
High School CLEP® Test Taking, Dual Enrollment, and College Outcomes

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Executive Summary

In recent years, several states and districts have implemented programs and policies that have sparked growth among high school students taking College-Level Examination Program® (CLEP®) exams to earn college credits, with some states including CLEP in their K–12 accountability structures. In the 2018-19 school year, 22% of CLEP exams taken were taken by high school students. To understand the relationship between earning CLEP exam credit in high school and subsequent college outcomes, we compare college outcomes of students who obtain a passing score of 50 or higher on a CLEP exam in high school to students who participate in another early college credit program—dual enrollment (DE)—as well as to students who do not participate in any early credit programs in high school. Matching CLEP exam takers, dual enrollment students, and those without early college credit on race, gender, first-generation status, and SAT® score we find:

- High school CLEP exam takers who score 50 or higher and matriculate to a four-year college have generally higher retention and graduation rates than a comparable group of DE students. Both CLEP and DE students outperform students without early credit, although CLEP students generally have the highest retention and graduation rates by about 1 percentage point.
- High school CLEP exam takers who score 50 or higher and begin at a two-year college have higher transfer rates to a four-year college, higher graduation rates, and higher rates of bachelor's degree completion than a comparable group of DE students. Both CLEP and DE students outperform students without early credit, while the CLEP students outperformed the DE students, being more likely to transfer to a four-year institution (about 13 percentage points higher), more likely to graduate within 6 years (12 percentage points higher), and more likely to earn a bachelor's degree (7 percentage points higher).
- Among first-generation college-going students and underrepresented students, those earning a CLEP score of 50 or higher have considerably higher graduation and retention rates at colleges as well as higher transfer rates from two-year to four-year colleges than comparable groups of DE students and students without early credit.

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Introduction

The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) is a computer-based assessment that allows examinees with prior knowledge the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in up to 34 subjects and earn course credit at more than 2,900 institutions. CLEP exams have traditionally been popular among individuals who have obtained knowledge outside the classroom, either through independent study, homeschooling, or on the job experience. Because of this feature the CLEP exam has been especially popular among adult learners such as United States Armed Forces personnel and veterans.

While CLEP research is limited compared to that of other early credit programs, Boatman, Hurwitz, Lee, and Smith (2017) demonstrated that CLEP examinees had higher associate and bachelor's degree completion rates. Godfrey and Jagesic (2016) found that CLEP students who placed out of an introductory course by earning a qualifying CLEP score were generally better prepared for future coursework in the same subject than were the students taking the introductory course on campus.

In recent years, several states and districts have implemented programs and policies that have sparked growth among high school students taking CLEP exams to earn college credits, with some states including CLEP in their K–12 accountability structures.¹ In the 2018-19 school year, 22% of CLEP exams taken were taken by high school students.

As the numbers of students taking CLEP exams in high schools is increasing, it is important to consider the ways in which CLEP participation in high school is related to students' college outcomes. In this study, we compared the college outcomes of CLEP takers in high school to those who participate in dual enrollment (DE), and those who do not receive any early college credit in high school. We chose to include a comparison with DE students as it is a widely accepted early credit program that is locally administered and is often included in K–12.

Research Questions

To investigate the outcomes of students earning college credits via CLEP exams we asked:

- How do the college outcomes of students who earn a passing score of 50 or higher on a CLEP exam in high school compare to students who participate in dual enrollment programs, and to students who do not participate in any early college credit programs? Do these results differ for students who start at a two-year institution as compared to those who start at a four-year institution?

¹ As an example, Louisiana has a graduation index that measures the quality of the diploma earned by each 12th grader based on a points system. Students earning a 50 or higher on a CLEP exam are awarded points. See: <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teacher-leader-summit/2018-teacher-leader-summit/s030--what%27s-new-in-louisiana%27s-school-and-school-system-accountability-policies.pdf>

The college outcomes considered are retention to the second and third year and graduation in four, five, or six years for students who start their postsecondary education at a four-year institution. For students who start their postsecondary education at a two-year institution the outcomes considered are transferring to a four-year institution, graduation with any award (certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree) within two, three, four, five, or six years, and graduation with a bachelor's degree within six years.

