Dual enrollment: High school meets college

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UDDUALENROLLMENT web 042316-P1

true

Tracy Barbutes / Union Democrat

Tioga High School senior Emily Kennedy studies a child development college course online in Groveland, as part of a collaboration with Columbia College.

UDDUALENROLLMENT 042316-P4

true

Tracy Barbutes / Union Democrat

Tioga High School senior Syvanna Lopez (right) takes advantage of online college courses. Lopez plans to study medicine in college. Classmates (from left) Jenn Harvey and Emily Kennedy study college courses in child development.

UDDUALENROLLMENT 042316-P7

true

Tracy Barbutes / Union Democrat

Tioga High School sophomore Halei Belvail takes advantage of online college courses as part of a collaboration with Columbia College. Belvail is studying a college drama history course online.

UDDUALENROLLMENT 042316-P2

true

Tracy Barbutes / Union Democrat

Tioga High School seniors (from left) Jenn Harvey, Emily Kennedy, Syvanna Lopez, and sophomore Halei Belvail, take advantage of online college courses as part of a collaboration with Columbia College.

Classes allow high schoolers to sample college before graduating. In some cases, even freshmen can earn college credit.

By Scott Carpenter / The Union Democrat

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t takes 60 credits to graduate with an associate's degree from Columbia College. By the time Sheri Gempler's two oldest daughters graduated from Summerville High School, they had nearly 30 and 40 credits apiece. That equates to about a year of college.

Both had taken advantage of online courses offered at Summerville High, part of a collaboration with nearby Columbia College to grant high schoolers more access to college classes.

Because of the credit boost they gained from it, neither spent much time at Columbia College as actual undergrads.

Kylie, the oldest, transferred to Minot State and graduated from Southern Oregon University. Cassidy leapfrogged to a semester abroad in Denmark. She stayed, in total, just half a year at Columbia.

As part of an effort to increase university enrollment, high schools across Tuolumne and Calaveras counties are getting out the word about dual enrollment programs, so named for the simultaneous high school and college courses available under such programs.

With Columbia College a powerful engine at the heart of the effort, students are flocking to the campus to take classes from chemistry to political science, or going online to take courses that are even more specialized.

“We’re excited about the opportunity to give more high schoolers the chance to get more secondary credit,” said Brandon Price, associate dean of Student Equity and Student Success at Columbia College, who is spearheading the college’s attempted expansion of dual enrollment programs to area high schools. “Now, instead of trying to make that big leap from high school to college, you’re already familiar with it.”

Dual enrollment is of particular advantage to students who might not otherwise enroll in university-level courses, either because they are daunted by the transition or because they lack the resources to make the jump on their own.

That is one reason why universities are turning increasingly to dual enrollment in the wake of a post-2008 recession that has left behind a transformed workplace, one where the manufacturing or labor skills attainable outside university halls no longer cut it.

“The research shows that kids who manage to get some college credit in high school are more likely to persist,” Price said. He added, “The cool thing about dual enrollment is that, yeah, it lifts everybody, but it lifts disadvantaged students the most.”

For some high schoolers, such as those at nearby Sonora High School, just a few miles from the junior college campus, dual enrollment means taking actual classes on the campus.

The high school and college have teamed up to create a special bridge program, called Middle College, in which any junior or senior is free to enroll as long as they meet a minimum GPA and obtain two recommendations from teachers.

Once they are in, they must continue to take a minimum of three classes at the high school: English, social science, and another of their choice. But at Columbia College, where both morning and afternoon classes are available, Middle College students are technically not limited in the number of courses they can take, though most opt for either two or three.

Brooke Nielsen, a junior who commutes by car for morning classes at the college and afternoon classes at the high school, is one of 48 Sonora students who have signed up for Middle College. She is still more than a year away from graduation, but Nielsen’s casual decision to begin attending classes at Columbia is likely just the sort of mental transition that architects of the high school-to-college bridge dream about.

“High school is just a place that doesn’t sit right with me,” she said. “When I found out about the chance to go the college, that seemed to be a good opportunity.”

In addition to accumulating college credit, Nielsen said, the Columbia classes allow her to engage with more experienced teachers and learn material not available to her classmates back at the high school.

In her political science class, her professor, a former lawyer, has guided the class through scores of United States Supreme Court cases, including last year’s blockbuster Obergefell v. Hodges, a 5-4 decision that legalized gay marriage in all 50 states.

“I have friends who are taking the government class at the high school, and they’re doing nothing like what we’re

doing," she said. "They learn more about how the government system works. They don't go into as much detail as we can go into."

Students are also free to take before-school classes offered at the high school by Columbia professors, or to sign up for evening classes at the college as part of program separate from the high school.

Moreover, with the passage of Assembly Bill 288 in the state legislature late last year, Columbia will next year be able to offer college courses in Sonora High School classrooms during the day. The college is currently confined to teaching at the high school in the morning. Even with the bill's passage, much negotiation stands in the way of launching on-campus classes, according to Price at the college.

Students at Summerville High School, seven miles farther from the campus, also dual enroll at the college. This year, Summerville launched its Early College program, which allows students to take up to half their courses at the college. Six students this semester are enrolled at Columbia and the high school simultaneously, and up to 20 might enroll for the fall.

For students farther from Columbia, such as those at Groveland's two high schools, Don Pedro and Tioga, the bridge to college is often virtual.

Sheri Gempler, who teaches at Tioga High School, oversees a group of students who are taking online courses through Columbia College's virtual platform, called Blackboard. A new platform called Canvas is being piloted this year. Her students were so excited about the chance to gain college credits before actually matriculating, she said, that she had to put on the brakes.

"I have a few that take more than one class a semester, where it's about three units per semester," she said. "We were so gung ho at first, I was like, 'Wait, let's take it back a little bit.' "

In Groveland, where fewer than 50 students attend either Tioga or Don Pedro high schools, one advantage to online courses is the diversity of the material available.

Tioga has a rotating faculty of about 10 teachers, with five teachers on the campus on a given day. That's enough to cover four Advanced Placement courses — Spanish, psychology, English and calculus — and a handful of specialized courses, such as a Fire Science class taught by a firefighter from a nearby U.S. Forest Service station.

For the most part, though, students turn to the Internet for specialized content. Among others, there are courses in child development, sports management, and women's health: all courses that Gempler's youngest daughter, Taylor, has been taking.

The online programs have proven so successful that they have this year expanded from Tioga to Don Pedro. At both campuses the costs of the programs, small to begin with, are covered by the district.

Advanced Placement courses, though they also allow high schoolers to obtain college credit, differ in course content and in the amount of credit available. They are taught by high school teachers, not professors, and culminate in a proctored test scored on a 1-5 scale.

Price said dual enrollment was 132 in the fall of 2015 and 149 the spring of 2016.

But it is not the only college at which credits earned in high school apply. High schoolers can earn credits toward any college with which their schools have signed articulation agreements, or contracts verifying that the credits will be transferable upon matriculation.

Taylor Gempler, for example, could have a head start next fall at University of Las Vegas, where she has already been accepted, if she chooses to enroll. And students at Tioga have accrued dozens of credits toward Brigham Young University, with which the school has an articulation agreement.