

Inside Dual Enrollment

What do leaders of public universities need to know about high school courses that offer college credit?

By Stephen G. Pelletier

For university leaders looking for scenarios that can produce the proverbial “win-win,” dual or concurrent enrollment programs might in fact present an opportunity for “win-win-win.” Under the right circumstances, dual enrollment programs can position future college students for success while they simultaneously boost university enrollment numbers and provide a productive channel for community outreach via work with local high schools.

It’s no surprise, therefore, that such programs are growing. And while more research is needed, a growing body of studies show the impact of dual enrollment. The confluence of those factors makes the time right for a closer look: What can a university gain from offering dual enrollment, and what are the potential pitfalls? In this space, what do leaders of public colleges and universities need to know?

Defining Terms

First, a bit of parsing is necessary. Opportunities for high school students to enroll in a college course can be labelled “dual enrollment,” “concurrent enrollment,” “dual credit,” or “joint enrollment.” (Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs for high school students are sometimes also lumped into discussions of dual enrollment.) States, as well as individual institutions, use different terminology, with different definitions. A common model, often called “concurrent enrollment,” involves college-level courses taught in high schools by accredited teachers. For the sake of this article, however, we will follow the lead of Adam I. Lowe, executive director of the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) and a respected national leader in this space. For broad discussions, Lowe says that his group and a number of others that work at the national level consistently use the phrase dual enrollment to refer to “any opportunity for a high school student to enroll in a college course.”

Helpful amplification of that umbrella definition can be found in a 2016 report, “Dual Enrollment in the Context of Strategic Enrollment Management,” from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO). For the purposes of the report, the authors said that credit for dual enrollment courses can be earned at both the high school level and college level simultaneously or only at the college level, and that such courses and programs can be taught on a



California State University, Chico

college campus, in a high school, at some other location, or through distance education.

Proponents say that dual enrollment can help students gain their initial foothold in the pursuit of higher education; can speed their successful path to completion of degrees or credentials through transfer of credit earned; and can cut the overall price of college. (The AACRAO study found that 58 percent of respondents discounted tuition for dual enrollment, with two-thirds doing so by more than 50 percent.) Dual enrollment is touted as a way for students to learn how to do college-level work and avoid remedial work in college. Advocates say that the rigor of dual enrollment courses helps better prepare students for the workplace. Universities say dual enrollment can help them diversify their student body—with rural students as well as students from underrepresented groups, those from low-income families, and first-generation college-goers—and forge constructive relationships with K-12.

Who's Doing It?

The latest available federal data show that in 2010-11, 1.4 million high school students took more than two million college courses from postsecondary institutions in the United States.

Dual enrollment was found to have had an annual growth rate of more than 7 percent during the eight years after 2002-03. Assuming that rate has held steady since 2010-11—an assumption that is corroborated by analyses of state data—Lowe estimates that approximately 2.1 million students participated in dual enrollment in 2016-17. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center estimated that about 25 percent of associate and bachelor's degree earners had taken dual enrollment courses.

Surveying nearly 400 institutions, the AACRAO study found that more than three-quarters of colleges and universities (78 percent) offer dual enrollment options. Ninety-three percent of public institutions surveyed offered dual enrollment, versus 63 percent of private, nonprofit institutions.

What factors prompt universities to offer dual enrollment? Respondents to the AACRAO study said the top reason was to help recruit students (78 percent), followed closely by dual enrollment's role in helping the institution meet its mission (73 percent) and serve its community (67 percent). Notably, 59 percent of respondents said they had incorporated dual enrollment as

a strategic enrollment initiative. Top barriers to offering dual enrollment were an institution's culture, the costs of such programming, and the challenges of building productive partnerships with K-12.

Still another motivating force is politics. Across the country, state legislators have embraced dual enrollment as a tool for helping to ensure equity in access to college, as well as for cutting the cost of college and speeding student progression to college completion. Assessing data from the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the AACRAO report found that 10 states require all public high schools and eligible public postsecondary institutions to provide dual enrollment and that 28 states plus the District of Columbia allow it. ECS analysts found that 47 states and the District of Columbia have state-wide policies around dual enrollment. (The other three states leave such policies to local jurisdictions and to colleges and universities.)

