



In Brief

Dual Credit: Raising the Bar or Lowering the Standard?

By Janet S. Fontenot

Increasing numbers of high school students across the United States are enrolled in college courses while still attending high school. In Illinois alone there was an increased enrollment of 48.8% from FY 2001 to FY 2002. By FY 2002 there were over 25,000 high school students enrolled in college courses in Illinois (ICCB, 2003). Phillippe and Patton (1999) report that the number of part-time college students in the U.S. under the age of 18 increased by 206% between 1993 and 1997. The increase is partly attributed to the explosion of dual credit or dual enrollment programs.

What is dual credit or dual enrollment? These terms are not applied uniformly, but commonly the term *dual credit* refers to the delivery to high school students of a single course that, on successful completion, results in both high school and college credit. Dual credit courses are normally offered at the high school during the school day, taught by high school faculty who have adjunct faculty status with the postsecondary institution offering the college credit (Girardi & Stein, 2001).

Dual enrollment is often defined as the enrollment of a high school student in a college level course conducted at the college campus with instruction provided by a college faculty member. Dual enrollment participants are routinely integrated into the college student population without special consideration for their high school status. It is the difference in location for the delivery of the course and the status of the faculty member that often elicits the question, "Are dual credit students who take courses in their high schools actually receiving credit for a college level

course, or are they merely being awarded college credit for a component of the high school curriculum?"

However, many believe that the location of the delivery of the coursework should be a minor consideration when questioning the integrity of a dual credit program. Of more serious concern should be the issues of student admissions criteria, faculty selection and the assessment of student performance and competency. If a program can withstand scrutiny in these areas, then the issue of location should be of little consequence.

Student Admissions

In many states, students must meet the minimum academic standards for enrollment in the college in order to be eligible to participate in the dual credit program. For example, the Administrative Rules of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) state, "Students accepted for enrollment in college-level course must have appropriate academic qualifications, a high level of motivation and time to devote to studying a college-level course" (ICCB, 2002). The ICCB further mandates that students also satisfy course placement tests or course prerequisites to assure that they have the same qualifications and preparation as other college students. Georgia and Oklahoma have very strict standards that include not only a high SAT/ACT score, grade point average, and class rank, but a recommendation from the principal as well (Boswell, 2001). Other states are less restrictive in their admissions requirements and make such programs available to any junior or senior who is accepted by a college.

The disparity in admissions requirements between programs is likely to be a result of the initial goals and objectives established for the program by the participating public school and the college. If the goals and objectives are developed in a collaborative effort between the institutions, an acceptable admissions policy can be established prior to the onset of instruction and the goals of both institutions can be attained.

Faculty Selection

The second area of consideration when evaluating the quality of a dual credit program is that of faculty selection. Andrews (2000) speaks to the heart of the matter when he states,

The quality of the instructors cannot be over-emphasized. Dual-credit courses put the reputation of the college on the line among the high school faculty and the students who enroll. If an average or weak instructor is selected from the college to teach the course, the feedback to high school teachers will be immediate. If the instructor is selected from the high school to teach the dual-credit course, it is just as important that the instructor be highly respected, qualified and have similar credentials as the college faculty members on campus. (p. 36-37)

The Illinois Community Board mandates that the instructors for these courses be selected, employed and evaluated by the community college. They are expected to be selected from full-time faculty and/or from adjunct faculty with appropriate credentials and demonstrated teaching competencies at the college level (ICCB, 2002). In other words, colleges and high schools should identify faculty members who meet the same standards as those individuals assigned to teach on the college campus and who will view themselves as partners in the process of providing college level instruction.

Once a faculty member has been selected, there are other ways in which a college and public school can strengthen the partnership between the faculty member and the college. At Southwestern Illinois College, teachers from local high schools who are instructing in dual credit classes are routinely invited to the college to participate in faculty development activities. They receive the same benefits as other adjunct faculty members and are included in faculty meet-

ings held at the beginning of each semester. In some programs these instructors are members of advisory committees and participate in curriculum development. A number of dual credit instructors also teach courses on the college campus during evening hours or weekends which are viewed as integral parts of the academic program.

Assessment of Student Performance

The assessment of student performance and competency is considered by many to be the weakest link in dual credit programs. But in what context is this criticism made? The Illinois Community College Board requires that course outlines utilized for dual credit courses be the same as those for courses offered on campus and at other off-campus sites and should contain the content articulated with colleges and universities in the state. It further stipulates that course prerequisites, descriptions, outlines, requirements, learning, and methods of evaluating students must be the same as for on-campus offerings (ICCB, 2002). Missouri's Coordinating Board for Higher Education provides similar direction for dual credit course offerings, as do their counterparts in Ohio, Utah, Arizona and many other states.

Performance indicators at the classroom level are easy to monitor and have been implemented at a number of educational institutions. The Maricopa Community College District (MCCD) Chemistry Instructional Council has developed a compelling method for evaluating student performance. Twenty questions are included in every final exam to determine if selected chemistry classes are being taught uniformly across the district. Dual credit classes are routinely included in this process (Puyear, Thor & Mills, 2001).

Examples of outstanding course assessment techniques such as the one from MCCD would lead one to believe that the criticism of inadequate assessment in dual credit programs is not directed at the individual course level but at a program level. One criticism of dual credit programs at large is the lack of a consistency in evaluating the programs. In the past, most institutions selected the performance criteria to be evaluated, and many studies showed a tendency to focus more on student satisfaction as opposed to student outcomes. Consequently the results tended to emphasize only positive findings (Bailey, Hughes & Karp, 2003).

Studies in Arizona and New York have focused on the transfer rates of dual credit participants, as well as their grade point averages and completion rates at the college level. Studies such as these, however, have been criticized because only pre-selected students were included. Many dual credit programs require students to be academically successful prior to admission. This means that dual credit participants have already demonstrated a potential for greater success at college than a more typical group of students. The question of the impact of the dual credit program has therefore not been adequately answered.

One organization assisting in addressing the need for research is The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP). Established in 1999, NACEP is an organization for education professionals who administer or participate in Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships. Primary goals of this organization are to establish and promote national standards as well as to conduct research. Once a standard research methodology has been established, more rigorous evaluation of dual credit programs can move forward and greater significance can be attached to the findings.

Why Offer Dual Credit?

Why should schools and colleges continue to offer dual credit programs? Boswell (2001) provides a number of reasons the programs should continue. She cites reduced college costs for students and families, accelerating student progress towards a degree and providing greater academic challenge to high school students. She also includes the removal of the artificial barriers that inhibit students from moving between high school and college, improved collaboration between the faculty at both institutions, and the provision of greater academic opportunities for students at small rural high schools.

Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons is the opportunity to accomplish the mission of the community college. Robertson, Chapman and Gaskin (2001) remind us that the primary motive might be, "...to provide educational opportunities for college coursework to students in high school and afford them a high-quality, efficient way to become productive citizens" (p. 5).

References

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