

Dual enrollment can create a gradual transition that gives students with special needs the time and support they need to mature and develop skills for life.



The Benefits of Dual Enrollment



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By the time students with exceptional needs are in high school, most parents are fairly comfortable navigating the special education system. The sense of comfort can be quickly undone, however, when parents start to think about the great unknown: their child's life after high school. Transition options and adult service systems are often unfamiliar and unsettling.

As clearly explained in the special education law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition is intended to prepare students with special needs to move from high school to adult life. Whether students will work or pursue further education, they need time and help to truly be ready.

Teens with exceptionalities are likely to have needs in many different areas: academic, social, behavioral, communication, self-help, functional, vocational, organizational, problem solving, coping skills and self-advocacy. How can all of these needs be addressed during transition? This question is especially relevant for many students on a "diploma track," whose IEPs focus almost exclusively on fulfilling academic requirements for graduation.

What if there was an inexpensive resource that could ease the transition from high school to college or work? What if this option included numerous benefits for students, parents and even the school district? This resource exists, and it is as close as your local community college!

The Resource Around the Corner

Community college is recognized as a great bridge to a university or a career, but our family discovered (almost by chance) some great advantages of **dual enrollment**, taking one or more community college classes while still in high school. Dual enrollment helps high school students get a taste of college courses and

the campus environment. More important, dual enrollment can create a gradual transition that gives students with special needs the time and support they need to mature and develop skills for life.

Please note, there is not a single national community college system, so the options may be different where you live. You'll need to learn more about dual enrollment in your state to make the most of it. Whether it is called dual enrollment, concurrent enrollment or an early college initiative, high school guidance counselors are usually experts on this topic. You may want to make an appointment to discuss it soon!

We hope you'll be excited about the potential benefits of dual enrollment that we discovered:

1. It may be free. In many states students who are enrolled in high school do not have to pay tuition to attend one or more classes at a community college. The high school guidance counselor is usually the person who helps fill out the paperwork for free dual enrollment.

2. Earn dual credits. Students who dual-enroll can often earn high school credit for the courses they are taking and earn community college credit. In many cases, the community college credits can go toward a certificate or Associates Degree. Some of these credits may even fill prerequisites for a four-year university, saving time and money down the road.

3. More course options. Some students with disabilities struggle with a foreign language requirement for high school graduation or college entrance, but taking Sign Language at the community college can fulfill the requirement. Picked on in PE? How about taking weight lifting, dance or bowling through the community college with a more mature and accepting peer group! Not sure what you want to do in the future? How about tak-



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ing some exploratory courses in graphic design, culinary arts or welding and get a real-life idea of the match to interests and talents.

4. Nights, weekends and online.

College courses may be offered evenings and weekends, avoiding conflict with high school schedules. Weekend classes might fill some down time or expand the student's social network, especially in areas of interest like photography, video games, cinema, etc. Online courses may be right up the alley of many students with special needs, but don't miss the advantages of actually attending class on the college campus to adjust to the physical and sensory environment.

5. Personal development.

That's actually the name of a class at most community colleges. It is a preparatory class for anyone who needs help with study skills, organization, time management, project planning, etc. The class may also address personal goals and motivation. Does this class sound like it would help anyone you know? Students with disabilities often need more time to develop and progress! Why wait for graduation to take a class like this?

6. Get familiar with procedures and routines.

The "unknown" can be stressful to anyone, especially students with disabili-

ties. Starting slowly can help the student feel more comfortable and prepared. Enrolling in a single community college course is like taking a safe first step in a new direction, with the support needed to do so. Students who are dual-enrolled can ease into change with the support of parents or school staff. They can learn to register for class, buy books in the bookstore and find out what a bursar is. The student can learn to take public transportation to campus or manage parking procedures.

7. Learn about resources.

Some of the challenges students face in college include understanding academic content, managing the course load and calendar, speaking and presenting, completing written assignments, working in groups and communicating with professors. Community colleges have created a variety of networks to assist students with and without disabilities with these demands. Dual-enrollment can "buy time" for a high school student to learn about support options and opportunities, including tutoring, study groups, career counseling and work-study programs. It is a real advantage to have time to explore and understand the free or low cost services that are available to students before they are needed.

