In the late 1990’s, dual-enrollment increased significantly in Nebraska. However, there was a concern the growth was primarily by students from middle and high-income families. Studies have shown that high school students who take dual-enrollment coursework (a class where a student receives both high school and college credit) graduate at higher rates, matriculate to college at higher rates, and return for their sophomore year in college at higher rates than students who do not take dual-enrollment coursework. Since one of Nebraska’s education goals is to increase the college going rate of high school graduates, encouraging students to take dual-enrollment course work seemed like a perfect place to start. However, to receive the college credit, students must pay tuition to the college. While many colleges offer a reduced rate to these students, some students from low-income families might not even be able to afford the reduced rate. That is why Nebraska’s Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education (CCPE) recommended the state create the Access College Early Scholarship (ACE).

ACE pays the tuition for eligible low-income, Nebraska high school students who take dual-enrollment courses for credit from colleges. These students complete a scholarship application that is signed by the student, the student’s parent/guardian, and the student’s high school guidance counselor, which is then forwarded to the CCPE for review. Concurrently, the students sign up for the dual-enrollment course(s) through the high school and college. Once the application and the enrollment process are complete, the CCPE and the college work together in awarding the scholarship to the student.

In 2007-08, the first year the scholarship was available, 363 ACE scholarships totaling $114,856 were awarded to 294 Nebraska high school students from 110 high schools. These students registered for 1,698 credit hours at 11 Nebraska colleges and universities. In 2008-09, 825 scholarships totaling $216,754 were awarded to 643 students from 135 high schools. These students registered for 3,050 credit hours. In 2009-10, 1,302 scholarships totaling $339,624 were awarded to 1,020 students from 191 high schools who registered for 4,558 credit hours. However, showing the growth of the program was not enough. Were ACE recipients continuing on to college?

Using records from the Nebraska Department of Education, the CCPE calculated the college going rate for low-income (defined as those students who participated in the free/reduced price lunch program) and non-low-income students (defined as those students who did not participate in the free/reduced price lunch program) who graduated from Nebraska high schools and compared those figures to the college going rate of ACE recipients. For students who graduated in 2007-08, the college continuation rate for non-low-income students was 74.1%, for low-income students was 50.5%, but 83.7% for ACE recipients. For students who graduated in 2008-09, non-low-income graduates had a college continuation rate of 75.5%, low-income graduates had a 51.1% rate, while ACE recipients continued at an 80.6% rate. For 2009-10 graduates, the college continuation rate for non-low-income students was 77.7%, low-income graduates had a 53.8% rate, while ACE recipients had a college going rate of 77.4%. For a program created to encourage students to go on to college after high school graduation, ACE was a success. Additionally, these students will be monitored to see if they successfully graduated from a college with a degree.

The success of the ACE scholarship program has led to significant support from the Governor and the Legislature. In 2009 during a special session of the Legislature to address a budget deficit, ACE was the only state program not to receive a cut in funding.

If you have any questions regarding Nebraska’s ACE scholarship program please do not hesitate to contact Ritchie.Morrow@nebraska.gov.