



In Brief

Current Practices & Policies on Dual Credit Admissions in Illinois' 4-Year Colleges & Universities

by Julia Panke Makela

Introduction

Dual credit introduces high school students to college-level course work, enabling them to simultaneously earn credit towards their high school and college transcripts. A national study by Waits, Setzer, and Lewis (2005) estimates 1.2 million students are currently participating in dual credit programs across the nation. Closer to home in Illinois, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) reports student participation at 36,179 for the 2004 fiscal year (Kerr, 2005). Dual credit and dual enrollment together have shown rapid growth since 2001 when the state began awarding Accelerated College Enrollment (ACE) grants to community colleges to support all or part of the college tuition and fees of participating high school students. Enrollment increased 100% from 2000-01 to 2001-02 alone and was 10 times greater than 1991-92 (Andrews & Barnett, 2002). Figure 1 shows that the number of students in dual credit and dual enrollment rose through 2004 although the increase slowed compared to previous years, representing an expected leveling off according to the ICCB.

Dual credit growth in Illinois has varied at the local level in terms of policy and practice, with some educational institutions reporting struggling to put institutional policies and procedures in place to accommodate the increasing demand from students and parents to participate in dual credit (Barnett, Gardner & Bragg, 2004; Community College Research Center, 2003). One area of uncertainty focuses on the role of 4-year degree-granting institutions, as little focused research or attention has been placed on them as either participants in or recipients of the dual credit trend.

The Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) conducted a study that captures current institutional policies and practices from the perspective of admissions officers in Illinois' public and private 4-year colleges and universities (Makela, 2005). The study explored acceptance and transfer of college credits earned by high school students in dual credit courses by the selected institutions. The institutional history of dual credit, current enrollment trends, and details on institutional policies governing acceptance and denial of dual credit were examined. This brief presents selected findings from this study.

Study Participants

To best highlight the experiences that large groups of Illinois students encounter, a purposive sample of all 12 public institutions was chosen for this study; these institutions enroll almost 50% of the state's 4-year undergraduate students. In addition, a stratified random sample of 28 private institutions having enrollments greater than 500 students was taken. A total of 29 (72.5%) institutions responded. Together, these 29 institutions enroll 201,171 (67%) of the state's entire population of 4-year undergraduate students ("Data book", 2004).

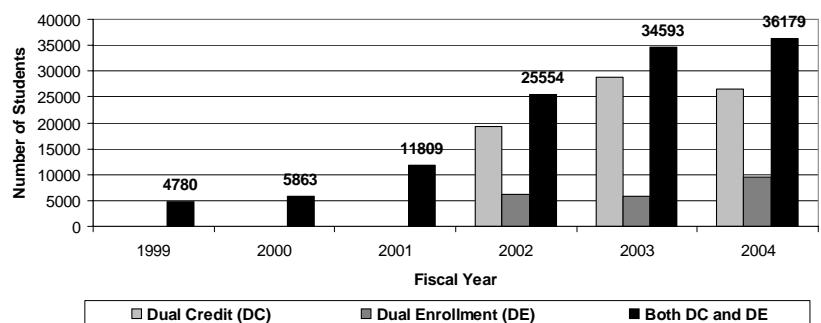


Figure 1. Number of students participating in dual credit and dual enrollment programs in Illinois (Fiscal Year 1999 – 2004).

Current Impact of Dual Credit at 4-Year Colleges and Universities

Major findings revealed over 70% of the 29 participating institutions have experienced an increase in students bringing dual credits earned during high school (see Figure 2). A sentiment echoed by many participants is that increasing numbers of high school students are getting a jump start on college. Dual credit, as one of several options for students, is picking up momentum. Recent literature and trend data both point to growing numbers of incoming college students having taken dual credit courses in the coming years.

Acknowledging that data tracking strategies for dual credit are not well implemented at many 4-year institutions, estimates provided by 20 institutions ranged from 1% to 20%, with an average of 10% of students admitted in Fall 2004 with dual credits. Applying these percentage estimates to actual enrollments for the 20 institutions, an estimated 4400 students transferred dual credits, which would average slightly over 500 incoming students per institution. Estimates of students enrolled with dual credit varied by size of institution, however, with medium and large institutions having greater percentages of students with dual credit than small institutions. This result was consistent for public and private schools. The amount of dual credit brought by incoming students ranged from 3 to 10 credits, with an average of just under 7 credits, representing about two 3-hour college credit courses.

