ONLINE, ON PURPOSE

A Framework for Building
Impactful Dual Enrollment Experiences
Through Online College Courses

NACEP

Amy Williams | National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) | June 2025

GUIDING QUALITY WHERE IT MATTERS MOST

The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) is the national leader in ensuring quality across dual and concurrent enrollment programs. Since 1999, NACEP has provided guidance, expertise, and accountability for this unique and growing sector of education. Dual enrollment programs don't fit neatly within traditional definitions of either high school or college; instead, they occupy a shared space with their own complexities, overlapping policies, and distinct needs. To help programs thrive in this complex space, NACEP offers the structure, support, and strategic guidance needed to deliver high-quality dual enrollment experiences.

To ensure programs thrive, NACEP provides:

- **Clear, field-tested standards** for program quality
- **Technical assistance** rooted in research and practice
- **Professional development** for K-12 and college professionals
- **Policy guidance** to align state systems with program needs

Online learning introduces new opportunities—but also distinct risks when poorly implemented or minimally supported. The allure of expanding dual enrollment through online college courses is strong. However, given the variable outcomes associated with online learning, there is ample reason to proceed with care and intention. NACEP is uniquely positioned to guide the field with research-informed, field-tested strategies for implementing online college courses in dual enrollment and to support institutions in putting those strategies into practice to improve student outcomes.

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ONLINE, ON PURPOSE QUICK REFERENCE

There are five essential elements to building an impactful dual enrollment program using online college courses: provider, partnership, model, supports, and engagement. Use this summary as a quick reference to guide your collaborative conversations.

PROVIDER: Work with a Legitimate, High-Quality Provider

Understanding the types of providers, their standard practices, and how receiving institutions evaluate transfer credit is essential to ensuring students have access to meaningful dual enrollment opportunities. Take time to carefully evaluate providers based on course quality, institutional legitimacy, and alignment with college-level expectations.

- **Avoid providers with red flags:** Watch for signs such as lack of accreditation, limited faculty oversight, or unclear student support structures, all of which can signal lower quality and create risks for students.
- **Check on credit transfer:** Ask about credit acceptance to ensure college credits are useful to students, recognized by other colleges, and applicable to degree pathways.
- **Use cataloged college courses:** Ensure courses are part of the institution's official catalog and included in appropriate degree programs rather than standalone offerings with limited applicability.
- **Use authentic college practices:** Look for providers that follow standard college processes, including formal enrollment or registration, syllabus distribution, standard grading policies, and official transcript recording.
- **Review instructor qualifications:** Confirm that instructors meet the necessary qualifications established by relevant entities, such as the college, school district, or accrediting body, for delivering both high school and college-level instruction
- **Start with in-state options:** In-state providers may be more likely to align with state funding policies and could have stronger articulation agreements for credit transfer.

PARTNERSHIP: Build a Proactive Partnership

Before building online college courses into a dual enrollment program, schools and providers should explore key questions to define the function of the partnership, establish clear expectations, and solidify details through formal agreements.

- **Clarify cost and funding responsibilities:** Determine who is responsible for tuition, fees, materials, and other expenses, and whether state support and funding apply.
- **Establish communication channels and timelines:** Outline how school leadership, counselors, students, parents, and other stakeholders will receive updates and ensure that check-ins and progress monitoring are built into the partnership.
- **Define roles and responsibilities:** Strong partnerships have a clear and consistent understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Identify who provides advising, manages enrollment, tracks progress, and supports students to prevent confusion and ensure accountability.
- **Verify technology compatibility:** Confirm that district devices and IT systems support the provider's learning platform. If courses are taken during the school day at the school, ensure that students can access all required materials without restrictions or limitations.

MODEL: Choose the Right Instructional Model

Selecting the right instructional model is critical to meeting student needs while aligning with school resources. Carefully evaluate the options and choose the best fit for their learners and program goals.

- **Synchronous plus (live instruction, on-site support):** Students participate in live, remote instruction from a designated classroom with an on-site facilitator providing support.
- **Synchronous (live instruction):** Students engage in real-time, virtual classes from any location.
- **Hybrid (blended synchronous and asynchronous):** Students experience a mix of live instruction and independent coursework, which may occur within or outside of the school day.
- **Asynchronous (structured, not scheduled):** Use with caution. Students move through course materials, lectures, and assignments on their own schedule, within structured course deadlines.

SUPPORT: Provide Academic and Non-Academic Support

Student success is more than mastering course content. Look for opportunities to supplement or support learners' online experience within and outside the high school setting. Proactive planning and building thoughtful support systems keep students engaged and on track.

- **Academic supports:** Explore ways the partnership can offer academic advising, early alerts, tutoring access, progress monitoring, structured check-ins, and office hours to help students stay on pace and succeed in their courses.
- **Non-academic supports:** Determine who will provide IT and tech troubleshooting, accessibility services, support enrollment and payment assistance, and provide guidance on transcripts and credit transfer to remove logistical barriers for students.

ENGAGEMENT: Prioritize Student and Parent Engagement

To set students up for success, onboarding and family communication should be built into the program. Communicate early and appropriately, providing clear information about course expectations, available support, and what students can expect from the online college experience.

- **Require student orientation:** Introduce students to platform navigation, course expectations, and time management. Include parents when possible.
- **Host parent information sessions:** Offer virtual sessions to explain the nature of college coursework, support resources, and how families can stay involved.
- **Distribute a "what to expect" guide:** Provide a clear, accessible guide covering platform access, communication tools, billing, grading, and progress tracking.
- **Clarify FERPA:** Explain privacy limitations and offer optional ways for families to stay informed about student progress.
- **Set expectations for college-level content:** Inform families that course content is unmodified and may include mature topics aligned with college standards.
- **Send timely reminders:** Use school-friendly tools to share updates, deadlines, and important academic milestones with both students and families.
- **Coordinate ongoing communication:** Ensure regular updates from both the school and provider to support organization, accountability, and informed decision-making.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Meeting the Moment

Dual enrollment programs are popular, impactful, and expanding across the country. This growth extends to online college courses taken by high school students, often for dual credit. Online delivery accounts for a significant share of dual enrollment offerings in some states and at some institutions. As this practice expands, secondary and postsecondary partners play a crucial role in ensuring these opportunities are high quality, accessible, and beneficial for students.

Terms used in this resource:

We use dual enrollment as a broad term that encompasses the various types of programs that provide early access to college courses for high school students. This aligns with terminology used by the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, which defines dual enrollment as high school students enrolled in college courses for credit, regardless of delivery mode, location, instructor type, or whether students receive secondary credit.

