RUNNING START PARTICIPATION AND SUCCESS

Running Start is a statewide partnership between community and technical colleges and school districts. The program allows juniors and seniors to attend college tuition-free and complete courses for both high school and college credit. State basic education funding goes first to the school district, which then divides it between the high school and college depending on a student's course load at each institution. Credits are paid for by the state, saving families money as students begin their college careers.

Running Start enrollment has grown by close to ten percent each year for the past ten years. In 2016-17, 26,303 students enrolled at the community and technical colleges through Running Start for 20,207 full-time equivalent enrollments (an average of 35 credits per student). Considering the growth in participation and potential cost savings to students and their families, it is important to monitor trends in Running Start participation and success.

Participation

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) tracks the number of students completing courses through dual credit options (link to OSPI Dual Credit data). With almost all Running Start students completing at least one of their courses (95 percent), this dashboard is a helpful resource for comparing rates of Running Start participation (See Figure 1).

Running Start participation is growing, with approximately 15 percent of all public high school 11th and 12th graders completing a Running Start course in 2016-17. There are large gaps in Running Start participation by gender, race/ethnicity, and income. Male students, historically underserved students of color (students identifying as Black, Hispanic, Native American, or Pacific Islander), and low-income students (as determined by free or reduced price lunch status) are about half as likely to participate in Running Start.

Figure 1. Running Start participation rates for public high school 11th and 12th graders

Note: The OSPI data shows the percent of all public high school students (9th–12th graders) who completed at least one Running Start course during the year. Running Start is available to half of public high school students (11th and 12th graders), so the participation rates shown in the chart below are double the rates shown in the OSPI data to reflect an estimated participation rate for 11th and 12th graders.
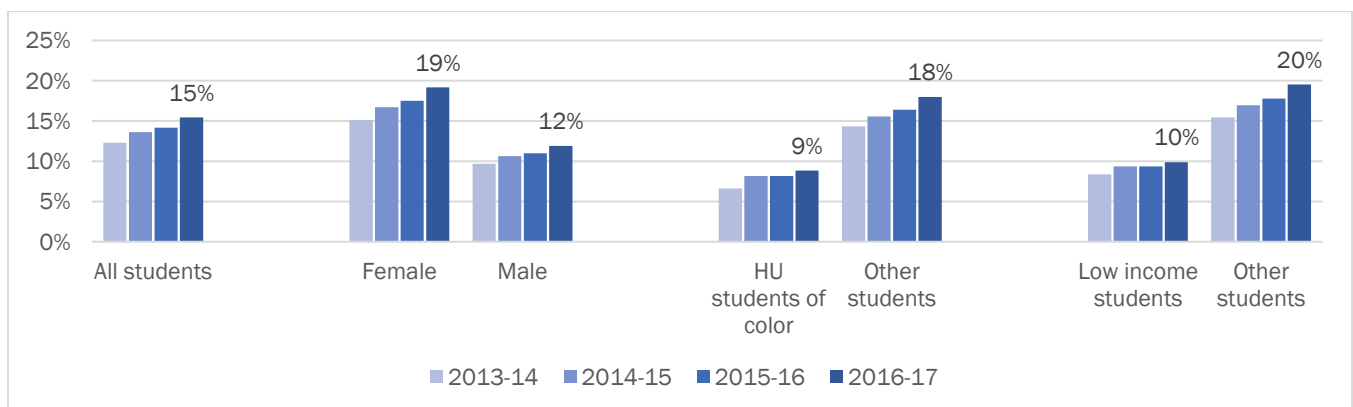
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Course Pass Rates

Running Start students have a higher rate of passing courses than other students in transfer or workforce courses. Even as participation rates grow, the course pass rate for all Running Start students has stayed at 91 percent (compared to 83 percent for other students). The pass rate for Running Start students has been slightly lower for historically underserved students of color (87 percent), low-income students (88 percent), and male students (89 percent). Running Start students, on average, are passing 11.5 of 12.7 attempted credits in a quarter, which means they are generally attempting two or three college courses in a quarter and most are passing all of their courses.

Regardless of the overall high pass rates, a significant percent of Running Start students still fail to pass at least one course in a quarter (close to 18 percent each quarter). This includes 4 percent who failed to pass all of their courses in a quarter. Considering the high pass rate for Running Start students, it is likely that many of the course failures are students who decided to withdraw from a course as opposed to having difficulty passing the course. The consistency in course pass rates over the past few years suggests that to this point growing participation in Running Start has not meant a growing proportion of students who are struggling with the college level coursework, but more research is needed to assess the most common reasons for Running Start students not passing courses.

Online Courses

A growing number of Running Start students are enrolling in online courses, with 30 percent enrolling in at least one online course (close to 50 percent of Running Start students are enrolling in any eLearning courses, including hybrid or other distance education courses). The percent of Running Start students enrolling exclusively in online courses has stayed around 5 percent for the past several years. The course pass rate for Running Start students has been slightly lower in online courses (87 percent), but still higher than the pass rate for other students in transfer or workforce courses. Online courses might be one option for helping more students who have difficulty traveling to a college campus to have the opportunity to participate in Running Start.

Credit and Program Completion

On average, students finish their Running Start enrollment with 52 college credits, a little more than a year's worth of college credits. The percent of students who finish with an associate's degree has grown to about 20 percent (3,130 degrees awarded to Running Start students in 2016-17). Approximately 15 percent more students will continue at the college and finish their associate's degree within a year or two following their enrollment as a Running Start student (2,823 degrees awarded to former Running Start students in 2016-17). Another 25 percent of the students who did not finish a degree as a Running Start student or shortly thereafter finish their Running Start enrollment with at least one year's worth of credits (45 credits) to transfer to another institution or credential program. Students from the lower participation groups (historically underserved students of color, low-income students, and male students) have been less likely to complete a degree as a Running Start student (about 15 percent) or shortly thereafter (about 10 percent).

Conclusion

As found in other research, the primary concern for Running Start students at this time is equitable participation (see also this issue brief on key outcomes and metrics for Running Start). Running Start students in general and from the lower participation groups are passing courses and completing credits at relatively high rates, but there are large gaps in participation for historically underserved students of color, low-income students, and male students.

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