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PRISON EDUCATION PROGRAM

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NASFAA Prison Education Program Learning Series

Federal Pell Grant Lifetime Eligibility Used

Award Years 2025-26 and Later

What is lifetime eligibility used (LEU)? The aim of the federal Pell Grant program is to generously provide enough funds to help low-income students to reach up to the level of a bachelor's degree. Because the program can't fund a student indefinitely, the government sets a limit on the amount of Pell Grant funds students are eligible to receive over their lifetime. The Department of Education (ED) calculates your LEU to determine how much of that limit you've used.

How does LEU work? LEU is not about a specific amount of money or a specific amount of time on a calendar; it is about the percentage of personal Pell Grant eligibility you've used. Each time you use Pell Grant funds, you use up a small percentage of your lifetime limit. The LEU number indicates how much of your lifetime Pell Grant eligibility you have already used, allowing you to plan your studies effectively and avoid running out of funds before reaching your educational goals.

Why does it matter? You can't receive Pell Grant funds beyond your lifetime eligibility. If you have academic plans for the future — for example, if you want to make sure you have enough remaining Pell eligibility to earn a bachelor's degree — you need to avoid using up your Pell eligibility by accumulating credits and credentials outside of your area of academic interest. You also need to avoid "sampling" courses by signing up for several classes and then dropping some. Every class you take while using a Pell Grant — whether you complete the class or not — counts toward your lifetime Pell Grant eligibility. It's important to plan your educational journey so you can use that eligibility wisely.

How does the LEU work? The LEU indicates the percentage of Pell Grant eligibility you've used, which then allows you to determine your remaining eligibility. First, you need to understand the limits of your Pell Grant eligibility.

Traditionally, students complete a bachelor's degree in eight semesters (usually four years) of full-time study. However, ED recognizes students may be unable to complete their degree within that time for many reasons: their program may be longer than four years, they may attend part-time, or they may run into challenges that slow their progress. To account for this, ED set the equivalent of 12 full-time semesters (six years) as the limit for the Pell Grant a student can receive in their lifetime. A full year of full-time study comprising two semesters uses 100% of the Pell Grant for that year. Since students have up to the equivalent of six years of full-time, full-year study to achieve their first bachelor's degree, the maximum LEU is six times that length ($100 \times 6 = 600$).

So, when you're looking at your LEU number on your FAFSA Submission Summary, you need to interpret it by dividing it by six. That will tell you the percentage of Pell Grant eligibility you've used out of your lifetime limit of eligibility. For example, if your LEU number is 150, you have only used 25% of your total eligibility for Pell funds ($150 \div 6 = 25$). However, if your LEU number is 550, you have used up 92% of your total eligibility ($550 \div 6 = 92$), which means you are close to running out of Pell eligibility.

How is the LEU calculated? ED calculates the LEU for you, and the financial aid administrator for your school or your Prison Education Program (PEP) representative can provide you with your LEU number, which is also available on your online financial aid account. However, the following will give you some insight into how the calculation works.

A basic concept underlying LEU is *enrollment intensity*. Enrollment intensity refers to the percentage of credits you're enrolled in relative to full-time enrollment.

- Full-time students have an enrollment intensity of 100%, even if they take more than the minimum of 12 credits per semester required to be considered full-time for federal financial aid purposes. For example, whether a student takes 12, 13, 14, 15, or more credits per semester, they still have an enrollment intensity of 100%.
- Part-time students have an enrollment intensity equal to the number of credits they are enrolled in divided by the number of credits required to be full-time, which is 12. For example, a student taking 9 credits would have an enrollment intensity of 75% ($9 \div 12 = .75$) for the year. To find the enrollment intensity for a single semester, just divide this number by two to arrive at 38% ($.75 \div 2 = .38$).

The LEU that appears on your FAFSA Submission Summary shows the cumulative sum of your Pell eligibility used ($600 = 100 \times 6$), based on your enrollment intensity during each period you received a Pell Grant.

But wait! The LEU number is NOT the percentage of overall Pell Grant eligibility you have used up! LEUs are all about doing division. To find the percentage of Pell eligibility you have used, you must divide the LEU by six. A couple of examples should make this clearer.

Example 1: Jamie has been a part-time student for two years and also took a class in the summer.