This paper discusses online college courses used by school districts to provide high school students with dual credit (both high school and college credit). While some refer to these as "online dual enrollment" courses, NACEP prefers more precise language. These are typically standard college courses that are open to all students and used by high school students and/or schools to expand dual enrollment offerings. They are generally not exclusive online courses created solely for high school students.

Efforts to expand access to college courses in high school settings through concurrent enrollment often stall due to a shortage of qualified high school instructors. At the root of this issue is the mismatch between the education and training needed to teach in high school and college settings, which differ significantly. High school teachers are typically trained in pedagogy, developmental psychology, instructional design, differentiated instruction, and classroom management. In contrast, college faculty preparation often emphasizes disciplinary expertise and academic research, with less emphasis on formal training in teaching methods. This underlying disconnect becomes quite pronounced in dual enrollment, where instructors are expected to meet college adjunct qualifications to teach concurrent enrollment. This staffing challenge is common across the country and often particularly acute in rural and under resourced school districts, making online college courses an appealing alternative for expanding access to high school based dual enrollment opportunities.

NACEP endorses in-person instruction as the first and best choice for students but recognizes that online courses can provide important options when credentialed instructors are unavailable. Research suggests that when online learning is poorly implemented, inconsistently supported, or misaligned with student needs, it can negatively affect both short- and long-term outcomes. The growing use of online college courses in dual enrollment underscores the need for a clear framework to support high-quality, impactful implementation.

This resource offers a research-informed, field-tested framework grounded in NACEP's national expertise to help secondary and postsecondary partners build impactful online college courses into dual enrolment experiences.

What are "credentialed dual enrollment instructors" or "credentialed teachers?"

These phrases are often used in the field of dual enrollment, but there's no formal definition. In application, it means that the high school instructor teaching the college course has the degrees, credentials, and/or experience required by the partner college for the course. Typically, the teacher must meet or exceed the requirements for teaching the same course on the college campus. Requirements can vary by state, by institutional accreditor, and by the type of course (general education or career and technical skills courses). Credentialling requirements may also vary by the institution or department. *Building a Concurrent Enrollment Teacher Pipeline: Opportunities, Challenges, and Lessons* provides a thoughtful exploration of this challenge unique to concurrent enrollment.

A Unique Opportunity

Online college courses are credit-bearing classes offered through virtual platforms. They may be asynchronous, synchronous, or a blend of both. When used in dual enrollment, these courses allow high school students to access college instruction beyond the walls of their school, expanding access to advanced coursework, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, or when a qualified instructor isn't available locally.

Offering an online college course through a dual enrollment program isn't just about handing students a login and hoping for the best. Students new to online learning benefit from intentional, well-coordinated support. Because dual enrollment students remain connected to their high school's systems and routines, there's a clear opportunity for high school and college partners to work together to provide additional structures that promote student success. With thoughtful coordination, students gain more than credit: they build confidence, strengthen academic and interpersonal skills, and begin to see themselves as capable college learners.

A high-quality dual enrollment program ensures students experience authentic, rigorous college learning with the support they need to thrive. As online options grow, it's essential that programs apply the same focus on quality, alignment, and student support as they would for in-person dual enrollment.

The universe of online options is vast. The challenge lies not just in selecting a provider or course, but in ensuring that options include support, align with student goals, and lead to valuable college credit and meaningful learning. Fortunately, this is an area where NACEP has deep national expertise.

NACEP's View of the Online Course Landscape

These programs exist in a unique "shared space" between secondary and postsecondary education. They're neither fully high school nor fully college, but a blend of both, which requires thoughtful alignment, shared responsibility, and intentional design.

Online, remote, and distance education options have existed for decades but have evolved substantially in the last decade. The shift to temporary online learning due to the pandemic further expanded student exposure to online options of varying quality across the K-12 and higher education landscape. In addition to reviewing and compiling program practices in use across the nation, we have relied on the expertise of other organizations, such as Quality Matters and the Online Learning Consortium. We have also integrated success strategies elevated by the work of others, particularly the DEEP Framework from the Community College Research Center and Zinth Consulting.

NACEP encounters three types of providers in the online space.

PROVIDER TYPES

Traditional Colleges and Universities

Offer online courses in addition to on-campus offerings for students. Some may have very robust options, including fully online degree programs

Examples:
Nearly every college or university in the nation offers some content in an online format

Considerations:
Traditional colleges with established dual enrollment programs typically have a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities in offering in-person dual enrollment. These types of institutions have well-established processes for course quality assurance. This knowledge is very helpful when establishing a partnership to offer online college courses to high school students. When exploring providers, ask about how online instructors are trained and supported to ensure the impact of online education to determine how specialized or experienced faculty are in online learning.

Course Sharing Platforms

Companies or organizations serve as brokers for online college courses from colleges and universities. Course sharing allows students to take courses from other institutions when they are unavailable at their home college or when they need it.

Examples:
Parchment Pathways Course Staring, WICHE Online Course Exchange, Acadeum

Considerations:
Course sharing platforms work with a wide variety of higher education institutions to broker courses with open seats from different institutions. The process often includes common pricing agreements, and courses may be less expensive than other providers as a result. Because you're working with a broker and likely not the institution directly, it may be difficult to establish an actual partnership with shared responsibilities that meets the recommendations in this framework.

Fully Online Colleges and Universities

Institutions of higher education that primarily offer full degrees through online courses and may not have a physical campus.

Examples:
Southern New Hampshire University, Western Governors University, Purdue Global, University of Maryland Global Campus

Considerations:
When reviewing a potential provider, it should be evident how they work to ensure student learning through specialized instruction and support. Some of these institutions have partnerships with local high schools to offer dual enrollment courses in person. Conversations with these providers should include their capacity to build robust partnerships aligned with the recommendations in this framework.

