

Pathways to College Access and Success  
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How can we help all youth have smoother and more successful transitions to college? Credit-Based Transition Programs (CBTPs) such as Tech Prep, dual or concurrent enrollment, International Baccalaureate, and middle college high schools may provide one answer. These programs allow high school students to take college-level classes and earn college credit. Some CBTPs also provide services to support the many aspects of college transition.

Credit-based transition programs are widespread and interest in them by policymakers, parents, educators, and students has increased in recent years. For the 2002-03 school year, 71 percent of public high schools reported that students took courses for dual credit, meaning that they took a course for both high school and college credit (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). In the recent past, CBTPs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) have tended to enroll academically proficient and high-achieving students. Today, a growing number of policymakers, education reform groups, and researchers argue that middle- and even low-achieving high school students may benefit from participation in these programs (AASCU, 2002; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). Thus, while CBTPs are not new, the idea that they should be accessible to a broader range of students is a new approach.

A major reason sites encounter difficulty recruiting a wider range of students is a significant lack of understanding of the program's purpose and its target students. The perception by some students that the programs target an elite and non-diverse population helps to perpetuate narrow participation. And in some sites, the CBTP is not well understood even by school staff. For example, some guidance counselors know of the program but not well enough to counsel students to enroll in it. Moreover, some teachers and guidance counselors who are not involved in the program actively discourage some students from enrolling.

### **Recommendations**

Three broad areas should be addressed by programs and policymakers seeking to help middle and low-achieving students enroll and to be successful in CBTPs: student access, institutional collaboration, and data collection for program evaluation.

Student Access To encourage broad participation programs should:

- Develop multiple ways to ensure that all students—regardless of academic background and level of motivation—learn about the credit based transition program.

This entails giving all students information about the program early enough and often enough in their academic careers to allow them to plan to participate. This information should be shared with students frequently so that those with less access to information sources are likely to learn about and enroll in the program. And, simply providing the information is not sufficient; students must also be made aware of the benefits of

participating. To ensure that all students—including those not usually seen as college-bound—learn about the program and have the opportunity to enroll, programs should initiate formal recruitment strategies involving middle and high school guidance counselors, parents, and teachers.

- Develop a program culture that supports and encourages students from different backgrounds and academic levels to participate. Students need to feel comfortable in the program. They need to see students like themselves participating in CBTP activities and to feel that their academic needs and concerns are being met. Programs are beginning to address this issue by seeking to change the reputation of the program, targeting activities at under-represented students, and using support services to create a CBTP culture that feels comfortable to students not previously or frequently involved.

- Structure the program and the curriculum with an eye towards increasing access.

A developmental sequence of courses can help to maintain access for middle- and low-achieving students who need opportunities to build their skills before attempting college-level courses. Curricular pathways with multiple access points ensure that students at all levels can enter the program. A program in which CBTP coursework is part of the regular school schedule is likely to help more students participate, as opposed to an after-school program. Programs should also be attentive to encouraging access for special education and ELL students, who may have additional needs beyond the opportunities available through the programs' developmental pathway.

Institutional Collaboration In order to promote meaningful collaboration, programs and college leadership and policymakers should:

Clearly establish the roles and benefits for each institution in the partnership. Collaboration appears to be most successful when all partners perceive that they are receiving benefits from the partnership, or when particular goals drive strong commitment at the top levels of leadership. It does not seem to matter whether goals are self-interested or altruistic, as long as they lend themselves to a commitment to sustaining the program.

- Support broader integration between the secondary and postsecondary sectors. CBTPs require and promote deeper institutional changes than implied by the word “collaboration.” High schools and colleges must overcome their structural differences to integrate their goals, practices, and services.

Such widespread integration—and its potential impact—mirrors the goals of the larger K-16 movement, in which high schools and colleges are encouraged to work together to create a seamless education system. Articulation of high school with college coursework would also help students transitioning to college know that they are prepared.

- Simplify the credit-earning and credit-transfer process.

Credit-earning in some of the sites is quite complicated. The extent to which students retain their credits as they matriculate to different postsecondary institutions is unclear. Policymakers should take steps to ensure that earning credits through CBTP participation is not an onerous process and that the credits are easily transferable.

Data collection for Program Evaluation To provide information on program effectiveness to policymakers and practitioners, it is imperative to:

- Support the gathering of student-level data that can be used for outcomes analyses.

Policymakers should support outcomes analyses that begin with students' performance prior to program participation, include comparison groups, and follow students through college matriculation and graduation. This will require secondary and postsecondary sectors to share data and use common student identifiers. Researchers should help program administrators collect these data in forms that lend themselves to rigorous analyses and use the data for internal evaluations and improvement efforts.

The findings from the Accelerating Student Success study lend credence to the enthusiasm many policymakers and educators have for CBTPs. They have the potential to help a wide range of students, not only the most academically advanced, but also middle-to low-achieving students, become prepared for postsecondary education.