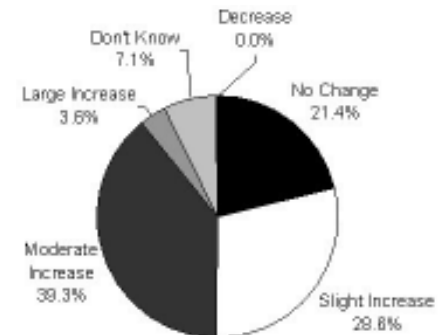


Figure 2. ACE grant impact on the number of students applying with dual credits.

Institutional Policy Decisions Regarding Dual Credit

Looking at current institutional policies, 25 of the 29 (86%) 4-year higher education institutions studied accepted dual credit. Of the remaining 4, 1 public institution is changing its policy to accept dual credit, and 3 private institutions do not accept dual credit and indicated that they do not have current plans to change their policy to accept dual credit. The 4-year institutions that accept dual credit have had policies in effect for many years, ranging from 6 to 32 years, with an average of 16.3 years. Only 1 admissions officer offered that his/her institutional policy had changed within the last 5 years during the period when Illinois was experiencing a steady increase of dual credit enrollments.

When considering current or future dual credit policy, institutions indicated they would be most influenced by peer institutions changing policy related to dual credit, high schools and community colleges needing to understand their institutional policy on dual credit, and students and parents needing answers about dual credit. Differences were evident between admissions officers of private and public institutions. As shown in Figure 3, private institutions turned more toward peer institutions (33.3%) and requests from students and parents (33.3%) than public institutions, whereas public institutions were more focused on state policy (28.6%) and the relationships with high schools and community colleges (28.6%) than private institutions.

Of the 25 institutions that accepted dual credit, 100% required that (a) students earned a minimum grade in the course, and (b) the course was taken at an accredited institution. Other common criteria included college level materials were used in the course (72%), the quality of the course was similar to the quality of the same course at the 4-year level (60%), and students met all prerequisites for the course (48%) (See Table 1). Acceptance of credits also varied based on the type of course, but no preference was found for credits earned at in-state rather than out-of-state institutions or for credits earned by incoming freshmen versus transfer students. Liberal arts and sciences and college prep courses, however, were more readily accepted than career, technical and vocational courses by the majority of institutions.

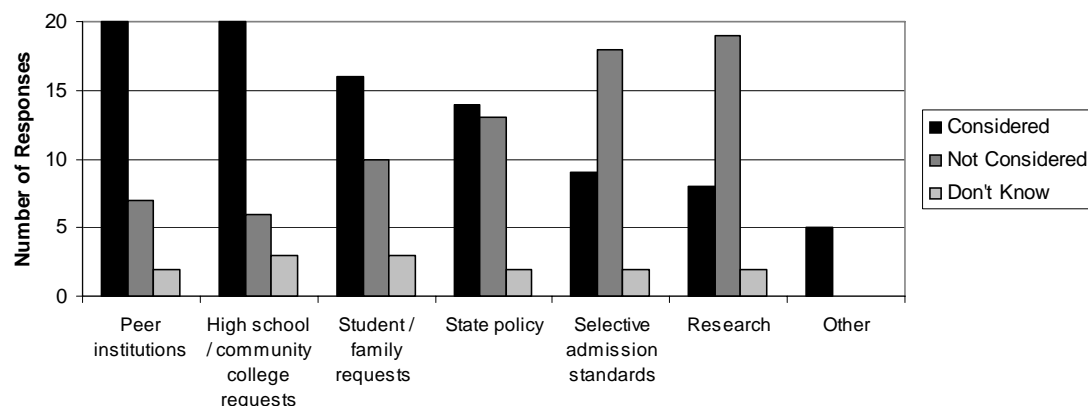


Figure 3. Factors considered when developing or changing dual credit policy.

The most common reasons for rejecting students' dual credit requests were that the grade received in the course was too low (40.0%), the material in the course was not college level (28.0%), and the sponsoring institution or community college was not accredited (28.6%). Universally, admission officers stated that an official college transcript from accredited higher education institutions was needed to demonstrate that students have met requirements; high school transcripts were insufficient.

