IOWA | Department of Education

Common Course Numbering Operational Guide



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System Governance and Framework

Mandate and Authority

Statutory Foundation

In accordance with 2026 Iowa Acts, House File 2610 [Iowa Code § 256.139], all credit-bearing community college courses shall comply with the requirements of the statewide common course numbering (CCN) system.

Statewide Integration

Pursuant to proposed 281 IAC § 21.4(7)"d", standardized course identifiers from the CCN system will be utilized universally across all community college course catalogs, registration systems, and official student transcripts. This baseline requirement ensures that equivalent coursework is recognized uniformly across the state.

System Purpose

The adoption of the CCN system is to support student transfer and academic transparency.

Responsibilities and Structural Framework

Central Registry and System Maintenance

The Iowa Department of Education (the Department) will maintain the centralized, statewide common course numbering directory via the State of Iowa Curriculum System (STICS). The procedural guidance, submission timelines, and administrative workflows required to operate, audit, and maintain this common course numbering directory are established permanently within this Common Course Numbering Operational Guide.

Applicability and Scope

The common course numbering system applies to all credit-bearing courses taught at Iowa community colleges, including Arts and Sciences (A&S) transfer courses and Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses.

Uniformity Across Delivery Formats

Standardized structural elements course apply uniformly to all offerings of a course, regardless of the delivery method (including online, hybrid, accelerated, and traditional face-to-face formats).

Structural Elements

A common course has six standard structural elements:

- **Course Prefix:** The standardized alphanumeric code identifying the academic discipline.
- **Course Number:** The standardized three-digit numerical code specifying the course level and category.
- **Course Name:** The official, uniform title assigned to the course.
- **Course Credit Hours:** The uniform unit of academic value assigned to the course.
- **Course Description:** The concise summary of course content and thematic scope.
- **Course Learning Outcomes**: The formal statements specifying what students are expected to know or be able to do upon completion.

Note: Because Course Learning Outcomes differ between A&S and CTE courses, the same course cannot be designated as both A&S and CTE.

Developing New Courses

When creating a new course, institutional developers must systematically check the statewide database (STICS) to see if a similar course already exists at another college.

Using Existing Names and Numbers

If a similar course is found, developers must review its structural elements. If the new course matches the existing course, it must adopt the standardized structural elements.

Developing a New Course

To develop a new course, a college must first check the statewide database (STICS) to see if a similar course exists:

- If a similar course exists: Developers must review its structural elements. If the proposed course matches the existing one, it must adopt the standardized name, number, and structural elements.
- If no similar course exists: A new course name and number may be created, provided the college demonstrates that the content is substantially different from anything currently in the statewide directory.

Technical Rules and Structural Elements

This section covers the technical rules and data standards for the six required structural elements under proposed 281 IAC § 21.4(7)"a". All entries submitted to STICS must follow these rules to ensure courses match across the state and transfer smoothly.

Structural Elements

Course Prefix

The standardized alphanumeric code identifying the academic discipline which comprises three letters identifying a statewide field of study, rather than a local campus department.

Course Number Taxonomy

The standardized three-digit numerical code specifying the course level and category. All course numbers must be strictly allocated according to the following taxonomy:

Sequence Progression

Less advanced courses must have numbers lower than more advanced courses within the same discipline prefix.

- **000–099 (Developmental Course Types):** Numbers below 100 are reserved solely for developmental, remedial, and preparatory coursework. General education courses are not intended to be developmental in nature.
- **100–299:** Arts & Sciences course types are restricted to these course numbers
- **100–899:** CTE course types can adopt any available course numbers (excluding the specialized course blocks below)

Standardized Special Suffixes

- **XXX017:** Developmental Experimental Course
- **XXX917:** Experimental Course
- **XXX927:** Honors
- **XXX928:** Independent Study
- **XXX948:** Special Projects
- **XXX949:** Special Topics
- **XXX975:** Service Learning
- **XXX999:** Study Abroad

Experiential/Work-Based Learning Blocks

- **XXX907:** Co-op Field Experience
- **XXX908:** Cooperative Education
- **XXX920:** Field Experience
- **XXX922:** Field Studies
- **XXX932:** Internship
- **XXX936:** Occupational Experience
- **XXX938:** On-the-Job Training
- **XXX941:** Practicum

Course Name

The official, uniform title assigned to the course provides immediate descriptive context about the subject matter (e.g., Introduction to Psychology, Microeconomics, or British Literature). The course name serves as the official record appearing on student transcripts, tuition bills and graduation requirement checklists.