How to Use This Framework

Whether launching a new initiative or refining an existing one, programs can apply these recommendations to:

- evaluate potential providers and partnerships
- navigate the frequent questions and challenges unique to dual enrollment
- explore typical instructional models and how they're used in dual enrollment programs
- implement or expand academic and non-academic support
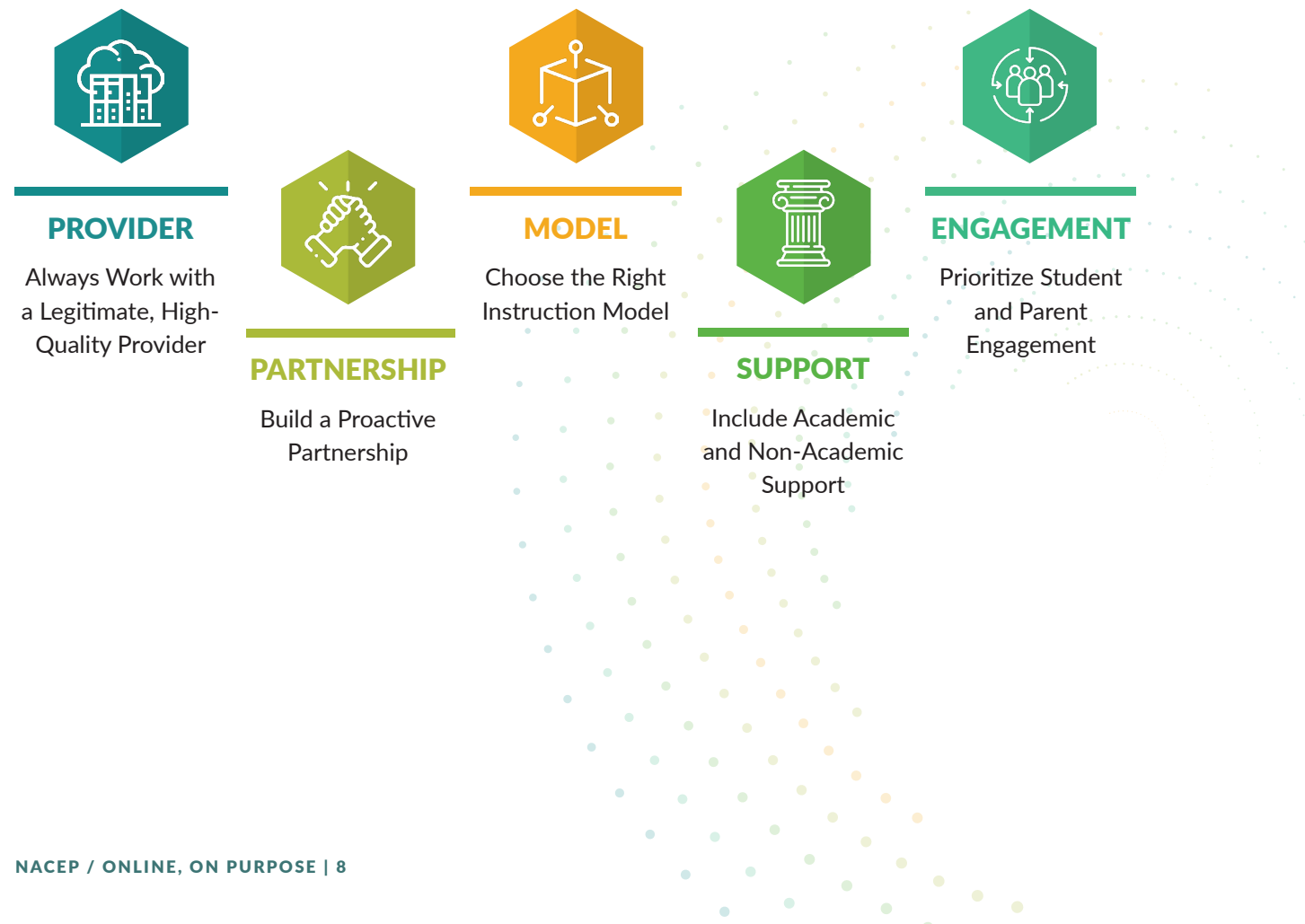- ensure early and ongoing communication with students and parents

ONLINE, ON PURPOSE FRAMEWORK

Five Essential Elements for Building Impactful Dual Enrollment Experiences Through Online College Courses

Our recommendations leverage NACEP's national standards for program quality and best practices for dual enrollment programs and apply them to the typical models in use across the nation. The practices we advise can apply to any program model, but specifically address using online college courses in high school settings. These five key elements help ensure that programs provide high school students with meaningful and impactful college experiences, providing strong preparation for postsecondary success.

PROVIDER
Always Work with a Legitimate, High-Quality Provider

PARTNERSHIP
Build a Proactive Partnership

MODEL
Choose the Right Instruction Model

SUPPORT
Include Academic and Non-Academic Support

ENGAGEMENT
Prioritize Student and Parent Engagement

PROVIDER: Work with a Legitimate, High-Quality Provider

To ensure students have access to useful dual enrollment opportunities, it's critical to understand the different types of providers, their standard practices, and how receiving institutions evaluate transfer credits. It's also important to evaluate providers on course quality, credit value, and institutional legitimacy, including alignment with typical college practices and expectations. Look for courses that are part of the institution's official catalog and included in appropriate degree programs rather than standalone offerings with limited applicability. Avoid for-profit institutions and work with established not-for-profit colleges and universities with experience in online education.

Below are additional considerations for finding and vetting a provider, ways to identify red flags, as well as some credit considerations that are unique in the dual enrollment space.

- **College credit portability:** Ask about credit acceptance to ensure the provider's credits are useful to students, recognized by other colleges, and applicable to degree pathways.

- **High school credit applicability:** Secondary leaders should verify that online college courses meet state and/or district requirements for awarding high school credit, particularly if it will be used to fulfill a graduation requirement. This may require reviewing course content, instructor qualifications, and determining high school credit equivalencies for college courses.

- **Authentic college practices:** Look for providers that follow standard college processes, including formal enrollment or registration, syllabus distribution, standard grading policies, and official transcript recording.

- **Start local:** The search for online learning options should start with what's available in the state or region, since they're more likely to align with state funding and program policies and have stronger articulation agreements for credit acceptance and transfer.

Explore Local and In-State Options First

The search for online learning options should start with what's available locally and within the state. Several statewide institutions, states, and organizations have increased access to college courses through remote and online learning options. These types of providers may have already integrated best practices for remote instruction and stress tested and resolved common challenges Examples include South Dakota's Governors Cyber Academy, Virtual Arkansas, Montana's Digital Academy, University System of Georgia eCore, and Idaho's Virtual Academy. Some institutions (Des Moines Area Community College) or institutional collaboratives (Indiana Online) feature their online options on their dual enrollment program website.