There's also interest at the federal level. This past fall, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos highlighted dual enrollment in a visit to a Florida community college, amid speculation that it might be included as one of her priorities for advancing school choice. In a statement about DeVos' trip, the Department of Education pointed to its own research on the value of dual enrollment, and said that "students and the public have attested to the value of the Florida Dual Enrollment Program and the choice it gives to students in pursuit of higher education." Earlier in the year, a bipartisan group of senators urged the secretary to continue a trial Department of Education program that made Pell grants available to high school students taking college courses for credit. Another bipartisan group of senators proposed the Making Education Affordable and Accessible Act, designed to improve access to higher education through grants to help colleges start dual enrollment and other programs that let high school students earn college credit.

Standards for rigor and quality of dual enrollment programs established by NACEP have been adapted or incorporated into state policy in 17 states. The standards are also recognized by several disciplinary professional associations and regional institutional accreditors. NACEP currently accredits 104 programs. Lowe says NACEP standards can serve as guideposts for quality for all dual enrollment programs. "We can't expect students to succeed if we don't provide them with a true

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college experience, in the curriculum they're getting, and in the assessments by which they are being judged on their performance,” he says. “If we're expecting students to get the full benefits of these programs, then they need access to a quality program.”

Is Dual Enrollment Effective?

A growing body of research suggests that dual enrollment helps students complete college. Examining a nationally representative sample of students who began postsecondary education in 2003, for example, researchers at the University of Iowa found that students who took dual enrollment courses were 10 percent more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than the comparison group. The benefits were even greater (12 percent) for first-generation college students. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center published research in 2016 that found that students pursuing both associate and bachelor's degrees who had taken dual enrollment reduced both the time they were enrolled in college and their elapsed time to degrees. The AACRAO study cited research showing that dual enrollment can reduce the likelihood of students needing to enroll in remedial courses in college. Still another study found a connection between a student taking dual enrollment and his or her likelihood of attending college versus peers who did not take college courses in high school.

Dual Enrollment in Practice

As an example of dual enrollment in practice, the College Achievement Program (CAP) at the University of Southern Indiana started offering what the school calls dual-credit programming in 1985. It earned NACEP accreditation in 2006. As of this past fall, CAP enrolled approximately 1,800 students in 40 different courses in 25 high schools.

Jaclyn Dumond, the assistant director of Lifelong Learning at CAP, has learned several important lessons about dual enrollment. One is about the importance of collaborating with units across campus. “This program cannot operate in isolation,” she says. “A significant number of activities that support our program are carried out in other parts of the institution.” CAP works closely with USI's admission staff, registrar and bursar. Faculty liaisons oversee every one of CAP's courses. Dumond says it's also important to work with advising staff, the library, IT, and the LMS support team. For schools that might be looking to strengthen their performance in dual enrollment, Dumond says

that “integrating and collaborating with units across the campus is an opportunity to improve programs.”

“Academic leadership is critical to a successful program,” Lowe says. Suggesting that some universities may view dual enrollment just as a way to “get more butts in seats,” Lowe says that it's up to university academic leaders to “embrace dual enrollment as a truly academic program even if it may be operated out of a different area of the university.”

Among other benefits, dual credit programming has been shown to be an avenue for guiding high school students to USI for their baccalaureate degree. “When we work in concert with undergraduate admissions, we make sure that they know how valuable these students are,” Dumond says. “They are top of their class. These are the students that you want coming to your campus.” Dual enrollment students also help USI meet some of the expectations behind Indiana's complex formula for allocating funds to higher education, which includes an emphasis on on-time graduation—high school students with dual enrollment experience who matriculate at USI tend to graduate on time and thus help boost the school's overall graduation rate.





