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Quad 136

Emptor

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

College Credit for Non-College Work: Caveat Emptor



Two recent articles in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* highlight the growth in non-traditional ways of earning college credits. “[At Rasmussen College, a game attempt to cut college costs](#)” describes a new program where “students will play a series of simulation games to show how well they’ve mastered the course material, such as using PowerPoint or handling customer complaints. If they ace the games, they get credit for the course.” This “competency-based education,” is a variant on the “[credit for life experience](#)” model. Both are controversial because they limit or eliminate the role for faculty and traditional teaching, sometimes substituting academic coaches who serve more as

advisers than as faculty members.

The [second article](#) highlights the growing emphasis on earning college credit in high school. This movement is not new but emphasizes the use of Advanced Placement (AP) classes and postsecondary enrollment options where students can earn college credits, often through courses taken at their high schools. “Some districts are even adding programs where students can earn an associate degree from a community college while in high school.”

There is talk about these programs increasing the rigor of high school through these course offerings. One administrator said, “All kids should be able to take several rigorous courses.” This raises the dispiriting question of what kinds of courses high schools were offering prior to this growth in college orientated options. But the main emphasis of all these alternative routes to earning college credit is to save money, as the headline of the second article emphasizes: Minnesota High Schoolers Tackle Tuition Before Turning their Tassels.

While I and my higher education colleagues certainly understand the challenge of paying for a college education, particularly at a private institution, students and parents should tread carefully as they seek ways to manage college costs. Substituting non-traditional college credits (at those schools that accept such credits) could well leave students with a lower quality educational experience and a less valuable bachelor’s degree. Three or three and a half years of college may well cost less than four but they are not the same as four.

AP courses are usually considered the gold-standard for college prep courses. If students take the College Board administered exam at the end of the year and earn a high enough score they can often earn college advanced placement and credit. But based on my experience with students who have taken AP exams and also having worked closely with high school teachers who offer AP classes, the vast majority of high school AP classes are simply not equivalent of college courses on the

same subjects. While there are certainly exceptional high school AP teachers, they do not typically have the experience and preparation that college professors have. In addition, college courses are filled with college students while high school classes are not—talented as the best high school students are. High school and college are two distinctly different academic and intellectual experiences. To blur this distinction cheapens the college experience.

Students should absolutely seek out the most rigorous courses they can find in their high schools. But the goal should be to make their college experiences more rigorous and deeper. Take Calculus I in high school so you can take Calculus II in college, not so you can avoid math in college or to shorten your time on campus. You will graduate a better educated student, more prepared for work, life and maybe even graduate school.*

*I should note that my institution, Saint John's University and our partner, the College of Saint Benedict, do offer academic credit for some kinds of work done in high school, like AP classes. I would simply urge students (and their parents) to take advantage of the advanced placement opportunities these policies offer rather than to graduate early. Costs of college notwithstanding, students get one shot at a four year college experience. They should immerse themselves deeply and completely in that rare and valuable experience. It is an investment for a lifetime—both professionally and personally.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | July 7th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).