



The Labor Costs of Dual Enrollment Programs

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The dual enrollment programs offered to cash-strapped students and parents imposes a specific labor burden on sometimes low-paid faculty. We need a solution that doesn't whipsaw the faculty in high schools and colleges.

In 1990 the state of Washington Passed the "[Learning by Choice Act](#)," a series of reforms that were designed to give students in K-12 and higher education more flexibility in their learning at all levels. The Learning by Choice Act also instituted one of the nation's first dual enrollment programs, which allows high school students to enroll in community college courses and receive high school and college credit simultaneously. Intended initially as a program for advanced high school students, Washington State's dual enrollment program, and many similar programs across the country have morphed into one of the most significant sources of tuition dollars for community colleges. As a result, these reforms have transformed the political economy of college instruction. Currently in Washington State dual enrollment programs funnel money away from public secondary schools, while directing students into classes for which they are underprepared, creating additional pressures and labor time for the adjunct teaching population.

It's difficult to get national numbers, but in Washington State, participation in dual enrollment programs grew by over ten-thousand students in the last ten years, from roughly 16,000 to over 26,000 students in the state. The president of the American Association of Community Colleges, Walter Bumphus, estimates that 30% of community college students nationally are high school students enrolled in dual enrollment programs. This growth accelerated in both the aftermath of the 2008 crisis and in the current period of low unemployment. With state budgets for public education cut in 2008, colleges looked for new tuition revenue streams, and found that dual enrollment programs could put students in classrooms and return budgets into the black.

This trend continued during the economic recovery, when states like Washington failed to reinvest in community colleges, and continued its long-running divestment of state funds from higher education. With record low official unemployment, and fewer adult learners looking to develop skills between jobs, the colleges continue to look for new students to maintain revenue streams.

In the program's earliest years, only advanced high school students participated in dual enrollment programs like Running Start. But as schools moved to dual enrollment programs as a reliable funding model, more students, many of them unprepared for college expectations, enrolled in the programs. Now, after years of growing enrollment, some community college classrooms are entirely populated by high school students. This is especially the case in disciplines like English, history, math and political science. This has placed particular challenges on both high school and community college programs. High school teachers we've talked to say that dual enrollment is gutting AP course in English and other disciplines at their schools, as students flock to the dual enrollment programs in an effort to maximize their college credits before graduating. In our experience and in conversation with other college instructors some of the students in the college class are not prepared for academic work. Many lack the skills in independence and self-discipline necessary for successful college work. Others may struggle with basic skills around literacy or reading comprehension, which presents unique challenges for community college instructors, who are some of the most precariously employed education workers.



Institutions of higher education across the country are adopting dual enrollment as an economic strategy. This is expressed as an additional labor burden on faculty. Credit: Wikipedia

Colleges eager to get tuition dollars from dual enrollment students are not adequately supplementing resources for students who may be struggling. And this means the extra labor falls on college instructors, the overwhelming majority of whom are employed on an adjunct basis. The kinds of skills necessary for college success are costly to teach, and colleges have not provided these services as a requirement to participate in dual enrollment. This has led to a challenging dynamic between high schools and colleges. On the one hand, states are essentially pulling funds from public secondary schools to put that money into state college programs. College instructors, many of whom have little formal pedagogical training, are then asked to address challenging instructional classrooms, spaces that high school teachers are specifically trained to teach. This move also circumvents public sector unions, as secondary school instruction is typically benefited, salaried, permanent, and regular. Washington's community colleges rely heavily on adjunct instructors who are paid poverty wages, without benefits, and face extremely precarious employment.

For students, there are also some significant costs to the programs. First, in Washington State, a disproportionate number of running start students are white and Asian. This means that the program is functioning like a charter school that pulls money out of poorly performing minority lead classrooms for a program that facilitates a widening education gap. More than this, for students that do poorly, they are placed in double jeopardy, as failing marks in a dual enrollment program makes high school graduation more difficult, and

is permanently placed on their college GPA. College adjunct instructors are then put under enormous pressure to take volunteer hours to get students up to speed, or to pass them along because the stakes for the students are so high.

In many ways, dual enrollment is an effective policy innovation that can serve students and schools very well. However, as they are implemented today in states like Washington, there are major programmatic shortcomings that need to be addressed. Among the biggest is an instrumental and economic measure of education at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Getting a career “head start” or making educational progress a function of market determined “choice,” is a disservice to the practice of teaching – at both the secondary and university levels. As our institutions of higher learning are increasingly corporatized, and our profession made more and more precarious, the logic that undergirds those changes is also impacting potentially laudable programs like dual enrollment.

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