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Dual Enrollment Programs: Easing Transitions from High School to College

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Research demonstrates clear economic benefits for students who continue education beyond high school (NCES, 2001). Yet the transition from high school to college is an unsuccessful one for many. Of those high school graduates who entered postsecondary education for the first time in the 1995-1996 school year, 37 percent had left two years later without having earned a degree or certificate.

This slippage results from a variety of causes. Some students are unsure how to apply for college or how to pay for it; some are academically unprepared for higher education; some face a frustrating task of balancing school and work. As postsecondary education becomes increasingly necessary to gain access to most reasonably well-paid jobs, the sharp division between high schools and colleges becomes more problematic.

The American Youth Policy Forum (2000) and the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001) have called for a re-thinking of how students move from secondary to postsecondary education. We briefly review two approaches that attempt to link high schools and colleges—the coordination of high school exit and college entry standards, and Tech Prep. The remainder of this Brief is devoted to a discussion of one rapidly growing and promising initiative, dual enrollment.

The strongest predictor of bachelor's degree completion is the intensity and quality of students' high school curriculum (Adelman, 1999). The efforts of the last few years towards raising academic standards have achieved some progress in this regard. In 1982, only 14 percent of high school students took the minimum coursework recommended by the 1983 *Nation At Risk* report (four years of English and three each of science, math, and social studies). In 1994, 51 percent of students did so (Jennings & Rentner, 1998). Enrollments in advanced math, science, and AP classes are higher than they were a decade ago (Jennings & Rentner, 1998).

However, school district requirements for graduation still often fall short of those for college entry and success (The Education Trust, 1999). The National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001) reported that only ten states have aligned their high school graduation and college admissions requirements in English and only two have done so in math.

Tech Prep offers students planned career pathways that link high school classes to advanced technical education at colleges. These programs usually begin during the last two years of high school and continue into the first two years of college. Tech Prep has made some progress in formalizing articulation between secondary and postsecondary education (Orr, 1998; 1999; Bailey & Morest, 1998). Its growth, however, has been hampered by the perception that it is a vocational program, while the emphasis of secondary education is increasingly on academics.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment allows high school students to enroll in a college course prior to high school graduation, giving them first-hand exposure to the requirements of college-level work while gaining high school and college credit simultaneously. Though such programs have existed for over thirty years, their enrollments have increased rapidly of late.

These programs have traditionally been seen as a way to offer gifted students an academically challenging alternative to remaining in their regular, age-graded high school programs (Rogers & Kimpston, 1992). Proponents of this approach believe that less advanced students might not be academically prepared for college-level work, and that offering "easy" access to college will reduce their motivation to achieve at high levels in high school (Greenberg, 1988).

However, the relationship between a rigorous high school course-load and success in postsecondary education (Adelman, 1999) argues for the inclusion of middle and low-achieving high school students in dual enrollment programs. Since dual enrollment can increase the intensity and rigor of the high school curriculum, challenging students through these programs could lead to high levels of college success.

Because many (though not all) dual enrollment programs include time on campus and exposure to the

non-academic side of college, they can serve as a demystifying experience for students and ease the psychological transition to college. Moreover, expensive false starts in college can be avoided, as a dual enrollment experience may show some students that college, at least at this time, is not for them.

For budgetary reasons, high schools must often limit their course offerings. Science and technical courses, upper level courses, and "extras," such as music and art, are often eliminated (Robertson, Chapman, & Gaskin, 2001). Dual enrollment can enable students to take advantage of such courses even if the high school is unable to provide them.

These benefits are particularly important for vocational students. The increased emphasis on academic standards has led to a de-emphasis on vocational coursework in the high school. Courses that are lab-intensive and in need of regular updating—automotive technology, for example—are being phased out in many high schools (Rafn, 2002). The community college's traditional role as a provider of technical education makes a partnership with high schools an ideal endeavor.

As many dual enrollment programs are free to participating students, they can accumulate college credit, in some cases up to almost a full year's worth prior to entering college. This can shorten the time it takes to earn a degree and reduce significantly the overall cost of education (Orr, 2002). Given the financial advantages of such programs, advocates for their expansion have argued that confining them to only the most academically able limits access to educational opportunity and is thereby contrary to the mission of public education (Greenberg, 1988).

The case for dual enrollment has proved compelling and participation is growing rapidly. All but three states have some sort of dual enrollment program (ECS, 2001). In Virginia, there were 6,700 high school students in dual enrollment programs in 1997, as compared to only 2,000 in 1991 (Andrews, 2001). In New York City, the number of colleges offering dual enrollment grew from 6 to 17 between 2000 and 2001, and nearly 12,000 New York City high school students enrolled in a credit-bearing college course during the 2000-2001 school year (Kleiman, 2001).

What do dual enrollment programs look like? While all dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college courses and earn high school and college credit simultaneously, their funding streams, academic prerequisites, and structures vary widely. Some states' legislation requires the state or local school district to pay students' tuition at the college at which they are enrolled, while others compel students to pay their own tuition and fees, and still others allow funding decisions to be made at the local level (Orr, 2002; Boswell, 2001).

The determination of eligibility also varies (Boswell, 2001). Although the trend is to open access to a wide range of students, concerns about quality, rigor, and the maintenance of college-level standards have led many states and educational institutions to require that dual enrollment students meet at least minimum academic requirements.

A wide range of courses are offered. In Wisconsin, students can take any course not offered at their high school, while other programs, such as in Salt Lake City, limit high school students to courses offered specifically for dual enrollment purposes. Unlike Tech Prep, the programs do not aim for linked sequences of courses but just offer a menu of single choices.

