

# Dual Enrollment's Expansion: Cause for Concern

*By Alec Thomson*

As the U.S. emerged from last decade's Great Recession, stories of home foreclosures, bankruptcies and unemployment levels were replaced with accounts of staggering student debt, low college graduation rates, prolonged delays to degrees, rising tuition costs, and program cutbacks and closures. These difficulties prompted parents, students, colleges and universities, politicians, and interest groups to call for higher education reforms. While these voices rarely agreed on a prescribed course of action, many of them worked from a perception of colleges and universities as failures with the current model of higher education as broken and requiring immediate action. Faculty and staff must respond to these demands because although it is not always explicitly stated, at its core, this public discourse surrounding the value of higher education is redefining the nature of a college education.<sup>1</sup> No other policy area best epitomizes these changes than the expansion of dual enrollment programs.

At its most elemental level, dual enrollment—sometimes known as dual credit or concurrent enrollment—enrolls high school students in college-level courses. The exact nature of each dual enrollment program varies from state to state, but generally students earn college credits when they pass their classes. In many places, college tuition and fees are reduced

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or waived for students in a dual enrollment program. In 47 states, policies exist to govern these agreements between school districts and local community or state colleges.<sup>2</sup> While there are many different elements to dual enrollment programs, three defining features are: (1) who teaches the courses, (2) where the classes are taught, and (3) who is eligible to participate. Depending upon the program, classes are taught by either college instructors or high school teachers. The classes are offered online, at high

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schools, and at local college campuses. Finally, each state sets minimum qualifications for the program (e.g., age, academic achievement).

While few nationwide statistics about dual enrolled students exist, it is easy to note the rapid expansion of dual enrollment programs. According to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, 82 percent of all public high schools in 2010-11 offered dual

enrollment to students, and more than 1.4 million of their students enrolled in college courses for credit.<sup>3</sup> Eight years earlier, about 813,000 high school students were taking college credit classes, according to the 2002-2003 NCES report.<sup>4</sup> This represents a 72 percent increase in less than a decade. Such growth encourages us to ask: why are so many more young students taking college courses before they complete high school? Indeed, the purposeful expansion of dual programs represents a fundamental shift in the goals of dual enrollment and a realignment of the relationship between colleges and high schools.

#### STUDENT PROFILE

In its original form, dual enrollment was mostly limited to academically advanced high school students who, through achievement, had exceeded the curriculum offerings of their high schools. Participation rates were low and inclusion was selective. Current dual enrollment programs share little of this focus on advanced academic offerings. Instead,

the programs are marketed to students and parents as ways to reduce the time needed to get a degree, save money on college costs, and prepare students for collegiate success. Such an emphasis treats education and learning as commodities where value is found exclusively in the efficiency measures of tuition bills, time to degree, and employment statistics. Students are defined as consumers, while colleges and universities prove their worth by improving their score on metrics like graduation rates or graduates' earnings.

One of the most energetic dual enrollment efforts in the country can be found in Iowa. An exemplar in the field, Iowa leads the nation with the greatest percentage of students under 18 years old taking college credit classes. In 2016, half of their high school juniors were enrolled in college courses.<sup>5</sup> What is it about these students that draws them into college even before they have

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completed high school? Is one to infer that Iowa's students are exceptionally bright? That the K-12 curriculum can't keep pace with them? Not so. Rather, Iowa has made the decision to compress its educational timeline and move students along quicker. Earlier this year, *Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter Beth McMurtrie profiled one of Iowa's dual enrollment students: "[He] is an average student, and that's exactly what the Kirkwood Regional Center at the University of Iowa is aiming for. Once tailored toward high achievers, dual enrollment, in which high-school students can earn school and college credit simultaneously, is expanding outward, aimed at students in the academic middle."<sup>6</sup> When such a broad program definition is adopted, the line between being enrolled in high school and college becomes so blurred that the one thing becomes indistinguishable from the other.

