

An aerial photograph of the San Jose State University campus, showing various academic buildings, green lawns, and surrounding urban areas. The image serves as a background for the presentation title slide.

SJSU

COLLEGE OF
GRADUATE STUDIES

Expanding Access to Graduate Education via Credit for Prior Learning

Marc d'Alarcao
December 5, 2025

Snapshot of San José State University

Oldest Public University in the West

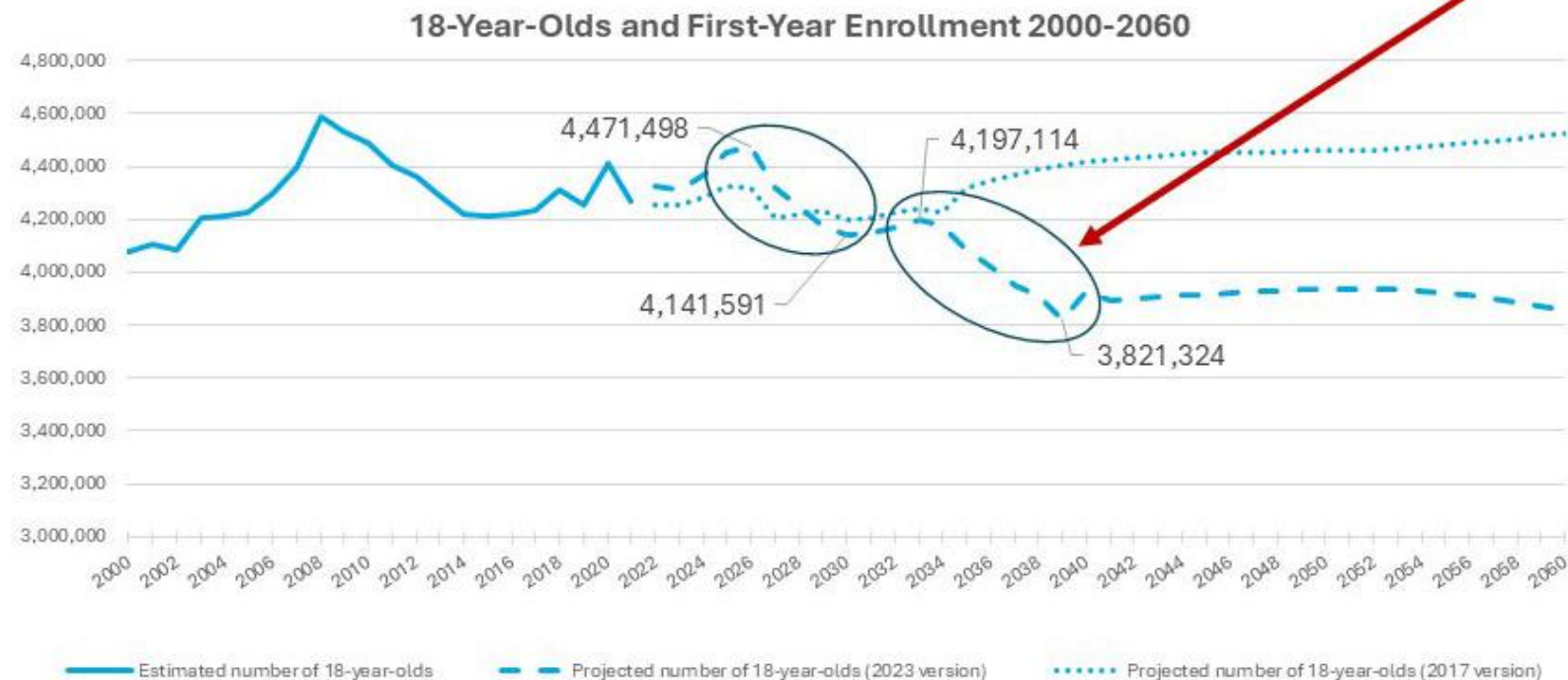
- Established in 1857 as a Normal School
- Current Total Enrollment >40,000
- >10,000 Graduate Students
 - More than 120 master's degree programs
 - 4 doctoral programs currently, mostly clinical
 - 3 new research doctoral programs coming soon
- Carnegie R2 Research Designation
 - ~\$90M in research expenditures in FY24
 - Silicon Valley's only public research university

