



Enabling Student Swirl: A Community College/University Dual Enrollment Program

- This article describes a unique partnership involving a community college and a university, in which students are jointly admitted, are eligible to enroll concurrently at both institutions, and may combine credits for financial aid eligibility. Since 1998, more than 5,000 students have been admitted to the program, with more than 1,000 graduating with baccalaureate degrees.

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A Context for Dual Enrollment

Dwindling resources and rising tuition have generated keen interest and concern regarding college access, degree completion, and time-to-degree. The public and governmental authorities increasingly question duplication of effort among institutions, resources expended on gaining market share, and ways to reduce student indebtedness. At the federal level, much debate has been generated by amendments to the Higher Education Act that would dictate transfer credit policies, establish accountability measures based on degree completion, and refocus funding programs to promote baccalaureate degree attainment. These factors have led to unprecedented scrutiny related to the degree of collaboration among two- and public four-year institutions.

In Oregon, similar issues are being debated. A governor's task force charged with identifying more efficient means of delivering higher education programs identified these goals for the state's community colleges and universities:

- Improved opportunities and efficiency for students to take courses from Oregon community colleges that apply toward a baccalaureate degree.
- Increased and more efficient course offerings to meet high student demand.
- Increased capacity of the state's universities and community colleges to provide high-quality educational opportunities to more students in a timely manner.

In reviewing the current educational landscape, perhaps the most compelling trend is in enrollment patterns among students themselves. Today's students are more inclined than ever to "swirl" among institutions, as they seek to further their education in the manner that best fits their personal and financial circumstances.

The Dual Enrollment Program Defined

In response to these interrelated factors, Oregon State University and Linn-Benton Community College established a "Dual Enrollment Program" in 1998. The Dual Enrollment Program (DEP) described here is a comprehensive partnership designed to enable students to tailor educational programs that meet their personal needs and aspirations. Specific aspects of the Dual Enrollment Program include:

- Joint admission with a single application form and fee.
- Eligibility to enroll concurrently at both institutions.
- Electronically-shared student information to facilitate transmission of student transcripts (through Electronic Data Interchange or EDI) and student financial aid data (through a specially designed system among Oregon institutions).
- Combination of credits earned concurrently to achieve full-time status for financial aid purposes.

These features distinguish the Dual Enrollment Program from more common dual admission programs, which offer eligible students the benefit of joint admission to both the community college and the university. However, such programs often involve conditional university admission and typically offer minimal coordination of enrollment services among the institutions.

The DEP was designed to give students the opportunity to derive the greatest benefits from both institutions, and to provide efficiencies in the areas of admissions, financial aid, registration, records, and course articulation. The program broadens opportunities for students to meet their individual educational goals. The overarching goal of the DEP is to promote college persistence and the completion of baccalaureate degrees.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on student transfer supports the concept of dual enrollment programs between community colleges and universities. The historical mission of the community college, the identified barriers to transfer—systemic, institutional, and student developmental—and current findings related to student attendance patterns all support the creation of a more integrated collegiate experience to leverage institutional strengths and improve student success.

An examination of community college and university dual enrollment programs must begin with an examination of the role of community colleges in serving their transfer mission. Few today would challenge the notion that community colleges provide a vital service by serving as stepping-stone institutions to four-year institutions. Though serving a valuable public good, some research has suggested that the transfer pathway from community college to four-year institution may not be in the best interest of students. After reviewing the research about transfer students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) came to the conclusion that "...there is consistent evidence that initial attendance at a two-year rather than a four-year college lowers the likelihood of one's attaining a bachelor's degree" (p.372).

