

When the First Year Isn't the First Year

Summary of discussion at 2008 National First Year Experience Conference

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Dual Enrollment, Senior Year Plus, Running Start, Middle College, Post Secondary Enrollment and other names describe the burgeoning phenomenon of blending the senior year of high school with the first year of college. For economic, political and academic reasons these programs are bringing a new kind of first year student to campus. More than one-third of First Year students now enter college having already earned college credit.

Our roundtable explored the challenges posed by this perceived "head start". What factors are contributing to this trend? Are these students developmentally ready for the challenges of advanced coursework? What impact do these students have on first-year programs, advising, and scheduling? We explored the issues surrounding this phenomenon, possible institutional responses, and opportunities for further research.

Most of the research that has been done on these initiatives has focused on the front end – how it impacts high schools, community colleges, students and their families. Little attention has been focused on the experiences that these students have once they enter college and if the promises of early graduation, money saved, etc. are validated. The roundtable on February 17 was designed to be a forum for exchanging concerns, hearing solutions, and proposing ideas for research. Participants represented both two and four-year institutions, public and private, and all areas of the country. We hope that this discussion was a catalyst for future presentations and analysis. The following is a summary of the discussion.

The initial question, What makes college college?, prompted many responses. They fell into two general areas.

- Stage of academic development – ready to learn independently, level of curiosity, ability to reflect critically, appreciation of life-long learning, engaging ideas for their own sake
- Community – a place, an environment that is different, where people go to better their lives, a group of people united by a physical campus and campus culture

Participants questioned to what degree earning college credits within the high school setting actually provides these experiences to students.

The next question focused on how earning early credit changes the first year experience. Some of the responses were:

- Students assume a level of readiness that they may not really possess. They want to attempt courses that they are not developmentally prepared to do.
- Students are transfer students by credit level, but still operate as first year students. Need to educate faculty to anticipate these students in their classes.
- Does this create two classes of first year students? If yes, how do we adapt first-year programs to provide successful transitions for both?
- Student reaction to having earned credits that will not apply directly to their program of study and thus do not reduce time to graduation.

We asked for examples of how institutions have been responding to these “super freshmen”. Examples included:

- Creating freshman only sections of core classes rather than putting these students into the advanced level courses along side sophomores.
- Creating first-year experiences that do not focus on courses that are frequently taken as AP, IB or dual enrollment.
- Focusing on the developmental level of the students and their status as first-year and including them in the established first-year seminars and associated experiences.

We concluded the discussion with a call for research questions to be pursued.

1. What is the time to degree for these students?
2. Do these students take advantage of additional academic enhancements (minors, double major/degree, internships, study abroad) because they are ahead on credits?
3. Do these students choose majors based on expediency and efficiency (going where their credits fit best)? This may drive these students away from highly structured programs such as engineering or science.
4. Does time to graduation reduce student choices on “fit” of major? Is there a growth in the number of students choosing “general studies” degrees because they are the most flexible and accommodate early credits better?
5. Dual enrollment is being promoted as a way for students not in the very top tier of their classes to experience college early. Research has already been done on high achieving high school students (talented & gifted, AP, etc.) Similar research should be done on the next tier(s) of students to see if the results are the same.
6. What is the impact on mentoring?
7. Are the economic savings to states that are currently being forecast actually realized?