Identifying Provider Red Flags

Not all online offerings are created equal, and practices used by some may jeopardize credit transfer, student success, or even program credibility. Here are some red flags to consider when evaluating providers:

- **Is the course from an accredited degree-granting institution?** Ensure the course is offered by a degree-granting institution accredited by a U.S. Department of Education-recognized body. That will ensure the institution has undergone a rigorous external evaluation for quality and accountability. At the time of this publication, the U.S. Department of Education database lists all accredited institutions. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation also maintains an institutional database. Most institutions will also list their accreditor or accreditation status on their website.

  o Why does this matter? Receiving institutions determine whether they will accept credit transferred from another institution. Credit from non-accredited institution has a low likelihood of being accepted at another institution.

- **Does the course use standard college processes?** This includes using qualified instructors, having an enrollment and registration process, and generating a college transcript. Avoid unusual practices like retroactive credit, which is credit awarded after the fact without the student being enrolled at the time of learning.

  o Why does this matter? The more a course diverges from typical college processes, the more scrutiny a receiving institution is likely to give the course when students transfer. Colleges and universities may reject or question credits awarded under odd circumstances or through atypical processes.

- **Does the institution accept its own credits awarded through online offerings?** Any college that offers online courses should accept the credits within the appropriate degree program. Online courses should exist within the institution's catalog as standard options available to any student. Colleges may offer continuing education or non-degree online courses that may not count toward a degree. When in doubt, check with the institution.

  o Why does this matter? If a college refuses to accept its own online credits, it suggests the courses may not meet academic standards or won't count toward a degree or credential.

College Credit Portability

Typically, credits from college courses taken in high school are well accepted at U.S. colleges and universities. A recent report on dual enrollment activities at accredited degree-granting institutions found that 98% accept credits from students who took the courses while in high school. Courses regularly transfer the same way they would if they were taken after high school graduation.

Receiving institutions determine credit acceptance, and typically post their policies on the admissions or transfer student sections of their websites. Ask whether the provider has a publicly available tool to look up transfer agreements and equivalencies with other institutions. Some receiving institutions provide these tools as well, and it's worth reviewing how other institutions in the region view credit coming from a potential provider institution

The University of Connecticut Office of Early College Experience (UConn ECE) maintains a database of nearly 1,000 institutions that notes the likelihood of credit acceptance—and in many instances, links to the actual institution policy. The Credit Transfer Database includes options to search by institution name, state, star rating, and institution type. Each institution has a star ranking indicating the likelihood of credit acceptance based on published policy and/or direct reporting from former dual enrollment students. UConn ECE updates the database every other year and as it receives requests for additions. Information is subject to change, without notice. The database is a guide and doesn't guarantee the success of credit transfer. Caveats aside, the UConn ECE Credit Transfer Database is a useful tool to learn about the credit transfer landscape from students who have navigated the process. Even if the desired institution isn't in the database, it can help students and families better understand language to look for as they assess credit acceptance.

Rare but Real: Institutions with Restrictive Credit Acceptance Policies

- Although it varies, most U.S. military academies, many highly selective universities, and some private colleges may not accept any credits earned in high school.

  o This includes college credit earned through dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB).

- Admissions offices at highly selective institutions generally view college courses through dual enrollment and AP/IB exam scores as academically equivalent. Advanced coursework is seen as a strong indicator that a student has pursued rigorous learning opportunities.

- Some receiving institutions may ask for details about the course to determine whether to accept credit from another institution.

  o Common questions asked include: Was the course taught on a college campus? Was the instructor a faculty member? Did the student participate with other enrolled degree candidate students (non-high school students)? Is the course part of the official college catalog?

High School Credit Applicability

Secondary school leaders must consider several factors as they consider whether to award high school credit for an online college course. If the intent is to have the course count for credit, particularly toward graduation, it's important to review the content and instructor requirements to check applicability for high school credit based on state and/or district policy. Many states specify qualifications for high school instructors of record, including in-state licensure and appropriate endorsements. Practically, this may require pairing a local educator with the online faculty to meet the college and the high school's instruction requirements and to count for dual credit. The state office of public instruction or department of education may also be able to provide guidance. The Iowa Department of Education, for example, provides specific guidance on the use of online college courses for high school credit.

It may also be necessary to determine how a college course aligns with high school requirements, including which specific high school course it can substitute for and how many high school credits or units should be awarded. Using an in-state provider may help high school counselors save time and effort determining what high school credit best matches a college course. Some institutions and state education agencies have recommendations or credit crosswalks for dual enrollment that set the high school class equivalency.

Examples of state agency crosswalks:	Examples of institutional-level crosswalks
Ohio	Indiana's Ivy Tech Community College maintains a crosswalk showing the course title and the corresponding state department of education course title.
Arkansas	Temple College, Texas
Alabama	Indiana University Advance College Project: Includes codes from the Indiana Department of Education Course Crosswalk

Course and Instructional Quality: An Important Factor in Provider Selection

Quality online coursework and instruction isn't just about content delivery alone. It's about how students engage, learn, receive support in a virtual environment. Choosing a provider that uses experienced online instructors and implements evidence-based online teaching practices significantly improves student outcomes.

Instructors who are trained in online pedagogy and supported with quality course design tools are better equipped to:

- foster meaningful engagement and interaction.
- communicate clear expectations and feedback.
- use digital tools intentionally to support learning.
- create inclusive and accessible experiences for diverse learners.

Programs benefit when providers draw on research-based standards and frameworks, such as those developed by:

- Quality Matters
- National Standards for Quality Online Programs (K-12 focus)
- Online Learning Consortium
- WCET (WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies)
- National Standards for Quality Online Learning

These organizations offer research, tools, and professional development opportunities that elevate the quality of online learning.

PARTNERSHIP: Build a Proactive Partnership

Before building online and remote courses into a dual enrollment program, schools and providers should explore key questions to outline the partnership, establish clear expectations, and solidify details through formal agreements. Typically, a partnership will rely on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that memorializes the details. Some states have a MOU template for dual enrollment, and institutions may also use their own standard version.

Some considerations to include in provider conversations:

- **Cost:** Determine who is responsible for tuition, fees, materials, and other expenses, and whether state funding apply.
- **Coordinating communication:** Outline how and when school leaders, counselors, students, parents, and other stakeholders will receive updates, and explore options for check-ins and monitoring progress.
- **Defining roles and responsibilities:** Strong partnerships have a clear and consistent understanding of roles and responsibilities. Identify who provides advising, manages enrollment, tracks progress, and supports students to prevent confusion and ensure accountability.
- **Verify technology compatibility:** Confirm that district-provided devices and IT systems support the provider's learning platform and course activities. For courses held in schools, ensure students can access websites and materials and download necessary content. Some courses require students download specialized software for course activities. While one-to-one device initiatives in school districts increase student access to computing resources, devices like Chromebooks and tablets can present significant challenges due to this limitation. District internet "safe search" restrictions and website limitations may restrict student access to required activities including using open education resources used in the course.

