

# THE CHRONICLE

## of Higher Education

### How Colleges Are Teaming Up With High Schools to Streamline Students' Paths

By Beth McMurtrie APRIL 02, 2017 **PREMIUM**

Nick Niehus is a senior at Iowa City West High School, but he's already got a head start on college. Every afternoon, after he is done with his classes, he heads to Kirkwood Community College's new regional center, where he takes college courses alongside other high-school students from the area. When he graduates he'll have 16 credits in advanced manufacturing under his belt, which he'll apply toward an associate degree at Kirkwood.

By his own admission, Mr. Niehus is an average student, and that's exactly what the Kirkwood Regional Center at the University of Iowa [is aiming for](#). Once tailored toward high achievers, dual enrollment, in which high-school students can earn school and college credit simultaneously, is expanding outward, aimed at students in the academic middle. [Key Research Studies on Dual Enrollment](#) Premium

"So far it's been pretty amazing," says Mr. Niehus, who likes the fact that his classes are hands-on and career-focused. Kirkwood's programs, which run the gamut from general-education courses to career and technical education, are also well attended. One friend is studying psychology, another is learning about nursing, a third takes a writing course, he says. "Pretty much half the people I know go to Kirkwood."

Across the nation, dual enrollment — also called concurrent or joint enrollment — is growing in popularity. Its appeal taps into widespread concerns about college costs as well as academic and career readiness. Such programs allow students to earn credits free or at a fraction of the cost that they would pay in college. The courses have also been shown to improve educational outcomes, like progress toward a degree. Some students apply general-education credits toward a degree from a participating four-year institution. Those interested in career and technical training can move directly into the work force after graduation or get a two-year degree much faster.

Dual enrollment often helps institutions, too, by strengthening ties between colleges and their local high schools. Professors can shape how students are being prepared for college, while teachers gain professional-development opportunities and insights into what is expected of their students after they graduate. For some struggling schools, calling on the expertise of local community colleges and four-year universities has expanded their academic offerings. And colleges with declining enrollments have found it a valuable recruiting tool.

The growing interest in dual enrollment is part of broader college-completion and work-force-development efforts being embraced in many states, says Jennifer Dounay Zinth, director of high school and STEM for the Education Commission of the States, a nonprofit group that tracks and analyzes education policy. Some have revamped their dual-enrollment programs in recent years

to improve quality, add more career and technical options, and expand access for rural, low-income, and minority students, who are typically underrepresented in these programs.

Despite the spread of dual enrollment, the programs remain underutilized, advocates say. While 80 percent of all public high schools offer dual-enrollment courses, only about [10 percent of students](#) took a course for college credit by the time they graduated in 2010-11. But participation is growing: At high schools reporting that they offer dual enrollment, 19 percent of juniors and seniors enrolled in these courses in the 2013-14 school year.

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Dual enrollment has its share of skeptics. In some states that have expanded their programs rapidly, [like Texas](#), educators have worried that academic quality may suffer. [In Ohio](#), private colleges have been dropping out of the program because they find it bureaucratic and costly. Some organizations, like the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships and the new College in High School Alliance, are hoping that through strong oversight and quality controls, dual-enrollment programs can be expanded without sacrificing rigor.

No state has used dual enrollment as widely as Iowa, which [leads the nation](#) in the percentage of students under 18 enrolled in community-college courses for credit. Iowa's success has been driven in large part by Senior Year Plus, a \$21-million program created by the state in 2008 to encourage more high-school students to take courses that can result in college credit, including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. Today all 15 of the state's community colleges and three public universities participate, as do a number of private institutions. More than half of all high-school seniors in 2016 were jointly enrolled in at least one college course.

Across Iowa, as in other states, dual-enrollment programs come in many forms. In most cases, teachers are certified by an affiliated college to teach such courses in their school. Courses are also taught online, in high schools by visiting college instructors, and in regional education centers, like Kirkwood's.

Iowa has invested in education centers as a way to centralize instruction for high-school students in both rural and urban areas. By putting technical and general education under one roof, and offering a set of courses with specific "academies," the state has helped thousands of students earn college credits. At Kirkwood's University of Iowa center, which is run by Kirkwood Community College and housed in the university's research park, more than 400 students this year will take courses in fields including business, education, engineering, and health care.

The center is a bit unusual in that both University of Iowa faculty members and community-college instructors offer courses, although the university's teaching contributions are more limited.

Classes are taught in blocks, so that students can fit them around their high-school schedules, says Jon Weih, the center's director. His administrators meet monthly with principals, guidance counselors, and other staff members in the Iowa City school system. The school districts pay the students' tuition and then recoup costs from the state. Mr. Weih says the average participant earns about 12 to 15 credits during their years in high school; others reach the state maximum of 23 credits per year.

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Pulling together such a broad range of people and institutions is no easy feat. Todd Prusha, executive dean of distance learning at Kirkwood Community College, which runs four such centers and oversees Kirkwood courses taught in high schools and online, says that in the early years, high-school administrators and college instructors had concerns about participating in dual enrollment. In rural areas, some high schools feared they might lose students to Kirkwood's regional centers and see their funding reduced. But the Senior Year Plus program reimburses schools for the tuition they pay for their students to take college coursework.

At the college level, some Kirkwood instructors worried that their introductory courses would be decimated if students could earn the necessary credits in high school. Instead they've found that some of those students have taken higher-level courses as they've continued on to college, and that enrollments have expanded over all, Mr. Prusha says. "I'm not going to say it's Pollyanna and all perfect," he adds. "But we've gone through the growing pains, and everyone sort of understands that there's a place for everyone here."

Mr. Weih, head of the Kirkwood Regional Center at the University of Iowa, identifies three critical components to making partnerships work: state support, good relationships with schools, and a willingness among school districts to try different things. "Partnering is hard work and takes a lot of time," he says. "But if the benefit in the end is that the majority of universities and community colleges can work together to benefit local high-school students, I think that's a great thing."

Still, challenges remain to expanding access to dual-credit classes across the state. Staffing is one issue. Because instructors must have qualifications similar to those of an adjunct instructor, like a master's degree in the relevant subject area, it can be difficult to find qualified high-school teachers, particularly in more-remote areas. That has proved to be a problem nationally as well.

In rural areas of the state, dual enrollment has been a lifeline for some high schools and a boon to community colleges with declining enrollments. Pekin Community High School, says Tim Hadley, the principal, has had to cut back on staffing and course offerings because of budget cuts and a shrinking population. From 2009 to 2016, the school cut 79 electives. But because of dual-enrollment programs, Pekin's 200 students have access to a slew of offerings, including some that would have been too expensive for the high school to offer alone, such as CNC machining, which teaches students how to run computer-controlled machine tools.

Virtually all Pekin students have taken at least one college-level course by the time they graduate, and the number of students continuing on to community college has steadily increased, says Mr. Hadley. In a region with a declining agricultural base, he says, it's important for students to learn new trades, like welding, robotics, and electronics. "There are 15- and 16-year-old students," he says, "who are earning the first college credential in their family."

Mr. Niehus, the Iowa City high-school student, says he never imagined that he'd end up graduating from high school with the kind of training that will help him get a job. After he earns his associate degree, he wants to become a welder. "So now instead of going out of high school and saying yeah, I got good grades, I can now say I have certifications. It's more applicable to the work force."

*Beth McMurtrie writes about campus culture, among other things. Follow her on Twitter @bethmcmurtrie, or email her at [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com).*