

Dual credit programs ease transition into postsecondary education

Targeted to high school students at risk of not obtaining their diplomas, the Dual Credit and School Within a College (SWAC) programs at George Brown College help students graduate from high school, improve their grades and ease their transition into postsecondary education (PSE), according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Students said that the programs positively influenced their decision to attend postsecondary education and helped them in their preparation for PSE when they applied. They emphasized the importance of learning through experience and learning about college life without the risk or pressure of commitment.

Project description

The Dual Credit and SWAC programs allow high school students from grades 11 and 12 to take college courses and earn a high school credit towards their high school diploma as well as a college-level credit. These programs offer pathways into PSE for non-traditional or under-prepared students, help them complete their high school diploma and ease their transition into college or the trades. While these programs have existed for some time, there is little research on their effectiveness.

Opportunities for Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Exploring the Dual Credit and School within a College Programs examined the educational outcomes of students who participated in the Dual Credit and SWAC programs at George Brown College in winter 2012; 257 high school students were enrolled in the Dual Credit program and 24 in the SWAC program. Students were surveyed at four different intervals: at the beginning and end of the programs, as well as six months and one year after the programs ended. The study also explored the effects of outreach, transition and retention strategies used to attract students to the programs.

Findings

Both programs were successful in helping students accumulate credits towards their high school diplomas, improving academic performance and easing the transition into college. When first surveyed, many students were under performing: the GPA for SWAC and Dual Credit students was 49% and 65%, respectively. Upon completion, the GPA for SWAC students was 71% and 74% for Dual Credit students.

Students looked to teachers and guidance counsellors as the primary sources of information on these programs and other PSE options in general; many students went on to pursue PSE.

Surveying students at four different times proved to be difficult. Many students moved after high school and changed their contact information, resulting in uneven sample sizes at different survey points and few students participating in all four surveys.

Recommendations/Further research

At the high school level, the authors suggest that outreach to students begins in or before grade 9 and that more resources be directed toward teachers and guidance counsellors to help students access information about PSE including options, costs and employment opportunities. Similarly, at the college level, they recommend increasing postsecondary advising by college staff as some Dual Credit and SWAC students faced academic, financial and personal barriers preventing them from pursuing higher education.

To understand the full impact and effectiveness of these programs, further research should examine whether students who participate in these programs graduate from PSE. The authors also suggest that an assessment be conducted at all Ontario colleges.

Opportunities for Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Exploring the Dual Credit and School within a College Programs was written by the Community Partnerships Office and the Academic & Student Affairs Special Research & Evaluation Projects at George Brown College.