The Graduate Enrollment Imperative

The Next “Demographic Cliff” Begins in 2026

- Estimated -650,174 18-year olds from 2026-2039
- This represents a 15% decline
- Regionally variable
 - Worst in the Northeast, Northwest, and Midwest
 - Increases in Texas and the North Mountain States
- Universities who survive will make up this UG enrollment decline with other learners, especially master’s students

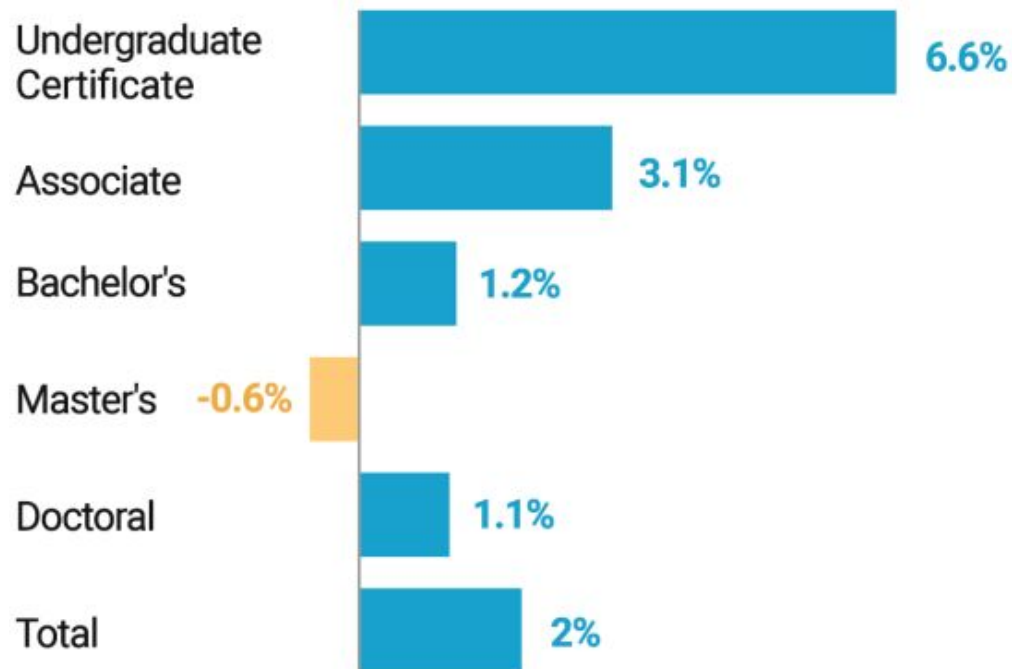
Two Demographic Cliffs



Scott Jeffe, RNL [Education Insight Blog](#), Sept. 24, 2024

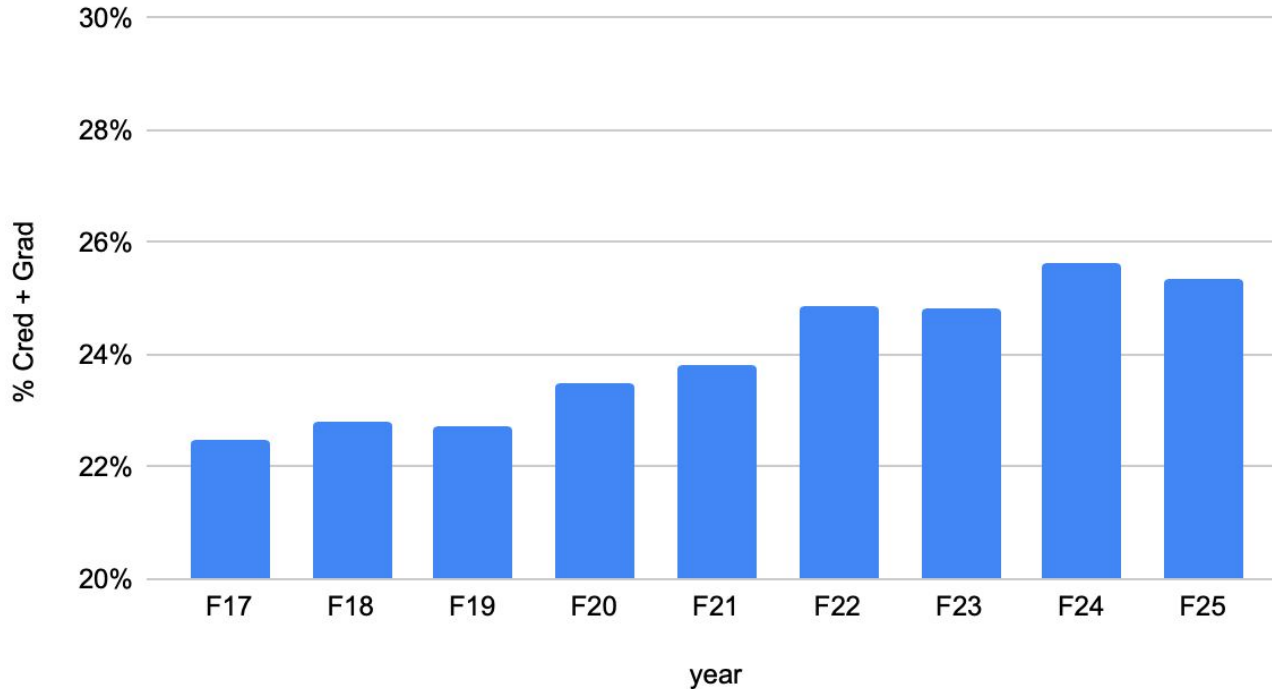
The Softening Master's Degree Enrollment Picture

**Preliminary F25
Enrollment Changes
(percent change over F24)**



The Graduate Enrollment Imperative

% of Total Enrollment at SJSU that are Graduate Students



The Softening Master's Degree Enrollment Picture

Chronicle of Higher Education notes that:

- Declines (in UG) are mostly in computer science and related disciplines
- Ascribes the declines to two factors:
 - Challenges in the tech job market
 - Concerns about AI taking coding jobs

The Opportunity of CPL for Both Students and Universities

For Students

- Faster attainment of graduate degree
- Upskilling opportunity for professionals threatened by AI
- Cost savings
 - Fewer semesters paying tuition
 - Less opportunity cost from being out of job market
- May be decisive for student decision to obtain graduate degree
 - Higher lifetime earnings

For the University

- Bolster graduate enrollments
- Learn from experienced practitioners

CPL in the California State University

Updated Policy in 2023

- Retains challenge exam option
- Requires campuses to develop policies to allow additional ways of awarding CPL
 - May include portfolios, interviews, demonstrations
 - Must be assessed by subject matter experts (faculty)
 - Must be awarded for specific course or requirement
 - Matriculated graduate students are eligible if they have completed 3 units in residence at the campus

CPL at SJSU

- Has launched at the UG level; just starting at graduate level
- Biggest challenge is compensating faculty for the assessments
 - For challenge exams
 - compensate faculty for creating the exam
 - Compensate faculty for grading exam, if necessary
 - Charge students a nominal fee (~\$25) to take the exam
 - For other assessments (portfolio review) fewer economies of scale
 - Compensate faculty for assessment
 - Charge student a more substantial fee

Thank you!

Questions?