Hallmarks of Proactive Partnerships: Dual enrollment programs move at the speed of their partnerships. A strong partner shares your commitment to students, understands your constraints, is clear about roles and responsibilities, and works with you to navigate friction points. Proactive partnerships outline clear roles and foster robust communication to ensure students get access to the courses they seek with the support they need. NACEP recommends those looking to build online and remote dual enrollment programs in high schools should prioritize high-quality partnerships. Hallmarks of proactive partnerships include:

- clearly defined roles and responsibilities
- ongoing and transparent communication
- a commitment to student success
- proactive problem-solving

Cost Considerations

It is important to discuss financial arrangements when exploring providers. Costs can differ by state, institution, program model, subject, student characteristics, and other factors. Who pays (student, school district, state, or another entity) and how much similarly varies. In general, if a high school or district is working with an in-state provider for its online dual enrollment, the cost structure is more likely to be similar to arrangements for in-person dual enrollment instruction. Offerings from out-of-state institutions, course-sharing platforms, or online-only providers may not be included in state funding to support dual enrollment. Despite this complexity, many schools and districts have found workable options. If cost is a consideration, it should be the starting point for discussions with a provider.

Coordinated Communication

Establishing clear communication channels and timelines ensures that all stakeholders—school leaders, counselors, students, parents, and partners—receive timely and relevant updates. Strong communication and proactive student support, which may come from the high school or the partner institution, is a key strategy to ensure student success and an impactful experience.

There are several areas where proactive coordination on communication can be helpful.

Timing	Key Communication Areas	Information Students and Families Need	Possible Coordinated Communication Strategies
Before the course	Basic advising	Guidance about the benefits and implications of taking a college course, as well as the college's policies and expectations	**Goal:** Student understands potential positive and negative academic impacts. Colleges provide information on what taking a college course eantails, and high schools ensure that students understand within the high school context and beyond.
	Enrollment and registration	Clear guidance on course registration, deadlines, and eligibility requirements	**Goal:** Coordinated messaging on course registration steps, deadlines, and eligibility Colleges provide official enrollment instructions, and high schools ensure students understand the process
	Parent and student communication	Awareness of FERPA rules, key deadlines, and how to seek support when needed and from whom	**Goal:** Clear outreach to students and families on expectations, deadlines, and privacy considerations Colleges inform students about course requirements, and high schools help parents navigate FERPA limitations and support options
Starting the course	Access support	Support access to essential elements of a course, including emails, logging in to the student portal, using digital learning materials, knowing how to download and use software applications	**Goal:** Ensuring students can navigate the technology, software, and resources necessary for the course Colleges share guides and tutorials and high schools reinforce and ensure access High schools and colleges ensure students have logged in, accessed their institutional email, used the student portal, etc.
Starting and during the course	Tech support	Ensuring students have a functional device that can access course activities	**Goal:** Technical support coordination during the course Colleges ensure access to platforms, while high schools confirm that devices and networks are compatible
	Student progress-monitoring	Updates on attendance, engagement, and academic performance to stay on track	**Goal:** Monitor student progress and enable timely interventions that support success Colleges provide regular progress reports on attendance and grade updates, or provide connected systems for monitoring High schools track student engagement and provide interventions
Starting and during the course	Support and intervention strategies	Access to tutoring, instructor office hours, advising, and tech support	**Goal:** Joint promotion of support services Colleges share available resources, and high schools reinforce access and encourage student use
	Key deadlines	Notification of important deadlines, such as drop/add and withdraw dates	**Goal:** Coordinate deadline awareness and student guidance Colleges ensure students and high schools are aware of important deadlines High schools help students understand what deadlines mean and if the student should drop or withdraw from the course
End of the course	Credit transfer and transcript management	Support for the post-high school transition, using credits, and transcript request process	**Goal:** Support graduation progress and next step Colleges communicate grading and transfer details, and high schools track student progress toward graduation and facilitate post-high school planning

Define Roles and Responsibilities

Defining each partner's roles and responsibilities helps keep everyone on the same page. Coordinated communications allows partners to define their roles, but there are several other topics to include in planning conversations, including deciding who manages student advising and determining the role of the high school, course provider, and student. The same applies to the enrollment process: Who inputs the information and how? Does the high school have a role in approving the enrollment? What are students expected to do? Partners should discuss whether to coordinate progress-monitoring if and how to notify high schools about struggling students, and the role each partner plays in addressing the situation. Similarly, partners should determine the roles of academic and non-academic support. Discussions should also include how the partnership will pay for the course, textbooks, or other instructional materials. Establishing these responsibilities early helps prevent gaps in oversight, ensures consistency in program implementation, and supports a more seamless experience for students.

Verify Compatibility Through a Tech Check

High schools and colleges typically provide different levels of safeguards for technology. Safeguards appropriate in high schools can disrupt students' access to college courses due to restrictions on software installation, website access, or video conferencing platforms may derail a course or its engagement activities.

If students are likely to be taking their course using a school device or the school's internet access, it is important to check for roadblocks prior to students starting the course. Tech incompatibility and internet constraints may significantly impact access to the course learning platform and materials, the college digital library, instructional tools, details on instructors' office hours, and other resources needed for the course.

Coordinating with IT staff ahead of time can help identify and address these issues before they disrupt learning. Be sure to check technology needs and issues with compatibility as part of reviewing potential providers.

MODEL: Choose the Right Instructional Model

Dual enrollment programs may use a variety of models for online courses, each may have value when matched to the right learner and context. The best approach depends on variables like student independence, school resources, scheduling, instructor availability, and the level of real-time support required. The course subject may also be important to consider in selecting a model. For example, laboratory sciences and world languages typically don't translate well into online environments.

Prioritize Synchronous Models

Research indicates that synchronous instruction models often provide stronger support for student learning and success, particularly for high school learners. NACEP members working in the online space for dual enrollment cite live instruction and interaction (i.e., synchronous or synchronous-plus models) as important strategies for promoting engagement, accountability, and positive outcomes. These models also offer students meaningful opportunities to develop self-directed learning skills and habits within a supportive structure.

