

## **A Longer Look: Under-Examined Ethical Issues with Early College Credit**

Jordan Hill

Programs that yield early college credit (ECC), such as dual-enrollment (DE) and Advanced Placement (AP), have become increasingly popular in the past decade. Proponents argue that they enhance college access, affordability, and degree attainment among college students, especially among students of low socioeconomic status (SES). While there is a general consensus that ECC programs have contributed positively to these goals, some fear that they have grown more quickly than higher education leaders can assess and evaluate their comprehensive impact and are raising concerns about under-examined ethical issues and unintended negative consequences. This non-exhaustive paper will call attention to a few of these issues and propose solutions that can be enacted by both higher education policymakers and university administrators.

To begin, it should be made clear that the general consensus is that ECC programs are achieving many of their proponents' desired outcomes. Research has found that DE programs do positively impact college attainment, and that this effect is proportionally greater for low-SES than it is for affluent students. These findings support the hope that DE programs will increase equity in college access and degree attainment, which has increased the push for them to be specifically offered for low-income schools. However, other studies are finding these benefits are not the only outcomes associated with DE; there is also a certain degree of risk, which is inequitably distributed.

To further this point, it will be helpful to explain the distinction between DE and AP credits. DE programs vary by state, but commonly consist of high school courses taught by specially-certified teachers, yielding credits that transfer to most institutions and count toward degree completion, curricular requirements, and cumulative GPA. AP programs, in contrast, are voluntary courses offered in some high schools that prepare students for an optional exam. These exams, which students must pay for, may yield credit depending on the score and the institution. These credits do not factor into a student's GPA.

Subsequently, an unintended outcome of DE credits is that they also carry a greater associated risk, as student participants may not be fully aware of the impact their grades in these courses will have on their college GPA, and they can actually begin college at a deficit as a result. AP courses do not carry this risk, as score submission is optional and does not impact GPA regardless. This distinction, when taken in conjunction with the following fact, is troubling. Policy experts note that AP programs were designed for and are still more frequently available to students in more affluent schools, and that these programs struggle to remove barriers to equitable access for low-SES students. This means that already-underrepresented students are those more likely to be carrying the potentially riskier DE credits.

In addition to concerns of access and risk, experts have called for greater scrutiny about the educational quality of these DE and AP credits and whether they are always truly equivalent to college courses. Others worry that ECC may constitute a loss of curricular control as more and more students receive degrees with credits substantially earned outside of the institution from which they graduate. These issues may weaken overall college preparedness, which negatively impacts all college students but especially those who are more at risk of under-preparedness (such as low-SES students).

On top of these pre-college concerns, there is a related and critically under-researched issue for current students: institutional course registration policies. The common practice is to assign registration priority by the number of credits a student has. The more credits completed (including ECC), the earlier

a student will register. This system reflects a time when class standing corresponded more faithfully with total credit number, but the proliferation of ECC means that more first year students are coming to college with semesters' worth of credits already completed and registering well ahead of their peers. Multiple studies have found that earlier course registration is associated with greater persistence and graduation. While it is obviously not logically possible for all students to register "early", it stands to reason that having to register later is a disadvantage. There are fewer course options to suit students' preferences and their graduation needs, and since opportunities for ECC are still inequitably distributed, this means that the current policies may be preserving and even magnifying the relative advantages that affluent students had before college. This gives them more time to explore, risk failure, and complete more degrees compared to their more "precariously enrolled" peers who may have a relatively more constricted experience of college.

To address these issues requires informed efforts in a number of sectors. For the issue of inequitably distributed access and risk, institutions of both secondary and higher education need to ensure that they are not only pushing for expansion of ECC programs but also responsibly informing all students of the associated benefits and potential risks of electing to do them. Along with this, DE and AP programs need to continue to be evaluated to assure that their design and outcomes support both college preparedness and success for students as well as curricular integrity for institutions. Finally, institutions today can address the disadvantages they perpetuate in course registration by adopting new policies. They can choose to value their own credits more highly by not factoring or only partially factoring ECC into registration priority, thereby making the playing field more level. They can also implement a semi-"lottery" system in which students within a defined range of total credits are assigned registration priority randomly. This would preserve an important degree of "class standing" order but would also lessen the instances of giving first choice to students who arguably need it the least and leaving the highest-need students for last.

Though ECC comes with many benefits and increases opportunities for many students, there needs to be a critical examination of the full range of their effects. Who they are benefitting, to what degree, and who they may harm are all necessary to consider and address in order to increase access, educational quality, and attainment for all students.