



# Leveraging Digital Innovation in College Admissions and Dual Enrollment

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ITHACA S+R

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# Introduction

Many selective colleges and universities are considering alternate strategies to enroll diverse student bodies following the 2023 US Supreme Court ruling against race-conscious admissions.<sup>1</sup> Developing high-quality online courses for college credit, and offering them to students at lower-income high schools in a hybrid format, has the potential to both increase the pool of well-prepared, diverse high school graduates and create a direct recruitment pipeline for these institutions, and others.

Since Fall 2023, Ithaka S+R, the National Education Equity Lab, and Stanford University have collaborated on Digital Innovation for Equity & Excellence in College Admissions (DIEECA)—a community of practice to support colleges and universities in the American Talent Initiative (ATI) in pursuing this strategy.<sup>2</sup>

This issue brief provides an overview of dual enrollment, the DIEECA community, and emerging themes from institutions pursuing this work.

## State of the Field: Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment—programs where high school students can enroll in college coursework—can serve as a powerful onramp into college. Dual enrollment programs are widespread, with more than 1.5 million students annually enrolled in such courses, and this number continues to grow.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Catharine Bond Hill, Martin Kurzweil, and Eugene Tobin, “Alternative Strategies to Support a Diverse Study Body,” *Ithaka S+R*, 10 February 2023, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/alternative-strategies-to-support-a-diverse-student-body/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Digital Innovation for Equity & Excellence in College Admissions,” *Ithaka S+R*, <https://sr.ithaka.org/digital-innovation-for-equity-excellence-in-college-admissions/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Understanding Dual Enrollment: Policy Fact Sheet,” Community College Research Center, Columbia University, April 2024,

While dual enrollment varies in program features such as enrollment procedures, credit offering, modality, location, and instruction types, the approach centers on students taking actual college courses while in high school and often involves the partnership between a high school and a higher education institution.

Dual enrollment gives students the opportunity to acclimate to college academic expectations and environments, receive college credit, and gain a head start in their postsecondary journey. Dual enrollment courses are shown to have positive effects on students' high school academic achievement and completion, credit accumulation, and college access and degree attainment.<sup>4</sup> Students who participate in these programs are more likely to attend college and complete their degrees more quickly than their non-participating peers.<sup>5</sup> Dual enrollment can also help students reduce their financial burden by enabling them to earn college credits in a more affordable way and potentially get on a faster track to completing their credential. Moreover, participation in dual enrollment coursework can positively impact students from lower-income backgrounds and students of color. Students from lower-income households who participate in such courses are 10 percent more likely to attend college after high school than their non-participating peers.<sup>6</sup>

Dual enrollment courses are shown to have positive effects on students' high school academic achievement and completion, credit accumulation, and college access and degree attainment.

However, there are also widespread equity gaps in accessing dual enrollment coursework. Access to dual enrollment varies widely by school characteristics such as locale and proportions of lower-income students and students of color. Students from rural and urban communities tend to

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<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/understanding-dual-enrollment.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> "WWC Intervention Report: A Summary of Findings from a Systematic Review of the Evidence," *What Works Clearinghouse, US Department of Education*, February 2017, [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc\\_dual\\_enrollment\\_022817.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/InterventionReports/wwc_dual_enrollment_022817.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "NACEP Fast Facts," National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, <https://www.nacep.org/resource-center/nacep-fast-facts/>.

<sup>6</sup> "NACEP Fast Facts," National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, <https://www.nacep.org/resource-center/nacep-fast-facts/>.

have less access to dual enrollment coursework as compared to town and suburban locales.<sup>7</sup> High schools with higher rates of poverty are 19 percent less likely to offer dual enrollment than high schools with lower rates of poverty.<sup>8</sup> This further exacerbates systemic racial inequities as low-income high schools serve a higher proportion of students who are Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous. First-generation students, students with disabilities, and English language learners are also underrepresented in dual enrollment.<sup>9</sup>

These equity gaps highlight a national opportunity to revamp dual enrollment programs to ensure that the higher education system in America serves all talented students from across our society.

These equity gaps highlight a national opportunity to revamp dual enrollment programs to ensure that the higher education system in America serves all talented students from across our society, regardless of their backgrounds, families' circumstances, or zip codes. Equity-centered dual enrollment programs have the potential to bridge these gaps and contribute to greater socioeconomic mobility and racial equity.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Gagnon, Jing Liu, and Trudy Cherasaro, "Understanding Access to and Participation in Dual Enrollment by Locale and Income Level," *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance at the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)*, May 2021, [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL\\_2021089.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2021089.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> "Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty and Smaller Schools Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College," *United States Government Accountability Office*, October 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-8.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> John Fink, "How Many Schools in Your State Shut Out Students From Dual Enrollment or AP?" *Community College Research Center, Columbia University*, 10 November 2021, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/schools-dual-enrollment-ap.html>.

