At a time when over 70 percent of the fastest growing jobs in Michigan require at least a bachelor's degree, K-12 educators, administrators, and support staff are seeking new, creative ways to help students access, afford, and be successful in higher education, including exploration of early postsecondary credit programming while they’re in high school. However, it can be hard to know what early postsecondary credit programming and supports to invest in and even harder to advise on the myriad of opportunities available.

In Michigan, there is broad support to better prepare students for college and career opportunities after high school, however there is limited alignment of goals and shared understanding on the best strategy to take that are currently being discussed and developed at the state level. Early credit programs such as Advance Placement (AP), Early Middle Colleges, and dual or concurrent enrollment are leveraged nationally to expose high school students to postsecondary academic and workforce courses, and to remove financial barriers to college coursework for local students and families. While it is increasingly critical to more effectively prepare students for postsecondary learning and make that learning more affordable, it is equally important for states and schools to have clear goals and advising structures for early postsecondary credit programs to be effective. Michigan, while in the process, has not yet established clear goals and is seeking to align understanding and needs for the many early credit programs available to students.

As a result, schools have been positioned and encouraged to provide early postsecondary opportunities for students without the full understanding of how to align their school and/or district goals with programs, including consideration for the role of finances in supporting programming or how different programs’ expectations of teaching and learning may impact students’ experiences. This is made even more complex given the inconsistent credit awarded to students who complete the programs across different institutions of higher education. In the end, students are encouraged to “get ahead” by participating in early credit programs and may find themselves navigating complex and contradictory systems, expectations, and goals.

Below we describe what early credit programs are, outline current inequities in access, and highlight why it is important for schools, institutions of higher education, and the state to: (a) identify specific goals, (b) select the program that best aligns with these goals, and (c) consider the resources necessary to meet those goals.

What are Early Postsecondary Credit Programs?

In this section, we identify and describe existing early postsecondary credit programs, consider their program design, and their intended purposes for students. Looking at programs side-by-side will help decision-makers have a better understanding about how to select, expand, and adopt programs to reach their goals and the needs of their students.

Early postsecondary credit programs are opportunities for high school students to be exposed to college level coursework and potentially earn college credit while still enrolled in high school. These programs can take many shapes and forms. For example, they can take place in traditional high school classrooms, in their own separate school buildings, or on college campuses. The staffing structure could be strictly college faculty, high school or secondary teachers credentialed to teach college-level coursework, or a combination of both K-12 and college faculty. Some programs are affiliated with external non-profit organizations or partnered with 2-year or 4-year colleges. In Michigan, student enrollment in programs can start as early as 9th grade, others may require students to be in their junior and senior years, and some offer an additional 13th year to allow students to complete an associate degree.
This variation of structures can be overwhelming for students and parents as well as administrators looking to expand early credit programming, especially when trying to understand program specifics and nuances. For families, trying to find the best program that aligns with a student’s education goals and needs is critical for their postsecondary and lifelong education planning. For school districts and higher education partners, it’s important to fully understand program specifics when selecting the best program to align with strategic goals.

**College Level Examination Program (CLEP)**

The College Level Examination Program (CLEP) is unique in that it is not a program or course, but a computer-based examination that allows participants to demonstrate proficiency in up to 34 subjects and earn credit at higher education institutions. Created over 50 years ago, CLEP exams have historically been used by individuals who have gained knowledge outside the classroom, particularly adult learners returning to education. However, more and more high school students are taking advantage of the tests making up 22 percent of national CLEP examinees during the 2018-19 academic year.

**Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB)**

Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) curricula were developed post-WWII to give advanced high school students more challenging and engaging curricula, validate learning experiences within a globalized context, and better prepare students for the demands of higher education. Thus, AP and IB are commonly viewed as meeting the dual needs of 1) raising the standards of academic rigor in American high schools and 2) ensuring that students are prepared for college coursework through greater depth of knowledge within fields of study. Since their inception, participation in AP and IB has increased among advanced high school students. In 2018 - 2019, 79,546 Michigan high school students took an AP course and 12,822 took an IB course. While AP and IB are both widely provided for advanced students, they are often inaccessible to students and districts who have fewer resources, may be less academically prepared, and may struggle to perform well on standardized exams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testing Site</td>
<td><strong>College Level Examination Program (CLEP)</strong></td>
<td>Students find and use practice resources to prepare for exam</td>
<td>Exam Only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td><strong>Advanced Placement (AP)</strong></td>
<td>Students are enrolled in AP courses to prepare for exam</td>
<td>Curriculum that is developed by content experts and taught by high school teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>International Baccalaureate (IB)</strong></td>
<td>Students are enrolled in IB courses to prepare for exam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dual Enrollment (DE), Concurrent Enrollment (CE), and Early-Middle Colleges (EMC)**

Dual Enrollment (DE), Concurrent Enrollment (CE), and Early-Middle Colleges (EMCs) also have much in common. DE allows high school students to enroll in a college class at a college. CE allows high school students to enroll in a college class, but that class is taught at a high school. It’s important to note that DE, CE, and EMCS are sometimes combined in national research and state policies, making their distinctive impacts hard to discern. In Michigan, dual and concurrent enrollment are not distinguished in state data or reporting. EMCS are high schools designed for students to simultaneously complete high school and college coursework through concurrent or dual enrollment.
Like AP and IB, DE and EMC participation has increased over the years.\textsuperscript{xv} In 2021 – 2022, 29,594 students participated in DE and 15,013 students were enrolled in EMCs (5.9 percent and 3 percent respectively of overall students enrolled in grades 9-12).\textsuperscript{xxi} Between the 2016 – 2017 and 2021 – 2022 school years, over 100 more schools had students participating in EMCs and enrollment increased by about 5,000 students.\textsuperscript{xxii} Additionally, about 2,000 more students participated in DE from 2016 – 2017.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Also, like AP and IB, DE, CE, and EMCs all have equitable access and outcomes concerns.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

Table 2. Programs where Credit is Determined by Performance in Courses and Higher Education Institutions’ Credit Transfer Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Concurrent Enrollment (CE)</td>
<td>Students are enrolled in a college course taught at the high school</td>
<td>College course often taught by high school teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School &amp; College</td>
<td>Early-Middle College (EMC)</td>
<td>Students are enrolled in institutions which dually or concurrently enroll all students</td>
<td>Hybrid institutions where students are a part of both high school and college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Dual Enrollment (DE)</td>
<td>Students are enrolled in a college course at a college while still in high school</td>
<td>College courses taught by college professors on campus or online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is the Purpose of Early Postsecondary Credit Programs?

Today, we are using early credit programs to solve several interlocking, but not the same, problems. For example, early credit programs are currently being relied on to address:

- Students - particularly historically underrepresented students - are not enrolling in higher education resulting in lower academic completion rates.
- Students - particularly historically underrepresented students - are deterred from enrolling in higher education due to its increasing cost.
- Academically advanced students are not being challenged in traditional high schools, limiting their potential and academic engagement.

While the outcomes for each of these problems may be similar (i.e., Higher college enrollment, educational persistence, GPAs, and graduation rates), the inputs required to meet these goals are not. Improving college preparation may involve more resources to get students up to speed and challenge them with additional rigorous curricula and learning styles. Whereas improving the overwhelming cost of college can only be tangentially addressed by early credit programs because this issue requires addressing the historical declines in funding to public colleges and universities, investments in financial aid, how far financial aid goes towards covering the cost of college, dependence on student debt, and loan repayment. Using early credit programs to address the cost of college may be particularly ineffective in a state where articulation agreements and credit acceptance policies vary by institution. The competing priorities among and within early credit programs creates contradictions within the education ecosystem, also known as “random acts of dual enrollment,” that then becomes a burden to students.\textsuperscript{xxv} The box below outlines many common goals stakeholders and decision-makers hope to achieve through early credit programs.
Funding

The impacts of early credit programs are greatly affected by the amount of money invested and the source of those dollars. School districts, institutions of higher education, the state, and students and families all make investments in early credit programs. Across early credit programs, school districts are often the largest financial stakeholders, though students and families are frequently asked to bear the burden of the additional expenses of program participation.

