

The Promise and Challenges of Dual Enrollment

Students in California who have historically been underrepresented on college campuses may be missing out on a promising opportunity to successfully transition from high school to college, due in part to state policies that hinder them from earning college credit while in high school.

Such opportunities, in the form of what are commonly called "dual" or "concurrent" enrollment programs, have long been offered to academically gifted students in need of more intellectual rigor than their high schools could provide. But increasingly, such programs are also being used – with notable success – to improve the college readiness of low-income, minority students who often don't think of themselves as college material.

"This is the kind of innovation that is changing how schools think about what a high school education should be and, in the process, changing students' lives," says Andrea Venezia, a senior policy associate at WestEd who specializes in improving student readiness for higher education. Yet, according to WestEd researchers, the future of such programs in California is in limbo due to the lack of a statewide vision for dual enrollment, policies that hamper its growth and large-scale replication, and the state's significant fiscal crisis.


"It's hard to see barriers put in the way of the development of a comprehensive system that aligns coursework and support systems for students traditionally underserved by higher education," says Venezia. In 2008, she led a team of WestEd researchers who undertook field research that examined state policies hindering dual enrollment in California.

The work was funded largely by The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, known for its national network of 20 Early College Schools, small high schools that provide rigorous classes at both the high school and college level. WestEd's findings were based on interviews with principals and teachers at Woodrow Wilson's seven California-based Early College Schools. Other funders included Jobs for the Future and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

How Dual Enrollment Works

The most successful dual enrollment programs, says Venezia, feature a comprehensive, aligned sequence of coursework beginning freshman year and culminating in the junior and/or senior year with college-level courses for which students simultaneously earn high school and college credit. These "capstone" classes are taught on either the high school or college campus, by either high school or college faculty members, and are the same courses offered to the college's "regular"

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students. Such courses typically are in core instructional areas, such as English or math, but can also be in elective areas that target specific student interests.

According to Venezia, more research needs to be done to better understand the efficacy of dual enrollment programs for underserved students, but initial investigations credit them with motivating nontraditional students to pursue college degrees; preparing such students to successfully complete rigorous, college-level coursework; and reducing the cost of college for the state and for individual families. Research also confirms that students who earn college credits while in high school are more likely to receive a postsecondary degree, and to do so more quickly, than those who do not.

The best programs, she adds, provide students with both a pathway to college-level work and a sense of "college-going culture." That's one way the model differs from Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs, which historically have served more affluent, higher-achieving students — those likely to attend high schools that already have relatively strong college-going cultures.

She says the keys to the success of dual enrollment programs for traditionally underserved students include strong partnerships between high schools and postsecondary institutions; broad-based recruitment effort that seeks out low-income, minority, and underachieving students; instructional scaffolding techniques such as modeling and setting clear goals and expectations that support student learning; and services such as counseling, tutoring, career exploration activities, and peer support networks.


"It's about providing traditionally under-served students with the help they need — the teachers, the scaffolding, the support services — to enroll in and pass a college course," she says. "It makes students who don't believe they can do it realize they can — a really important motivational approach."

Rob Baird, Woodrow Wilson's vice president for School-University Partnerships, agrees. "This is about more than just curriculum and academics," he says. "It's really about equity. We can't let the courses that have 'future success' written all over them be available only to affluent kids, or those able to succeed without intervention. Our focus has to be on getting first-generation, low-income, underserved students to experience college life and work sooner. Nothing about their backgrounds has prepared them for that."

Barriers to Dual Enrollment

In 2005-06, approximately 115,000 high school students in California, or about six percent of the state's public high school students, were in dual enrollment programs. Yet, despite the potential of these programs, WestEd's researchers unearthed a number of barriers hampering their creation and growth in California.

For example, the lack of a statewide vision for dual enrollment, says Venezia, makes such programs "vulnerable to short-term, ad hoc decisions at the local level." Allegations of financial abuses related to improper funding of dual enrollment courses in 2002 created "a climate of fear" about



offering and funding dual enrollment, according to Venezia, and those problems also led to state policies that discourage participation in dual enrollment.

A WestEd report for The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation lists specific recommendations aimed at expanding dual enrollment opportunities, including the creation of new funding mechanisms, investment in technical support and professional development for start-up programs, and an end to credit-limit caps. The report also notes that upfront costs associated with such programs may ultimately save the state money because students who participate are less likely to need remedial college-level classes and/or drop out of school before earning a degree.

Opportunities for the Future

Despite barriers from California's policy environment and fiscal challenges, Venezia is encouraged by how hard some schools work to help targeted students prepare for and access higher education. At one California high school, for example, calculus might be offered only at 7:30 in the morning because just a handful of students are academically prepared to take the course. "That means the students, who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals at the school, must choose between eating breakfast and taking calculus. It is heartbreaking, but at the same time awe-inspiring, because schools like this are going to great lengths to provide opportunities for students who need them, and some students are making big sacrifices to further their learning."

Successful models elsewhere include North Carolina's "Learn and Earn" program, which allows students to attend high school on one of 60 college campuses, simultaneously earning a high school diploma and two years of college credit or an associate degree in up to five years at no cost. At Woodrow Wilson's Early College Schools in New York City, students earn as many as 25 college credits while in high school.

Both Venezia and Baird say the first step in establishing such programs is local school officials setting up partnerships with area community colleges and four-year institutions. Baird contends that while it's "more problematic getting four-year institutions to support this kind of effort," it's well worth it. "After all, we want kids ultimately to be able to walk into a four-year college and be successful." To make sure the partnerships result in effective dual enrollment programs, he says it's important to "dig as deeply as you can into the rank and file faculties of the high school and college to identify and enlist the support of the people who will be doing the work."

Given California's current budget crisis and the upfront costs associated with dual enrollment, Venezia doesn't expect to see such programs grow much over the short term. "It's definitely a work in progress," she says. Still, she believes the model's strong track record elsewhere combined with current planning "behind the scenes" should pave the way for a more welcoming environment in years to come.