# Leveraging Digital Innovation in Dual Enrollment

The inaugural 2023-24 cohort of the Digital Innovation for Equity & Excellence in College Admissions (DIEECA) community consists of 12 highly selective institutions from ATI. Participating institutions are committed to recruiting high school students from high-quality, credit-bearing online courses delivered in low-income-serving high schools, and many of the participants are designing and delivering those courses. Ithaka S+R, Stanford University, and the National Education Equity Lab serve as the organizers for the cohort, supporting institutions in utilizing dual enrollment digital education programs as an equity-driven model for college readiness, recruitment, admissions, and academic progression.

Over the course of the year, admissions leaders and digital innovation leaders at each DIEECA institution collaborated with each other and the organizing partners in a series of engagements to plan, develop, and implement at least one of the following strategies at their institution:

1. **Recruit talented high school students newly identified through innovative digital programs, like National Education Equity Lab and OnRamps.**<sup>10</sup> By identifying talented students who participate in these programs and/or partnering with Title I high schools nationwide that offer such programs, institutions can broaden their recruitment pipeline.
2. **Help more students develop and demonstrate their college readiness by offering high-quality, college credit-bearing courses for high school students at low-income high schools.** If more institutions offer these classes to students from low-income high schools, more students will be ready for college. In doing so, institutions can build a direct recruitment pipeline with partnered high schools and diversify the admissions pool.
3. **Recognize student performance in these courses, both in admissions and in credit transfer earned.** Institutions can take into account students' performances in high-quality, college credit-bearing digital education courses in the admissions process as a

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<sup>10</sup> "OnRamps," The University of Texas at Austin, <https://onramps.utexas.edu/>.

metric for college readiness and identifying talent that might otherwise be overlooked. Institutions can also explore potential changes to the institution's policy to recognize and award college credits to newly matriculated students who passed a credit-bearing course while in high school.

## **Emerging Themes from the DIEECA Cohort**

On March 26, 2024, colleges and universities participating in the DIEECA cohort convened at Stanford University for a full day, in-person meeting to share their institutions' implementation plans related to the three DIEECA strategies, receive tailored guidance from experts in the field, and connect with peer institutions in the cohort. Four categories of key themes emerged from this meeting which are synthesized below.

### **Developing Personae to Cater to Student Needs**

As DIEECA institutions engage in their work, they have found it helpful to develop various student personae to organize the design process. Considering different student perspectives and college-going experiences has helped to tailor programs to the types of support necessary to effectively address a diverse range of college aspirations, preparedness, and needs. For example, four different personae members of the group have found helpful include:

1. Students who have the talent and ability to excel in a selective institution, but who do not seek admission for various reasons. This can include a lack of exposure to selective institutions and feeling as if they do belong there, in addition to insufficient financial resources.
2. Students who are highly engaged and intentional about utilizing resources to gain admissions to selective institutions. These students tend to be proactive and often possess the academic skills and ambition necessary to succeed at highly selective

colleges. However, these students face the risk of undermatching and may attend institutions below their qualifications. Access to dual enrollment digital education courses provides these students the opportunity to take advanced coursework that better align with their aspirations, enabling them to better demonstrate their admissibility to selective colleges and prepare for rigorous courses once they're on campus.

3. College-going students who may need more structured support to navigate the college application process and understand their postsecondary options. These students may aim for less-demanding institutions, but with proper support, they can be empowered and equipped to reach colleges that better match their academic potential. Dual enrollment digital education courses can help these students build a robust academic profile, making them more competitive applicants.
4. Students who may not be college-going, but can still benefit significantly from meaningful academic experiences. For these students, dual enrollment digital education programs can offer courses that spark interest or provide practical skills, enriching their educational journey regardless of whether they pursue a postsecondary degree.

These student personas may be further distinguished by their motivations for participating in dual enrollment digital education programs. Some students may primarily want to use course participation to demonstrate admissibility and college readiness, while others may primarily want college credit to ease into their first semester of college or complete their degree sooner. Considering the students' goals and desired outcomes is an important factor in establishing systems of support for these different personas.

Digital education programs can promote shifts in mindsets that can be transformative for all participating students. For instance, several students who participated in the National Education Equity Lab courses highlighted the value of learning how to ask for help, recognizing that they're responsible for their own educational path, and building confidence through the coursework.

In addressing diverse student personas and needs, it is imperative to offer a broad spectrum of support that caters to each student persona and their contexts—state to state, district to district, and school to school. It's



important for institutions to consider: What kind of value do we offer to each of these personas? What college options can we provide to help meet the students where they are? How do we create resources to support these personas specifically? Institutions ought to take a collective approach to create support systems for diverse student needs and match students with a wide range of postsecondary institutions by providing equitable access to high-quality learning experiences.

## **Data and Outcomes**

Taking a data-informed approach is essential for developing dual enrollment digital education programs, as it enables institutions to identify effective strategies, inform best practices, and scale promising programs. There is a significant data opportunity to gain insights on student outcomes as DIEECA cohort institutions work towards leveraging digital education programs to recruit, assess, and support academic progression. By evaluating their current data practices, considering ways to optimize data collection and analysis processes, and building a robust data infrastructure, institutions can effectively track and improve student progress and outcomes. For instance, one DIEECA cohort institution is planning to modify its Common Application form by adding a field that asks about student participation in digital education programs such as National Education Equity Lab and OnRamps. These data can provide valuable information on the impact of these programs on college readiness and students' admissibility.