Semester	Credits attempted	Eligibility used this semester (The credits you enrolled in divided by 12 credits AND THEN divided by 2 terms)	Cumulative LEU (This is the official LEU number that your school can give you)	Cumulative percentage of Pell eligibility used (LEU ÷ 6)
1 st year, fall term	6 credits	25% ↑ $6 \div 12 = .50$ AND THEN $.50 \div 2 = .25$	25	4%
1 st year, spring term	5 credits	21% ↑ $5 \div 12 = .42$ AND THEN $.42 \div 2 = .21$	46	8%
2 nd year, fall term	9 credits	38% ↑ $9 \div 12 = .75$ AND THEN $.75 \div 2 = .38$	84	14%
2 nd year, spring term	11 credits	46% ↑ $11 \div 12 = .92$ AND THEN $.92 \div 2 = .46$	130	22%
2 nd year, summer term	2 credits	8% ↑ $2 \div 12 = .17$ AND THEN $.17 \div 2 = .08$	138	23%

At the end of the summer of the second year, Jamie has an LEU of 138. That doesn't mean Jamie's Pell eligibility has already been exceeded. Remember, the LEU number must be interpreted by dividing it by 6. Jamie has used only 23% of their lifetime eligibility ($138 \div 6 = 23\%$) and has 77% remaining.

Example 2: Chris attended both full-time and part-time to complete an associate degree.

Term	Credits attempted (Full-time is always set at 12 credits)	Eligibility used this semester (The credits you enrolled in divided by 12 credits AND THEN divided by 2 terms)	Cumulative LEU Add up all semester numbers	Cumulative percentage of Pell eligibility used (LEU ÷ 6)
1st year, fall term Full-time	12	50% ↑ $>12 \div 12 = 1.00$ AND THEN $1.00 \div 2 = .50$	50	8%
1st year, spring term	12	50% ↑ $>12 \div 12 = 1.00$ AND THEN $1.00 \div 2 = .50$	100	17%
2nd year, fall term	5 credits	21% ↑ $5 \div 12 = .42$ AND THEN $.42 \div 2 = .21$	121	20%
2nd year, spring term	10 credits	42% ↑ $10 \div 12 = .83$ AND THEN $.83 \div 2 = .42$	163	27%
3rd year, fall term	12	50% ↑ $"12" \div 12 = 1.00$ $1.00 \div 2 = .50$	213	36%

At the end of the fall term of the third year, Chris has an LEU of 213 and has used a total of 36% of his lifetime eligibility of Pell ($213 \div 6 = 36\%$). If Chris wants to pursue a bachelor's degree, there is still 64% of lifetime eligibility remaining.

These examples show the basic concepts behind LEU and remaining eligibility. If your school does not use semesters, or if you are studying full-time using year-round Pell, you can learn more about calculating LEU for your school from your Prison Education Program advisor. The rule about dividing the LEU by six to find the percentage of your lifetime Pell eligibility you've used remains the same.

Frequently Asked Questions

There is no bachelor's degree offered at my correctional facility. If I receive Pell funds to take associate degree or career technical education classes now, can I later receive Pell on the outside toward my bachelor's?

You will be able to receive up to your remaining lifetime eligibility, assuming you continue to meet the income and academic eligibility level, so you need to plan carefully to ensure you have enough eligibility left to complete the bachelor's degree.

If I stay within the lifetime eligibility limits but drop out of, or fail some of my classes along the way, can I keep getting Pell?

All classes you take that are paid for by Pell count toward your LEU regardless of whether you complete or pass the class, so you need to stay aware of your lifetime limit. You also need to show you're progressing toward your educational goals. Find out how your school measures satisfactory academic progress (SAP) to be sure you remain eligible for federal funds.

I already earned a bachelor's degree, but didn't use up my lifetime eligibility. Can I use Pell to take more classes?

Pell Grants help students earn up to their first bachelor's degree. If you've already earned a bachelor's, you no longer qualify for Pell.

If I received a Pell Grant in another program years ago, is that still part of my LEU?

Yes, typically any Pell Grant you've received is counted toward the total LEU.

Will I use less of my total lifetime eligibility if I go to a school with a lower tuition?

The school's tuition rate does not change the amount of lifetime eligibility you use. The LEU is based on the amount of Pell-funded education you've enrolled in, not the rate at which you are billed.

It seems like the LEU was calculated differently when I received Pell in prior years. Is that true?

LEU is still calculated in the same way. However, the way enrollment intensity is accounted for has changed. Prior to 2024-25, ED grouped enrollment intensity into categories: full-time, part-time, half-time, and less-than-half-time enrollment. Starting in 2024-25, the department calculates part-time enrollment intensity using the exact number of credits the student is enrolled in.

Are there circumstances in which my usage of eligibility for Pell can be restored?

There are limited circumstances in which a student's lifetime eligibility for Pell can be restored. Consideration may be reviewed in situations such as school closure, identity theft, and for certain loan discharges. There are strict regulations that apply to requests for review for restoration, and significant details will need to be provided for consideration.

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