Dixie State University (Utah)

USI treats dual-credit teachers essentially as adjunct faculty. They work directly with a faculty liaison who observes the teacher in the classroom and offers feedback. Dual-credit teachers have affiliations with a USI academic department, are invited to departmental meetings, and can attend summer workshops to deepen their content knowledge. “These teachers really feel that they are valued for what they are doing in their classrooms,” Dumond says, “and they get good feedback on their ideas and approach to teaching.” More than 50 percent of teachers in the dual-credit courses are USI alums, and Dumond says their work through CAP helps keep them connected with the university.

Issues and Concerns

From a national perspective, one of the big issues around dual enrollment concerns the rigor of the academic programs that provide college credit for high school students. Experts argue that more research is needed to clarify metrics for what makes dual enrollment programs academically sound. At the same time, they say, research is also needed to increase our understanding of specifically how dual enrollment supports gains in college enrollment and completion.

Barmak Nassirian, AASCU’s director of federal relations and policy analysis, urges that universities take a broad look at dual enrollment. Saying that widespread national interest in collegiate-level high school coursework is a positive trend, Nassirian also notes an interesting dichotomy. “While policymakers and parents concerned about college costs over-emphasize the college-credit angle as the primary benefit for students, higher education observers tend to view more robust high school courses as a definite plus regardless of whether the credits actually expedite time-to-degree,” he says. It’s important to remember, Nassirian suggests, that “high school students should always take the most challenging courses they can handle academically, and they should do so for the sake of learning and better preparing themselves for college.”

Nassirian was one of 18 leaders from K-12 and higher education who recently served as part of a working group that studied college credit in high school under the aegis of the College Board Policy Center. That panel’s report, released in November 2017, identified four

essential factors that define strong programs that offer college credit in high school: quality and accountability, value for time and dollars invested, equity and access, and transparency around credit transfer.

As means of ensuring rigorous program quality, Dumond advocates for NACEP accreditation, or at least for ensuring that dual enrollment programs are of sufficient quality to meet NACEP standards. “Those standards get to the meat of what makes a high-quality program and what makes this a positive experience for the student,” she says. Yet another relevant standard is reflected in what USI’s accrediting agency, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), has defined as the minimum requirement to teach an undergraduate course—having a master’s degree in a discipline or subfield, or a master’s degree in a related field along with 18 graduate hours in the discipline or subfield. Dual credit teachers in Indiana have until September 1, 2022 to fully meet the HLC credentials. USI is using a state allocation to fund a graduate fee waiver for its dual credit instructors who are in need of graduate hours.

NACEP’s Lowe says that student advising should be a critical cog. Dual enrollment programs are often a student’s first experience with college-level work, he says, and it’s therefore important to ensure that learners have “the academic support necessary to succeed.” Lowe says student advising would also help clear up confusion about the transferability of college credit earned in high school. Many high school students have later found themselves stymied by universities, particularly private institutions, that will not accept credits earned via dual enrollment. Part of the answer, Lowe says, is that high school students need more advising about what dual enrollment credits might ultimately apply to specific college programs that they are interested in.

Funding for dual enrollment programs is a perpetual issue. Lowe urges that university leaders figure out a funding model that is sustainable over time and provides “the resources necessary to run a good program.” It’s also important, he says, to “address cost barriers for students for whom it is difficult to pay” and to make dual enrollment affordable for all students.

The challenges of dual enrollment will likely continue even as such programs continue to expand. Overall, universities will need to continue to find ways to help students in dual enrollment succeed. Persistent questions about program quality and credit transferability need to be addressed. More research about dual enrollment is needed. As more dual enrollment courses migrate online, universities have to learn how to help high school students master that modality.

The bottom line, for many public universities in particular, is that dual enrollment will continue to be an important part of their educational portfolio. As the number of dual enrollment courses expands, universities must continue to be alert to identifying programmatic niches that can help their program stand out among many. Concerted effort will be needed to make sure these programs are of top quality and that they are accessible and affordable for all students.

“Dual credit appears to be here for good,” Dumond says. “So let’s make sure we’re doing it well.” **P**

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