Dual Credit, 20 Years Later

When I reported on the dual credit process in 1998, it was a new idea, at least at my institution, Ivy Tech Community College. As the title of my 1998 *Innovation Abstracts*, "A New Twist on Articulation" suggested, dual credit was largely understood in the context of articulation. Articulation in relation to dual credit refers to the process of assisting students transition smoothly from one level of education to another without experiencing delays or duplicating courses. Ivy Tech's goal at the time was to provide high school students with the same seamless transition to community college that community college students received when transferring to a four-year school, one that integrated what they had already learned into the next stage of their education with the minimum amount of bureaucratic fuss. Twenty years later, the context of dual credit and my institution have seen a lot of changes, including growing in size, scope, and ambition beyond anything I would have imagined in 1998. Along with that growth has come a shift in the purpose of dual credit from a "new twist on articulation" to an important tool for increasing completion.

Developments In Dual Credit

The change in scale and scope of Ivy Tech's dual credit operations was reinforced for me at a recent campus event. The event brought our faculty together with their secondary school colleagues to review dual credit policies and procedures and to discuss the content covered in dual credit courses. The number of people who attended the event reminded me how the scale of the dual credit program has increased as dual credit has become a part of every high school in Indiana.

In 1998, under the direction of the Tech Prep initiative, Ivy Tech started a dual credit program that mainly focused on career-centered learning. The Tech Prep initiative is a U.S. Department of Education program designed to help students gain academic knowledge and technical skills and earn college credit for their secondary coursework leading to an associate's degree or a certificate. To receive college credit, Tech Prep high school students completed a series of classes that integrated academic and vocational content. Today, Ivy Tech offers dual credit general-education courses like English, math, and history, as well as the original disciplines.

A Shift Towards Completion

Ivy Tech's institutional changes have mirrored national trends regarding dual credit. A 2015 presentation by Adam Lowe, executive director of the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, reported the number of students in dual enrollment courses nearly doubled between 2002 and 2010. In another presentation in the same year, Lowe described dual enrollment as growing at a rate of 10 percent per year. The most common growth areas have been in courses that form part of the general education curriculum: English, math, history, etc. The driving force behind this explosion in numbers and the shift towards including more general education dual enrollment courses is the demand to increase higher education completion rates. It's unlikely that any member of the community college profession reading this today is unaware of the push for increased student completion rates or of the substantial resources, public and private, that have been marshalled behind it in recent years. Dual credit is just one of a host of initiatives, ranging from early-college high school programs to competency-based education, that has been promoted as a way of helping students graduate as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This focus on completion has changed the thinking behind dual credit. To refer to it as another version of articulation, as I did in 1998, is to misinterpret that change. The goal is no longer to provide students with credit for something they have already learned, but rather to integrate that credit into an overall pathway that allows them to complete a certificate or a degree as quickly and efficiently as possible. The dual credit event at my institution that I mentioned earlier featured a checklist tool students can use to easily track their progress towards a specific degree or certificate. Each checklist laid out the courses required to complete a particular program and indicated which of those courses students could take while in high school.

Concerns With Dual Credit

The dual credit boom has naturally attracted a lot of attention, although not all of it is positive. It doesn't take much effort to find articles written by higher education faculty in prominent publications condemning the idea and bemoaning its results. If we allow students to earn their credit at another institution before they arrive at our own, the thinking goes, they will not learn what we want them to learn; they will come to us unprepared, and enrollment in the equivalent courses at our institution will plummet. Concerns like these, expressed by postsecondary faculty about granting credit for secondary coursework, have also been expressed by four-year college faculty about granting credit for community college coursework. We can address the concerns of faculty at community and four-year

colleges by conducting thorough faculty cross-trainings and establishing common course objectives, assessments, and textbooks between the institutions involved. Further, by community colleges hosting collaborative events and conducting regular visits to secondary schools and four-year universities, all faculty—secondary, community college, and four-year—can share ideas and concerns, and dispel misgivings about transferring course credits.

Whether or not students can get an acceptable level of knowledge at another institution compared to our own shouldn't be a concern with dual credit courses, assuming the steps outlined above are in place; most of us would be hard pressed to defend the idea that we are the only ones capable of properly teaching something. The question that drives dual credit is one that drives community colleges in a number of ways: How can we best reduce the barriers to graduation, such as time, effort, and money? My response to this question is *do not make students retake something they have already learned.*

Conclusion

Dual credit may no longer be a new strategy, but it is still an important one. I hope that in the next 20 years, more faculty will view dual credit as an opportunity to enhance students' prior knowledge rather than feeling obligated to teach students content they already know. Dual credit will never be perfect or seamless; there are too many conflicting stakeholders. However, it does have merit and can help students finish their degrees more efficiently, which is a goal we can all support.

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