At a time when the majority of high school students are not considered to be "college-ready," it is curious that state lawmakers' preferred remedy to these deficiencies is to accelerate students' conduit to college.<sup>7</sup>

In 2016 alone, at least six states took action to get more high school students in “college” classes. Indiana passed several measures aimed at boosting the number of high school teachers qualified to teach dual enrollment courses; Idaho moved to provide \$4,125 for every 7th through 12th grader to use on dual credit courses; and Tennessee established a Course Access Program, modeled on Louisiana’s statewide online charter school, Supplemental Course Academy, that will allow high school students more

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access to online college-level courses.<sup>8</sup> Florida is another state that has aggressively sought to expand dual enrollment. Enabled by state law requiring school districts to have dual enrollment agreements in place with public state colleges servicing their area, Florida’s numbers grew by 16,000 students between 2012 and 2016.<sup>9</sup>

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struggle with high school basics. The 2010-11 NCES report shows that 22,100 at-risk students took college credit classes that year.<sup>10</sup> While this number represents a small percentage of the overall enrollment, it illustrates the extreme re-characterization of the dual enrollment program and the changing expectations of college. The impact of these programs on at-risk students is unknown.

In Spring 2017, the central themes of dual enrollment were front and center during U.S. Department of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos’ first official visit outside Washington, D.C. During a visit to Florida’s Valencia Community College, she praised its dual enrollment program, stating “dual-enrollment and advanced manufacturing programs are creating impressive opportunities for students.”<sup>11</sup> However, when students at the event were asked about their participation in the program, they offered decidedly pragmatic reasons (decreasing time in college and saving money), not academic ones (increased rigor, availability of new curriculum, etc.).<sup>12</sup> One student declared that she participated in the program “to

help my parents.”<sup>13</sup> Looking beyond DeVos’ trip to Florida, similar scenes are surely playing out across the country.

#### RATIONALES FOR EXPANDING

The growth of dual enrollment programs has sparked examination of their impact on promised outcomes, and numerous studies have endorsed their positive effects on retention rates among participating students, college graduation rates, the likelihood of college enrollment, and time to degree completion.<sup>14</sup> However, much of the research on this topic suffers from two substantial concerns: the lack of comprehensive data and the failure to properly address the pre-existing conditions of the students.<sup>15</sup> Extant research is limited to case studies or single state analyses. Additionally, selection bias clouds the impact of dual enrollment programs. In other words, previous dual enrollment program cohorts were comprised of students who possessed academic skills and motivations which were more robust than the general student body. Their experience in the program would not be representative of a typical high school student.

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Thus, the expansion of dual enrollment offerings is happening without a clear picture of its effectiveness. It is most likely that such programs do not fit all students, or even most. Quality research is needed to ascertain not only who most benefits from dual enrollment, but which components characterize the most successful programs. Indeed, in a report on the topic, the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education highlighted the fact that, in spite of current research efforts, “it remains unclear whether dual enrollment participation increases students’ likelihood of entering college, preparedness for college-level work, or attainment of a college degree.”<sup>16</sup>

With the benefits touted, it is easy to understand the appeal of dual

enrollment for high schools, colleges, universities, students, and their families. However, the expansion of dual enrollment programs is not about providing new and challenging academic opportunities for capable students. Rather it seeks to address K–12 institutional shortcomings by co-opting college and university participation. These high schoolers are provided with a modicum of familiarity and credit acquisition—not the mastery of skills and the development of abilities. Given the exaggerated

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emphasis on metrics, such as retention and completion, and the growth of pay-for-performance state funding plans for higher education, colleges have no choice but to make sure their dual enrolled students are successful. As such, the early admission of academically average or deficient students forces colleges and universities to develop learning pathways of least resistance.<sup>17</sup> Dual enrollment programs are not making students better prepared for the challenges of college; rather, these programs demand colleges and universities meet dual enrolled high school students at their current academic and maturity levels.