Course Naming Standards

- **Abbreviation Restriction:** Abbreviations in official course names (such as "Intro" or "Adv") are not allowed across the state system. College developers should spell out words fully—for example, using Introduction to Biology instead of Intro. to Biology—unless shortening the title is absolutely necessary to fit system data fields or transcript character limits.
- **Catalog and Transcripts Fields:** Long Title is used for the main course catalog (e.g., Introduction to Twentieth-Century American History). Abbreviated Title is used strictly for registration/transcripts where character space is limited (e.g., INTRO 20TH C AMER HIST).

Formatting & Mechanics

- **Capitalization:** Each word in a course name must be capitalized unless the word is a preposition or an article.
- **Symbols:** The use of symbols (e.g., &, /, ,, (,), @, !) is discouraged and only allowed when critical to the course name.
- **The Oxford Comma:** The Oxford comma is the standard when a course title includes a list of more than two items. Place the comma before the conjunction that precedes the final item.
- **Punctuation:** Other punctuation, including colons and dashes, is discouraged and must follow prescribed grammar rules when used.
- **Sequence Designators:** Roman Numerals must be used to designate sequential courses (e.g., I, II, III).
- **Spacing Rules:** Place only one space between words and ensure there are trailing spaces at the end of the text string.

Course Credit Hours

Course credit distribution will follow all of the procedures identified in **281 IAC § 21.2(12)**

Course Description

Details the uniform thematic scope, content boundaries and foundational topics covered in the course across all participating institutions. It must provide sufficient academic transparency for external registrars to immediately verify core course content.

Course Learning Outcomes

The formal statements specifying what students are expected to know or be able to do upon completion. Use the following list to identify and write effective Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs):

- **Number of Outcomes:** The number of course learning outcomes may depend on the number of course credits. It is recommended that each course adopt no less than **three** and no more than **eight** CLOs.
- **Action-Oriented:** Each CLO is action oriented – most likely through use of an action verb at the beginning of each CLO.
- **Measurable:** Each CLO is directly measurable/assessable and avoids use of less measurable terms like "understand", "know" and "gain an appreciation for".

- **Time Bound:** CLOs are articulated within a time-bound context (e.g., "By the end of this course…", "Upon successful completion…").
- **Learner-Centered:** CLOs focus on what students will know or be able to do by the end of the course.
- **Jargon-Free:** CLOs are free of discipline-specific terms and abbreviations that students in the course or major are not likely to understand (or those terms are provided with further explanation or definition).
- **Provide Scope:** Provide detail about the action by providing conditions or context in which the learning will be demonstrated.
- **Alignment with Level:** Verbs used in CLOs trend toward lower-level cognitive skills (e.g., remember and understand categories of Bloom's taxonomy) for courses that are introductory in nature, and trend toward higher-level cognitive skills for more advanced courses.

How are Learning Outcomes Different from Learning Goals or Learning Objectives?

- **Learning outcomes** are specific statements of what students will be able to do when they successfully complete a learning experience (whether it's a project, course or program). They are always written in a student-centered, measurable fashion that is concise, meaningful, and achievable.
- **Learning goals** are broad statements written from an instructor's or institution's perspective that give the general content and direction of a learning experience. They generally describe what an instructor or program aims to do; i.e., “The curriculum will introduce students to the major research methods of the discipline.”
- **Learning objectives** are statements of what you intend to teach or cover in the class. They tend to be:
    - More specific than learning goals
    - Not necessarily observable nor measurable

Rule of Construction and Local Course Learning Outcome Guardrails

Individual community colleges retain the autonomy to include additional learning outcomes to fulfill unique regional or transfer needs, provided the course includes all required common course outcomes. Standardized structural elements (Course Prefix, Course Number, Course Name, Course Credit Hours, Course Description, and Course Learning Outcomes) apply to all versions of a course, regardless of delivery method (online, hybrid, or face-to-face).