CLEP

CLEP is a computer-based assessment that is not necessarily accompanied by a specific course. Currently, there are 34 CLEP exams in five subject areas: composition and literature, world languages, history and social sciences, science and mathematics, and business. The CLEP exams are accepted in over 2,900 higher education institutions nationwide. Exam scores range from 20 to 80, and the American Council on Education (ACE) recommends a credit-granting score of 50, often referred to as the “C level” because it corresponds to earning a grade of C in the equivalent college course. This scaled cut score is determined by a panel of college faculty whose recommendations are approved by the test development committee overseeing the CLEP exam.² Because 50 is the threshold at which ACE recommends awarding college credit, this report focuses on high school students having obtained a score of 50 or higher on at least one CLEP exam.

Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment (DE) programs permit high school students to enroll in college level courses and earn college credits. Unlike CLEP students, dual enrollment students do not take a standardized exam and receive a course grade rather than a standardized exam score. Often, students receive credits that can be used to fulfill both high school and college graduation requirements. For this reason, dual enrollment is often referred to as dual credit or concurrent enrollment. Dual enrollment courses are taught in the high school itself, at the college campus, or through distance education (Thomas, Marken, Gray, and Lewis 2013). Dual enrollment courses may either be academically focused or may have a career, technical, or vocational focus. Approximately 70% of the courses taught in the nation's public schools are academically oriented in nature (Thomas, Marken, Gray, and Lewis 2013).

Dual enrollment research has generally reported positive effects, as several studies have found a relationship between dual enrollment taking and college enrollment as well as between dual enrollment taking and degree completion in college (WWC 2017). However, there is some evidence that the positive relationship between DE and college outcomes is not universal, varying by the characteristics of the DE experience. Struhl and Vargas (2012) found that students who completed an English language arts course through DE were the

² More information on the ACE recommendation can be found at: <https://clep.collegeboard.org/develop-your-clep-program/create-a-clep-policy/ace-credit-recommendations>

most likely to enroll in college compared to students who completed no DE, but a much smaller effect on college enrollment was found for vocational education, world languages, and physical education, and no effect was found for mathematics. An (2013) found that DE students earned a FYGPA that was 0.11 higher, on average, than non-DE students but concluded that variability in program implementation likely resulted in overestimates for some types of dual enrollment and underestimates for other types. Speroni (2011) finds that positive effects of dual enrollment differ by course location (high school vs. on campus) and that only students who take a dual enrollment course on a college campus are more likely to earn a degree in five years or less. She finds no effect of taking a DE course on a high school campus and later bachelor's degree attainment.

Data

Data from students who took the SAT and graduated high school in 2006, 2007, or 2008 was merged with college enrollment records from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). NSC tracks student enrollment and degree attainment for over 3,100 two-year and four-year colleges and universities in the United States, equivalent to 94% of the U.S. college-going population. NSC data were also used to identify dual enrollment participation as it allows us to identify students who enrolled in college while in high school. Students who took any Advanced Placement® Exams in high school were removed from the study sample as we were interested in students who were solely exposed to either CLEP, dual enrollment, or no early college credit programs.³ Students who had missing data on any of the matching variables were also removed from the sample.

Analysis

One of the challenges in comparing CLEP students, DE students, and students without early credit is that the academic and demographic characteristics between these groups differ considerably. Table 1 shows the academic and demographic characteristics of the sample of students taking CLEP in high school, students who have participated in dual enrollment, and students who have not participated in any early college credit programs. The demographics indicate that CLEP and DE students are more likely to be female than students who do not have any early college credit participation. CLEP students as a group are less likely to be minority or first-generation than both the DE students and students without early college credit. In terms of academic preparation, CLEP students also have higher section and overall SAT scores than DE students and students without early credit.

To ensure that differences in college outcomes between CLEP students, dual enrollment students, and students who had not earned any college credit in high school were not due to differences among these academic or demographic characteristics, we made use of a

³ While AP Exam takers were eliminated from the sample, we weren't able to identify students who took the AP course but not the AP Exam. As a result, students who took the AP course but not the AP Exam may be included in our sample.

matching-based methodology to create three samples where each group of students were identical on these academic and demographic characteristics (See Godfrey 2016 for more details). We exactly matched students who had taken a CLEP exam in high school to both dual enrollment students and students without any early college credit on: gender, ethnicity, parental education, sector of first college attended (two-year or four-year), and to within 20 points on each SAT section.

