportunity to point out the transferrable skills of multiliteracy and the value of earning documentation of that multiliteracy.

## Hurdles

As IHEs implement and evaluate policies related to awarding college credit to SoBL earners, various hurdles will have to be overcome. The first relates to spreading news of the opportunity to students and advisors.

Because college applications do not have a question that asks about SoBL attainment, most IHEs do not automatically award credit—students must request credit. Many students are not aware of this opportunity. Southern Connecticut University offers an excellent model for how to overcome this hurdle using a modern language graduation requirement. Students must pass either the STAMP or the AAPPL with a score of Intermediate Low or better or take a third semester language class.

In their required freshman seminar, students learn about the modern language requirement. The seminar instructor is aware of the SoBL credit policy and explains it to all freshmen. For students to earn credit for the SoBL, they must first meet with Dr. Cardone, giving her the opportunity to recruit students to the department.

A second hurdle relates to the differences in requirements for SoBL attainment across states. In an article that appeared in ***Foreign Language Annals*** in 2017, Davin and Heineke compared the SoBL policies across participating states. Policies varied substantially in regard to the minimum required level of proficiency in the world language, English language requirements, and approved methods for demonstrating proficiency, for example.

Until SoBL policies become more uniform across states, it will be difficult for IHEs to determine how a student with a SoBL from Illinois compares to a student with a SoBL from North Carolina, for example.

Finally, just as equity and access issues exist with the SoBL at the high school level, they also exist in higher education. IHEs must grapple with how to provide access to college credit for students who are proficient in languages not taught at the institution. Moreover, because SoBL implementation is voluntary in many states, some students in U.S. schools may not have access to the award. Thus, IHEs must offer similar pathways to college credit for students whose school did not offer the SoBL but who are proficient in an additional language.

## Recommendations for Modern Language Departments

If you wish to leverage the SoBL, first meet with colleagues to discuss how you can implement the award in an equitable way that values the bilingualism of all students. Examine the policies of other IHEs leveraging the SoBL and create an advocacy and implementation plan within your own IHE.

Then determine how you will identify students who earned the SoBL. Perhaps incoming students take a freshman seminar where information can be shared, or perhaps an announcement can be sent via email or social media to all incoming students.

Finally, consider offering an assessment such as the AAPPL or STAMP for students whose high schools may not have offered the SoBL so that they have the same opportunities to earn college credit as their peers.

Although still in its infancy, the SoBL has the potential to bring long overdue attention to the importance of developing multilingual students. Recognizing the SoBL at the post-secondary level extends its importance beyond high school and represents an important step toward solidifying the longevity and impact of the award.

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