At the same time, asynchronous instruction plays a substantial and growing role in higher education, a trend that extends into dual enrollment contexts, sometimes by necessity and sometimes by design. When implemented with care, asynchronous models can expand access and flexibility, especially in under-resourced or geographically dispersed areas. For instance, Snow College, Utah's online course dual enrollment provider, uses asynchronous courses selectively, providing detailed guidance and establishing clear guardrails to support student success.

Programs encourage the use of asynchronous models thoughtfully and intentionally. The key distinction is not the absence of live instruction, but the presence of intentional design, meaningful student support, and structured communication, all of which are essential elements of any high-quality education experience.

We describe each model below, highlighting its key strengths along with common pitfalls that warrant careful consideration.

Synchronous Plus

Live instruction on a set schedule with high school-based in-person support

This model blends the structured learning setting of high school with live online instruction from college faculty. Students participate in real-time college courses from a designated classroom within their high school, often with a facilitator. Although the instructor is provided by the college, the course is structurally and functionally embedded into the high school environment.

This approach offers students the benefit of direct engagement with college faculty and online peers while maintaining the familiarity and structure of the high school setting. Holding the course within the school day and in a consistent location builds a routine minimizes logistical barriers reduces distractions, and encourages consistent engagement and participation. It also reinforces the idea that college learning is part of a student's educational pathway, not something separate or inaccessible. Additionally, onsite staff members can offer valuable support by helping students stay organized, manage their time, navigate technology platforms, and maintain focus. Their presence adds structure and accountability while giving students space to develop critical college-ready skills such as self-advocacy, time management, and communication.

Programs using the synchronous plus model typically take one of two approaches to the on-site facilitation role:

1. assigning a teacher from the same discipline to provide content support (sometimes creating a hybrid instructional model, discussed further below)

2. placing a non-academic facilitator in the room to assist with logistics, organization, and student support

Each approach comes with benefits and challenges. When a high school teacher from the same discipline facilitates, it's essential to clearly define the roles facilitator and college faculty member to prevent confusion about who's responsible for instruction, grading, and academic expectations. Without this clarity, students may default to seeking academic help from the high school teacher. Defining instructional roles helps preserve instructional integrity while reinforcing key college-readiness skills, such as self-advocacy and professional communication. Using non-academic facilitators reinforces the message that students should rely on their college instructor for content-related support. Non-academic facilitators play a key role in reinforcing expectations by managing the learning environment, troubleshooting logistical issues, and providing consistent encouragement. Even subtle actions like checking in on progress or maintaining a quiet, focused atmosphere can make a meaningful difference in student outcomes.

Regardless of the facilitation approach, school staff must ensure that students understand the course will require work beyond the scheduled class time. When students or schools assume all coursework can be completed during the school day, it can lead to unmet expectations and lower performance. This clarity is especially important for students who may lack reliable access to technology at home. Programs can plan by providing loaner devices and internet hotspots, or by building in dedicated time during study halls or before and after school hours to support course completion.

Solving for Scale: Utah's Online Strategy

Utah has significant teacher credentialling challenges due to the rural and remote nature of much of the state. The state sought a stable solution that ensured consistent availability of courses commonly used in dual enrollment but not widely offered in person though high school dual enrollment teachers. Interactive video conferencing (IVC) provides a systemic, statewide approach to increase access to high-quality dual enrollment courses. Snow College, the state-designated provider, places the most engaging faculty in IVC dual enrollment courses, ensures the high school classroom is equipped with tools that allow real-time participation, and includes on-site high school staff support. Snow College's program was one of the first in the nation to be awarded NACEP accreditation for College Provided Faculty Endorsement

Synchronous Plus

This model combines scheduled online college instruction with in-person support at the high school. A facilitator is present during class time to monitor progress, offer help, and reinforce engagement and learning expectations.

What's Powerful	What's Essential to Make It Work
Remote faculty with local support: Students participate in live, college-led instruction experiencing the pacing, rigor, and expectations of a real college course.	**Trained Facilitators:** Onsite staff need clear expectations and understanding of their role in supporting, not instructing students.
Lower Barriers: Because instruction happens within the high school, students gain college exposure without leaving the comfort, structure, and relationships of their school environment.	**Tech Infrastructure:** Students must have uninterrupted access to course platforms and materials.
Support That Sticks: An onsite facilitator helps students manage time, stay engaged, and navigate the course—providing consistent, in-the-moment support that improves follow-through.	**Credit Clarity:** Ensure alignment with local policies on instructional roles and credit awarding.
Best of Both Worlds: This model helps students build college-ready habits and confidence while still rooted in the routines and relationships of high school, easing the transition to higher education.	**Schedule Sync:** Class periods must align with the timing of the college course.

Pro Tip: Aligning high school and college schedules can be challenging, but it's an impactful way to ensure seamless integration of college course opportunities into he school day. Scheduling online courses during the same periods each day can support master scheduling while reinforcing structure for students. By assigning consistent periods for online courses, schools can simplify course planning, avoid scheduling conflicts, ensure resource availability, and even create the opportunity for cohorts. Schedule misalignment between high schools and colleges emerged as one of the most frequently cited challenges among contributors to this paper. While consistent scheduling may not be feasible in all educational contexts due to differences in institutional calendars and resource constraints, efforts to identify and implement innovative strategies to improve alignment can play a critical role in supporting student success.

Hidden Helpers: Strategies for Building Capacity

Supporting the synchronous-plus model doesn't necessarily require hiring new staff. It can also mean rethinking how existing roles contribute to the student experience. While every school is different, many already have people and partners in place who can help provide that critical layer of support in meaningful and manageable ways.

Community-based organizations, such as college access nonprofits, youth development programs, cultural centers, churches, clubs, and after-school initiatives, can serve as support intermediaries. Partnering with such groups may help expand onsite facilitator capacity and connect the school to broader community resources.

School librarians do far more than manage books. Many libraries have become dynamic, tech-enabled learning commons that foster collaboration and innovation. Librarians now often serve as instructional partners, guiding students in digital literacy, research skills, and the ethical use of emerging technologies. Despite this evolving role, they're often overlooked as direct support in high school-based dual enrollment programs. From using open educational resources to navigating college library resources and supporting digital access, librarians bring valuable expertise that can strengthen support in a synchronous-plus model.

Paraeducators or classroom aides can be valuable day-to-day support helping monitor participation, reinforce academic habits, and assist with logistics during college course time blocks.

Peer Mentors who have taken online courses can offer practical advice, encouragement, and firsthand insights.

