

## Examining the Effects of High School Dual Credit Programs

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### Abstract

*The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) defines dual credit as a system in which an eligible high school student enrolls in college course(s) and receives course credit for both college and high school (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Dual Credit courses are often taught on high school campuses by an approved instructor or a professor of the cooperating college campus and can include both academic and technical courses. Most institutions of higher education require the high school teachers to have a master's degree and 18 credit hours in the content area to be eligible to teach a college level course. When dual-enrollment programs first started, the primary recipients of the benefits were high-achieving students, hand-picked by high school faculty and administrators for the programs. However, studies reveal that students who are not as academically inclined may experience similar benefits as other students (Chen, 2013). In contrast, professors of higher education report concern that students are potentially missing career opportunities. Students entering colleges and universities with many credit hours may be forced to quickly determine a major; less time at the university could mean less time to explore career options with other experts in the various fields (Jaschik, 2018). Other considerations include, understanding of financial implications, course transfer requirements, decreased rigor of dual credit courses, and preparedness for state high school exams. With increasing popularity among high school dual credit programs, educators of both the K-12 sector and higher education need to be mindful of the positive benefits as well as potential pitfalls for our students.*

**Key Words:** Dual Credit, Dual Enrollment, Higher Education,

### 1. Introduction

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) defines dual credit as a system in which an eligible high school student enrolls in college course(s) and receives course credit for both college and high school (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Dual Credit courses are often taught on high school campuses by an approved instructor or a professor of the cooperating college campus and can include both academic and technical courses. Most institutions of higher education require the high school teachers to have a master's degree and 18 credit hours in the content area to be eligible to teach a college-level course.

While the notion of providing Dual Credit opportunities for students during high school is not new, Dual Credit has certainly taken a more prominent role in secondary education across U.S. school districts. Legislation and increased opportunity for access are among some of the factors contributing to its increased development and presence in schools. This reflective document explores the history, benefits, pitfalls, and overall impact of Dual Credit Programs.

## **2. Contextualizing the Issue**

### **2.1. History of Dual Credit**

Dual credit programs allow students to be enrolled in high school while simultaneously taking a college or university course. This practice is also commonly referred to as dual enrollment with students participating in two separate academic institutions while earning credit in both. This practice was first initiated to enhance attrition rates at the higher education level (NCES, 2005). In addition, poorly prepared high school students regarding college readiness and success also surfaced. The 2010-11 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report revealed that 22,100 at-risk students took college credit classes that year. While this number may represent a small percentage of the overall enrollment, it illustrates the extreme re-characterization of the dual enrollment program and the changing expectations of college.

In 2013, dual credit was one of the programs highlighted by President Obama affording students and parents access to higher education. President Obama challenged higher education not to just enroll students but to produce graduates. In fact, the President challenged higher education entities to produce five million graduates by 2020 so that America will once again have “the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (“Remarks of President Barack Obama in the Address to the Joint Session of Congress,” 2009).

There has been an underlying belief students in secondary education, particularly during their senior year of high school, are not being challenged academically which may result in disengagement, boredom, and a lack of interest in learning. Based on some researchers, it is Higher Education’s responsibility to partner with the local school districts to offer introductory college/university level courses (Bailey, T. R., Hughes, K.L. & Karp, M. M., 2002). Several school districts have had dual credit programs for over 50 years, while others have just begun the work of establishing them. Moreover, numerous colleges and universities have begun the work of forming partnerships with district high schools, ensuring the registration of thousands of students each year. Incorporating this partnership may provide secondary students the opportunity to experience a more rigorous academic experience and giving them a boost or upper hand as they start for college.

### **2.2. Basics of Dual Credit**

House Bill 1638 requires each school district to establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the institution of higher education and the independent school district. The House Bill further delineates the terms that must be included in the MOU. The initial purpose of the bill was to create minimum standards and consistency among Dual Credit Programs (TEA, 2020). The bill provides clear goals and guidelines by which a dual credit program can be established within a school district. Districts are not required to offer a Dual Credit program, but must students the opportunity to earn at least 12 semester credit hours of college credit. This can be earned through advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, articulated credit, advanced technical credit courses as well as Dual Credit courses (TEA, 2020).

Many details are outlined within the MOU such as where the courses will be offered and who will teach the course. The partnering university is responsible for the content taught in the course, however, public schools are still required to ensure mastery of the TEKS within those same courses. Depending upon the arrangement with the university, the course may be taught at the university or the high school campus. Dual Credit teachers may be faculty members of the partnering university or a teacher at the local high school. High school teachers must meet the same college faculty requirements and meet the same standards as established by the regional accrediting association to teacher a Dual Credit course.