8. Create a social niche.

There are many differences between life in high

school and life on a college campus, including demands for independence and self-reliance. Students who can no longer rely on their social network from high school (or who never had one) report feeling isolated or alone in community college. Diverse schedules make it harder to see the same people consistently and make new friends. For these reasons, clubs and social organizations are central to community college campus life. It can be very helpful to have the chance to learn about different clubs or interest groups and try them out over time to find the right fit. A dual-enrolled student who later attends community college will already have a place to belong and recognize some familiar friendly faces.

Two additional advantages of dual enrollment merit some in-depth explanation: community college placement tests and the Center on Disabilities (COD). Read on to find out just how relevant these benefits can be for students in transition.

Community College Placement Tests

Placement tests in English and math are usually required before a student is allowed to enroll in a community college class, even if the class is online bowling! Placement tests determine the incoming student's level of proficiency compared to the performance level needed for success in community college. The student usually makes an appointment to go to a campus testing center where testing is administered by computer.

Taking placement tests can be a real advantage for a high school student with a disability.

- *The tests can help determine how near or how far the student's skill sets are from the standard for success in post-secondary education. For example, the placement test will reveal if the student is ready to take English 101, a course required for every community college or university degree.*
- *Students who don't meet the community college standard on placement tests can take remedial classes to prepare them for college coursework. They can often take the remedial class while in high school. Besides preparing the student for post-secondary education, the remedial classes might also have a positive impact on other high school courses.*

- *Low scores on the placement tests can alert the student, parents, and the rest of the IEP team so that need for growth can be addressed through the IEP. For example, a student who is not ready for English 101 may need additional goals and services in the areas of vocabulary development, reading comprehension and/or writing skills.*

Center on Disabilities (CoD)

There is no special education in higher education. That is a mantra to live by! Students with disabilities in college are held to the same academic standards as students without disabilities. Some accommodations are available; modifications are minimal.

Students with an IEP must go through a specific eligibility process for accommodations by meeting with staff from the Center on Disabilities (CoD), the Office of Disability Services Programs and Supports (DSPS) or a similarly named department. The process determines if the student will become a client of CoD and can benefit from specific programs or supports that may be available. Discussion includes if or how the student's special

needs will be accommodated. This is not an easy process, and understandably a dual-enrolled high school student would need help with it.

What are the benefits of becoming a client of CoD while still in high school, under age 18?

- *Parents or teachers can help with the eligibility process. Once the student turns 18 and is in charge of their educational rights, the student has to sign a waiver to allow other adults to be involved in the process. Speaking frankly, most CoD staff expect students to take responsibility for their own needs. This is, in fact, a tall order for many students with developmental and learning disabilities!*
- *The student gets an eyes-on, real-life understanding of the need to develop essential self-advocacy skills. He or she can have more time and support to do this.*
- *The "team" can develop a tool and procedure that the student will use for self-disclosure (telling professors about their disability and asking for specific accommodations).*
- *Parents and students can get a realistic view of the types of accommodations that are (and are not) offered through CoD. The student can try the accommodations out in their college courses and if applicable, use similar accommodations in high school. For example, most colleges offer priority registration to students with disabilities. Students have a better chance of getting the classes they need, at the time they need them, and with a professor who is likely to be a good fit for the student. Once a dual-enrolled high school student registers with CoD and gets priority registration, the benefit continues indefinitely.*

Call to Action!

Remember the many different areas of preparation that should be addressed to ready students for life after high school: academic, social, behavioral, communication, self-help, functional, vocational, organizational, problem solving, coping skills and self-advocacy? Notice that needs in these areas can be addressed by different aspects of community college!

Hopefully many students can benefit from dual enrollment during high school. If that is not possible, be sure to consider the potential of community college after high school to ease the way to university. The short list of possible benefits may include staying local, opting out of college entrance exams (like the SAT or ACT) and "guaranteed transfer" programs that allow students to enter state universities as a junior. •

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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DUAL ENROLLMENT Is it Right for You?



American Institutes for Research

Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study

www.mtsac.edu/president/board-reports/ECHS_Impact_Study_Sep2013.pdf

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Early College High School Initiative

www.gatesfoundation.org/What-We-Do/US-Program/College-Ready-Education

Let's Home School High School

State-by-state chart and more information about dual enrollment

<http://letshomeschoolhighschool.com/2012/07/15/dual-enrollment-in-your-state/.pdf>

Study Points

Dual Enrollment Programs: The Pros and Cons

www.studypoint.com/ed/dual-enrollment/