To simplify curriculum management and prevent database errors, campuses must follow these guardrails:

- **Local Course Learning Outcome Additions**: Additions are not recommended for Arts and Sciences courses and should be reserved for Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. Colleges are limited to a maximum of two (2) local outcomes per course.
- **Mandatory Local Approval Workflow:** Individual campuses must establish a central curriculum checkpoint. Faculty cannot unilaterally append a local learning outcome; any addition must be formally approved by the local College Curriculum Committee.
- **Verification of Need:** The local committee must verify that a unique regional or employer-driven need exists, utilizing a rubric developed by the Department, before the outcome is added to a syllabus.
- Additional Resources for Writing Course Learning Outcomes:
    - Access the [University of Georgia Guide for Creating Well-formed Learning Outcomes (External Site)] for structural frameworks.
    - Read the [University of Wisconsin-Madison Guide on Writing Student Learning Outcomes (External Site)] for academic examples.
    - Review the [University of Arkansas Guide on Using Bloom’s Taxonomy to Write Effective Learning Objectives (External Site)] to select measurable verbs.

STICS Maintenance and Course Management

This section establishes the permanent administrative workflows, collaboration protocols, and submission steps required to maintain the centralized statewide common course numbering directory housed within STICS 281 IAC § 21.4(7)"b"–"c".

Proposing and Aligning New Courses

Before submitting a new credit course proposal to the state common course numbering directory, college developers must conduct a data audit to prevent duplicate entries.

1. **STICS Database Check:** Before proposing a course, colleges must check STICS to see if a similar course exists at another institution.
2. **Using Existing Course Details:** If a match is found, the college must use the existing, standardized structural elements (prefix, number, name, credit hours, description, and core learning outcomes).
3. **Submitting New Courses:** If there is no match, the college may create a new entry following the six data standards in Part II. The Department must approve the STICS proposal before the campus can adopt the course.

Modifying Existing Course Structural Elements

- **Authorized Initiators:** Any institutional representative or stakeholder may submit a request to modify a standardized course structural element (Prefix, Number, Name, Credit Hours, Description, or Learning Outcomes).
- **Submission Mechanism**: Requests must be submitted via the official modification form maintained by the Department.
- **Review Timeline:** The Department compiles all submitted requests annually for systematic evaluation.
- **Approval Authority:** The Chief Academic Officers (CAO) group reviews the compiled requests and retains final action authority.
- **Voting Threshold:** A majority vote of the CAO group is required to approve any structural modification.
- **STICS Integration:** Approved changes are updated in the State of Iowa Curriculum System (STICS) annually ahead of the upcoming academic cycle.

Course Retirement Protocols

To maintain an accurate database and prevent regional transfer issues, colleges must notify the state when a course is permanently removed from their local catalog.

- **Deactivation Request:** When an institution permanently retires a credit course, the designated campus administrator must submit a deactivation request through STICS.
- **Archiving System:** Retired courses are archived within the central registry rather than completely deleted. This preserves historical metadata for automated degree-audits and past student transcripts.

Updates to the Common Course Numbering Operational Guide

Because this guide carries regulatory authority, any proposed updates must undergo mandatory drafting, public comment windows, and legislative reviews. Final revisions require State Board approval and official publication in the Iowa Administrative Bulletin before taking effect.

Drafting the Update

The Iowa Department of Education:

- Drafts the proposed changes to the existing rule.
- Ensures alignment with current state statutes and legal authority.

Filing & Official Publication

- Proposed change is filed as a *Regulatory Analysis* with the Legislative Services Agency.
- Analysis is published in the bi-weekly Iowa Administrative Bulletin (IAB).

Public & Stakeholder Input

- 20-Day Public Comment Window: Minimum period required for the public to submit written feedback.
- Public Hearings: Scheduled by the Department's rules coordinator, date and time published within the bulletin.

State Board Approval

- Notice of Intended Action: State Board moves to publish a notice of intended action.
- Repeat of above steps: Notice is published in the bi-weekly IAB and a second 20-day public window opens along with two additional public hearings.

Legislative & Executive Review (throughout above process)

- Reviewed by the legislative Administrative Rules Review Committee (ARRC).
- Committees evaluate economic impact and potential effects on small businesses.

Final Adoption Timeline

- 35-Day Minimum Wait: The agency must wait at least 35 days after publication before adopting the final rule.
- 180-Day Expiration: The rule must be finalized within 180 days of the original notice, or the proposal lapses.

Effective Date

- Agency files the final "Adopted and Filed" rule for publication in the IAB.
- Rules officially become effective 35 days after publication, unless a later date is specified.