

College Credit for Writing in High School

Bypassing First-Year Comp Courses Is a National Trend with Both Critics and Defenders

Brigham Young University English professor Kristine Hansen met two colleagues recently; one from the history department, the other from biology. Both had the same question for her—a question she says she and other composition instructors nationwide hear repeatedly: “Why don’t our students write very well?”

Hansen believes one reason is the increasing trend among today’s college students to bypass traditional first-year composition courses. Instead, students earn credit while still in high school via Advanced Placement tests, International Baccalaureate degrees, or dual-enrollment programs—and then never set foot in an English classroom again.

The trend is a controversial one for a variety of reasons, and has prompted a book of essays examining the issue from a range of perspectives. The volume is NCTE’s *College Credit for Writing in High School: The “Taking Care of” Business* (2010), coedited by Hansen and Christine Farris, director of the composition program at Indiana University.

“We need a national discussion” to see how students are being affected by the current trend, and what can or should be done in response, says Hansen.

Despite criticisms that students aren’t being well-prepared to write at the college level, the rise in these alternatives to first-year comp has produced benefits, say some, such as providing opportunities for students who might not have previously considered themselves college material, saving families thousands of dollars in tuition, and enhancing curricula.

First, a look at three common ways that students today receive credit for first-year college composition courses.

Advanced Placement (AP): *Almost 800,000 public high school seniors in the U.S. took an AP exam in 2009—slightly more than a quarter (26.5 percent) of the nation’s 3 million seniors, according to a recent report by the College Board, which runs the AP program.*

The AP English exams in literature and language were the second and third most commonly taken (behind U.S. history).

The AP program includes two English courses: English Literature and Composition and English Language

and Composition. The AP language course (and exam) has been retooled within the past few years to bring its standards more in line with goals set by the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

Kathleen Puhr, a high school English teacher in St. Louis and former member of the AP English Test Development Committee, says the AP English language course today focuses on “the sorts of skills college-level writers need to have—analysis, argument, synthesis.”

International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB): *The International Baccalaureate program is in high schools worldwide, including about 700 in the U.S. It offers a two-year program of strenuous college-preparatory study; some colleges award credit for equivalent courses completed under IB. The program is tightly supervised and regulated.*

“The International Baccalaureate organization certifies faculty to deliver its curriculum,” says Hansen. “It is a very rigorous curriculum, very demanding, and requires a lot of writing—not just timed writing, but very careful, lengthy drafts. It’s the kind of writing we teach at the university: long assignments in multiple drafts. This is a lot more similar to what we do in first-year writing courses.”

IB, however, is more costly to implement and operate. It takes several years for an IB curriculum to be established at a high school, and students pay up to \$600 annually, though state and federal grants may defray costs, according to Hansen.

Dual or concurrent enrollment (DE): *More than 1 million high-schoolers in the US are enrolled in dual-enrollment (also called concurrent enrollment) courses annually, which provide college-level learning and credit while the student is still in high school.*

Miles McCrimmon is an English instructor at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, Virginia, who frequently teaches dual-enrollment courses. He says most DE students (about 75 percent) take their classes in high school, where they are taught either by college faculty or high school faculty; the rest travel to colleges to be taught.

Dual enrollment program fees vary widely. In some cases, state legislatures or schools (high schools and/or

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colleges) pay the costs, and students can attend for free. Sometimes nominal fees are charged.

“In most cases, dual enrollment is the least expensive way to go,” says Hansen. “Since there’s no test associated with it, a lot of students are choosing it.”

What Are the Concerns?

“These three means of getting credit have different purposes, goals, and sometimes different audiences,” points out Christine Farris. “The quality of programs and courses offered and the training and support provided also vary a great deal.”

Indeed, the variation in teacher preparation levels and curriculum standards has raised red flags for some, who wonder if students are being short-changed and not well-prepared for what they will encounter in college.

“Some high school courses can teach students many of the same skills and abilities that first-year composition teaches, but one thing they don’t do very well is teach how to do research that professors are satisfied with,” says Hansen.

“Most high school libraries are rather small; even though the Internet gives students access to a lot of information now, too few high school students get the kind of instruction to help them judge the reliability and validity of Internet sources. They don’t learn how to cite or paraphrase . . . or to use sources ethically and responsibly.”

She adds that college composition courses teach students how to write in other genres not typically assigned in high school, which are often focused exclusively on literature. The AP language course is often offered in the junior year—when students also must take an American literature class.

“Many AP teachers are trying to smash together both curricula. . . . I suppose those two could be blended, but I think that possibly one or the other gets short-changed,” says Hansen.

High-schoolers may learn how to write an analysis of a literary text, she says—but not, say, “a narrative that a history professor might want them to write, or a good lab report, or other genres that a student may encounter in other courses in the university.”

Advanced Preparation for High School Teachers

Ironically, notes Katherine Puhr, many high-school English teachers themselves skipped first-year composition due to testing-out or receiving AP credit; many haven’t taken basic rhetoric courses.

Farris instructs high school teachers in how to teach college-level composition—using cross-disciplinary, primarily nonfiction texts—in 35-hour summer sessions each year at Indiana University, through the Indiana Advance College Project.

“We devote a week to understanding each of the assignments in our reading and writing sequence—summary, critique, comparative critique, comparative analysis, and trend analysis,” she says. “So that the papers will be more than just formulae, we also practice a lot of heuristic techniques that model for teachers the inquiry and engagement with ideas in class that we hope the student papers will eventually reflect.”

