



The Illinois Board of Higher Education Faculty Advisory Council recommends sharing a document like the following with high school students and their parents, as well as high school and community college administrators, teachers, and advisors. The IBHE Faculty Advisory Council consists of a representative group of faculty members from Illinois' community colleges, public universities, and private higher ed institutions. The FAC voted to support this document at our meeting on February 17, 2023.

Early College: What to Consider?

Early college credits earned during high school take the form of AP classes, dual credit courses that count for both high school and college credit, and dual enrollment courses that count only toward college credit. The purpose of this document is to foster awareness of the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with taking early college courses as a high school student. Students might especially want to consider how *many* early college courses it may be beneficial for them to take.

On Financial Cost:

Potentially Cost Effective: Many public schools that offer dual credit courses also cover the cost of taking those classes including fees and books. The cost of these classes is then covered by the state and not the individual student. Some early college courses are reduced cost, but not all are. This varies with location and institution.

May impact financial aid:

- Students starting college as a sophomore or junior may miss out on grants and scholarships that are offered to individuals that have earned below a certain threshold of credit hours or are at a freshman standing.
- All dual credit courses count towards financial aid standards of academic progress (SAP) whether or not the student receives financial aid. Therefore, the student could run out of financial aid before they have completed their degree requirement.
- Because full-time status is required for financial aid purposes, taking too many early college courses can make it harder to secure full-time status once in a baccalaureate

program.

On Course Credits:

Credits Transfer: In Illinois, credits earned from dual credit classes approved under the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) are accepted by in-state public universities as well as many private colleges for General Education credit, but not necessarily for credit in a major. But the credits earned from dual credit may not transfer to all higher ed institutions, especially if a student attends a public university out of state or a highly selective private institution. Early college courses marketed as upper-level courses also may not be accepted by a university's major degree program.

Course grades may become part of the transcript: Grades from early college courses may become part of their official transcript, even if students do poorly in the course. This could prevent or revoke admissions into a desired college or even graduating high school. At the college level, the class may not be accepted to meet the requirement if a specific grade is not earned.

Early college students should request college-level advising from the college or university offering the course, since this is something that high schools cannot provide. Professional college advisors help students navigate the specific educational pathways of the degrees at their own institutions, and have a wider sense of what is available by way of majors and career pathways.

Early college is not about collecting credits, at least ideally. Collecting college credit just to collect credits can work against one's educational goals in ways described below.

On College Completion:

Increased college enrollment and completion: Many studies suggest that students who take early college courses go on to study at higher ed institutions and to complete associates and baccalaureate degrees.¹

Earlier college graduation: Depending on the number and type of Dual Credit classes that the student takes, these students can enter college having completed many required courses. This will leave extra hours to pursue other electives or double majors. If the student has accumulated enough college credits to be a sophomore or junior then they can potentially graduate early. These students could also start a graduate level program early.

Those finishing an Associate's degree before graduating from high school may find that their majors presuppose longer than two-year course sequences. Advisors of STEM and other fields often recommend spacing out General Education (Gen Ed) courses over more than

two years, alongside a four-year course sequence plan for courses in the major. This challenge also relates to that of needing full-time status for financial aid.²

On College Experiences:

“Qualitative research on dual enrollment student experiences shows that dual enrollment students can have both positive and negative experiences, depending on the nature and design of the course(s) and students’ background and expectations of the course(s). Positive experiences include providing authentic and rigorous experiences, boosting self-confidence, developing a college student identity, and helping students feel prepared for college. Negative experiences included feeling unsupported and isolated, decreasing self-confidence by failing a dual enrollment course, limiting educational experiences and choices, and experiencing low-quality dual enrollment pedagogy and inadequate administration of programs” (Taylor et al., 2022).³

Student Confidence: Students who take early college classes start viewing themselves as college students and develop an understanding of the time and dedication needed to pass a college-level course. This can also be a disadvantage if the student has a negative experience.

Academic maturity and preparedness must be more developed to succeed in college-level courses. Students can feel overwhelmed about expectations to take early college courses amid a high school experience.

Allowing for exploration: Students may be able to take early college courses in a variety of subject matters and determine if they like a subject. If they take a dual credit course, they might do so without the cost associated with a traditional college course.

Limited choices:⁴

- Not all high schools offer the same opportunities for dual credit or AP courses. The students have to take what is offered. Four-year colleges and universities offer a wider range of General Education courses.
- Students may lack exposure to a fuller range of possible major and minor options if they take a lot of Gen Ed credit in high school.
- High schools do not have the necessary equipment to offer certain dual credit classes.

