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ADVICE

Serving Our Dual-Enrollment Students



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My blog post last month comparing Advanced Placement courses with dual-enrollment programs (in which high-school students take college classes) stirred a great deal of debate over which program does a better job of preparing students for the rigors of college-level work.

Whichever side you happen to be on, one thing is certain: Dual-enrollment programs remain popular at many community colleges and regional universities, and are likely to become even more popular as more parents realize the financial benefits of those programs. In most states, qualified high-school seniors (and, in some cases, juniors) can take college classes at little or no cost.

That means those of us who teach at institutions with dual-enrollment programs will continue to see an influx of high-school-age kids taking college courses. We would do well to consider their unique circumstances and special needs.

Personally, I've been involved with dual enrollment (or DE as it's known) in one way or another virtually my entire career. I've taught DE courses at local high schools, as well as special sections designated for those students at my college. In most of my regular courses, I've had plenty of high-school students mixed in with the usual students over 18.

As department chair, I was largely responsible for scheduling and staffing dual-enrollment courses, as well as dealing with problems that arose in them. And when I was academic dean, our campus DE coordinator reported directly to me. I even went with him, on several occasions, to visit local high schools, talking to prospective students and schmoozing counselors and administrators.

I am also, as I mentioned in my blog post, a parent who has had three children taking advantage of dual enrollment. The first two took college classes full time during their senior years of high school, and each earned a full year of college credit—more than 30 semester hours. The third is taking some of his classes at the high school, but he will still finish with more than a semester's worth of college credit.

So I'm a big believer in dual enrollment, and I've had a great deal of experience with it. In fact, this semester I'm teaching a 7 a.m. course made up almost entirely of DE students, and I have at least a dozen more of them scattered throughout my other classes. So when I offer advice about serving such students, I do so as someone who has been there and done that, who has seen the potential problems and dealt with the fallout.

Here's what I recommend for faculty members teaching dual-enrollment students:

Treat them like college students. As I've explained elsewhere, a fundamental tenet of my teaching philosophy is that college students are adults; they should be treated and expected to behave as such.

But most dual-enrollment students are not, literally, adults. And they're certainly not used to being treated like adults at their high schools, where their days are extremely regimented, they constantly have someone looking over their shoulders, and they have to ask for a hall pass just to go to the restroom.

College, of course, isn't like that. Many DE students have told me that the biggest difference they find between high school and college is that, in college, they—not the teacher or the school—are primarily responsible for their own success or failure. Nearly all of them prefer it that way, but it takes some getting used to.

One of the best things we can do for dual-enrollment students, then, is to treat them as much as possible just like other college students, with the same expectations, freedoms, and responsibilities. Although some faculty members may hesitate to invest that much trust in 17-year-olds, my experience indicates that the vast majority will embrace their newfound "adulthood" and rise to the occasion, rather than taking advantage.

Treating your students like adults can be a challenge if your course meets on a high-school campus. You might not be able to allow them to leave the room to go to the bathroom or whatever. But as much as possible, I always try to treat my classroom like an extension of the college, regardless of where it's physically located. As I explain to students, my classroom is kind of like an embassy: As long as they're inside, they're in college.

Expect college-level work. Even well-prepared students—which the dually enrolled usually are—often need time to adjust academically to college.

Dual-enrollment students often find that, while their advanced high-school courses were demanding in terms of time and effort required, their college courses make different sorts of demands. Students are forced to learn new things, relearn old things in new contexts, and think in unfamiliar ways. Typically, college-level reading and writing require deeper analysis, more synthesis of ideas, and greater practical application. You're not doing DE students any favors if you water down the course curriculum to make it easier for them, or if you expect any less from them than from other students.

Again, it might be especially tempting to cut academic corners if your course is held on a high-school campus or is entirely made up of DE students. But if dual enrollment is to be a program that not only provides college credit but also prepares students for the rigors of upper-division coursework—that is, if DE courses are to be the literal equivalents of college courses—then we must use the same syllabi, the same assignments, the same grading standards, and the same learning outcomes.

But they do have special needs. All of that said, there are still some important differences between dual-enrollment students and regular college students.

Try as we might to treat them like adults, they are actually minors and, thus, far more reliant on, and accountable to, their parents or guardians than are adult college students.

I'm not suggesting that we violate Ferpa guidelines with respect to DE students—personally, I treat them the same as other students when it comes to issues of privacy. But if a 17-year-old's parents decide to take him or her out of school for a family trip, for instance, that student has to go, and as instructors we need to be understanding and make allowances. (Of course, that sort of thing can happen with young college-age students, too, and I always try to be understanding about it. It's just that it's more common with minors.)

Many dual-enrollment students also tend to be active at their high schools. They play sports, cheer, serve on the student council, belong to clubs, and participate in drama productions and musical performances. Those are all important aspects of high-school life that I have no desire to deny students just because "they're in college now." But such activities do occasionally create some conflicts with their college courses.

When conflicts arise, I ask myself one question: If a regular college student had a similar conflict—if that student were going to miss a test because of playing in a ball game or attending a student-council retreat—would I hold it against him or her? If the answer is no, then I make exactly the same allowance for a DE student.

Other problems emerge when a student's high-school calendar clashes with the college calendar—such as two different spring breaks. DE students attending classes on the college campus might not have any spring break: Their high school may be in session when the college is on spring break, and vice versa. That's when you might get parents taking the student out of school to go on a family trip. Such conflicts can usually be worked out at the administrative level, but individual instructors might still need to be flexible.

Personally, rather than taking a hard line in those situations, I've always found it more productive to bow to the inevitable, consider the needs of families, and allow students to make up any missed assignments while not holding such absences against them.

Remember that, in most cases, the college course these students are taking with you also counts as a high-school credit. That means that, if you're too much of a stickler, penalizing students for things that, as minors, they can't really control—or penalizing them for taking part in the very activities that count for so much on college applications—you might actually prevent them from graduating. In addition to the human toll such decisions can take, there's no quicker way to sink a dual-enrollment program than to earn that sort of reputation.

As much as possible, we need to treat DE students just like other college students while also acknowledging that, in some ways, they're not like other college students. If we're going to recruit and enroll them, we have to serve them appropriately, just as we seek to serve students with disabilities or students with military commitments. And that means recognizing their special needs and accommodating them where possible.

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