Table 1: Academic and Demographic Characteristics of the Sample Before Matching

		None	CLEP	DE
Gender	Male	48.2	41.7	41.4
	Female	51.8	58.3	58.6
Ethnicity	Asian	6.2	3.0	5.5
	Black/African American	15.7	4.6	9.9
	Hispanic	11.5	17.4	9.3
	White	62.4	71.9	71.2
	Other	4.3	3.1	4.1
	Less than High School	4.2	2.8	3.2
Parental Education	High School	37.4	22.7	33.2
	Associate Degree	10.2	8.7	11.3
	Bachelor's Degree	28.8	36.1	30.6
	Graduate Degree	19.4	29.6	21.8
SAT Mean (SD)	Critical Reasoning	463 (92)	531 (99)	496 (94)
	Math	472 (96)	528 (91)	505 (93)
	Writing	455 (89)	519 (94)	487 (89)
	All	1390 (245)	1578 (251)	1487 (245)
Number		1,594,328	5,246	246,083

Table 2 shows the academic and demographic characteristics of the three groups of students after the match. As expected, all three groups of students have an identical composition in terms of gender, ethnicity, parental education, and SAT section scores.

Table 2: Academic and Demographic Characteristics of the Matched Sample

		None	CLEP	DE
Gender	Male	41.2	41.2	41.2
	Female	58.8	58.8	58.8
Ethnicity	Asian	2.0	2.0	2.0
	Black/African American	4.0	4.0	4.0
	Hispanic	15.2	15.2	15.2
	White	76.7	76.7	76.7
	Other	2.1	2.1	2.1
	Less than High School	2.3	2.3	2.3
Parental Education	High School	23.4	23.4	23.4
	Associate Degree	7.9	7.9	7.9
	Bachelor's Degree	37.1	37.1	37.1
	Graduate Degree	29.2	29.2	29.2
SAT Mean (SD)	Critical Reasoning	531 (93)	531 (93)	531 (92)
	Math	530 (87)	530 (87)	530 (86)
	Writing	519 (88)	519 (88)	519 (88)
	All	1580 (237)	1580 (237)	1580 (237)
Number		4,713	4,713	4,713

Measures

Control and Predictor Variables

Gender. Students were asked to report their gender when registering for the AP, PSAT or SAT Exams. We use the most recently reported response. Students are asked to select between “Male” and “Female.”

Race/Ethnicity. Students were asked to report their race/ethnicity when registering for the AP, PSAT/NMSQT®, or SAT exams. We use the most recently reported response. Students select from the following options: White; Asian; American Indian or Alaska Native; Black or African American; Mexican or Mexican American; Puerto Rican; Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American; Native American; Pacific Islander; and Other.

Parental Education. Students were asked to select their mother’s highest level of education and their father’s highest level of education separately when registering for the AP, PSAT/NMSQT, or SAT exams. We use the most recently reported response. Students select from the following options: grade school, some high school, high school diploma, business school, some college, associate degree, bachelor’s degree, some graduate education, or graduate degree. The mother and father education variables were combined to make one highest level of parental education variable based on the highest degree obtained by either parent.

SAT Score. SAT scores were obtained from official College Board records and had three sections; Critical Reading, Math, and Writing. The student's most recent SAT score was used in this analysis

College Sector. College sector data were obtained from NSC data merged with Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data. Institutions are classified as either offering degrees of "Four or more years" or "At least two but less than four years."

CLEP Participation and Performance. Students who have a recorded CLEP exam prior to their 18th birthday are coded as having participated in CLEP in high school. Students who have scored a 50 or higher on at least on CLEP exams are assigned to the 50+ CLEP exam category and included in these analyses. Students who scored below a 50 and failed to receive a "passing score" are not included in the results section as they are not the focus of this study but results for all CLEP students are included in the appendix.

Dual Enrollment Participation. Dual enrollment participation was obtained through records from NSC. Students with a record of college enrollment prior to high school graduation (May 1 of high school graduation year) were determined as having participated in a dual enrollment program.