The pressures on colleges and universities to participate in these programs comes not only from the push for expanded offerings. Recent demographic trends and budgetary concerns are serious practical considerations that can override academic factors. For several years, as the economy has recovered and employment rates have risen, the overall enrollment at public colleges and universities, especially community colleges, has been in decline.<sup>18</sup> Dual enrolled students can—and do—compensate for those losses on many campuses, as they become a larger part of the core student body.<sup>19</sup> When this happens, administrators become more dependent upon dual enrolled students to sustain their institutions. “Colleges are making up for the declines in adult enrollment with dual-enrollment high school students,” concludes Davis Jenkins, Columbia University senior research scholar.<sup>20</sup> These external pressures encourage,

even incentivize, the acceptance of dual enrolled students, and entwine dual enrollment programs with the long-term health of the institution. As Todd Clark, director of the Office of Articulation for the Florida Department of Education, explains, “Dual enrollment is something that schools get incentives for—financial incentives for teachers and accountability incentives for having students in acceleration programs.”<sup>21</sup> The financial rewards only got higher during President Obama’s administration, when the U.S. Department of Education waived rules that prohibited high school students from using federal Pell Grants to cover college credit costs.<sup>22</sup> This broadening of federal policy not only has created academic possibilities for thousands of poor and low-income high school students, but also has encouraged colleges and universities to pursue this new revenue stream.

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#### MISSING THE MARK

As it stands today, dual enrollment pushes to remove the distinctions between higher education and high school. Such a development invites less autonomy for colleges and universities and encourages greater outside control over matters of curriculum and learning outcomes. While strong connections between higher education institutions and high schools are important and worth pursuing, the current rush to expand dual enrollment misses the mark. Addressing the problems of student motivation, college cost, or completion rates by offering high school students a quasi-college experience is a poor substitute for a college learning experience that should be transformational.<sup>23</sup>

At the core of this debate is a key question: what is the central purpose of a college education? Should students attend college to expand their learning and develop skills such as critical thinking, or is college expected to be an experience that is designed to bolster a student’s future employment options? These are not mutually exclusive options, but prop-

erly balancing the mix of these two perspectives is critical. Public attitudes on this matter are different, depending on respondents' college experience. Nearly half of the public (47 percent) hold that "the main purpose of a college education is to teach work-related skills and knowledge," but among those with post-graduate education, just 26 percent say the same.<sup>24</sup> Clearly colleges and universities need to do a better job of advancing education as a public good with benefits broader than job training for

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individual students. Pursuing the short-term gains promised by the influx of dual enrolled students will not help this effort. Rather, such a course of action threatens to accelerate a disturbing trend toward the degradation of college rigor and expectations. A report from the National Center on Education and the Economy finds that, "college instructors do not expect their students to be able to read at the level of their texts or to write very much

at all, suggesting that those instructors have very low expectations for their students, expectations so low as to deny many, if not most, students the opportunity to learn skills essential to the careers they have chosen to pursue."<sup>25</sup> More generally, in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Arum and Roksa argue that colleges are failing at the basic mission of student learning.<sup>26</sup>

With the challenges facing colleges and universities, it's not enough to simply assert that high schools do a better job of preparing students for college, or diminish college standards and expectations. Action is needed. But such reforms must look beyond the simple appeal found in simply expanding a current program—dual enrollment. Dual enrollment programs do provide important opportunities to select high school populations, but their rapid expansion does not address the core issues facing so many high school seniors and college freshman. Instead of trying to misapply dual enrollment opportunities, we should instead focus on developing and expanding programs that enhance and support college

learning. At the collegiate level, student learning support services must be expanded to not only provide struggling academic students with practice in skill development and content acquisition, but also to help generate attachment between students and their institution. Persistence and completion are strengthened when students are connected to their peers, faculty, and staff.<sup>27</sup> At the high school level programs such as Alabama's A+ College Ready, which focuses on increasing enrollment in high school AP classes, provide support and resources to students, institutions and faculty in prepping students for their leap to college. The use of AP exams still affords outstanding students the opportunity to obtain college credit, but the greater emphasis is on skill development and steering them toward college admission and success. Similar efforts can be found in the expansion of schools offering International Baccalaureate diplomas. Like Alabama's efforts, the focus rests on skill development and college preparation, but within the structure of high school. Educators and policymakers should work to implement these reforms at the collegiate and high school levels; they will do far more to advance the quality of education than the expansion of dual enrollment programs. ☒

