



Dual Enrollment: Accelerating the Transition to College

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High school students who take a full academic load can meet their graduation requirements well before the end of their senior year in high school. For students who want to go on to postsecondary education – and most say they do – dual enrollment programs offer a leg up in getting through college and may save on college costs in the process.

The term “dual enrollment” refers to an arrangement where students are enrolled in courses that count for both high school and college credit. These programs are also called “dual credit” or “concurrent enrollment.” Parents and educators find dual enrollment attractive because it keeps students academically challenged throughout their high school career. In this way dual enrollment supports the *No Child Left Behind Act*’s goal of encouraging greater academic rigor during the high school experience.

At its core, dual enrollment allows students to progress to their next academic challenge without having to wait until high school graduation. Proponents of dual enrollment argue that these programs:

- **Prepare students for the academic rigors of college** by exposing them to the type of intense curriculum that research has found to promote bachelor’s degree attainment.¹
- **Lower the cost of postsecondary education** for students by enabling them to earn free college credits (depending on state policy) and shorten their time to degree completion.²
- **Provide students with more realistic information** about the academic and social skills that they will need to succeed in college through their participation in actual college courses.³
- **Provide curricular options** for students, particularly in high schools that, due to small size or inadequate funding, are unable to offer interesting and exciting electives.⁴

What We Know

At this time, nationwide numbers are not available on the growth of dual enrollment programs. However, information is currently available from specific states to support the perception of growth in programs and enrollment. In New York City, for example, the number of colleges offering dual enrollment grew from six to seventeen between 2000 and 2001.⁵ In Virginia, there were 6,700 high school students in dual enrollment programs in 1997, as compared with only 2,000 in 1991.⁶ In Texas, the percentage of high school students taking dual enrollment courses tripled, from 2 percent to 6 percent of the total student population, in the past decade.⁷

However, despite the growing popularity of dual enrollment programs, little rigorous research has been conducted on their effectiveness. Most published literature is descriptive or focused on student and parental opinions and attitudes.

The literature that does address program outcomes varies greatly in quality. For example, few studies attempt to take into account other factors that might influence program outcomes, even though many dual enrollment programs target highly motivated and academically successful students. Without understanding how these factors influence outcomes, it is difficult to determine if the findings are due to the program or to other factors, such as student motivation and academic achievement. One study, conducted by researchers at the University of Arizona, did take into consideration prior academic achievement and found that students who participated in either AP or dual enrollment (or both) experienced lower drops in their grade point averages during their freshman year when compared with other University of Arizona freshmen.⁸

While dual enrollment programs have the potential to help students enter and succeed in postsecondary education, there are many factors that still need to be explored. More information is needed on:

1. How many and what types of students participate in dual enrollment;
2. What program features are most common;
3. Whether these efforts support the transition and persistence of students in postsecondary education; and
4. How state policies influence program structures and practices.

Variations on a Theme

Dual enrollment programs differ from other credit-based transition strategies. One important distinction is that dual enrollment programs are shaped by state policies and legislation and thus may differ considerably from state to state. Other credit-based programs, or initiatives, are more homogeneous because they are supported by private or federal organizations. For example, Advance Placement (AP) is a College Board program and Tech-Prep is supported by federal legislation.

Dual enrollment programs, for the most part, offer identical courses to those offered to regularly enrolled college students. This distinguishes them from such other credit-based programs as AP or International Baccalaureate (IB), which modify college-level curricula for use in high schools.

Dual enrollment students also receive a college transcript from the sponsoring postsecondary institution and are therefore eligible to apply the credits towards a degree or certificate once they enroll in college. In contrast, AP and IB students must take and score well on an end-of-course exam to be eligible for college credit, even if they succeed in passing the course itself.

Dual enrollment programs do vary widely in how they are financed; who can participate; where the course is offered; who teaches the course; what the student mix is; and the intensity of the experience.

Some programs require students to pay their own tuition and fees, while others ensure that participation is free. Some dual enrollment programs have restrictive eligibility requirements – often requiring students to gain admission to the postsecondary institution in order to participate. In addition, dual enrollment courses may be offered at a high school or a college campus, and may be taught by a high school teacher or a college professor.

The programs vary in their intensity, as well.⁹ Some programs are categorized as “singletons,” meaning that they are only a small part of students’ high school experience. Other programs adhere to a “comprehensive” model and encompass most of students’ junior and or senior years. Students in these dual enrollment programs take virtually all of their courses through dual enrollment, sometimes even leaving their high school for full-time study on a college campus.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment programs share a set of common features, but great variation exists within each feature:

- **Tuition** – ranges from student responsibility for tuition and fees to no cost to students.
- **Eligibility** – ranges from few eligibility requirements to extensive requirements focused on GPA, placement exams, SAT/ACT, and state assessment tests.
- **Instructors** – high school teachers and/or college professors.
- **Location** – high school and/or college campus.
- **Student Mix** – high school students or combined groups of high school and college students.
- **Intensity** – ranges from single classes to comprehensive program.