In Michigan, school districts are the primary investors in AP, IB, and dual and concurrent enrollment programs. For AP and IB programs, the districts may pay to employ teachers with specialized credentials to teach the courses, professional development to help teachers maintain those credentials, program fees to be able to offer courses, and to provide the materials for those courses. According to College Board estimates, the program related costs of implementing an AP course can range from $2,050 to $11,650 depending on the subject. Offering IB courses can be as or more expensive.

For dual and concurrent enrollment programs, the schools pay the tuition and fees for students’ courses at a special rate agreed upon with the partner institution of higher education. Early-Middle Colleges are independent institutions who receive their funding from the state as other public schools and public-school academies.

It is important to note that because Michigan funds its schools by the number of students in school buildings, schools have a financial incentive to keep students on their campuses. Sending students to institutions of higher education or alternative high schools (EMCs) could potentially cost them thousands of dollars and harm their ability to maintain the level and quality of services they aim to provide students and families. As a result of these cost burdens and disincentives, schools need to be thoughtful about how to best provide their students the experiences they need for long-term success as well as ensure they have the sufficient funds to provide high quality programming for all students.

Higher education institutions and the state also contribute to covering the costs of early credit programs, but to less of the extent of K-12 schools. To provide schools with discounted rates, institutions of higher education are also often bearing a cost. However, these institutions often view the cost as a reasonable investment in securing prospective students. The state has invested $3 million per year for the last three years (2022 - 2023 to 2024 - 2025) to help cover the costs of dual enrollment for non-public school students. Of these dollars, the state spent over $2.4 million in 2022 - 2023 to help cover the cost of tuition and fees for 2,138 students.
Other investments made by the state include $1.2 million to help cover AP, IB, and CLEP test fees for low-income students. The state has also invested $8 million in the last year to help fund EMCs and career-technical education.

Students and families often cover the associative costs of participating in early credit programs, including test fees, transportation costs, and purchasing the required materials for coursework. While these costs may seem small compared to the cost of tuition, they can still be burdensome for families and create a barrier for participation among low-income students. These associated costs also undermine goals of equitably exposing students to postsecondary curricula, increasing access to higher education, and maximizing transfer credit transfers to lower the long-term cost of college.

Potential Benefits and Considerations

Early credit programs have been found by researchers to have positive effects on students’ short and long-term academics. In high school, programs increased GPAs and graduation rates while lowering suspension rates and absences. In college, students enrolled in greater numbers and were more likely to persist to a degree. Students who could transfer a large number of credits could also graduate more quickly, potentially saving thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, and living expenses. However, the high number of academically advanced students in these programs and the fact students and families must opt-in to participate, likely impact these findings, potentially overstating their benefits.

Additionally, program benefits have been limited among historically underrepresented groups due to a lack of access. Students of color and low-income students have been excluded from these programs due to inequitable recruitment and/or adequate preparation. Recruitment efforts and participation requirements focused on academic ability rather than equity are likely to further reinforce existing disparities. Additionally, these students are more likely to come from under resourced districts and lack the proper preparation for these programs. As of the 2021-2022 academic year, the majority of DE and ECM student participants in Michigan were white and academically prepared. In a sample of over 170,000 students at 87 Michigan public high schools between 2006 and 2012, nearly 75 percent of AP participants were white. Furthermore, it is likely that these programs currently are not reaching the students who are on-the-fence about going to college and could benefit most from exposure to postsecondary education.

There are also consistent findings that participating in AP, IB, and EMCs social lives, with many students reporting they sacrifice participating in extracurriculars and hanging out with friends to meet the demands of their workloads. While it may be tempting to say that prioritizing academics over socializing will help students in the long run, this undermines messaging around healthy work-life balance and concerns over student mental health. Therefore, schools, districts, and partner institutions should create support systems to help moderate the academic demands of early credit programs and student social lives.

