

Issues with the CCP Program:

Although perhaps unintentional, the rollout and continuance of the CCP program has created a wealth of problems for local school districts and their students. Rather than propel college ready students toward further academic excellence, this program has created over-inflated GPA's, promoted less rigorous coursework, and reduced opportunities for students who choose to remain in the traditional high school setting. Middle school and high school students are just that – adolescents who, though perhaps mature for their ages, require guidance and scaffolded learning opportunities that are age appropriate – both cognitively and emotionally. Implementing a program that allows 12 year olds to go online and choose university courses (without extensive support from a dedicated teaching staff who knows the abilities of the students) is not logical.

The first major issue with the program is the lack of consistent requirements for eligibility. Previously, under the Post Secondary College Options Program, our partnership with the local university required a minimum of 3.5 GPA to participate; that program also mandated that students be at least juniors in high school and have taken at least 10 college prep classes and passed all 5 parts of the OGT. These requirements served two purposes: first of all, the minimum GPA requirement and college prep background assured that students who participated in the program were already academically strong and ready for the challenges of university. Secondly, allowing only upperclassmen to participate ensured that students were mature – emotionally and cognitively. These were college bound students who had the requisite foundational knowledge necessary for collegiate success.

For CCP to continue, students should be required to meet minimum GPA and ACT scores to participate. These scores and GPA requirements should be set by the ODE and be consistent with the rigorous state standards for graduation. Although local school districts should be a part of the decision-making process (along with representatives from the Universities participating), it should not be only a local control issue because that could lead to manipulation of the standards. The term “college ready” needs to be clearly defined and consistent throughout the state.

Universities are allowing students to completely register for courses without consent from the local school districts. These students need to know that the university courses they are choosing meet the current ODE graduation requirements. How can school guidance counselors be sure that students are on track to graduate and meet the rigorous state standards when they do not even know the students are enrolled in a particular university level course?

This leads to the second major confusion and parity issue within the CCP program – the courses themselves. When students choose to take university courses, there are no clear guidelines as to what courses at the university replace what courses at the local high schools. Logic demands that university courses should substitute equally for their high school equivalent. Thus, a College Algebra course would replace a high school Algebra course and NOT an AP Calculus course. A Speech class taken at university would thus replace the elective Speech in high school, not a rigorous College Prep or AP English course.

We are finding, as this program continues to roll out, that this is not the situation. Students are registering online for classes at a wide variety of universities and substituting university courses for high school courses that are NOT equivalent in any way. So, a student could take Medical Terminology and replace a Health requirement. Or, perhaps a student wants to skip a more challenging high school English course and chooses to take a Poetry course at university.

At the hearing, we will have examples of that with us. Students opting to bypass College Prep Senior English or AP Literature and Composition at our school have chosen to take less rigorous English courses at university. From the textbooks (which we also have with us) to the course work and writing samples, it is obvious that these are not a course for course substitution. However, because AP Literature and Composition is weighted, so is the university course. Students enrolled in various online and university Communications classes have shared syllabi that indicated students could “take as long as they needed to complete the mid-term exam and use their textbooks and other notes.” Although students had not mastered the content (as is evidenced by the use of their texts on the exam), they still received a weighted grade for the course because it is equated with an AP English Literature or Language course at our high school.

Currently, we have been advised that if our district offers weighted grades in a particular subject area (i.e. with AP level courses), then any student taking a collegiate course in that discipline (regardless of its course designation) should receive a weighted grade for that university course. This has become a real problem. Students have discovered that they can take less rigorous courses at university (both on campus and online) and thus receive the weighted grade – which overinflates their GPA while allowing them to skip the rigorous, standards-based coursework required of the traditional high school student. One student actually said, “Why would I come back to the high school for College Prep Senior English, go five days each week, do more and more difficult work, and chance a lesser grade? It is way easier to go to class two days each week and do less work for a better, weighted grade.”

