

DUAL CREDIT

For Institutions and Peer Reviewers

Introduction

In 2012, the Commission commissioned a study to identify common practices in dual credit programs and courses across the nation. This study was conducted with the expectation of then developing formal guidance for institutions and peer reviewers regarding the evaluation of dual credit activity at institutions.

These guidelines add to the Criteria for Accreditation a level of explicitness regarding dual credit. They address issues that fall within the scope of the Criteria, ranging from faculty qualifications to academic rigor to learning outcomes and resources. They establish five baselines that the institutions should meet in order to ensure the academic integrity of dual credit. They also provide a framework for consistency in evaluating dual credit activities across all institutions in the Commission's region and through all teaching modalities.

Peer reviewers conducting comprehensive evaluations will begin using these guidelines for evaluations starting September 2014.

The Commission's dual credit definition: dual credit refers to courses taught to high school students for which the students receive both high school credit and college credit. These courses or programs are offered under a variety of names; the Criteria on "dual credit" apply to all of them as they involve the accredited institution's responsibility for the quality of its offerings.

The Criteria for Accreditation directly refer to dual credit in several places (*emphases added*):

Criterion Three. Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support

The institution provides high quality education, wherever and however its offerings are delivered.

Core Component 3.A. The institution's degree programs are appropriate to higher education.

3. The institution's program quality and learning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as *dual credit*, through contractual or consortial arrangements, or any other modality).

Core Component 3.C. The institution has the faculty and staff needed for effective, high-quality programs and student services.

2. All instructors are appropriately qualified, including those in *dual credit*, contractual, and consortial programs.

Criterion Four. Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

Core Component 4.A. The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs.

4. The institution maintains and exercises authority

over the prerequisites for courses, rigor of courses, expectations for student learning, access to learning resources, and faculty qualifications for all its programs, including *dual credit* programs. It assures that its *dual credit* courses or programs for high school students are equivalent in learning outcomes and levels of achievement to its higher education curriculum.

Findings from the Study

The study's data are based primarily on state policies and interviews with education officials in 47 states conducted in 2012 and developed through a conceptual framework of:

- *Inputs* (student eligibility, faculty credentials, funding, and curriculum standards),
- *Processes* (general oversight, faculty orientation and training, institutional review and monitoring, and state review and monitoring), and
- *Outputs* (learning outcomes, transferability, and program and course outcomes).

The study revealed the following:

1. Regarding the volume of activity in 2010-2011 compared to 2002-2003: Dual credit enrollments increased by 75% from an estimated 1.16 million to 2.04 million. The percentage of public high schools offering dual credit courses increased from 71 to 82. High schools continue to be the predominant location for dual credit courses, accounting for 77 percent of dual credit enrollments in 2010-11, up from 74 percent in 2002-03.
2. Regarding the benefits and drawbacks: *The benefits include:* Enhancing and diversifying high school curricula, increasing access to higher education, improving high school and college relationships, and shortening time to degree and lowering the cost of college. *The drawbacks include:* Not preparing students for the academic rigor of college, inadequate instructor qualifications, not providing an authentic college experience, and uncertainty of course transferability.
3. Among the overall observations and implications for regional accreditation, the study notes:

“Enough evidence has been gathered to suggest that dual credit has more positive than negative impacts, on average. However, the evidence also

reveals that there is variation on impact and some impacts are negative. Further, there is insufficient evidence to support the critical promise for improving postsecondary access and success for underrepresented students relative to more privileged and high-achieving students.”

“The quality of dual credit remains a pressing issue. Respondents indicated that their states were trying to figure out how to manage and ensure the quality of dual credit. Faculty credentials and capabilities were often cited as a critical quality issue. Respondents generally acknowledged the importance of qualifications and professional development for dual credit instructors.

Respondents raised concerns about the variations in faculty qualifications, which often differ by programs and offering institutions. For example, some school districts allow high school teachers with less than required credentials to teach dual credit classes. This is in part because the states do not have a mechanism for preventing this practice, which is viewed as an issue for the accrediting body.”

“Regional accreditation focuses primarily on the academic integrity of postsecondary programs and, more broadly, the institutions that offer these programs However, consistency in course requirements and the assessment of student learning across institutional locations and teaching modalities, along with the availability of student support systems, are important accreditation concerns with direct linkages to dual credit activity Recent reformulations of accreditation standards have more explicitly accommodated distance/online learning but this level of explicitness has generally not yet been applied to the dual credit realm.”

Quality Assurance for Dual Credit Courses or Programs

Linked to the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation and the findings of the Commission's dual credit study, the following five critical elements constitute the quality assurance for dual credit courses or programs:

1. Faculty credentials and qualifications, orientation and training (*Criterion Three*)

The institution requires the same level of credentials and qualifications for faculty in dual credit courses or programs that it does for its regular higher-education courses. Currently, this is the standard practice. The Commission's dual credit study notes: "The most common of these provisions [about instructor eligibility] is that colleges and universities use the same standards in selecting instructors for dual credit courses as they do for courses offered on their own campuses" (p. 19). Additionally, faculty teaching in dual credit courses or programs are appropriately trained with proper orientation for teaching at the higher education level.

2. Rigor of courses or programs and curricular standards
(*Criterion Four*)

The institution mandates the same level of rigor in dual credit courses or programs as it does for its regular higher-education courses or programs. Dual credit courses or programs meet the same curricular standards and undergo the same institutional approval processes as the institution's regular courses or programs.

3. Expectations for student learning and learning outcomes
(*Criterion Four*)

Expectations for student learning and learning outcomes in dual credit courses or programs are consistent with the same courses or programs that the institution offers at the higher-education level.

4. Access to learning resources (*Criteria Three and Four*)

Students as well as faculty in dual credit courses or programs have the same level of access to learning resources (libraries, laboratories, databases, etc.) as the institution's students and faculty in the same higher-education courses or programs.

5. Institutional monitoring, oversight, and transparency
(*Criteria Two, Three, and Four*)

The institution, specifically its academic departments and disciplinary faculty, exercises proper monitoring and oversight of its dual credit activity to ensure that dual credit courses or programs meet higher education standards. Finally, the institution informs students clearly and accurately whether courses taken for dual credit (i.e., at a high school via a community college) will transfer to other institutions, including four-year institutions.

Note: While student eligibility for dual credit courses or programs, transferability of such courses, and funding of such courses or programs are certainly identified in the study as areas of concern, these issues generally fall beyond the scope of regional accreditation. These issues, especially the question of funding, are generally under the purview of higher education governing entities at the state level or state legislatures or subject to institutional arrangements. This document, therefore, does not weigh in on these matters.

When Dual Credit is Reviewed

Evaluation of dual credit activities will occur at least at the time of an institution's comprehensive evaluation but may also be a subject of examination at other times if dual credit courses or programs become a matter of concern at an institution. 

Questions?

Contact an HLC staff liaison for clarification.