While these are the general findings across the early credit programs, it is also important to consider the potential benefits and particular characteristics of each program. Below, Table 3 outlines this information.
Table 3. Potential Benefits to Students and Considerations for Implementation by Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Potential Benefits to Students</th>
<th>Considerations for Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| College Level Examination Program (CLEP) | • Variety of subject areas to demonstrate competence  
• Potential college credit or waived coursework                                              | • Not a course  
• Students and families must cover test fees                                                  |
| Advanced Placement (AP)       | • Exposure to rigorous coursework  
• Accessible within high schools  
• Try out college level subjects of interest                                                   | • Course offerings are often determined by school resources  
• Students and families must often cover test fees                                               |
| International Baccalaureate (IB) | • Exposure to rigorous coursework  
• Accessible within high schools  
• Try out college level subjects of interest                                                   | • Course offerings are often determined by school resources  
• Students and families must often cover test fees                                               |
| Concurrent Enrollment (CE)    | • Exposure to rigorous coursework  
• Accessible within high schools  
• Course costs covered by school district  
• Try out college level subjects of interest                                                   | • Students who do not continue in subject areas may not benefit from credit  
• High school location does not expose students to college campuses                             |
| Early-Middle College (EMC)    | • Exposure to rigorous coursework  
• Potentially accessible within high schools  
• Course costs covered by school district  
• Try out college level subjects of interest                                                   | • Students who do not continue in subject areas may not benefit from credit  
• High school location does not expose students to college campuses  
• Transportation to ensure accessibility  
• Materials for course may not be covered by school                                               |
| Dual Enrollment (DE)          | • Experience college campuses and classrooms  
• Exposure to rigorous coursework  
• Course costs covered by school district  
• Try out college level subjects of interest                                                   | • Transportation to ensure accessibility  
• Materials for course may not be covered by school                                               |

Teaching, Learning, & Evaluation

Aside from the availability of and equal access to early credit programs, it is equally important to consider the variety in students’ educational experiences. A college professor and a high school teacher are trained to educate in very different ways and function within different institutions with different expectations for student learning. Additionally, high schools, college campuses, and online learning are all incredibly different environments and have different expectations of the student’s role in guiding the learning process. All these differences impact a student’s learning experience, preparation for higher education, and movement towards the district’s goal. Below we discuss key differences in program design that any decision-maker should consider.

Each early credit program has a different structure with different learning environments, expectations for the roles of educators, expectations for the roles of students, goals for learning, and ways of measuring those goals. This means that each program will produce different student learning experiences. Understanding this, we should be more intentional about aligning our learning goals for students with the learning experiences that help reach those goals. To do this, we should first consider the teaching, learning, and evaluation components of each program.

Traditionally high school curricula are developed by the state and individual teachers, whereas AP and IB curricula are developed by content experts who then train high school teachers to engage students within the different fields of study. In some CE programs, high school teachers become members of staff at a local higher education institution, given they have the appropriate credentials, and teach college courses within the high schools.
In all these scenarios, students are taught by high school educators trained in teaching methods, curriculum theory, and who receive annual feedback on their teaching. Additionally, these students remain on high school campuses, which allows easy access to courses but does not expose them to college campuses.

In contrast to elementary and secondary teachers, college professors are primarily trained to be content experts rather than educators. This means that their teaching methods may be rooted in their own learning experiences and their knowledge of the field, rather than knowledge of how students learn best or how to engage a wide range of students. Working with a college professor rather than a high school educator may greatly impact student learning experiences and should be considered when deciding between different early credit programming.