There are a number of reasons researchers have posited to explain the lower bachelor's degree attainments of transfer students. Astin (1973) attributed the problems of success by transfer students to the low level of social integration and involvement. Tinto (1975) described how a lower institutional commitment on the part of transfer students might be to blame. Kintzer and Wattenbarger (1985) reported that post-transfer attrition may be tied to difficulties in successfully adapting to the social setting. Other factors such as gaining admission, obtaining financial aid, and transferring credits present serious administrative obstacles to the process of transferring from two- to four-year institutions. Kinnick and Kempner (1988) have proposed that the role of preparing students for transfer to the university be eliminated, or that there be a "serious and coordinated effort" on the part of higher education to revamp the transfer preparation role. Any efforts should remove some of the barriers to successful student transfer that contribute to differences in educational experiences that leave a transfer student ill-prepared for the university experience.

What is becoming better understood is the fact that students do not necessarily follow a linear attendance pattern in pursuing a degree; they swirl. Cliff Adelman (1999) identified that the number of students attending multiple postsecondary institutions had grown significantly during the 1970s and '80s. The numbers had grown such that over half of a substantial sample of 1972 high school graduates matriculated at more than one institution. Alfredo de los Santos and Irene Wright (1990) applied the term "student swirl" and "double-dipping" to describe this multi-institutional enrollment pattern among community college students. Alexander McCormick (2003) has gone further to develop a taxonomy

of student swirl patterns: 1. trial enrollment, 2. special program enrollment, 3. supplemental enrollment, 4. rebounding enrollment, 5. concurrent enrollment, 6. consolidated enrollment, 7. serial transfer, and 8. independent enrollment. This taxonomy offers multiple means of describing student swirl.

Building on the evidence of student swirl and its various patterns, some observers have suggested ways of working with, rather than against this phenomenon. Victor Borden (2004) suggests four mechanisms for accommodating swirl: student tracking and research, assimilation programs that quickly engage students in campus academic and student culture, cross-institutional efforts to collaboratively establish common outcomes, and competency-based assessment for placement. Similarly, a joint conference on baccalaureate attainment sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) generated a report (2004) recommending joint admissions programs and dual financial aid programs; improving student access to accurate, timely, and consistent advising throughout the educational experience; and structures that promote ongoing inter- and intra-institutional communication about advising and transfer issues.

Procedural Elements of the Dual Enrollment Program

Though this article will not detail the many process details of the Dual Enrollment Program, it is important to note briefly the procedures that are essential to the success of the program. In the broadest sense, a dual enrollment program should create streamlined processes for students, as well as administrative efficiencies in managing and implementing the program. Procedural elements central to dual enrollment are:

- 1 a single application process;
- 2 the ability to combine credits earned at each institution concurrently for financial aid eligibility;
- 3 advising, articulation, and credits transfer at both campuses;
- 4 use of technology resources for electronic data interchange; and
- 5 a commitment to regular communications and ongoing collaboration among the institutions.

The document that establishes the procedural elements of the program is the memorandum of understanding (MOU). The MOU addresses major procedural elements of the program, the work of the core enrollment services areas (admissions, financial aid, registration/records, fee payment), and other important areas including program articulation, new student orientation, marketing, handling of student grievances, and student conduct issues. While the MOU is an important point of reference for all parties, the program remains fluid and dynamic in responding to student needs.

Development of online functions has been critical to the success of the program. This includes three main components: an exclusively Web-based application process, the use

of electronic data interchange (EDI) to exchange student transcripts, and OFAX, a system developed among Oregon institutions to exchange end-of-term student records to facilitate financial aid processing. Without the use of these online systems, operation of the Dual Enrollment Program would not be feasible from a procedural standpoint.

Furthermore, it is critical to the success of the program that partners are able to combine credits and identify concurrently enrolled students who are registered for “part-time” credits at either or both schools, but whose combined total of credits qualifies them for full-time status. Combining credits is especially important for students who are on financial aid, and can realistically be done only with technology developed for that purpose. The importance of the process and the technology for combining credits to determine full-time status can be summarized in this way: 1) without technology, it would be practically impossible to combine credits for students on financial aid, and 2) without combined credits for financial aid students, the usefulness of the Dual Enrollment Program is greatly diminished.

