Understanding TOP Codes

What is a TOP code?

Taxonomy of Program (TOP) codes were created by the California community college system in 1979 to make it possible to group programs and courses with similar objectives. Over time, TOP codes have been expanded to serve a variety of purposes including supporting the curriculum approval process, documenting which types of certificates and degrees are issued, tracking enrollment data, recording outcomes for state and national funding streams for career and technical education (CTE), creating staffing reports, itemizing spending on instructional programs, supporting facilities planning, and displaying information in statewide data tools like the Data Mart, Salary Surfer, and the LaunchBoard.

How are TOP codes assigned?

TOP codes are assigned to courses, certificates, and degrees by California community colleges as part of the curriculum development process. While the Chancellor's Office reviews designated TOP codes as part of curriculum approval, the ultimate decision over which code is assigned lies with the college, with faculty taking a primary role in determining appropriate codes. Practitioners can reference the TOP code manual when assigning codes, which provides descriptions of the content that is associated with each code. Discipline faculty should work with their CTE administrator and local Curriculum Chair to identify possible TOP codes for new courses, certificates, and degrees. If there are several possible TOP codes that could be chosen, reaching out to other colleges already offering similar programs can help narrow down the selection of the TOP code.

What is the difference between TOP 2, TOP 4, and TOP 6?

TOP codes can be assigned at different levels of specificity using two digit pairs. The first **two digits (TOP 2) represent the discipline**, such as Health (12). TOP 2 can be used to roll up results for related content areas, but colleges assign more granular designations to courses and awards across each discipline.

TOP 4 adds two additional digits to designate the sub-discipline, such as Nursing (1230). Colleges often assign awards to a TOP 4 code, particularly when programs train toward a broad range of occupations. They may also assign courses to this level.

TOP 6 adds two more digits to specify a field, like Certified Nursing Assistant (1230.30) Some colleges and disciplines use TOP 6 extensively for courses and programs. However, many colleges

TOP CODE HEIRARCHY

12 – *Discipline*: Health

   1230.00 *Sub-discipline*: Nursing

      1230.10 *Field*: Licensed Vocational Nursing

      1230.30 *Field*: Certified Nursing Assistant

      1230.80 *Field*: Home Health Aid

only assign a TOP 4 code to courses and awards, so a generic ".00" is added to the assigned TOP 4 code to create the TOP 6 designation.

When using statewide data tools like Data Mart, Salary Surfer, and the LaunchBoard, selecting results at the TOP 4 level may yield the closest approximation to a program. However, in some content areas, it is impossible to display comprehensive results because programs are made up of two or more TOP 4 sub-disciplines.

How is a TOP code different from a CIP code?

TOP codes are unique to California community colleges. All other post-secondary institutions use a a different coding system called the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP). CIP codes are more detailed than TOP codes, so several different CIP codes could correspond to the same TOP code. California community colleges need to use CIP codes when they compile federal Gainful Employment figures or document CTE outcomes for accreditation, so many colleges use both codes to designate program content. Each year, the Chancellor's Office converts program-level data from TOP to CIP, using a crosswalk, which is then reported to national databases such as Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Why don't TOP codes match the content of my programs?

TOP code groupings don't align with interdisciplinary content

In some cases, program names and course descriptions align directly with the TOP code descriptors. For example, Construction Crafts Technology (0952) offers many detailed codes that clarify the difference between Plumbing (0952.30), Mill & Cabinet Work (0952.50), and Roofing (0952.90), which all roll up under the Engineering & Industrial Technologies TOP code (09).

However, interdisciplinary programs that combine diverse skillsets may find that their courses include multiple disciplines and TOP codes. For example, the Business Information Worker Certificate includes courses from 0501, 0514, and 0702. There is no simple way to combine student records across disparate TOP codes to automatically display results by college program, as there is no up-to-date degree audit tool to provide this analysis at the state level.

TOP codes are too broad

In other cases, several specific programs may fall under the same TOP code designation. For example, a college may offer several certificates that demonstrate proficiency with database applications such as Oracle or SQL, but all of these programs would be tracked under the same code: Database Design and Administration (0702.20).

> ## PROGRAMS DON'T ALWAYS ROLL UP TO A TOP 4 CODE
>
> **Business Information Worker Certificate**
>
> *Course codes include 0501, 0514, and 0702:*
>
> 0501.00 Business English
>
> 0514.00 Keyboarding
>
> 0702.00 Intro to Windows

TOP codes have not been assigned consistently

Sometimes, even when course codes could roll up into the same discipline code to represent a program, they have not been assigned consistently, or courses unrelated to specific degrees or certificates have been assigned to the same codes. This means that these additional courses or awards may be reflected in the results. It is also possible that TOP codes that were assigned in previous years may no longer reflect the current course content.

Why do other colleges have different TOP codes for similar programs?

Specific skills may vary

While two programs may address the same occupational cluster, they may be focused on different skill sets or occupations. Therefore, courses and awards may be assigned to different codes based on the content and learning outcomes of the program.

Codes were assigned at different times

The list of TOP codes has been amended over time. Colleges may have assigned the most applicable code that was available when the program was created and not updated the code to a more specific option after revisions were made to the TOP code list.

Multiple codes may be applicable

For some programs, there are several plausible codes that could be assigned because the TOP code list does not include an exact match for the program. For example, colleges offering the Business Information Worker certificate could easily assign the award to the TOP code for Business and Commerce, General (0501), Office Technology/Office Computer Applications (0514), or Computer Information Systems (0702).

In other cases, there are multiple TOP codes that address similar content. For example, Medical Office Technology (0514.20) and Administrative Medical Assisting (1208.20) both teach students to support medical office administration tasks like managing medical records.

Use of TOP 6 codes

Some college use TOP 6 codes only for courses and assign awards at the TOP 4 level. Others assign TOP 6 codes to awards as well as courses. And still others use only TOP 4 codes for both courses and awards. This can make it difficult to pinpoint similar programs across campuses using TOP codes alone.

Use of the "All Other" Option

If colleges can't find a related TOP code, particularly for programs that train for emerging occupations, they can create an "all other" option by assigning 99 as the final two digits in a TOP 4. This means that very different programs could be assigned to the same code. For example, one college might include a new biomedical program under Other Health Occupations (1299), while another college uses the same code to designate a program on patient advocacy.

Want to examine the accuracy of your program's TOP codes?

Read the related guide on "Understanding Which Codes Are Assigned to Programs"