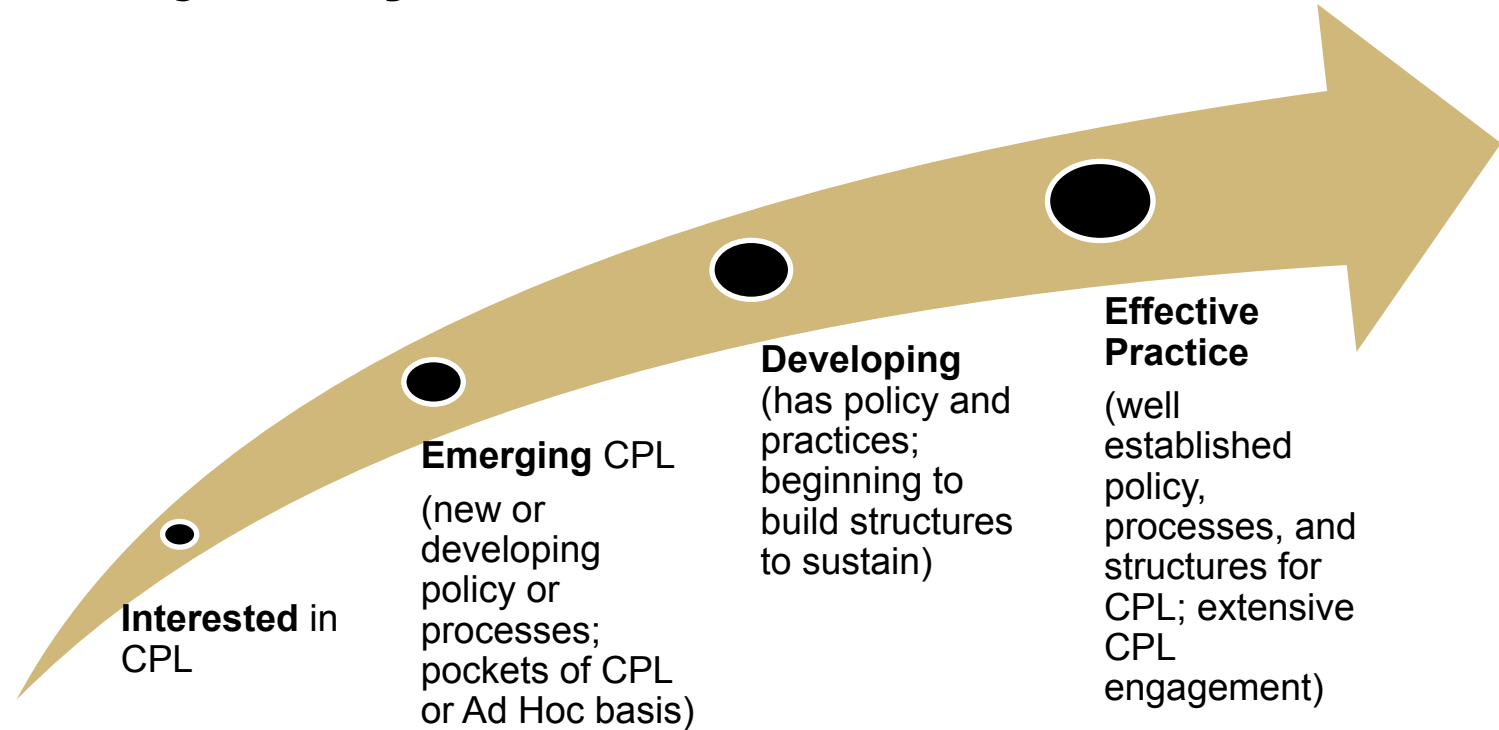
Emerging Credit for Prior Learning at a Mid-Sized University

Hillary N. Fouts

Dean of the Graduate School

hfouts@uccs.edu

Where is your Graduate School/College on this CPL trajectory?