May impact athletic eligibility: Depending on the program, the student would have to confirm that taking dual credit/dual enrollment courses would not affect participation in a sport at the high school level, or affect their scholarship eligibility when applying to colleges.

May impact their extracurricular activities:

- Many high school students are involved in a variety of sports, clubs, and other activities. College level classes require dedication and generally a great deal of work. If a student

is taking several early college classes in addition to their normal high school load, then they may not have the time to devote to other activities.

- Students who take a lot of early college course credit also limit their opportunity to experience extracurricular activities at a college or university.

May affect internships or study abroad programs: Many of these programs are designed to occur during sophomore or junior year, so if a student has already completed a lot of early college coursework, they may no longer be eligible for these programs. However, entering college with Gen Ed credits may also free up students to study abroad earlier in their college career, before major degree requirements make it harder to do so.

May limit undergraduate research opportunities for those who want to go to four-year universities or colleges. Likewise, they may miss out on their professors' having enough time to get to know them and to write them letters of recommendation.

May enhance the ability to double major: Students bringing in Gen Ed credits might be more readily able to pursue two major degree tracks simultaneously. This assumes a student has had enough opportunity to explore their options to know which direction they might want to head academically. It may also assume that students have enough college credits remaining that they can qualify for financial aid to support the extra major.

May miss out on the fuller college campus experience: College is about more than grades and getting degrees. It is also about wider campus experiences that feed both professional and personal growth opportunities:

- making **connections**,
- building a **network**,
- finding **passions**, and
- developing **emotional maturity**.

College is also about interacting with peers other than those only in one's high school setting.

DUAL CREDIT IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

In a high school setting, early college becomes more attainable: If the courses are offered at a local high school, then the students are able to access these courses with relative ease without having to find additional time and means to travel to a college campus or university.

Rigor of the class is difficult to measure: Some college classes that are taught in high school may not meet college standards, even though technically they are supposed to be. Also, some high schools may inappropriately prohibit discussion of topics that are expected at a college level, such as racism, LGBTQ topics, and evolution. Students may be encouraged or required to retake a class once at college.⁵

Experience of college: Dual credit courses taught in a high school do not model the college environment.⁶

Overall Considerations: No One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Because of the diversity of higher ed institutions, a parent or student should not assume that the way credits and aid work at one school would apply to any other school. (This is especially the case for colleges and universities that do not participate in the Illinois Articulation Initiative, although even in IAI-participating universities, a major degree program may not accept all IAI credits towards the major itself.) At each school where students apply, they will need to talk to admissions and department advisors to decide whether and how to use any early college credits.

Early college is a complex issue, and multiple factors need to be considered before enrolling in an early college course. Students need to consider their priorities and their educational goals to determine whether, how much, and in what way early college is appropriate for them.

¹ For a review of recent studies on dual enrollment, see Jason L Taylor et al., “Research Priorities for Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Policy and Practice,” University of Utah (2022), https://cherp.utah.edu/publications/research_priorities_for_advancing_equitable_dual_enrollment_policy_and_practice.php.

² Patricia Witkowsky et al., “Promises and Realities: Academic Advisors’ Perspectives on Dual Enrollment Credit,” *NACADA Journal* Vol., 40, No. 2 (2020): 68.

³ Taylor et al. (2022), 12.

⁴ “It was apparent from the research that is the base of this paper that the students held some assumptions of dual enrollment that turned out, in some cases, not to be true or were incomplete. For instance, there was the belief that if taking courses that earned college credit was a good thing, then it would be better to take as many of them as possible. However, the downside of this decision was that some students felt their paths were now pre-ordained (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). In the Tobolowsky and Allen (2016) study, one student felt her major was ‘set in stone,’ because she had entered college as a junior (p. 40). She added, ‘I have like a year until I graduate college then I have to be an adult,’ which she admitted ‘freaks me out sometimes’ (p. 41). She envied those students who took fewer dual credit courses because she felt they had ‘all the time in the world to decide; on their futures’ (p. 41). Another student who entered college with 78 dual credits ‘felt she was at a competitive disadvantage with other students in her major,’ because ‘she did not have time to pursue’ summer internships, ‘which would have given her valuable experience and position her for employment after graduation’ (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016, p. 40). These comments suggest there is a potential sweet spot regarding the number of credits that help with the financial burdens of college but still allow students time to explore areas of interest before deciding on their major or career path.” Taylor et al. (2022), 53; citing Barbara F. Tobolowsky and Taryn Ozuna Allen, “(Un)intended Consequences: The First-Year College Experience of Female Students with Dual Credits,” *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* Vol. 28, No. 1 (2016), 27-48.

⁵ Witkowsky et al., 68-69.

⁶ Taylor et al. (2022).