No Early Credit Participation. Students who did not have a record of college enrollment prior to high school graduation, a CLEP exam score, or an AP Exam score were identified as not having any participation in an early college credit program.⁴

Outcome Variables

Retention. A student was identified as persisting in a given academic year if they had consecutive enrollments in consecutive fall terms.

Graduation. A student was identified as having graduated in a given academic year if the graduation date was anytime between September and August of that academic year.

Transfer Up. A student was identified as transferring up if they started at a two-year institution and subsequently moved to a four-year institution at any point during their college career.

⁴ Some of the students identified as not having taken an early college credit program may have taken an AP course but not the accompanying exam.

Results

Our analysis focused on the comparison of outcomes for CLEP students who earned a passing score on at least one CLEP exam (50 or higher), students who participated in at least one dual enrollment course, and students who do not have a record of having participated in any early college credit program.⁵ We focused on CLEP exam takers scoring a 50 or higher to focus on students who had potential of earning college credit. We were unable to identify the course grade students obtained by dual enrollment students to make a similar restriction for them.

Because two-year and four-year institutions offer different educational options, we compared educational outcomes separately for those who matriculated to a four-year institution and for those who matriculated to a two-year institution. We also look at the outcomes separately for first-generation and underrepresented minority students to understand if the same trends are observed when underrepresented student groups are considered.

Results in Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the retention and graduation rates for students starting at a four-year college or university. Figure 1 indicates that overall CLEP students scoring 50 or higher had the highest retention rates and five- and six-year graduation rates by roughly 1 percentage point, while dual enrollment students had the highest four-year graduation rates.

Figure 2 shows that among first-generation students starting at a four-year institution, CLEP students scoring 50 or higher have the highest retention and graduation rates by a considerable margin, generally 3 to 6 percentage points above that of dual enrollment students. Dual enrollment students have the second highest retention and graduation rates, with graduation rates about 9 to 10 percentage points higher than those of students without early credit.

Similarly, in Figure 3 among underrepresented students starting at a four-year institution, CLEP students scoring 50 or higher had the highest retention and graduation rates of 1 to 2 percentage points and 3 to 8 percentage points than those of DE students. DE students had higher retention rates (3 to 6 percentage points) and higher graduation rates (9 to 11 percentage points) than did students without early credit.

⁵ We provide results for all CLEP students (not just those scoring 50 or higher) in the Appendix as they are not the focus of our analyses.

Figure 1: Percentage Retained and Graduated at Four-Year Colleges/Universities

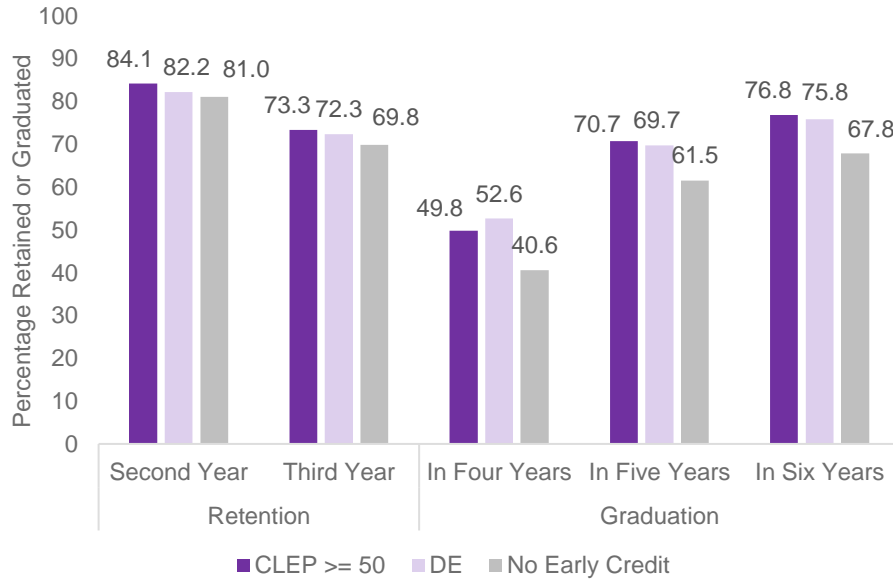


Figure 2: Percentage of First-Generation Students Retained and Graduated at Four-Year Colleges/Universities