Table 1
Criteria for Accepting Dual Credit, Comparing Public and Private Institutions

Criteria	Public (9)	Private (16)	Overall (25)
Minimum grade earned in the course	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Course is taken at an accredited institution	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
College level material is used in the course	33.3%	93.8%	72.0%
Quality of the course is similar to the quality of courses taught at the responding institution	33.3%	75.0%	60.0%
Student meets all prerequisites	22.2%	62.5%	48.0%
Course is taken at an institution that has been approved by the responding institution	55.6%	37.5%	44.0%
Course syllabus includes all objectives required in the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI)	22.2%	37.5%	32.0%
Current material is used in the course	22.2%	37.5%	32.0%
Teachers meet or exceed qualifications of the responding institution's faculty	0.0%	25.0%	16.0%
Collegiate concepts of academic freedom are applied	11.1%	6.3%	8.0%

Informing Others About Dual Credit Policy and Practice

There were no cases in which written policies directly referenced or used the term "dual credit." The current most common strategy for addressing dual credit, employed by over half of the institutions, was to default to the institution's transfer credit policy. Even when policies were developed under other titles (e.g. advanced standing, college credit earned in high school, previous college work), the parallels to transfer policy were clear. One quarter of the institutions had no written dual credit policy of any kind, but two of those institutions were working on a written policy to be implemented by Summer or Fall 2005 (See Table 2). Sample written policies can be found in the technical report for this study (Makela, 2005).

Written Policy Title	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
Transfer credit	15	53.6%
College credit earned in high school	2	7.1%
Advanced standing	1	3.6%
Previous college work	1	3.6%
No written policy available	7	25.0%
(Will have a written policy in the next 6 months)	(2)	(7.1%)
Don't know if a written policy exists	2	7.1%

Word-of-mouth was the most common way for groups such as prospective students, parents, and school counselors to be informed about dual credit policies. Over half (51.7%) of the institutions relayed information about dual credit over the phone or in person, and a smaller percentage of participants used course catalogs (39.3%) and websites (25.9%). These findings provide insight into why stakeholders outside 4-year institutions have difficulty understanding dual credit policies.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The Assistant Director of Admissions at MacMurray College conveyed the experience of several respondents saying, "Dual credit has kind of snuck up on us... we didn't realize [that] all these students were taking dual credit courses and that high schools were encouraging it now." This study showed a growing awareness of dual credit among admission officers of 4-year institutions. An encouraging number of institutions (from all public and most private institutions) seemed receptive to the idea. Over 90% accepted dual credit in some way, however approaches and strategies differed greatly. Results suggested that the novelty and recent growth of dual credit programs may be influencing the current ambiguous state of policy and practice. In fact, the practice is so new that several 4-year institutions had not yet experienced large numbers of dual credit students. Moreover, most institutions had not examined existing institutional policies or created new policies specific to dual credit, or developed formal communication strategies.

How can 4-year colleges and universities prepare for the future growth of dual credit? Beyond the established, widespread criteria of ensuring students have earned a minimum grade in a course from an accredited institution, mechanisms are needed to alleviate confusion and insure course content is college level, course quality is comparable to college-level instruction, and course prerequisites are met. Although word-of-mouth, the most common way of communicating dual credit information to prospective students, parents, and school counselors, is important, other forms of communication are needed. Student handbooks, course catalogs, and websites should include clear and unambiguous information about dual credit. Over

half of the institutions surveyed currently default dual credit policy to their transfer credit policy that is designed for students who have taken substantial course work or earned an associate degree from another higher education institution. This raises the question of how well transfer policy serves dual credit students who are matriculating from high school to college. Whether students with dual credit are advantaged or disadvantaged by this approach remains to be seen.

In the process of further defining and formalizing dual credit policies, it is important to gather input from stakeholders. New resources, such as the Academic Pathways to Access and Student Success (APASS) 50-state profile (OCCRL, 2005), provide an overview of dual credit and dual enrollment within the larger context of each state's high school-to-college transition initiative. Prior studies involving high school and community college personnel in Illinois have shown a lack of adequate information about how dual credit is treated at the 4-year level. This study corroborated previous studies, suggesting prospective students, families, and school counselors need current and credible information but may have difficulty accessing it. All 4-year higher education institutions in Illinois involved in awarding and accepting dual credit would benefit from seeking input from these stakeholder groups when developing future policy and programs.

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Academic Pathways for Access and Student Success (APASS)

For more on the transition from high school-to-college, see the APASS Project which identifies and disseminates information about new and emerging academic pathways that extend from high school to college and enhance transition to postsecondary education.

www.apass.uiuc.edu

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The Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) was established in 1989 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. *Our mission is to provide research, leadership, and services to community college leaders and assist in improving the quality of education in the Illinois community college system.* Projects of this office are supported by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and are closely coordinated with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).



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