

EARNING EXTRA CREDIT

A quarter of Wisconsin’s high school students earned some college credit in a dual enrollment program during the 2021-22 school year. The two-fold increase in students over the past decade represents a substantial potential savings of time and money for students and families, but better data collection and analysis is needed to determine how these programs affect students’ readiness for the workforce or higher education.

In the 2021-22 academic year, 69,471 high school students in Wisconsin earned college credit through dual enrollment programs at public universities and technical colleges. This was about 23.5% of the state’s high school population that year, including those attending public and private schools and those receiving home-based instruction. Over the past decade, the number of students earning dual credit has more than doubled, rising by 126%, or 38,785 students (see Figure 1).

Our data come from the annual reports distributed by the University of Wisconsin System and the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). Many of the state’s 22 private colleges and universities offer dual

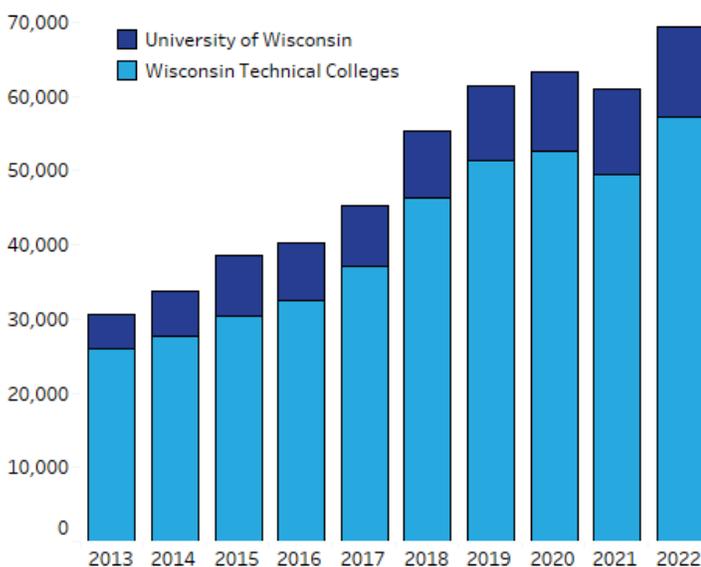
enrollment programs of their own to additional students and are gathering data that might be used to track their activities in the future, but those figures are not yet available. Statewide totals are based on the numbers provided by the UW System and WTCS, both of which removed duplicate students within their programs. However, a limited number of students may be enrolled in classes in both college systems and counted twice in our total.

HOW DUAL ENROLLMENT WORKS

Dual enrollment refers to any program in which high school students take classes that earn college credit and, typically, high school credit as well. Some programs allow a high school student to go to a college campus (or attend virtually if online) and take the course alongside college students. Other programs have classes on high school campuses that are taught by high school teachers who have been approved by colleges. Finally, some courses are taught at a combination of high school and college locations or are conducted on a third-party site.

There are two main dual enrollment programs that enroll high school students in college courses in a college setting. The UW System’s Early College Credit Program (ECCP) had 1,697 participants in 2021-22 (referred to as 2022 in this report), while WTCS’ Start College Now program had 4,028 participants in 2022 (see Figure 2 on page 2). Together, these two programs accounted for 8.2% of the students who participated in dual enrollment programs that year.

Figure 1: Dual Enrollment More Than Doubles Over Decade
Number of dually enrolled students by public higher education system

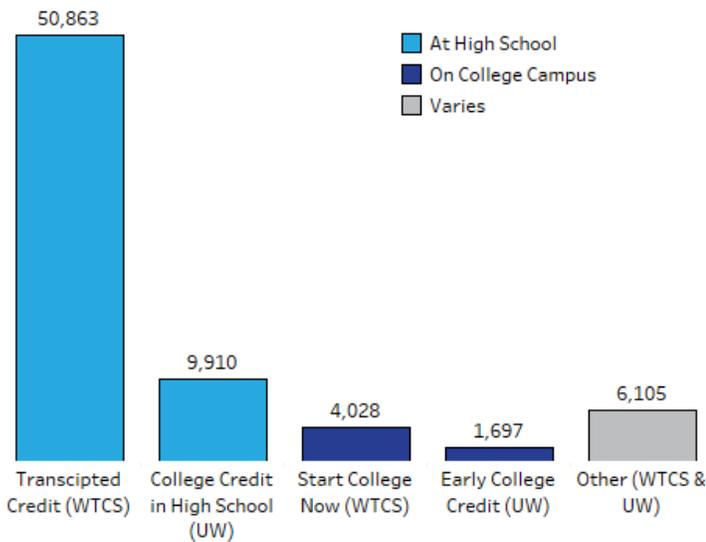


Source: University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical College System



