



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM
BRIDGING YOUTH POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for Success for All Students

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Definition

Secondary-Postsecondary Learning Options (SPLOs) are schools and programs that link secondary education with two- and four-year institutions of higher education and allow high school students to participate in college-level courses for credit and not for credit.

Questions

- **Is there evidence that these different models of SPLOs are effective at increasing academic performance, closing the achievement gap, and increasing entry to and retention in postsecondary education, particularly for first-generation, low-income, or students of color and students with disabilities?**
- **Do financing mechanisms support equity and access by all students?**
- **Is there evidence that these programs are cost effective?**

Questions

- Are college courses for high school students as rigorous and at the same level as regular college courses?
- On what outcomes should these programs be measured: high school graduation or grades, attainment of college credit, entry to postsecondary education, and/or completion of degree?

Categories of SPLOs

22 evaluations were included

- **Dual Enrollment**
- **Tech Prep**
- **Middle/Early College High Schools**
- **Programs Serving Disadvantaged Youth**

Data Limitations

- **Few third party evaluations**
- **More qualitative than quantitative**
- **Considered short-term outcomes (at high school graduation, after one semester of postsecondary education)**
- **Few follow participants through college graduation or into job market**
- **Difficulty accessing data from two unique systems (K-12 and postsecondary)**
- **Limited student demographic data**

Outcomes

- **Credits earned during high school**
- **Performance on high school standardized tests**
- **High school graduation rates including other high school outcomes**
- **College-going rates**

Outcomes

- **College Placement tests/need for remediation**
- **College course grades/GPAs**
- **College retention**
- **Degree attainment/time to degree**
- **Job market outcomes**

Credits earned during high school

- **12 evaluations considered this outcome, none in terms of statistical significance**
- **Students earned zero to up to two years worth of credits**
- **Few indicated the value of the credits once students graduated from high school and matriculated to postsecondary education**
- **Limited information on the types of credit (academic, technical, or self-improvement) students are earning**

Performance on high school standardized tests

- **7 evaluations considered this outcome, one in terms of statistical significance**
- **SPLO participants perform better than their peers who have not participated in SPLOs**
- **None compare results to scores prior to SPLO participation to determine if participation improves students' overall academic ability**

High school graduation rates including other high school outcomes

- **11 evaluations considered this outcome, one demonstrated statistical significance**
- **Other high school outcomes included:**
 - improved high school attendance
 - decreased high school dropout rates
 - the type of high school diploma earned
- **High school graduation is an important outcome to report for SPLO participants but should not be the terminal outcome.**

College-going rates

- **15 evaluations considered this outcome, none in terms of statistical significance**
- **Variety of techniques, such as students' self-reports to the national database of students enrolled in postsecondary education**
- **Higher percentages of SPLO participants continued in postsecondary education after high school graduation.**

College placement test/remediation

- **6 evaluations considered this outcome, 2 in terms of statistical significance**
- **Used for admission to SPLOs or to determine a student's need for remediation once enrolled at a postsecondary education institution**
- **Includes college placement tests like COMPASS and college entrance exams like SAT or ACT.**
- **Significant number of the students who needed remedial coursework in English and math were students who took technical courses through SPLOs (lower English and math entrance requirements for participation)**

College course grades/GPAs

- **9 evaluations considered this outcomes, 4 in terms of statistical significance**
- **Assessing the academic value of SPLOs at two points in time:**
 - **when a student was participating in a SPLO**
 - **when a student had matriculated and enrolled in a college course as a traditional student.**
- **Typically, SPLO participants do as well as or better than traditional college students**
- **Upon matriculation, students with SPLO credit typically did better than those without prior credit**
- **This finding held true in the subsequent course for which students had received initial course credit in the SPLO, an indication that the prior course was as rigorous as a college-level course**

College retention

- **5 evaluations considered this outcome, 3 in terms of statistical significance**
- **From either the first to second semester or the first to second year**
- **SPLO participants persisted at higher rates, but some variance exists between SPLO student subgroups based upon the types of credits earned**

Question: How well are students prepared, academically and developmentally, for the realities of college-level coursework.

Degree attainment/time to degree

- **6 evaluations considered this outcome, 2 in terms of statistical significance**
- **Critical to assessing the effectiveness and potential cost savings of SPLOs**
- **Two compared SPLO students' time to degree to that of their classmates with no prior credit and found shorter time to degree**
- **Another reported on credits to degree, a more accurate measure of whether or not SPLO participation is cost saving AND?**

Job market outcomes

- **5 evaluations considered this outcome, none in terms of statistical significance**
- **For students who had received some technical training through their college-level courses**
- **Students with SPLO credit did better than their peers without it in terms of finding employment and earning higher wages**
- **All job market outcomes included were self-reported by participants**

Lessons Learned - Overall

SPLOS are a strategy to increase postsecondary education access for underserved populations, but they don't necessarily reduce time to degree or save money

Lessons Learned – Course Rigor

SPLOs need to ensure they provide college-level courses and work.

Program elements to consider include:

- **Location**
- **Faculty preparation**
- **Prerequisites**
- **Program length**

Lessons Learned – Extra Supports Needed

For students to be successful, SPLOs need to provide appropriate experiences and supports to students based on their individual needs.

- **Caring adult advisors**
- **Academic assistance and tutoring**
- **College success class**
- **Peer support network in safe environment**

Lessons Learned – Credit Transfer

Very little data is available on what courses transfer for credit or how students use credit earned from participation in a SPLO. Many credits do not transfer for a whole host of reasons.

Lessons Learned - Collaboration

Collaboration between secondary and postsecondary teachers and administrators helps create a supportive environment for SPLO participants.

Policy Considerations

- **Do SPLOs reduce time to degree and result in savings for students, families, and the public?**
- **Are they a college-access strategy?**
- **What is the value of SPLOs in providing college experience to wide range of students? Or do you target your efforts?**
- **Who pays? K-12, postsecondary, students/families**

Policy Considerations

- **K-12 and postsecondary system alignment**
- **Equitable access to SPLOs (do you establish prerequisites)**
- **Quality and accountability: who is responsible for overseeing these programs?**
- **Data collection, evaluation, and research**



The College Ladder

The College Ladder: Linking Secondary and Postsecondary Education for Success for All Students is available online at

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