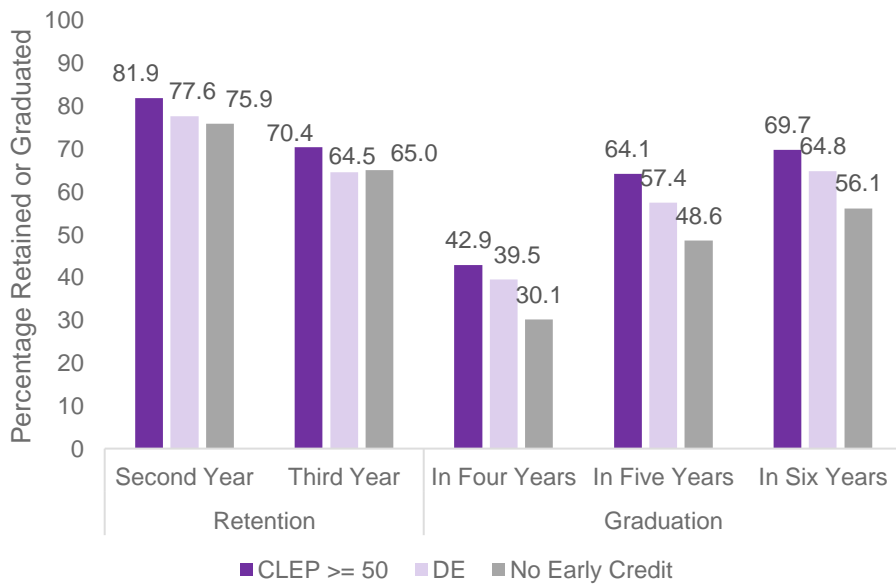
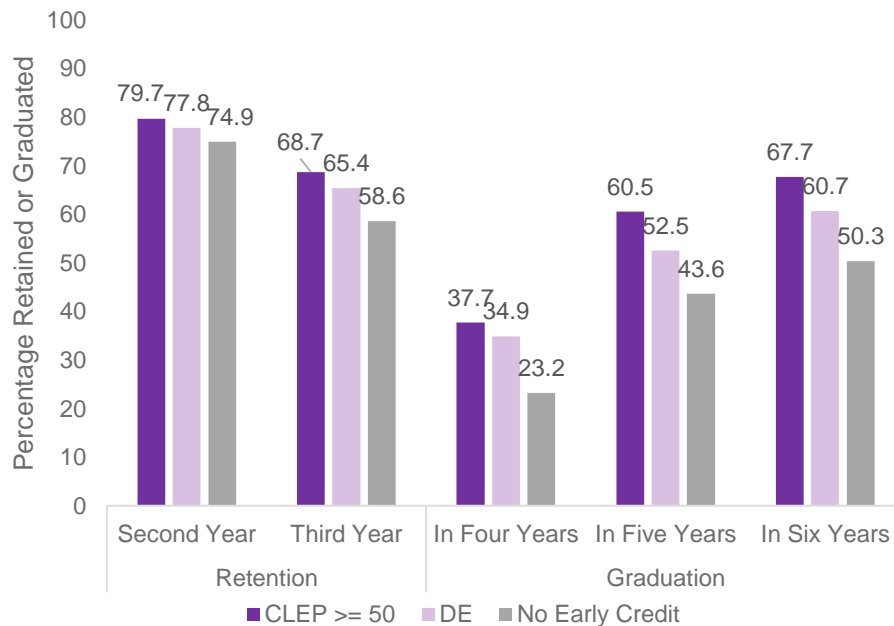


Figure 3: Percentage of Underrepresented Students Retained and Graduated at Four-Year Colleges/Universities



Results from Figures 4, 5, and 6 show the transfer to a four-year institution, graduation, and bachelor's degree completion rates for students starting college at a two-year postsecondary institution after high school graduation.

Among students starting their postsecondary education at a two-year institution (Figure 4), CLEP students scoring 50 or higher had the highest rates of transfer to a four-year school, the highest graduation rates, and the highest rates of bachelor's degree completion, followed by dual enrollment students and students without early credit. Transfer rates (to a four-year institution) of CLEP students were about 13 percentage points higher than that of DE students, six-year graduation rates that were about 12 percentage points higher, and bachelor's degree attainment rates that were 7 percentage points higher. Dual enrollment students had higher transfer rates (9 percentage points), higher six-year graduation rates (12 percentage points), and higher bachelor's degree attainment rates (8 percentage points) than that of students without early credit.