Figure 2: Most Dual Credit Earned on High School Campuses

Dually enrolled students by type of public program in 2022



Source: University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical College System

The vast majority of students who participated in dual enrollment programs did so at their own high schools, in classes taught by high school teachers who have been approved by the college. The UW System collectively refers to these programs as College Credit in High School (CCIHS), though they have distinct names on various campuses. In 2022, the CCIHS program reported 9,910 participants across the state. The parallel WTCS program, Transcribed Credit, reported 50,863 students in 2022. These programs accounted for 87.4% of dually enrolled students in 2022.

The remaining programs administered by WTCS and the UW System collectively accounted for 8.8%, or 6,105, of Wisconsin's dually-enrolled students in 2022 and included a youth apprenticeship program and programs to offer classes not available at a student's high school.

The responsibility for covering the cost of dual enrollment varies by program, making it difficult to summarize briefly. Some programs, such as WTCS' Transcribed Credit, are offered tuition-free. For those that charge tuition, some have a single payer like Start College Now, in which participating high schools pay the WTCS tuition. Other programs are supported by multiple payers such as the ECCP at UW-Milwaukee, where tuition is reduced and covered by the high school and some state aid. In other cases, students and their families may cover the cost.

A wide range of classes is available to students across both the UW System and WTCS. In the WTCS programs, the three most popular classes taken for dual credit in 2022 were Medical Terminology, a required course for many programs in the Health Science Career Cluster; Introduction to Psychology; and Oral/Interpersonal Communications. In the UW System, the three most popular subject areas for the past decade have been mathematics, English, and Spanish.

DUAL ENROLLMENT ON THE RISE

Dual enrollment programs are not new to Wisconsin. The UW System reports data on them going as far back as the 1970s. However, they have greatly increased in popularity in the past decade. Regardless of delivery method or provider, most programs have more than doubled since 2013. Except for the declines during the first full academic year of the COVID-19 pandemic, each year has shown an increase in enrollment in UW and WTCS programs.

Given the numerous types of programs, there could be several reasons for the steady and substantial enrollment increases. One obvious reason for the growth in dual enrollment participation, however, is its potential benefits for all parties involved.

High school students see these programs as a way to save time and money by earning credit and credentials ahead of schedule from local colleges or universities. High schools promote these courses as part of their academic offerings and highlight their ability to give their students a leg up on their college and career climb. On the other side of the agreements, colleges use dual enrollment courses as recruitment tools, giving students previews of what they can expect if they ultimately enroll at their school. Also, as many colleges see declines in the numbers of traditional students, dual enrollment can sometimes offer an additional revenue stream, though in other instances such as WTCS' Transcribed Credit that is not the case. All parties promote the programs as accelerated tracks to careers and the workforce.

In some cases, dual enrollment programs function as an alternative or complement to Advanced Placement (AP) classes, a national program that is offered at many high schools and is independent of any specific college. The



AP program allows high school students to earn college credit based on the score they receive on a standardized assessment at the end of the school year. Proponents of dual enrollment programs argue that they more closely resemble college experiences because credit is based on a semester's work, as opposed to solely on one high-stakes test. Other observers point out that, unlike AP, there is little oversight or standardization of dual enrollment, which could lead to varying degrees of rigor in the courses offered. Both programs are intended to provide students with access to college-level work.