Students in grades 9-12 are eligible to take Dual Credit courses if they pass the Texas Success Initiative Assessment(TSIA). TSIA assesses the areas of math, reading, and writing. The purpose of the TSIA is to determine college readiness for college-level coursework.

Local school boards determine the weighting of Dual Credit courses for high school grade point average. Grades will appear on the students' regular high school report cards as well as their college transcript.

### **2.3. Impact of Dual Credit on Public School Districts**

When dual-enrollment programs first started, the primary recipients of the benefits were high-achieving students, hand-picked by high school faculty and administrators for the programs.

However, studies reveal students who are not as academically inclined may experience similar benefits as other students (Chen, 2018). In contrast, professors of higher education report the concern students are potentially missing career opportunities. Students entering colleges and universities with many credit hours may be forced to quickly determine a major; less time at the university could mean less time to explore career options with other experts in the various fields (Jaschik, 2018). Other considerations include understanding of financial implications, course transfer requirements, decreased rigor of dual credit courses, and preparedness for state high school exams. With increasing popularity among high school dual credit programs, educators of both the K-12 sector and higher education need to be mindful of the positive benefits as well as potential pitfalls for our students.

School leaders often question which model of advanced coursework is most likely to help prepare students to succeed in college, dual credit, or Advance Placement. In many instances, findings suggest school leaders should provide a balance of both offerings to students. However, many high schoolers avoid AP level courses thinking they are not smart enough or confident enough to manage the magnitude of assignment requirements. On the other hand, academic guidance counselors encourage students who are apprehensive about taking an AP course and encourage them to entertain taking a dual credit class. While both AP and dual credit enhance university enrollment and graduation rates, dual credit is the only college-prep curriculum supported by data to improve student completion rates at the college level. Moreover, increasing the number of dual credits earned while students are in high schools produce a more profound impact on high school and college graduation. Several counselors message The College Board's stance on college preparedness, which measures readiness based on how well a student scores on standardized assessments, such as the SAT and ACT. However, the THECB (2018), explains it is considered critical students have analytical writing skills and the ability to manage time well to succeed in college courses. There is an underlying belief in public school districts, that the aforementioned critical factors identified by the THECB are all experiences that can be gained when students participate in dual credit course work.

#### **2.4. Impact of Dual Credit on Higher Education**

Several higher education institutions have partnered with school districts to establish a seamless pathway to postsecondary education. Some institutions have fostered the idea of beginning the transition process in high school with expanded dual credit offerings so that students enter higher education with college credits to help students start with momentum toward degree completion (Adelman, C., 2006). Dual credit provides students with the opportunity to experience college-level coursework while still having the access and support afforded by the high school environment. Experiencing the level of college rigor while still in high school has proven to be beneficial in building perseverance to handling the challenging coursework once they are full-time college students. In addition, research supports students who participated in dual credit programs in high school tended to have higher cumulative GPAs during their first three years in college and higher completion rates (Allen, D., & Dadgar, M., 2012).

On the other hand, some higher education institutions are concerned with the quality and rigor of dual credit courses. One area of concern is regarding whether dual credit courses have the same level of rigor and student learning outcomes as a four-year college course (Karp, M. M., Bailey, T. R., Hughes, K. L., & Fermin, B. J., 2004). Another concern was related to the quality and rigor being limited when the dual credit courses are taught by high school-based instructors. In cases such as this, an individual has to shift between the role of the classroom teacher and college professor throughout the day and have the flexibility to allow high school students the ability to retake tests and extend deadlines to comply with campus and district policies.

Oftentimes, high school students participating in dual credit may enroll in a college course and receive credit for both high school and college. However, not all dual credits automatically apply to a degree plan. An acceptance of transfer credits by a university does not mean that it will be applied to a specific degree plan. Moreover, contingent upon the university, students may be required to retake a course based on the institution's requirements. Therefore, students need to research their options, meet with their school counselor, as well as a college advisor before enrolling in a dual credit class.

### **3. Addressing the Issue**

#### **3.1. Pitfalls**

While there have certainly been many positive outcomes resulting from the implementation of Dual Credit opportunities in higher education, it has not come without concerns and obstacles. Professor Carey writes about the concerns she has encountered regarding the rigor of courses offered through Dual Credit.

Through the Dual Credit partnership, many of the courses offered are taught by high school teachers who have been credentialed to teach such courses. In some instances, however, this arrangement means that students taking courses for college credit are in the same classes as non-credit seeking students.

