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FEATURED

Local colleges see boost in PSEO enrollment

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PSEO student Nick Huynh works with partners Alex Wehrman and Taylor Grossen on a genetics lab Wednesday at Minnesota State University. A high school senior, Hahn is about a year and a half into his college education.

Pat Christman



High school senior Nick Huynh is on track to earn a bachelor's degree in biochemistry at Minnesota State University and is about a year and a half into his studies.

He's a local high school student enrolled in a Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program this year. The program, which allows some high school students to take classes at Minnesota public or private colleges at no cost to them, has been growing, and the pandemic has only increased the program's popularity.

Minnesota State University had a 43% increase in students taking classes through the program this year.

With many local high school events canceled and classes online for most of the academic year, some students decided to get a jump start on college classes.

Others, like Huynh, started PSEO before the pandemic. Some say the pandemic made the decision to do the program easier because many of the typical high school experiences aren't happening this year and because of the flexibility colleges are offering. With many classes available online, students can partake in PSEO courses without being on a campus.

Mankato West High School Principal Sherri Blasing said some students were anticipating that they wouldn't get the full high school experience this year so they decided to do PSEO. The desire to not miss out usually prevents some people from doing the program.

Around 140 students from Mankato West are partaking in the PSEO program this year, about a 25% increase from typical years.

With students already learning in an online environment last spring, Judy Endres, associate vice president of student affairs at South Central College, said the disruption probably made it easier to transition into a new program.

South Central College had a 7% increase in PSEO students this year, with almost 400 students taking classes through South Central's Faribault and North Mankato campuses.

An opportunity for growth

Huynh decided to do PSEO because of the professional development opportunities and the ability to work towards a degree. He is part of MSU's honors program and is able to conduct research while a PSEO student.

"The PSEO experience is very good if you have good goals," he said.

Marilyn Hart, an MSU biology professor, said PSEO students are a good addition to the school because they engage in class and know how to manage their time. At the beginning of a semester, they always come visit during office hours to introduce themselves.

"We love them, love them, love them," she said. "It's money well spent by taxpayers. By the time students graduate, they've already been integrated into higher education."

Huynh, who is in one of Hart's classes this semester, has been taking PSEO courses at MSU since he was a sophomore and while he loves the opportunities he has had through the program, he is also not as close as he used to be with his high school friends.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. You make friends at college and get to attend for free, but you do miss some of those high school experiences."

Kaitlyn Kirchner, a junior at Lake Crystal Wellcome Memorial High School, enrolled in the PSEO program because she wanted more responsibility.

"There are not a lot of opportunities in rural schools. ... PSEO gave me an opportunity to take more advanced courses," she said.

When she was signing up to take PSEO courses last spring, her counselor said that she could miss out on high school experiences, but Kirchner said many of those experiences aren't happening because of the pandemic, so she doesn't feel like she's missing anything.

Grace Guetschow, a PSEO student at Bethany Lutheran College, said taking college courses during the pandemic has been nice because there is flexibility and she can take her classes in-person, which she wouldn't have been able to do at the high school. She said she prefers learning in-person because it's easier to pay attention.

Who pays for it?

PSEO students help bring in revenue for colleges. MSU receives about \$216 per credit, two-thirds the regular rate, for students enrolled in the PSEO program. There were 229 PSEO students at MSU last semester, a jump from 160 students in fall 2019.

The increase in PSEO students helps support these colleges but also can put a strain on school district budgets. The Mankato school district uses state aid to pay for students' PSEO tuition.

The school district has paid more than half a million dollars for students to take PSEO courses over the past two and half years. The district paid \$176,000 for the program last fall, a 47% increase in fees compared to fall 2019.

The rise in students doing PSEO comes as Mankato Area Public Schools is dealing with a funding shortfall primarily driven by a decline in enrollment. Most of the district's funding is based on enrollment and about 300 students chose alternative education such as home schooling during the pandemic.

The district has also had an increase in students taking courses through online learning providers, which the district also pays for. The district has paid more than \$2 million since 2015 for students to take alternative online classes.

Tom Sager, director of the Mankato school district's department of business services, said the increase in students taking PSEO and online courses does have a dramatic impact on the school budget because the district is obligated to pay those bills.

He said the programs do provide students with more opportunities and is a way the district works to support students in their endeavors.

A financial relief for students

While the PSEO program can hurt school budgets, they alleviate a lot of financial burden for some students.

Annabelle Hanke is in her second year of taking PSEO classes full-time at MSU and can graduate more than two years early because of the program. With courses being free for students, she has saved more than \$20,000 in tuition.

"I don't want to be paying off loans until I'm 30," she said of her decision to do the program.

The flexibility college classes provide has also allowed Hanke to get a job as a teller. She is taking a course online at night this semester and is able to work during the day. She said she would have a harder time getting a job if she was taking high school classes because they fill most of the day.

The pandemic's impact

Officials say the hybrid model with classes in-person and online has made college classes more accessible to high school students because they do not need to be on campus, removing transportation logistics and barriers that previously prevented some from participating.

The rise in PSEO enrollment in the Mankato region during the pandemic is not unique, but Michael Altomari, PSEO office director at MSU, said enrollment has differed in other areas, with some rural colleges seeing a decline.

Gustavus Adolphus College didn't see an increase in PSEO enrollment because the college caps program participation, but more students than usual reached out expressing interest in taking PSEO courses.

On whether the higher number of PSEO students will stick, Blasing, the principal at Mankato West, anticipates that PSEO numbers will drop down to pre-pandemic levels once high school activities resume.

Altomari said he thinks it's entirely dictated by the way courses are offered.

"It depends on how many classes are available online," he said.

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