The project also provides free tuition for participating teachers to take subsequent graduate courses in rhetoric/composition, digital literacy and literature.

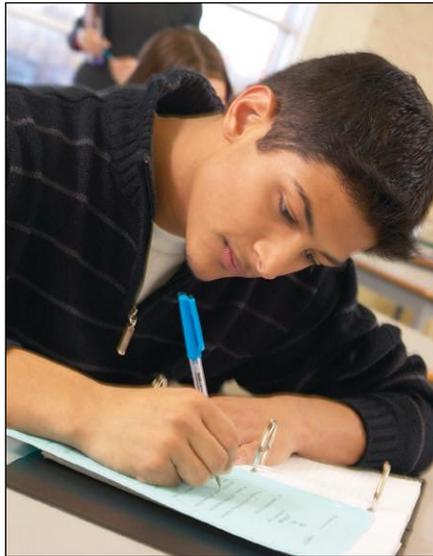
Anecdotally, the additional instruction has helped teachers better understand what college instructors need from students, who have reported being well-prepared for their classes, says Farris.

Not all teachers in dual-enrollment or AP programs across the country receive the same level of preparation, however—and therefore don’t provide the same level of instruction.

McCrimmon recommends that to counter this, all DE programs follow the accreditation standards laid out by the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP).

So far, however, only a small fraction of schools seek NACEP accreditation—about 57 schools at present, according to NACEP (<http://nacep.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/NACEPAccreditedPrograms.pdf>).

Another concern: developmental readiness by high-schoolers for higher-level work, especially among juniors or even younger students (some DE programs have reportedly accepted students as young as 14).



One question under debate is whether students who are able to demonstrate mastery of first-year composition through an AP test or DE/IB course should be exempt from any writing course requirement in college.

Some research indicates some students in high school may not be cognitively ready to learn higher-level material, based on brain development timetables, says Hansen.

"It's very likely that a 16-year-old may not be capable of performing some of the same cognitive tasks as an 18- or 19-year-old, or making the same kinds of analysis and judgments that older students are capable of making. This is an area where we need to do more research."

Benefits of AP and DE

In 2007, Puhr began teaching AP English Literature at Central Visual and Performing Arts High School in St. Louis. She was one of four teachers hired to develop an AP program at the urban school, which serves a largely low-income populace.

As a result, says Puhr, "students who would never have had the opportunity to be challenged through college-level work, would never have been encouraged to be scholars, and hadn't thought of themselves going to college, are now very much embracing all those roles . . . They are probably going to be first-generation college students."

Offering an AP English language course "enriches the curriculum" and raises standards in other classes as well, says Puhr.

"Students seeing other students take academic performance seriously is a really remarkable cultural transformation I'm seeing happen more and more in our building. . . . It can have a transformative impact on the school culture, where being a good student becomes the norm rather than the exception."

Having an AP credit on a transcript has practical benefits for students as well, says Puhr, such as improving their chances for admission.

Similarly, students in DE programs may find college opportunities they hadn't expected for themselves, says McCrimmon. Families in a DE program can save thousands in tuition (some DE programs graduate high-schoolers with associate degrees).

Puhr says her students don't seem to be taking AP English just to "credit out" of first-year comp.

"When I ask why they want to enroll in AP English, it's never 'so I can get out of English and be done for life.' It's 'because I want the challenge, I want to experience college-level expectations, I want to be in a serious academic environment; I like reading and writing,'" says Puhr.

"The course to me is where the real value lies," she says. "The exam in and of itself I see more as an exit ticket, a sort of culmination of their work, but not the be-all and end-all of the course. A good AP course is a good English course."

McCrimmon favors DE English: "Students will write more and in greater variety in DE than they will in any other 12th

grade option they have available to them, whether standard or AP English, with the possible exception of IB."

Those alarmed by the rise in dual-enrollment programs should keep an open mind, says McCrimmon.

"Because it threatens the primacy and territoriality of the traditional post-secondary model of full-time, residential students aged 18 to 22, DE, like distance learning and other non-traditional modes of delivery, will likely continue to be judged by its worst and most egregious examples," he says.

"That's unfortunate, because handled well, [DE] has the potential to be as progressive an innovation in higher education as the GI Bill after World War II or the rise of the community college in the 1960s and 1970s."

He suggests a greater sharing of resources and responsibilities between colleges and high schools, and a letting-go of "territorial identities" that have kept the two apart.

Excellent Writing: No Shortcuts

If students are able to demonstrate mastery of first-year composition through an AP test or DE/IB courses, should they be exempt from any writing course requirement in college?

Puhr, Hansen and others say no, pointing out that the AP test, for instance, is theoretically a "placement" exam—not an exemption exam.

"Rather than excuse students from a generic writing course, why not have an honors or sophomore version?" says Hansen. That way, students wouldn't "'place out' and do nothing, but rather 'place in' to a higher level."

Hansen compares learning to write with learning to play a musical instrument.

"The more you play, the more you do it better; it's not like with a bike, where you learn to ride it once and that's it." Instead, writing—like instrument-playing—is "an iterative skill," says Hansen.

Students who have taken the equivalent of first-year composition could be asked to take a "more challenging course, where they'd write in different genres and write about different subjects, so they could get better in writing and broaden their repertoires."

"Writing is something we've tried to do in this country on the cheap," says Hansen. "We live in an age now when writing is the way most professionals largely perform their work. We can't take shortcuts; we need to give it the kind of resources and space in the curriculum it deserves."

Making students excellent writers should be a national priority, she says. "Our economy depends on it. Our future depends on it."

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