

New rules fail to slow interest in Running Start

High schoolers will have to pay for some college-level credits

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The flood of Running Start students pouring into Clark College keeps rising, despite new rules that make the high schoolers' path to stockpile early college credits a bit more complicated — and, possibly, more expensive.

Clark officials reported 1,791 students signed up for Running Start courses for the fall quarter

that starts Sept. 26.

Of those, 1,331 students are considered full-time, taking a class load of 12 or more credit hours.

Each number was up more than 7 percent from the same point in September 2010.

In fact, Running Start students comprise 14 percent — that's one in seven — of all Clark students registered for classes this fall.

The phenomenon isn't new, as Washington public colleges and universities have jacked up



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tuition rates by double-digit percentages for three years straight in response to state funding reductions. Bleak economic projections indicate the trend won't soon end.

Running Start, which gives high school juniors and seniors a chance to earn tuition-free college credits in core subjects, even as they earn their high school diploma, is a potential opportunity for families to save a significant amount of money.

New this year are rules that lim-

it just how big a price break Running Start students can obtain at colleges' expense, though.

Previously, teens could easily double-enroll: They could take a full load in community college while also keeping a full class load at their high school.

Washington state would reimburse the school district, which in turn would ship 93 percent of the money to the college, keeping a small portion for its own expense.

But, state legislators chose to slice the maximum state funding reimbursement to 1.2 FTE. For additional courses, students

now must pay full college tuition. The move should save community and technical colleges about \$3 million in over-enrollment costs, officials say.

That means students enrolled for 15 credits per quarter at Clark College (some Running Start courses, such as English composition and history courses, are worth 5 credits; many others are 3 credits) may also take only one high school course before they trigger a tuition charge.

(Conversely, the limit would be one Running Start course for a full-time high school student).

Students who add another

high school or college course must pay the full \$101.50 tuition for each credit over the limit.

Family budgets key

Locally, all Running Start students faced a Sept. 9 deadline to hand in new paperwork detailing their class schedules, so that Clark officials could calculate appropriate tuition charges and process billing statements.

The early verdict: A small, but steady portion of Running Start students are affected by the

Running Start:

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lower tuition trigger, and must decide either to pay \$101.50, \$203 or \$304.50 for that one extra course, or drop a class or two somewhere.

In the fall of 2010, 180 out of 1,669 Running Start students at Clark took more than 15 credits, and officials don't expect much different behavior in fall 2011.

"We're doing a lot for a very few students," said William Belden, Clark's vice president of student affairs.

Predictably, decisions can hinge on family budgets.

"I haven't seen a lot of kids drop a class. If they have to pay an additional hundred dollars for 16 (credits), so be it," said George Geranios, a Skyview High School counselor who works with about one-fourth of the student body.

Keith Graham, counselor for the alternative CAM and HomeLink high school students in the Battle Ground school district, sees the same trend.

"If they're working for an (associate's degree) and parents have the ability to do it, they're staying with it," Graham said. The thinking is, "I may have to pay for two or three credits, but in the long run, it's worth it," he said.

He estimates about 15 students have opted to pay tuition; a handful have instead dropped a high school or Clark College course. He said only about 10 percent of Running Start students face the issue.

It's far different at Evergreen High School in east Vancouver, where more students come from low-income homes. Counselor Celeste DeMara said nearly a quarter of 105 Running Start students have cut back on their high school schedules to avoid tuition.

"It depends; it could be electives (such as art or music), maybe that extra year of math or science, or a foreign language class," DeMara said. The five students willing to pay for tuition "overage" charges this quarter are the exception.

"I think any time that anyone in high school has to pay for education, it's a bit of a surprise. And there's sticker shock," she said, at the tuition rates.

Running Start officials at Clark College have scrambled to alert students to the changes and to gather schedules so billing notices can go out. Students must pay tuition or agree on a payment plan by Sept. 26, when Clark classes begin.