Adapted from ACE & Vantage Point Consulting, 2024

ACE Matrix for Self-Assessing CPL

Institutional Functions	New/Emerging Stage	Developing Stage	Effective Practice Stage
	<i>Has a basic understanding of prior learning with demonstrated institutional interest</i>	<i>Begins to deepen understanding of prior learning across the institution and develops standard policies, practices, and procedures</i>	<i>Has broad and deep understanding of prior learning and acknowledges its role in equity and postsecondary pathways; sustains systematic and accessible CPL practices</i>
Academic Engagement	Determination of prior learning credit by pockets of faculty; grants credit awards on an ad hoc basis in response to requests	Provides professional opportunities for faculty and staff, including conferences and research; encourages faculty to include CPL activities in annual reviews; implements other incentives	Supports prior learning across institution; actively involves faculty in crafting policy and practice, such as crosswalks and articulations; creates venues for information sharing across the institution; invests in automation for standardized tasks (e.g., credit awards for known experiences) to optimize human resources for new assessments
Student Support and Outreach	Accepts prior learning on ad hoc basis in response to requests; CPL options are not yet fully transparent or well coordinated across institution	Shares CPL policies and options on website and through orientations and advising	Informs students of prior learning options before admission; uses all types of communication tools to share information with students; provides transparent and up-front guarantees of credit awards for prior learning; proactively grants CPL credit awards
Institutional Supports	Identifies policies, processes, practices, and governance structures that will help meet institution's CPL goals	Establishes policies and practices; puts people, resources, and structures into place to manage programs	Executes new, data-informed policies and refines practices in a continuous improvement process; shares best practices and benchmark data with peers; engages effectively with ecosystem partners; supports CPL for student success
Technical Capacity/Data	Collects best practices on how to manage CPL data but may not fully integrate CPL data and processes in SIS platforms	Records, tracks, and collects data related to CPL credit awards systematically; consistently tracks equivalency decisions; expects technical proficiency in roles and responsibilities	Manages, tracks, and shares CPL data internally and externally for maximum transparency; uses historic data to make proactive CPL awards; automates standardized tasks (e.g., credit awards for known experiences); provides ongoing training to encourage technical proficiency
Ecosystem Engagement	Researches and identifies best practices for partnerships with state-level entities, workforce boards, employers, other institutions, or credential providers; initiates and sets foundation for relationships with partners	Establishes a regular meeting cadence with ecosystem partners to share data, understand needs or requirements, and remove barriers to collaboration	Maintains tight alignment and collaboration between partners that supports direct-hire pipelines, custom training, and upskilling options for learners

© 2024 American Council on Education | Vantage Point Consulting

<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Infographic.pdf>

UCCS Context

- Part of the University of Colorado System
 - 1 of 4 campuses
 - Colorado Springs campus established in 1965
- R2 Carnegie Classification since 2019
- 37 master's programs, 11 doctoral programs
- 11,153 students (Fall 2025, total enrollment)
 - 2,031 graduate students
 - 19% of total student population

CPL at UCCS

- Moving from Emerging to Developing CPL Stage
 - Graduate CPL allowable, but no university policy providing guidance
 - Lots of interest, but minimal CPL activity at the grad level
- Formal policy work began in Fall 2024
 - Focused on both UG and Grad together
 - Policy nearing completion

Key Considerations

- State policy alignment
- ACE tools and research reports
- External Exemplars
 - Especially HLC accredited universities
- Internal Exemplars
 - Identified grad programs with Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) processes and/or college CPL structures.

Prior Learning Assessment

- External examination
- Internal/Departmental examination
- Credit by licenses, certifications, training and non-credit technical coursework
- Assessment of experience
 - By examinations and portfolios
 - Most common among grad students
 - Program specific assessment procedures

Lessons Learned

- Partnership with campus stakeholders
 - accreditation liaison, faculty, registrar, bursar, extended studies, communications and marketing, etc.
 - Deep engagement and buy-in from programs, faculty workload
- Balance flexibility with quality
 - Maximizing options to give programs flexibility
- Policy differentiation
 - Needs of graduate programs vs undergraduate
- Cost implications and student impact

Thank you!

Questions?



University of Colorado
Colorado Springs



University of Colorado
Boulder | Colorado Springs | Denver | Anschutz