Across the DIEECA cohort, institutions may also consider sharing aggregate student data and participating in collaborative research efforts to understand the efficacy, experiences, and outcomes of the dual enrollment digital education programs. With the first cohort of National Education Equity Lab students graduating from college this year, institutions are primed to gain valuable insights in the near term. Furthermore, demonstrating the effectiveness of these programs through data can help institutions showcase the return on investment and build a compelling case for continued investment in these dual enrollment digital education courses.

## Innovation Unlocked

Members observed that offering hybrid courses for high school students has fostered a beneficial “reverse innovation,” where an innovation initially developed for one context is adapted in another context. For instance, a physics professor for an OnRamps course collaborated with 165 high school teachers to receive valuable feedback on ways to improve the course. This feedback loop not only improves the learning experience for high school students, but it also enriches the professor's teaching methods and materials, benefiting their college students as well.

In another form of innovation, institutions may consider a student's successful completion of rigorous dual enrollment digital education courses as an alternative metric for assessing college readiness. While this approach requires a high degree of confidence in student outcomes backed up by data, in essence, student performance in such courses can provide information on a student's academic preparedness beyond standardized tests, test-alternative admissions policies and other advanced coursework (such as AP or IB) in making college admissions decisions.

By creating scalable and sustainable models that focus on equitable access and success, we can continue to build on the progress made in promoting diversity in higher education over the past few decades.

In addition, there may be a creative opportunity for high schools and postsecondary institutions to collaboratively establish clear credit articulation standards and build smooth credit transfer pathways through dual enrollment digital education programs. Such efforts are particularly important in a post-affirmative action landscape, where maintaining diversity through legally and morally defensible means is vital. By creating scalable and sustainable models that focus on equitable access and success, we can continue to build on the progress made in promoting diversity in higher education over the past few decades.

## Collaborative Opportunities

As we look to build and enhance dual enrollment digital education programs, fostering collaboration amongst institutions rather than competition is crucial. During the March meeting, DIEECA institutions indicated a high appetite and interest in “radical” collaboration opportunities to work within and across institutions in a more effective, coordinated way.

Within an institution, strengthening the connective tissue between the admissions office and digital learning office will facilitate the development of a synergistic, scalable dual enrollment digital education program. Engaging institutional leaders, departmental stakeholders, and faculty are necessary to the success of these programs.

Across the DIEECA cohort, institutions may look to develop and implement a shared curriculum. For example, one institution may want to offer a psychology course but lack sufficient student demand, while another institution may have student demand but doesn’t intend to offer the course. Sharing courses or curricula amongst institutions, as well as sharing institutional resources such as teaching fellows<sup>11</sup>, can benefit all institutions involved, address institution-specific resource and capacity limitations, and offer high-quality digital education programs to high school students more widely.

In such collaborative efforts, organizations that partner with higher education institutions to deliver and support college credit-bearing courses, such as the National Education Equity Lab and OnRamps, provide valuable blueprints and infrastructure, resources, and learned expertise in jumpstarting institutional efforts. Strategic research organizations, like Ithaka S+R can help serve as the organizing body for collaborative efforts, providing strategic guidance, coordination, and tools to ensure successful implementation and scaling of dual enrollment digital education programs across multiple institutions, as well as cross-institution research to evaluate best practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Teaching fellows in the United States are often graduate students with variable teaching and research roles depending on their institution.

# What's Next

As colleges and universities navigate the changing landscape, particularly with the end of race-conscious admissions, the need for innovative strategies to diversify campuses has never been more urgent. Dual enrollment programs that leverage digital innovation offer a powerful solution, providing equitable access and opportunities for high-achieving students from all backgrounds. The collaborative efforts of the DIEECA cohort highlight the potential of targeting high school students in low-income, community-serving schools to identify and recruit a more diverse pool of talented students, thereby expanding equitable access to higher education.

Over the coming months, DIEECA cohort members will finalize their implementation plans and begin to initiate implementation programming at their institutions. Cohort members might also consider applying this summer to receive two-year grants of \$250,000 or \$500,000 from the ATI IDEAS (Innovation Driven by Evidence-Based and Advanced Strategies) Fund to implement and scale their innovative, strategic projects aimed to increase the number of lower-income students at their institution.

As these institutions collaborate to implement innovative strategies, they pave the way for a more inclusive future in higher education. By investing in dual enrollment digital education programs, colleges and universities can create meaningful change, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

*The DIEECA cohort would not be possible without the many individuals who devote their time, energy, and expertise to the collaborative effort, including Cappy Hill, Martin Kurzweil, and Carmen Araoz of Ithaka S+R, Matthew Rascoff of Stanford University, and Leslie Cornfeld and Laura Moore of the National Education Equity Lab. We extend our deepest gratitude to their dedication to serving on the DIEECA leadership team and their ongoing work to advance access, success, and equity in higher education.*