Synchronous

Live instruction on a set schedule

Students join live, remote college classes on a set schedule, engaging in real time with instructors and peers, from wherever they are. This model offers structure, interactive learning, and immediate feedback, but without embedded onsite support. However, like Synchronous Plus, this model requires careful attention to scheduling and technology, especially when used during the school day or in a high school setting with school-managed devices.

What's Powerful	What's Essential to Make It Work
Flexible Location: Participation isn't tied to a specific classroom or facilitator.	**Independent Learner Skills:** Students should be able to self-manage their time as well as seek help independently and proactively.
Real College, Real Responsibility: Students are responsible for managing their own learning without direct support in the room.	**Schedule Sync:** Similar to synchronous plus models, aligning class periods with the timing of the college course is a persistent challenge.

Pro Tip: Look for providers using a variety of engagement strategies. Course design should maximize engagement by incorporating interactive elements like live discussions, breakout rooms, and real-time polls.

Hybrid
Blended in-person and independent learning

A hybrid course model combines synchronous and asynchronous instruction, offering structure and flexibility. Students engage in live real-time classes with an instructor on some days, but complete self-paced coursework independently on others. Some hybrid models also incorporate occasional in-person sessions with a local high school teacher or college faculty member, providing additional support and hands-on learning opportunities. Hybrid flex (hyflex) models may offer students significant choice in their mode of participation (face-to-face, synchronous online, or asynchronous online) that may vary on a class-by-class basis. Some hyflex models leverage asynchronous content heavily, so be sure to determine fit when reviewing options. The same advice for synchronous models applies here: schedule alignment and technology infrastructure will apply when used in school settings.

What's Powerful	What's Essential to Make It Work
Develops Student Skills in Multiple Learning Formats: This approach fosters student proficiency in navigating both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments, preparing them for diverse educational settings.	**Independent Learner Skills:** With hybrid and hyflex models providing variable options for structure and flexibility, independent learning skills become even more important.
Flexibility with Structure: This model offers flexibility to accommodate varied schedules while maintaining consistent interaction, ensuring that students benefit from independent learning opportunities and structured instructional support.	**Clear Role Definition:** When high school teachers are involved, their support should be intentional, aligned with course expectations, and developed in coordination with the college faculty instructing.
Options for Integrating High School Educators: High school teachers sometimes supplement instruction, provide in-person engagement opportunities, and offer additional activities that reinforce or contextualize learning.	

Pro Tip: Ensure students are learning to balance the transition between live and self-paced learning by setting clear expectations for independent work and providing structured check-ins.

Asynchronous
Independent learning that's structured but not scheduled

The asynchronous model offers flexibility and accommodates varying schedules, making it helpful for students balancing obligations or in school settings with insurmountable scheduling challenges. There are no set meeting times, since students work independently. Students move through course materials, lectures, and assignments on their own schedule within deadlines. While typically there are no live instructional sessions, there should be interactive activities that foster collaboration among students. Interactions with instructors and peers often occur through discussion boards, feedback on assignments, facilitated online discussions, and other hosted platforms.

Because student engagement is essential to successful online instruction, this model presents the greatest challenge for fostering meaningful interaction. To be effective, asynchronous courses must be supported by thoughtful course design, intentional engagement strategies, and a strong instructional approach. These elements are critical to ensuring that students remain connected, motivated, and on track in the absence of real-time interaction.

What's Powerful	What's Essential to Make It Work
Provides Maximum Flexibility: Students complete coursework on their own schedule, providing the option to balance school, work, and personal responsibilities.	**Strong Independent Learner Skills:** This model is best suited for highly motivated, self-directed students with strong time management and problem-solving skills.
Expands Course Offerings: The model allows schools to offer a wider range of courses without the restrictions of bell schedules, classroom space, or staff.	**Ongoing Monitoring:** Even for students are strong independent learners, high schools should actively monitor progress and completion of assignments.
	Engagement is Essential: Asynchronous courses should include regular, substantive interaction between students and instructors. Look for providers that incorporate interactive elements like mandatory participation in discussion boards, facilitated online chats, or other structured opportunities.

Pro Tip: Incorporate high school staff into asynchronous courses. Programs using asynchronous suggest including a high school staff member within the course learning management system in a teaching assistant-like role. This is similar to using a facilitator in the synchronous plus model. Sometimes called a "classroom manager," this person focuses on academic monitoring. This approach allows high school staff to see exactly what students see. Programs working with this model require the classroom manager and college course instructor to meet regularly to set expectations and keep communication open on both sides.

SUPPORT: Academic and Non-Academic

Success in online dual enrollment goes beyond course content; it requires intentional support systems that help students navigate both academic and non-academic challenges. Partnerships should plan for academic supports, such as advising, early alerts, tutoring access, progress monitoring, structured check-ins, and office hours to ensure students stay engaged and on pace. Equally important are non-academic supports, including IT troubleshooting, enrollment and payment assistance, and guidance on transcripts and credit transfers.

Academic Support Opportunities:

Early Alerts for Struggling Students: Automated notifications can help flag student disengagement or missing assignments. These notifications need a communication chain to connect students to the support they need.

Instructor Check-Ins: Regular touchpoints, such as required office hours, tutoring, or weekly synchronous sessions for struggling students, and mid-semester check-ins, can improve retention and student outcomes.

Tutoring and Academic Assistance: Access to tutoring services, whether provided by the college or high school, helps students navigate challenging coursework. Ensuring students know how to access subject-specific tutoring, writing centers, or peer support can improve confidence and academic performance.

Navigating 24/7 academic support:

Montgomery College (MC) in Maryland collaborates with Montgomery County Public Schools to offer the Virtual Middle College. This program allows high school students to earn their diploma while completing a college degree from MC virtually. One of MC's challenges was addressing students' need for tutoring at irregular hours. The college wanted to serve students through campus resources like its online and in-person learning centers but recognized the need for 24/7 options. The solution was to use an online tutoring provider, Brainfuse, but only making it available when campus learning centers were closed.

Other programs expand tutoring support by offering high school students access to tools already used by their regular college student population, such as Upswing. Some programs provide links to useful tutorials and support resources from open access sites, such as Khan Academy.

Academic Advising and Career Guidance: Helping students choose courses aligned with their goals ensures they maximize dual enrollment opportunities for short- and long-term impact. Plain-language guides are helpful for basic guidance when individual advising is not an option. This example from Iowa Lakes Community College breaks options into three areas—exploration, pathways, and general education—to help students navigate options in the context of where they might apply to degrees.