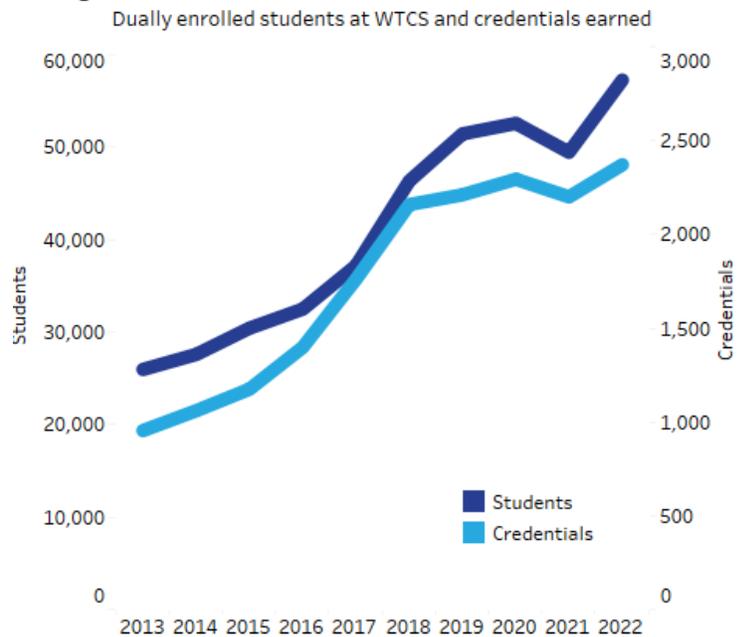
ASSESSING THE GROWING IMPACT OF DUAL ENROLLMENT

[Existing national research](#) indicates a net positive effect of dual enrollment programs, with benefits related to college degree attainment, college access and enrollment, credit accumulation, high school completion, and general academic achievement in high school. To our knowledge, there have been few [studies](#) undertaken specific to programs in the state. Because the majority of Wisconsin's programs are through WTCS, which focuses on workforce preparation, such studies would ideally track students from their high school career through college enrollment and completion to their first years of work – a difficult task. They could include consideration of the reduction in the total higher education cost paid by students, including the opportunity cost borne by students while they complete their education.

One available data point suggesting a positive outcome of dual enrollment for at least some students is the rate of credentialing through WTCS. Industry-recognized credentials earned through dual enrollment at the technical colleges equip high school students with concrete benefits such as EMT and welding certifications alongside their high school diplomas. As the number of dual enrollment students has grown, the credentialing rate has kept pace (see Figure 3). In each year studied, 3% to 5% of dual enrollment students at technical colleges earned some type of work credential.

Another question raised by the surge in dual enrollment participation is whether that growth is occurring in all sectors of the state's student population. Currently, the

Figure 3: Credentials Rise With Enrollment Over Decade



Source: Wisconsin Technical College System

distribution of participating students is uneven across Wisconsin's high schools and colleges. Colleges and high schools that have invested energy and resources into growing their programs serve higher numbers of high school students than those that have not done so. For example, in 2022 Gateway Technical College accounted for 6.5% of WTCS' total student enrollment but a full 11.3% of the system's dually-enrolled students. The college employs six staff members working with local high schools to develop their programs. Students in those high schools have easier access to dual enrollment classes simply by virtue of living within Gateway's region.

Location is not the only determinant of a student's access to dual credit options. In limited cases, cost may be a factor, although the majority of dual enrollment students are participating in programs at no cost to them. Another factor may be access linked to perceptions of students' abilities based on their race or other attributes. The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has already flagged equitable access as a concern and provided [resources](#) for school districts. Meanwhile, AP classes and tests have shown [gaps in participation](#) along lines of race and income, making it reasonable to expect that similar disparities could exist for dual enrollment programs.



Although dual enrollment participation is included on school districts' DPI report cards, where it can be analyzed alongside students' demographic data, the data are not available on a statewide basis. Analysis is largely limited to individual school districts or individual institutions of higher education. These data silos make it difficult to systemically analyze the impact of this growing approach, as the [BLEST Hub of Marquette University](#) discovered when attempting to do some of this aggregating [work in the Milwaukee area](#).

In addition, saving time and money may benefit students in the short run, but it is also important to make sure that quality and outcomes are being maintained. Further data-gathering and evaluation will help to determine whether the recent surge in dual enrollment participation should accelerate even more.

ENSURING QUALITY ACCOMPANIES QUANTITY

The substantial increase in dual enrollment participation represents a potential win for students as well as K-12 and higher education institutions. It holds the promise to help the state respond to its labor market challenges as well as help colleges and students do more with less.

This growth has happened with DPI's encouragement and some initial steps toward data transparency. The inclusion of dual enrollment on school report cards and in DPI's Academic and Career Plan initiative are both ways to promote these programs without mandating them.

Making enrollment data available at a statewide level would allow for more complete analysis of the program's growth, as would data coordination with the state's colleges and universities. Demographic data on participating students could help to measure who has access to these programs and whether they are giving all students additional pathways into higher education and careers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Follow-up studies could help to determine whether dual enrollment participants are more or less successful after they leave high school. In addition, policymakers in Wisconsin could look to [national studies](#) on dual enrollment for potential models in other states.

As dual credit participation increases, it becomes all the more important to make sure these programs are effectively serving students across the state and doing so equitably. Dual enrollment could be a tool to reduce disparities or widen them, depending on how it is used.