Dual enrollment programs also differ in: *course content*—some use the identical college course, others are designed specifically for high school students; *location*—some are offered at the college, others at the high school; *instructors*—some are taught by regular college faculty, others by specifically certified high school teachers; *student mix*—some teach high school students separately while others combine the high school and college students in the same class; and *credits earned*—some offer college credit immediately upon completion of the course, others offer the credit only when the student enrolls in postsecondary education (Orr, 2002).

Two Models: College Now and Youth Options. College Now, at Kingsborough Community College (KCC) in Brooklyn, New York, is one of the nation's largest dual enrollment programs. It had nearly 5,000 students during the 2000-2001 school year (Kleiman, 2001). College Now uses a modified curriculum designed by the college faculty specifically for high school students (Kleiman, 2001). Although the courses are taught at the high schools by high school teachers, the students are given college IDs, providing access to the college's campus, facilities, resources, and events (Shulman, 2000). The program is free to students, and seniors can take up to six credits per semester. Thus, at least in theory, academically prepared high school seniors can earn the equivalent of a college semester during their senior year at no charge.

While College Now focuses on academic subjects and preparation for college-level work, the Youth Options program in Wisconsin focuses on providing expanded curricular choice. The cost of providing a wide range of courses, combined with the state's focus on academic standards and testing, has led many schools, particularly smaller ones, to eliminate elective and vocational coursework (Rafn, 2002). Youth Options allows high school juniors and seniors in Wisconsin to enroll in technical colleges and public and private universities to take courses that are not available in their high schools (Rafn, 2002).

Youth Options started in the 1998-1999 school year and has slightly over 300 students. Like College Now, it is free to students, with tuition paid by the local school district. But unlike College Now, Youth Options' students take the same courses as other college

students. Moreover, the courses often integrate the high school students with college students. College faculty, not high school instructors, teach all courses.

A developing backlash? Some state officials and legislators are skeptical of dual enrollment. Much of their concern is focused around financing. In states in which both colleges and high schools receive some funding based on enrollments, some state officials have accused the programs of "double dipping" (Orr, 2002).

Critics also worry about the quality of dual enrollment programs, fearing that the presence of high school students in the courses compromises the curriculum's rigor (Clark, 2001). Others say that dual enrollment programs whose classes are not on a college campus differ little from traditional high school coursework. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education has ruled that dual enrollment courses taking place in high schools, taught by high school teachers, do not meet the state definition of a college course. The Commission has also begun to limit the number of credits earned by an individual high school student for which the college can receive state reimbursement.

Outcomes and research findings. Students enjoy their participation in dual enrollment programs and find them useful and motivating (Orr, 2002; Robertson, Chapman & Gaskin, 2001). However, the literature on outcomes is sparse (Orr, 2002). Much of the available research has been conducted by the programs themselves and tends to emphasize positive outcomes.

The most serious methodological problem involves selection. Many programs require students to be academically successful prior to admission. In such cases, it is hardly surprising that dual enrollment students enroll in postsecondary education and have greater success there than a more typical group of students.

Studies in Arizona are encouraging, though it is not clear that the research controlled for students' likely outcomes without the dual enrollment experience. Over 90 percent of dual enrollment students who received their college instruction on a college campus graduated from high school, as compared to the average of 49 percent for the seven high schools from the Maricopa Community College District (Finch, 1997, in Puyear, Thor, & Mills, 2001). A survey from another Arizona program found that dual enrollment students' first semester grades were higher than those of a typical community college transfer student (Finch, 1997, in Puyear, Thor, & Mills, 2001).

Studies of Kingsborough Community College's College Now program find high levels of success for program participants. Compared to CUNY freshmen who did not participate, College Now students who enrolled in the CUNY system were twice as likely to graduate from college on time and less likely to need remedial coursework (Kleiman, 2001).

Conclusion and Federal Policy Role

Dual enrollment has the potential to facilitate the high school-to-college transition for a broad range of students: it may motivate students to take a more rigorous high school curriculum; it shifts the focus of occupational education to postsecondary institutions, while keeping such coursework available for high school students; it can provide an early warning mechanism to signal whether students are prepared for college; and it can acclimate high school students to a college environment. Dual enrollment can also fit with other federal goals such as improved career guidance in high school and the assessments sought by the No Child Left Behind strategy. Nevertheless, positive conclusions can only be considered tentative, and many policymakers and legislators responsible for funding both high school and community college enrollments have questioned whether these expenditures are the most effective use of their dollars.

Despite the strategy's growing popularity, a surprising number of straightforward descriptive questions remain unanswered. How many students are participating? How many courses do they take? What is the mix between courses taken in high schools, on college campuses, or through some form of distance education media? Are high school-based dual enrollment courses taught at a college level? Is the content downgraded in community college courses with large high school enrollments?

Educators and policymakers need to know whether well-designed dual enrollment programs live up to their potential. Do their students attend college at higher rates? Do they have stronger college records? It is particularly important to understand the extent to which the program is confined primarily to more advanced and academically successful students and whether more typical high school students can perform adequately in courses that are taught at the college level.

Dual enrollment has the potential to alter the relationship between high school and college. At one extreme, it could fundamentally change the content of the high school junior and senior years and promote a more focused and perhaps coherent role for postsecondary institutions, particularly community colleges. At the other extreme, it could reduce the amount of effective education received by students if they complete high school—with college credits—having learned exactly what they would have in a regular high school program.

The federal government, through a coherent and well-designed program of innovation and assessment, has an opportunity to shape and guide a movement that is growing rapidly yet so far lacks a solid basis on which educators and legislators can make decisions about design, size, and targeting. Given the enthusiasm for the program and its apparent potential, a federal focus on this strategy seems well worth the effort.

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