Non-Academic Support Opportunities:

IT/Tech Support: Identify and address common technology challenges before courses begin by ensuring students can access platforms, use logins, and find course tools. To create a smoother academic experience, provide clear communication about where to go for help and how to troubleshoot common tech issues. Indiana University has the common IT issues and questions in the student handbook.

Accessibility Services: Online courses must be inclusive by design. Ensure that all digital materials are accessible and that students know how to request accommodations when needed. Accommodation for students with learning disabilities differs in the high school and college settings. Eastern Iowa Community Colleges provides a good summary of the key differences in how disability law applies in both educational contexts. Communicate early and often—students may not self-disclose or even know they qualify for support. High school counselors and educators should be looped in to help identify needs, and college partners should be clear about what can and cannot be provided. Indiana University's student handbook spells out the process for typical accommodations and whether they require and approval.

Mental Health Services: When available and applicable, share virtual mental health resources, encourage help-seeking, and normalize conversations around stress, anxiety, and time management. Provide clear information on what's available through the college and how students can access it confidentially.

Orient Expectations: High school students entering an online college course are navigating academic and cultural transitions. Consider offering a student landing page, handbook, enrollment guides, virtual orientation sessions, welcome videos, or check-ins to explain how online college differs from high school, highlight time management tips, and set expectations. Pair students with peer mentors or liaisons who've taken similar courses.

Postsecondary Navigation: Help students understand the process for using their college credit after high school. Provide clear guidance on requesting transcripts, checking credit transfer policies, and exploring how the credit fits into future degree plans. Even a short explainer, degree map, or checklist can help students make more informed decisions. The Utah System of Higher Education includes dual enrollment guidance in its Utah Transfer Guide. The College of Southern Idaho has straightforward, Dual Credit Transferability Guide for participants. Some programs cover credit at the orientation, while others work to "right time" this information, presenting it toward the end of the instruction period. In some cases, students receive guidance on using the course syllabus to advocate for credit acceptance with a receiving institution.

Consolidated Content: Consider providers offering a virtual campus that parallels the services, support, and engagement offered on campus. Landing pages with curated information in the institution's learning management system gives students access to all the modules, tools and resources needed. This helps students more easily navigate resources.

Skill Development: Help students build habits that improve online success, including self-direction, recording due dates in calendars, setting reminders, and breaking large assignments into manageable parts. Offer short digital modules or virtual workshops and encourage high school staff to reinforce these skills.

Pro Tip: Create a structured support system by pairing students with someone who regularly checks in, helps them navigate challenges, and connects them to resources. College access nonprofits, youth development programs, cultural centers, churches, clubs, and after-school initiatives can serve as support intermediaries. These partnerships may expand capacity for providing services and add culturally relevant services that schools or colleges may not be equipped to provide on their own.

ENGAGEMENT: Prioritize Student and Parent Engagement

To set students up for success, onboarding and family communication should be built into the program. Below are strategies programs have integrated to better ensure student success.

Student Orientation: Every program we interviewed for this report identified student orientation as a non-negotiable element for preparing students for online learning. Requiring first-time students to complete an onboarding or orientation module helps them navigate online learning platform, understand course expectations, and develop strategies for success in a virtual environment. Formats include in-person meetings hosted at the high school, live virtual orientations, tutorials, and recorded content with knowledge checks. Video orientations, configured for students or their families, accommodate busy schedules but don't allow facilitators to know whether students have retained the information.

Parent Information Night: Offer a virtual parent night to introduce families to the online learning platform, course expectations, and accessing available support resources. Schools can help families understand academic expectations, the nature of college coursework, important deadlines, and how to provide guidance at home. Sharing recorded sessions, offering information in different languages, and providing follow up communication are important ways to ensure accessibility. It's often helpful to provide a live question and answer period.

Handbooks and "What to Expect" Guides: Develop a clear, user-friendly guide for students and families that outlines key information about online college courses. Include topics like logging onto the college email, accessing the learning platform, paying tuition, communicating with instructors, monitoring progress, and understanding grading and deadlines. Use plain language and visual formats where possible. Provide guides in languages that address the learner population to improve accessibility. Distribute the guide early and make it available in print and digital formats and review the information during the mandatory student orientation. A few examples to consider: Tips for Parents and Student Handbook from Hawkeye Community College.

Parental Access to Progress: The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) restricts direct access to student records without a waiver, schools can help parents and guardians understand these limitations. Parents can't participate in courses, since it would violate the student code, yet many still do and to the detriment of the student and class. Clear communication about how parents can stay involved but not engage ensures they remain informed while respecting privacy regulations and course expectations.

College Content Awareness: College courses follow the curriculum and academic standards set by the institution, which may include topics beyond the typical high school curriculum. Programs can help set appropriate expectations by providing parents with information about course content and reinforcing that course materials are not modified for high school audiences, including ones that may be considered to have mature content.

Timely Reminders: School-friendly messaging platforms can help to provide real-time updates, reminders, and announcements while maintaining privacy and accessibility. Regular communication keeps students and parents informed about deadlines, course requirements, and academic expectations, helping students and their support networks stay engaged and on track.

Communicate Updates: Regular updates from the high school and course provider keep students and parents informed about key milestones, deadlines, and academic expectations. Clear communication helps prevent missed assignments, reinforces accountability, and ensures students can make informed decisions about their coursework. This is especially important during critical deadlines such as course drop periods, drop for non-payment, and withdrawal deadlines.

Pro Tip: Build Connection to Campus
Helping students see themselves as part of a college community strengthens engagement and makes the college part of the dual enrollment experience more meaningful. Integrate opportunities for a campus visit, virtual tour, or connections with college staff into your approach. Alternatively, explore ways to bring the campus to the students. Work with the provider to bring in-person orientation directly to the school setting each semester.

From Strategy to Success

Online college courses can offer an array of academic opportunities for students. However, ensuring these opportunities translate into meaningful postsecondary success requires thoughtful planning, strong partnerships, and intentional student support.

High-quality dual enrollment is more than just earning college credit; it's about preparing students for the expectations and independence of higher education. High schools and their higher education partners can create accessible, impactful educational experiences by aligning course models with student needs, addressing potential challenges proactively, and maintaining clear communication between families.

When used intentionally, online college courses become more than a delivery method—they become a purposeful strategy for expanding access, supporting readiness, and designing dual enrollment experiences that truly prepare students for what comes next. That's the power of being Online, On Purpose.

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