Finally, some of the most significant benefits of the DEP are the stronger connections between academic departments at partner institutions. Those connections have manifested themselves in enhanced program articulation and advising. Advisors at both institutions are more aware of each other’s programs than ever before, with enormous benefits to students, faculty, and staff.

Enrollment Patterns

The program has been successful, enrolling more than 3,000 students over the past seven years. During this time period, both institutions have experienced record enrollments, disproving the concerns of individuals on each campus that dual enrollment would result in “losing” students to the other institution.

Students have employed the flexibility of the program to help them in dealing with important educational concerns, such as finances, flexibility in accommodating work and school commitments, level of comfort with different academic environments, and preparation for college work. In addition, they have been helpful in identifying the best use of the program from their point of view. The adaptability of dual enrollment is evidenced by changes in timing for dual applications, and differing enrollment patterns of dual students. Though this information illustrates the flexibility of dual enrollment, these are probably not exhaustive examples; students will ensure that the evolution in the use of the programs continues.

At the inception of the program, most students applied to the DEP as transfer students. They had already been accepted at LBCC or OSU, and were already taking classes. When the program first became available, students applied to become dual students, knowing that informally they were already doing what the program envisioned, only without most of the administrative assistance. As the program became established, more well known, and more popular, a larger number

of students applied through the dual enrollment program as new students. These students have been in the DEP from their first term as college students.

Dual students take credits in all conceivable combinations, depending on work schedules, family commitments, finances, and class availability. Enrollment patterns may vary from term to term, in some terms enrolled exclusively at one institution or the other, and other terms enrolled at both institutions concurrently. Some students use the program in a manner that mimics the more traditional 2+2 program, attending the community college exclusively to earn an associate’s degree, and then enrolling exclusively at OSU to complete their four-year degree. Even then, the student benefits by already being admitted to OSU, and by having his or her community college credits transferred automatically to OSU at the end of every term.

The dual enrollment program once was seen as facilitating movement only from community colleges to OSU. Now, however, OSU students enrolled during the Fall, Winter, and Spring quarters are using the program as a way to take summer classes at a community college near their home. The classes typically are first- or second-year classes to meet baccalaureate requirements, or perhaps to complete classes that their Corvallis schedule did not accommodate.

Additional factors that significantly affect students’ perception and use of dual enrollment programs are the proximity of the institutions, the availability of online courses, and access to services, including on-campus housing. Concurrent enrollment depends heavily on the proximity of the institutions. A program between institutions closely situated to one another will generally have greater numbers than those where partners are farther apart. However, lack of immediate proximity does not mean a program will not be popular. Students in other OSU-sponsored dual programs routinely commute 45 to 60 miles within the same term for classes at both partner institutions. Registration for online courses is another means students can use to concurrently enroll.

Finally, concurrent enrollment has been a way for students to obtain services at both campuses. These include library access, student health services, recreation center use, and athletic tickets. Fees for access to these services are built into course fees. If students are not enrolled at an institution for a given term, they may obtain services at that institution by paying a student service fee.

Future Research Agenda

The future research agenda related to dual enrollment is vast. To date, research on the Dual Enrollment Program has been descriptive: counting the number of students enrolled each term, monitoring four-year degree graduates, and collecting anecdotal information. Assessment is just beginning on the core outcomes sought by the program: student persistence and enhanced rates of degree completion. Beyond those outcomes, there are intriguing questions regarding students’ migration patterns, the impact of the program on student

achievement, and levels of student satisfaction with their educational experience—all as compared with the prevailing outcomes for students who remain at a single institution throughout their college career as well as those who transfer in the traditional sense.

Conclusion

The goal of the Dual Enrollment Program is to broaden students' educational options and promote completion of four-year degrees. Preliminary results suggest that the dual enrollment partnership is a viable approach to reaching those goals. At minimum, the DEP has led to new and improved procedures and processes that benefit students. Significant additional research is warranted to explore the educational outcomes of this, and other similar programs.

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