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Pew Research Center noted in a July 2017 study that a majority of Republicans (58%) believed that colleges and universities have a negative effect upon the country. By contrast, 72 percent of Democrats felt that these institutions had a positive effect. Go to: <http://www.people-press.org/2017/07/10/sharp-partisan-divisions-in-views-of-national-institutions/>
- 2 The exceptions are Alaska, New Hampshire and New York. For more details on state policies, see the 50-state comparison by the Education Commission of the States, here: <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuestRTL?Rep=DE1501>
- 3 See Marken et al., "Dual Enrollment Programs and Courses for High School Students at Postsecondary Institutions: 2010–11 (NCES 2013-002)," p. 6.
- 4 Kleiner and Lewis, "Dual Enrollment of High School Students at Postsecondary Institutions: 2002–03 (NCES 2005-008)," p. 7.
- 5 McMurtrie, "How Colleges Are Teaming Up With High Schools to Streamline Students' Paths."

- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Petrilli and Finn, "College Preparedness over the Years, According to NAEP."
- 8 See Zinth, "2016 Dual Enrollment and AP Legislative Enactments."
- 9 Dobson, "Economics, Access Enhance Dual Enrollment Trends."
- 10 Marken et al., *op cit.*, p. 19.
- 11 Littlejohn, "Learning for Life: Dual Enrollment in Florida is a Win for the State."
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Russon, "Education Secretary Betsy DeVos Tours Valencia Campus in Osceola."
- 14 For retention rates see North, "Dual Credit in Oregon 2010 Follow-up"; Adelman, "Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000"; Swanson, *An Analysis of the Impact of High School Dual Enrollment*; and Eimers, "Dual Credit and Advanced Placement: Do They Help Prepare Students for Success in College." For graduation rates, see An, "The Impact of Dual Enrollment on College Degree Attainment: Do Low-SES Students Benefit?"; and Heath, "Community College and University Experiences of High School Dual Enrollment Students." For college enrollment, see Bautsch, "The Effects of Concurrent Enrollment on the College-Going and Remedial Education Rates of Colorado's High School Students"; Karp, "The Postsecondary Achievement of Participants in Dual Enrollment"; and Spurling, "The Effect of Concurrent Enrollment Programs upon Student Success at City College of San Francisco." For time to degree completion, see Radunzel, "Dual-Credit/Dual-Enrollment Coursework and Long-Term College Success in Texas"; and Blanco "The Promise of Dual Enrollment: Assessing Ohio's Early College Access Policy."
- 15 Karp et al., "The Postsecondary Achievement of Participants in Dual Enrollment: An Analysis of Student Outcomes in Two States," p. 13.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 17 An example of this at work can be seen in the recent efforts to develop and implement Guided Pathways that seek to create "programs of study that are aligned with requirements for success in employment and at the next stage of education." See the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) for more details: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/pathways/Pages/ProjectInformation.aspx>
- 18 Fain, "Enrollments Continue to Slide at For-Profits and Community College."
- 19 Smith, "Double-Edged Sword of Enrollment."
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Littlejohn, *op cit.*
- 22 U.S. Department of Education, "Expanding College Access Through the Dual Enrollment Pell Experiment."
- 23 Many dual enrollment programs involve high school teachers teaching college classes to high school students in classrooms filled with other high school students. Many students enrolled in dual enrollment programs also participate via distance learning options.
- 24 Heimlich, "Purpose of College Education."
- 25 National Center on Education and the Economy, *What Does it Mean to Really be College and Work Ready?* p. 4.
- 26 The authors argue that nearly half (45%) of students showed no significant learning growth during their first two years in college.
- 27 Barnett, "Validation Experiences and Persistence Among Community College Students," pp. 193-230.

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