State Policies and Initiatives

All but 3 states allow some form of dual enrollment program, according to the Education Commission of the States.¹⁰ These policies can be loosely classified as either “comprehensive” or “limited.” Twenty-one states have comprehensive policies with few course restrictions, liberal credit-granting policies and minimal (or no) student fees. Twenty-six states have “limited policies,” which do not provide funding for student tuition and have more restrictions on credit and student access. The funding provisions in state policies can affect program participation, especially for students from low-income households. If tuition assistance is not provided, many of these families are not able to afford the costs associated with college attendance. Federal financial aid cannot be accessed until completion of a high school diploma.

In part because of the wide variation in state policies, researchers have not examined the impact of policy decisions on dual enrollment participation and growth. However, the limited support for the program in more than half the states almost certainly restricts the growth of participation in dual enrollment programs. Funding decisions have important ramifications on whether courses are supported at the school-level. In Illinois, for example, a policy change allowing both high schools and colleges to receive average daily attendance (ADA) funding was followed by a 240 percent growth in the number of high schools participating in dual enrollment programs.¹¹

The following are examples of state dual enrollment initiatives:

- **Minnesota** was the first state to develop a dual enrollment program, which it calls the *Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program*. State statutes mandate that schools must provide students with dual enrollment opportunities. The state has also set participation guidelines that include: students may not take more than the equivalent of two years of coursework through the program and schools may not offer students developmental or remedial coursework. Students pay no tuition or associated costs.¹²
- **Washington** state’s comprehensive *Running Start* program is an example of a comprehensive state program. In order to be eligible to participate students must meet eligibility requirements focused on, among other things, class standing and college entrance exams. Students are required to pass the same entrance exams as other students enrolled at the college. Students selected for this program are highly motivated, since Running Start offers them a campus-based college experience that generally takes the place of their junior and senior years of high school. Students are not charged tuition in order to participate, but the sending high school does lose funding.¹³
- **Texas** provides for a voluntary dual enrollment program. Schools are not mandated by the state to provide students with dual enrollment opportunities, though they are strongly encouraged to do so and most high schools do participate. In an effort to encourage dual enrollment opportunities, both high schools and colleges are reimbursed the average daily rate for dually enrolled students. The state, however, established strict eligibility requirements for participation in dual enrollment. Students must meet the college’s admissions requirements, and achieve a passing score on the state’s academic assessment.¹⁴

Conclusion

Dual enrollment programs appear to offer much promise in adding academic rigor to the high school experience by providing students with opportunities to experience college level work. However, policymakers face a number of challenges as they devise dual enrollment policies. In particular, policymakers need to consider how they can:

- Set eligibility standards and structure programs in ways that enable all students who can benefit from dual enrollment to participate;
- Maintain the rigor of regular college courses;
- Promote and sustain successful secondary-postsecondary collaborations; and
- Develop financing mechanisms that are equitable for the secondary and postsecondary sectors, as well as students and their parents.

Endnotes

- ¹ Adelman, C. *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1999).
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- ⁵ Kleiman, Neil Scott. *Building a Highway to Higher Ed: How Collaborative Efforts are Changing Education in America*. (New York: The Center for an Urban Future, 2001).
- ⁶ Andrews, Hans. "The dual-credit explosion at Illinois' community colleges." *Community College Journal*. 71(3) (2001): 12-16.
- ⁷ O'Brien, Daniel M., and Nelson, Teresa D. *A Head Start to College: Dual Enrollment in High School and Community College*. Paper prepared for the Annual Meetings of the American Educational Research Association. April 21-25, 2003. Chicago, IL..
- ⁸ University of Arizona. 1999. *Community College and AP Credit: An Analysis of the Impact on Freshman Grades*. Tucson, AZ.
- ⁹ Bailey, Thomas, and Karp, Melinda Mechur. *Promoting College Access and Success: A Review of Credit-Based Transition Programs*. (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2003).
- ¹⁰ Education Commission of the States (ECS) Center for Community College Policy. 2001. *Postsecondary options: Dual/Concurrent Enrollment*. (Accessed at www.ecs.org 30 January 2002).
- ¹¹ Andrews, Hans. "The Dual-Credit Explosion at Illinois' Community Colleges." *Community College Journal* 71(3) (2001): 12-16.
- ¹² Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, Office of Internal Auditing (2001). *Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program*. Saint Paul, MN: Author.
- ¹³ Washington State – Running Start Program. www.k12.wa.us/secondaryed/rstart.asp.
- ¹⁴ Texas Education Agency. www.tea.state.tx.us.

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