

Academic Qualifications for federal student aid (FSA) purposes

To receive FSA funds, a student must be qualified to study at the postsecondary level. A student qualifies if he or she:

- has a high school diploma (this can be from a foreign school if it is equivalent to a U.S. high school diploma);
- has the recognized equivalent of a high school diploma, such as a general educational development or GED certificate;
- has completed homeschooling at the secondary level as defined by state law;

Or

- has completed secondary school education in a homeschool setting which qualifies for an exemption from compulsory attendance requirements under state law, if state law does not require a homeschooled student to receive a credential for their education.

Recognized equivalents of a high school diploma

The US Department of Education recognizes several equivalents to a high school diploma:

- A GED certificate;
- a certificate or other official completion documentation demonstrating that the student has passed a state-authorized examination (such as the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) the High School Equivalency Test (HiSET), or, in California, the California High School Proficiency Exam) that the state recognizes as the equivalent of a high school diploma (note that certificates of attendance and/or completion are not included in this qualifying category);
- an academic transcript of a student who has successfully completed at least a two-year program that is acceptable for full credit toward a bachelor's degree; or
- for a student who enrolls before completing high school, a transcript indicating the student has excelled in high school. The student must no longer be enrolled in high school, must satisfy your school's written policy for admitting such students, and must be starting a program that leads at least to an associate's degree or its equivalent.

Homeschooling

Though homeschooled students are not considered to have a high school diploma or equivalent, they are eligible to receive FSA funds if their secondary school education was in a homeschool that state law treats as a home or private school. Some states issue a secondary school completion credential to homeschoolers. If this is the case in the state where the student was homeschooled, she must obtain this credential to be eligible for FSA funds. She can include in her homeschooling self-certification that she received this state credential. An eligible institution is defined in part as one that admits as regular students only those who have a high school diploma or equivalent, are beyond the compulsory age of attendance for the school's state, or are dually enrolled at the college and a secondary school.

For students who finish homeschooling at a younger age, the Department considers them to be beyond the age of compulsory attendance if Illinois would not require them to obtain a secondary completion.

Ability-To-Benefit (ATB) test

New students who do not have a high school diploma, or an equivalent such as a GED certificate, and who did not complete secondary school in a homeschool setting are not eligible for Title IV funds. Such students can no longer become eligible by passing an approved “ability-to-benefit” test or by satisfactorily completing at least six credit hours or 225 clock hours of college work that is applicable to a degree or certificate offered by the student’s postsecondary institution.

However, students who were enrolled in an eligible educational program of study before July 1, 2012 may continue to be considered Title IV eligible under either the ATB test or credit hour standards. To utilize the prior standards, the student need not have received Title IV funds for the enrollment prior to July 1, 2012; merely establishing eligibility in an eligible program is sufficient to continue using the ATB and credit/clock-hour alternatives. A basic method for determining a student’s eligibility for ATB grandfathering options is as follows:

Question 1: Did the student attend an eligible program at any Title IV institution prior to July 1, 2012? If yes, the student may use any of the ATB alternatives to become eligible for Title IV, HEA student assistance. If no, continue to Question 2.

Question 2: Did the student, prior to July 1, 2012, officially register at a Title IV institution, and is the student scheduled to attend an eligible program? If yes, the student may use any of the ATB alternatives to become eligible for Title IV, HEA student assistance. If no, the student may not use the ATB alternatives to become eligible for Title IV, HEA student assistance.

For a student who qualifies to use one of the alternatives through enrollment in an eligible program prior to July 1, 2012, LFC must document that the student qualifies to use one of the ATB alternatives. Such documentation could include documentation from NSLDS that shows a student’s prior receipt of Title IV funds, or a transcript or other receipt that demonstrates enrollment in an eligible program.