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Report finds room to increase number of high school students who take college classes

OLYMPIA – Offering qualified students more college-level course work in high school is one way to improve college-completion rates and create more room in college classrooms, according to a new policy brief prepared by the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB).

The paper, titled “Advance Placement and College Credit,” examines the potential impact that increased access to Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school could have on the number of Washington students working toward postsecondary degrees and certificates. The paper is available at: www.hecb.wa.gov/sites/default/files/AP-FTE-PolicyBrief.pdf.

AP classes involve more rigorous coursework than normally is included in a high school class. After completing an AP course, a student can take a test administered by The College Board that determines his or her proficiency in that subject area. Test results, as well as policies at individual colleges and universities, determine the number of college credits a student may receive for taking an AP class.

Based on student performance on national pre-college tests, an HECB analysis found that expanding AP class availability could produce an additional 5,193 to 5,873 full-time equivalent (FTE) students who are essentially working on a college degree or certificate while still in high school.

A similar number of FTE students (5,200) actually earned college credits through AP exams in 2010-11. That figure is nearly equal to the average FTE enrollment at a state community college, the HECB policy brief notes.

College enrollments often are expressed in FTEs rather than actual headcounts because not all students take a full-time credit load.

“Overall, the analysis indicates that we could double the number of FTE credits earned through AP courses and exams if courses and exams were more broadly available,” the report concludes.

The conclusion has implications for students and families looking for ways to trim college costs at a time of increasing tuition costs, and for policymakers looking for ways to meet the state’s goal of increased degree production in a time of shrinking state budgets.

Although students must pay to take an AP examination to be eligible for college credit, the cost is substantially less than the tuition required to take an equivalent class in college. The fee for the exam is \$87 per test and, with waivers and state support, students with demonstrated financial need may pay as little as \$5 per test.

Students who earn college credits while in high school also gain greater flexibility in course selection later, and they may graduate sooner, further reducing college expenses and making room for other students who follow them, according to Randy Spaulding, HECB Director of Academic Affairs, who authored the policy brief.

The Launch Year Act (E2SHB 1808), passed by the Legislature earlier this year, is intended to expand the availability of high school programs such as AP and International Baccalaureate (IB), which offer college credit to high school students.

The Act directs the state's public high schools to work toward the goal of enabling students to earn the equivalent of one year's worth of postsecondary credit while still in high school.

By Dec. 1, 2011, and by June of each odd-numbered year thereafter, public colleges and universities must develop a master list of postsecondary courses that can be fulfilled by taking the AP, IB, or other recognized exam, and achieving a score qualifying a student for college credit.

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction will distribute the list to school districts, and the HECB will annually publish the list on its website, as well as the exam scores needed to meet college-credit requirements.

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