Finally, it is also important to consider how student learning will be evaluated and how this learning may or may not translate into college credit. AP, IB, and CLEP programs all use high-stakes examinations to measure student learning; often students must meet a certain score to pass these tests (3 on the AP, 4 on the IB, and 50 on the CLEP). College acceptance of exam results and awarding of credit for them also varies depending on institution, with some institutions accepting only the highest scores to award credit despite students passing the exam. In contrast, students participating in DE, CE, or ECM courses are evaluated based on the grade they earned upon completing the course. As college classes, these grades will be included in all future college GPA calculations. Students who enroll at a different institution than their DE, CE, or ECM institution will need to transfer these credits; credit transfers will also depend on individual institutional policies, may not transfer to all institutions, and/or count towards the student’s degree. Credit transfers may be particularly difficult to secure at Michigan’s more selective institutions.

Effective Implementation & Support

In addition to the program's educational experience, it is critical to understand the resources required for implementation and equitable accessibility. If students do not have the resources to access or succeed in the program, then the investments made will only reiterate the status quo: well-resourced students pulling ahead, leaving under-resourced students behind. Additionally, this will not improve cohort, district, or state educational attainment. In effect, underinvesting in programs can potentially render them ineffective.

Setting up and maintaining early credit programs that are aligned with specific goals for students takes significant and strategic investment of time, money, and space. Increasing program options does not automatically increase student participation or performance. For example, if the district would like to expose students to the collegiate environment, then they must invest in a DE opportunity that takes place on a college campus because other early credit programs would not expose students to college classrooms, teachers and students, and learning-styles. To ensure a diverse range of students can participate, the district and their partner institution also need to create safe, reliable transportation between the high school and college campuses. Setting up a college campus-centered program without transportation will limit the students who can participate, likely leaving out low-income students who may not have access to their own transportation.

Underinvestment in intentional recruiting efforts and holistic supports that remove barriers and cover all costs associated with participating in programs help explain why white, middle-class, and academically advanced students are over-represented in early credit programs. In that vein, researchers have found that the focus on rigor rather than student success undermined the achievement of students of color in EMCS. To make early credit opportunities more equitable, direct and conscientious efforts need to be made to identify and remove barriers for students who are underrepresented.
Time, space, and resources are concerns for all early credit programs. Separate programming for a select group of students takes away some time, space, or resources that could be used for other pursuits. Creating multiple early credit program options may seem beneficial but may also stretch limited resources across programming needs and leave students and educators without the adequate supports they need to thrive in the program. To create a successful early college program, students and educators need a depth of support rather than a breadth of options. AP, IB, CE, and ECM programs all require high school educators to attain additional training and potentially reorganize their teaching approaches. For example, IB centers project-based learning within its curriculum, asking educators to design lessons around student participation rather than moving through content. To successfully implement this model, classrooms may need to be adjusted, additional resources for projects acquired, and teachers may need time to adjust their teaching style and lesson plans. In short, providing high quality early credit programming is resource intensive and must be done intentionally. If programs are established without sufficient supports, they are unlikely to be successful and students are unlikely to reap the program’s benefits. In districts serving students of color and students from low-income families, doing so will only perpetuate current inequities in access, outcomes, and postsecondary preparation.

As We Plan Ahead...

Early credit research and policy resources to date have not focused squarely on program implementation; much work remains to identify, evaluate, and expand best practices for designing and implementing effective and equitable programs. However, all stakeholders involved in developing, funding, and maintaining early credit programs must consider the options for designing an equitable program that aligns with their long-term goals for students. The considerations below are drawn from what has been covered by the early credit research to date and, while not exhaustive, can serve as a starting point for those in the selection, planning, and implementation process.