Results in Figure 5 show that among first-generation students starting at a two-year institution, CLEP students scoring 50 or higher had the highest rates of transfer to a four-year school, the highest graduation rates, and the highest bachelor's degree completion rates. Transfer rates (to a four-year institution) of CLEP students were about 16 percentage points higher than that of DE students, six-year graduation rates that were about 15 percentage points higher, and bachelor's degree attainment rates that were 8 percentage points higher. Dual enrollment students had higher transfer rates (12 percentage points), higher six-year graduation rates (14 percentage points), and higher bachelor's degree attainment rates (8 percentage points) than that of students without early credit.

As can be seen in Figure 6, underrepresented students starting at a two-year institution, CLEP students scoring 50 or higher had the highest rates of transfer to a four-year school, the highest graduation rates, and the highest bachelor's degree completion rates. Transfer rates (to a four-year institution) of CLEP students were about 25 percentage points higher than that of DE students, six-year graduation rates that were about 22 percentage points higher, and bachelor's degree attainment rates that were 15 percentage points higher. Dual enrollment students had higher transfer rates (6 percentage points), higher six-year graduation rates (5 percentage points), and higher bachelor's degree attainment rates (4 percentage points) than that of students without early credit.

Figure 4: Percentage Retained, Transferred, and Graduated at Two-Year Colleges/Universities

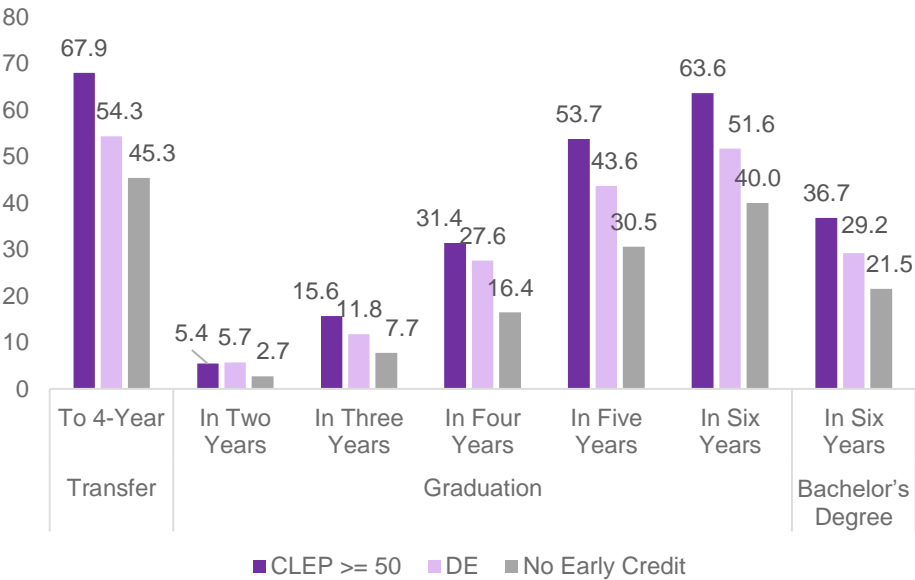


Figure 5: Percentage Retained, Transferred, and Graduated Among First-Generation Students at Two-Year Colleges/Universities