Rather than being provided with a true college-level course rigor, they are often required to simply complete additional assignments to receive college credit. This arrangement certainly makes one question if the recommendations of the NACEP regarding course rigor are truly meeting the intent of policy or simply finding a way around scheduling issues to provide one course to meet the needs of 2 very different student groups (Carey, 2015)

With a greater number of students entering colleges and universities with college credit hours, fewer students are experiencing the typical college “freshman” experience (Smith, 2017). Included in this typical first-year college experience is time spent with counselors discussing various degree plans, career paths, and future job opportunities. Students are entering college with a more direct path regarding degree majors and areas of interest. At this onset, this may sound positive; students are entering college with more credit hours and already have a good idea of what they want to do and who they want to be. But upon further reflection, is this really in the best interest of our students? Students are now discussing degree plans with high school counselors who may or may not have the same skill set or knowledge level to adequately guide students at the college level.

One would be hard-pressed to find a student who is entering college with zero credit hours. And the number of students taking advantage of Dual Credit opportunities continues to rise. According to Texas Higher Education Data (THED) (2018), “The number of students participating in dual credit in fall 2017 was 151,669, a 753 percent increase since fall 2000. Over the last ten years, dual credit participation has increased by 57 percent. Overall, dual credit participation represented 10 percent of higher education enrollment in 2017”. To that end, we must consider whether students are emotionally and mentally mature enough to make such decisions as lifetime career goals while in high school (Smith, 2017). Does increased access to college credit courses force our students to make decisions they may not be ready to make? Are the good intentions of educators to fast track students through the college experience causing collateral damages that students will ultimately pay for later in life. I’m not sure that we have the answers to these questions quite yet, but further reflection is certainly needed since there appear to be no intention to slow dual credit opportunities for high school students.

### **3.2. Benefits**

There are numerous benefits to taking dual credit courses. Moreover, there are several reasons students take dual credit courses, such as, to experience the rigor of a college-level course, earn high school and college credit simultaneously, save parents money, and reduce the amount of time spent in college are amongst some of the most popular (Chen G., 2018). Most Dual Credit courses taken during high school are offered at no additional cost to the students/parents. This translates to less overall funding for a student to receive a four-year degree. The financial benefit to families was the foundation and impetus for Dual Credit course offerings at the high school level. With a focus on providing equal opportunities to students of all sub-populations, this is certainly seen as a benefit for all. Students who would not otherwise be able to afford a four-year degree, now have greater access to institutions of higher education (Fenton, 2018).

Since students are enrolling with college credit hours, less time is required to acquire a four-year degree. Thus, students can enter the work-force sooner, or move into graduate programs and pursue advanced degrees at an earlier age. Less time pursuing degrees means students can enter the workforce sooner and begin earning income. This benefit becomes two-fold. Not only are students saving on the overall costs of earning a degree, but they are also able to enter the workforce earlier and begin earning a salary. High school students who take dual-enrollment courses are more likely than their classmates to go to college CCRC study found - percent of students go on to attend the colleges from which they took their dual-enrollment classes.

Research data affirm most students who participate in a challenging curriculum while in high school may graduate better equipped to pursue their post-secondary goals. Furthermore, completing dual credit courses can allow students to earn a bachelor's or associate's degree faster, which would allow students to save money on college tuition. Moreover, most dual credits earned by students while high school from higher education institutions can transfer to most public universities in Texas. Other potential benefits may include the following:

- Students may enjoy access to the college library and resources
- Grades earned become part of the student’s permanent transcript
- Classes may offer a lower ratio of students to instructors
- Students may explore fields of study that help them choose a major later
- Students may choose from classes not currently available at their high school

Dual-enrollment gives students a taste of college coursework while they are still enjoying the safe confines of the high school environment. At the same time, students earn credits that will apply toward a two-year degree or even toward a four-year degree, if the credits transfer fully to the four-year school of choice. In addition, most students who completed

dual-enrollment programs in high school tend to have higher cumulative GPAs during their first three years in college. These benefits held true both for the high-achieving students and students from other subsets. Advantages were also seen in the population of male and low socio-economic students, two subsets that often struggle academically in high school and beyond.

#### 4. Conclusion

When attempting to determine the impact of Dual Credit courses offered to high school students, it is clear to see that there are many factors to be considered. While the notion of impact is often hard to define, it is evident that there are many positive and negative outcomes resulting from Dual Credit Programs. Perhaps educators need to concern themselves with measuring impact, but rather increasing awareness of the potential pitfalls for students. Awareness of extraneous variables may allow for increased mitigation of such factors to minimize any negative effects on students. The common goal of public school districts and institutions of higher education is to educate the whole student and provide meaningful learning experiences. To that end, the partnership between the two entities must include opportunities for increased student benefit while minimizing negative impact.

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