Online courses are even more of an issue. As students work on these courses, they have learned that they can get parents or friends to help them with their classwork – including testing, major assignments, and quizzes. Because many, if not most, of these online courses allow for open book testing and include no time limit for tests and quizzes, students are not required to truly learn the material. The standards for these courses are definitely not equal to the rigor required of our College Prep and AP students; however, because many of these online courses are offered at the AP level in our building, these students receive a weighted grade without gaining the requisite knowledge and foundations in learning.

How is that fair to the students who elect to stay in the traditional high school setting? How are these students meeting the state-mandated requirements for graduation? Students who choose to take university courses attend class two days each week for a total of three hours and get one full credit in one single semester. How does that equal the 45-50 minute daily instruction in a year-long full-credit class in the traditional high school setting? Students in the local high schools are doing more and more rigorous work throughout an ENTIRE school year – thus preparing them to be more successful in college. Students who opt for the “easier” way out, are by-passing the mandated state standards and are ultimately less prepared for a successful collegiate career.

Under current graduation requirements, students must take end of course exams. However, as more and more students opt to take these classes at local universities, how can we hold them accountable? When a student never steps foot in the high school biology lab or English classroom and chooses to take his biology and English courses at a university, how can the local school district ensure that student is gaining the knowledge necessary to pass the end of course exams? Furthermore, when that student chooses not to take the end of course exams upon completion of the university classes because he “does not feel ready to take the test,” should it be a mark against the local school district when he finally chooses to take the exams and does not pass them? How can the local schools be held accountable for end of course exams when the student did not receive the instruction in our buildings?

Along with that, how can high school counselors track students for graduation when there is no uniform timeline by which universities communicate grades to the local schools? If a student fails a course at the university, it is virtually impossible for him to make it up in the local school until the following school year (or summer school) because most high school classes are year-long.

Beyond these academic problems, CCP brings up further issues for consideration. Students who begin participation in this program in the middle school jump straight to the top of their class. How is this fair to other 12 year-old students whose parents do not want them around adult students in the university setting or who do not have internet access at home to complete online courses? The students who do not “take advantage” of the university courses can – mathematically – never be at or near the top of their class. And, many of these students are academically stronger students – students who wish to stay at their local high schools or middle schools and build a strong educational foundation.

One anecdotal example: We have a student who is in the top 10% of her senior class. She is legally blind and cannot get a driver’s license. Both of her parents work full time. She cannot drive herself to the local university. She lives in a rural area where internet service is spotty at best, and thus cannot support an online course. Under the CCP program, this student would not have been able to hold onto her class ranking. However, because this student has taken all of the Advanced Placement and College Prep courses available at our school, has worked hard, and has established good study habits, her GPA and class rank have afforded her the opportunity to attend Penn State University. How would the CCP program have helped this student?

The CCP program has increased expenditures to the local school districts. As local school districts lose funding based on the percentage of time a student is in the building, and with more and more students participating in the CCP program, districts will continue to lose much needed funding. Add that to the burden of paying for the cost of the college courses, and already strapped districts will face agonizing dilemmas concerning how to best utilize their monies. Textbooks, building maintenance, staff salaries, technology, the endless list of educational costs – all will be affected by the reduction in available funds due to the cost of this program. As students see this as an “easy” way to pad their GPA and obtain college credit, more and more students will take advantage of this program – and without a clear designation of who is “college ready” – it may not only be those students who are truly ready for the challenges of university.

Although important, funding is not the deciding factor. As educators, our goal should be to educate students, to prepare them for the next phase of their lives (whether it be college or some other type of training). How does a program that allows students to skip the very fundamental basics of education – the building blocks upon which all other learning must depend – adequately prepare our students for the future? How does a program that allows our students to bypass the rigorous state mandated standards and graduation requirements adequately prepare our students for the future?

The answer? This program does not adequately prepare our students. One high school senior, wise beyond her years, quipped last week: “Students should NEVER be allowed to bypass core classes and take them at university! And, middle school students have no business being in college courses. They need to be in the middle school and high school – getting a strong foundation. If they want to take a psychology class or other elective at university during their junior or senior year, then great. Until then, they need to be here – getting a great education.” This 18 year old young lady understands the truth: the foundations of education gained during middle school and high school are requisite for collegiate success.