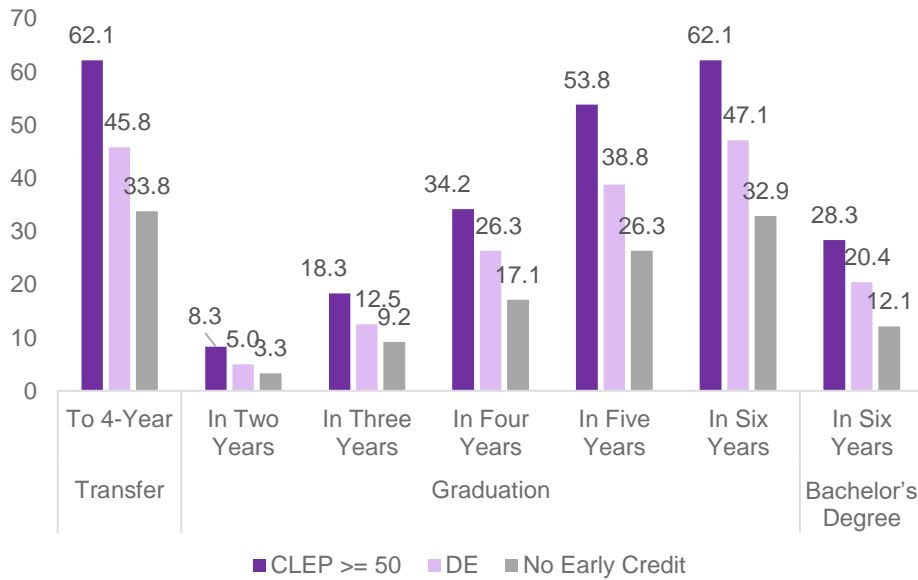
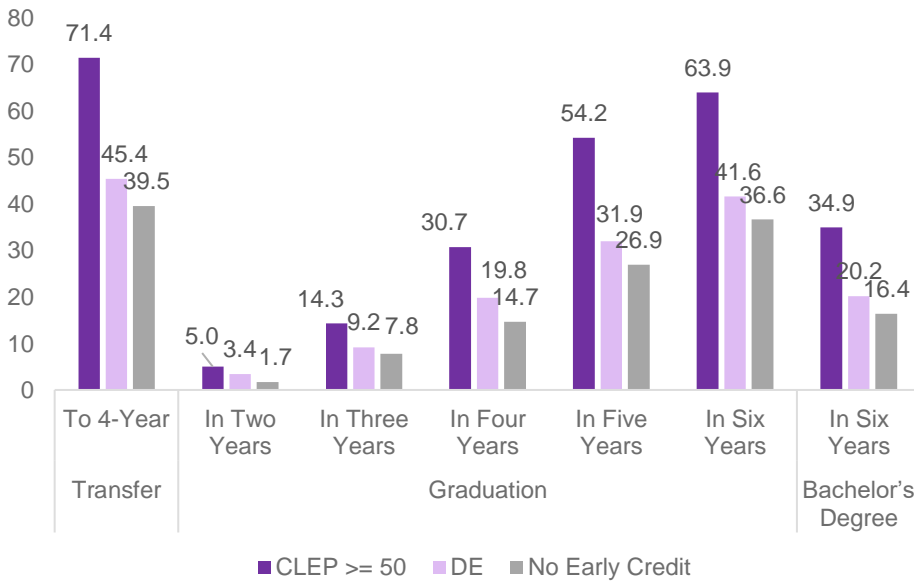


Figure 6: Percentage Retained, Transferred, and Graduated Among Underrepresented Students at Two-Year Colleges/Universities



Summary

The results presented in this study indicate that there is a positive relationship between passing a CLEP exam in high school and college outcomes. Both CLEP exam takers and dual enrollment students have more positive college outcomes when compared to similar students who have not participated in any early college credit program in high school.

High school CLEP exam takers who score 50 or higher on at least one CLEP exam and matriculate to a four-year college after high school graduation, have generally higher retention and graduation rates than a comparable group of dual enrollment students and students without early credit. CLEP exam takers who score 50 or higher and begin their postsecondary education at a two-year college have higher transfer rates to a four-year college, higher graduation rates, and higher rates of bachelor's degree completion than a comparable group of dual enrollment students and students without early college credit. These positive relationships remain when first-generation college-going students and underrepresented students are considered.