Students will benefit tremendously if schools, districts, and institutional partners start building and maintaining early credit programming with racial and economic equity at the center, and with specific, targeted program goals for student outcomes that can be directly tied to the design and functions of the programs. In general, but especially before a new program is established, schools, districts, and institutional partners should evaluate their current programming by interviewing educators and students about their experiences with the program. They should focus on identifying current costs, whether and what additional resources may be helpful, and administrative changes that could make the program more accessible to historically underserved students and more supportive of the holistic student. Following that intentional assessment, key considerations for anyone making decisions about how to design and implement early credit programming include:

1. Develop specific, targeted goals for program and student outcomes and align these goals with the type of programming that best supports that goal.
2. Design recruitment, enrollment, and student support strategies to ensure that historically underrepresented students have access to and can succeed in early credit programs. Importantly, research underscores the need to pivot recruitment and enrollment processes from prioritizing academic rigor to prioritizing accessibility to address systemic inequities in program participation.
3. Secure adequate resources and staff support to aid program implementation, maintenance, and student success. Table 4 shows investments districts and higher education partners should consider.
4. Provide students with adequate advising to help them understand their program opportunities and limitations, as well as any long-term implications of program participation they should be aware of (such as impacts on college GPA and credit transfers). This counseling should also help students to align classes with their long-term educational and career aspirations.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Investment</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
<td>□ What holistic support do students need to be able to access, persist, and succeed in the program?(^\text{ixi})</td>
<td>□ Does the program connect students with counselors or advisers who can help students identify ways to balance academic demands and still find time to participate in social activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
<td>□ Do class times and scheduling processes need to be adjusted to provide adequate time for the program's demands e.g. transportation/buses?</td>
<td>□ Are students and staff still struggling to adapt to new expectations for their learning halfway through the year? Is this to be expected? Or should other resources and support be provided to aid their adjustment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space</strong></td>
<td>□ Do classrooms need to be set aside or updated to meet the program's demands?</td>
<td>□ Are science and technology classrooms equipped with the materials, tools, and equipment to complete hands-on experiments and appropriate project-based learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transportation</strong></td>
<td>□ Do we need to provide transportation, e.g. off campus transportation needs?</td>
<td>□ When will students be able to receive transportation between campuses? Will there be specific drop-off/pick-up times? How will this be communicated to students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personnel</strong></td>
<td>□ Are the personnel at the school committed to implementing the new program? Do staff support the new programming? Do they have any concerns about the new programming?</td>
<td>□ Do staff have enough capacity to help manage the new program? If not, do we need to hire someone with a specific skillset to manage this program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training</strong></td>
<td>□ Do we need to find and provide training to staff and/or students to meet the programs demands?</td>
<td>□ Do staff need to attend an AP, IB, or other training session to adequately teach the curriculum?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
<td>□ Are there any additional materials we will need to provide staff and/or students to support the program e.g. books, technology, materials, or equipment?</td>
<td>□ Will schools, districts, or partner institutions provide all the resources students need or will they depend on parents and families to supplement student materials and resources?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equity</strong></td>
<td>□ Are adequate supports in place to ensure that any student, regardless of their personal backgrounds, can equitably take advantage of the program?</td>
<td>□ If the program set-up's external costs will be left to the family, will there be resources set aside for need-based support to ensure low-income students can participate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td>□ Does your budget cover not only the program but any additional supports needed for students and staff to ensure success?</td>
<td>□ Do you believe the program would be lucrative for your community, but you need additional funding to make it happen? Are there partnerships or additional funding opportunities available that you can take advantage of?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additionally, maximizing the efficiency of credit transfers and reducing the long-term cost of college will require the state, with the partnership of institutions and program administrators, to focus on improving transfer and articulation agreements. Florida, Indiana, and Kentucky all have state agreements regarding the number of transfer credits students can earn at any public institution based on completing and passing an AP/IB/CLEP exam and/or a DE/CE/EMC course. To help mold these conversations and support schools, districts, and partner institutions in considering their strategies, the new Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Attainment and Potential (MILEAP) should take a leading role. Additionally, MILEAP should work with districts and higher education institutions to create stronger transfer and articulation agreements to help make these programs a worthwhile investment for students.

Continuing to proliferate early college credit opportunities without careful, strategic aims will perpetuate the inefficient use of resources as well as confusion among students and families, and it undermine progress toward the goals the state and the districts share to provide meaningful opportunities to be exposed to and accumulate college credit while still enrolled in high school.

Endnotes


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Early Postsecondary Credit Programs: Aligning Goals and Strategies for Success