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Appendix

Table A1: Retention and Graduation Rates for Students Starting at Four-Year Colleges

	Measure	Time Period	CLEP	DE	None
All CLEP & All DE (N=3,604)	Retention	Second Year	82.7	81.7	81.1
		Third Year	71.3	71.7	69.1
	Graduation	In Four Years	46.9	51.1	39.0
		In Five Years	68.2	68.6	59.9
		In Six Years	75.2	74.6	66.9
CLEP Score >= 50 & DE (N=2,664)	Retention	Second Year	84.1	82.2	81.0
		Third Year	73.3	72.3	69.8
	Graduation	In Four Years	49.8	52.6	40.6
		In Five Years	70.7	69.7	61.5
		In Six Years	76.8	75.8	67.8
First Generation Students: All CLEP & All DE (N=831)	Retention	Second Year	80.5	77.6	77.1
		Third Year	67.9	65.4	64.4
	Graduation	In Four Years	39.8	40.3	29.2
		In Five Years	62.1	58.1	48.3
		In Six Years	68.6	64.9	56.4
First Generation Students: CLEP >= 50 & All DE (N=585)	Retention	Second Year	81.9	77.6	75.9
		Third Year	70.4	64.5	65.0
	Graduation	In Four Years	42.9	39.5	30.1
		In Five Years	64.1	57.4	48.6
		In Six Years	69.7	64.8	56.1
Underrepresented Students: All CLEP & All DE (N=793)	Retention	Second Year	78.7	77.7	76.8
		Third Year	66.7	65.7	59.5
	Graduation	In Four Years	35.9	34.4	22.4
		In Five Years	57.5	53.5	42.8
		In Six Years	65.9	60.5	51.1
Underrepresented Students: CLEP >= 50 & All DE (N=461)	Retention	Second Year	79.7	77.8	74.9
		Third Year	68.7	65.4	58.6
	Graduation	In Four Years	37.7	34.9	23.2
		In Five Years	60.5	52.5	43.6
		In Six Years	67.7	60.7	50.3

Table A2: Transfer-Up, Graduation, and Bachelor's Completion for Students Starting at Two-Year Colleges

			CLEP	DE	None
All CLEP & All DE (N=1,081)	Transfer	To 4-Year	62.3	53.5	45.8
	Graduation	In Two Years	5.6	5.5	2.5
		In Three Years	14.8	11.7	7.6
		In Four Years	29.0	27.0	17.2
		In Five Years	50.4	41.8	31.2
		In Six Years	59.9	50.6	40.2
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	32.8	28.7	21.9
CLEP >= 50 & All DE (N=706)	Transfer	To 4-Year	67.9	54.3	45.3
	Graduation	In Two Years	5.4	5.7	2.7
		In Three Years	15.6	11.8	7.7
		In Four Years	31.4	27.6	16.4
		In Five Years	53.7	43.6	30.5
		In Six Years	63.6	51.6	40.0
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	36.7	29.2	21.5
First Generation All CLEP & All DE (N=377)	Transfer	To 4-Year	57.3	45.4	35.0
	Graduation	In Two Years	7.2	4.0	2.7
		In Three Years	17.8	12.7	8.5
		In Four Years	31.3	24.9	17.5
		In Five Years	50.1	37.4	27.9
		In Six Years	58.6	46.4	33.4
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	26.3	20.2	13.0
First Generation CLEP >= 50 & All DE (N=240)	Transfer	To 4-Year	62.1	45.8	33.8
	Graduation	In Two Years	8.3	5.0	3.3
		In Three Years	18.3	12.5	9.2
		In Four Years	34.2	26.3	17.1
		In Five Years	53.8	38.8	26.3
		In Six Years	62.1	47.1	32.9
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	28.3	20.4	12.1
African American or Hispanic First Generation All CLEP & All DE (N=300)	Transfer	To 4-Year	68.3	45.0	39.0
	Graduation	In Two Years	6.0	3.7	1.7
		In Three Years	14.3	9.0	6.7
		In Four Years	29.7	20.0	14.3
		In Five Years	51.7	32.3	25.7
		In Six Years	61.3	40.7	34.3
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	31.7	20.3	15.7
African American or Hispanic First Generation CLEP >= 50 & All DE (N=238)	Transfer	To 4-Year	71.4	45.4	39.5
	Graduation	In Two Years	5.0	3.4	1.7
		In Three Years	14.3	9.2	7.8
		In Four Years	30.7	19.8	14.7
		In Five Years	54.2	31.9	26.9
		In Six Years	63.9	41.6	36.6
	Bachelor's Degree	In Six Years	34.9	20.2	16.4

About College Board

College Board is a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of over 6,000 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness and college success—including the SAT[®], the Advanced Placement[®] Program, and BigFuture[™]. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators, and schools. For further information, visit collegeboard.org.

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