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Looking ahead to college

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How could you get a bachelor's degree in less than four years?

Take a test.

No, really.

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests, administered by the College Board, allow students to gain college credit by taking the equivalent of placement tests in certain subjects.

Sounds good, right? So why are so many high school students unaware of the tests?

"Isn't that what kids in Africa get?" Elizabeth Robinson, a sophomore at Pleasant Plains High School, said when asked about the tests.

During the 2009-10 school year, 38 percent of CLEP tests were given to people in college, according to the College Board. In the same year, just 8 percent of CLEP test takers were high school students.

Those most likely to take advantage of the exams are college students and adults going back to school. Students can "CLEP out" of classes by taking the tests, armed with knowledge they obtained from either previous job experience or previous classes.

CLEP tests are popular in the home-school community, where students frequently graduate from high school early and often pursue options that get them through college quickly by graduating early. But CLEP tests are not as popular in public schools.

The reason? Students may be feeling test fatigue, and schools don't seem to be making CLEP a big deal.

With Advanced Placement (AP) tests, the alphabet soup of college entrance exams (ACT, SAT, PSAT), the PSAT (Prairie State Achievement Exam) maybe even a few SAT IIs — not to mention the plethora of quizzes and tests doled out by teachers — it's no secret high school students are heavily assessed.

Most local schools have no record of a senior ever CLEPping out of a college class.

"I have had none in my three years here at Lanphier," said Heather Daniel, the guidance dean and testing coordinator at Lanphier High School. "We don't do anything promotion-wise, and as far as I know, we don't have any taking them."

Springfield and Glenwood high schools don't offer widespread information about CLEP testing either. Donna Povse, the post-secondary coach at Springfield High, says she does not recall ever knowing of a student taking a CLEP test.

"CLEP is a well-kept secret, but it shouldn't be," said Jonell Sanchez, a senior director who oversees the CLEP program for the College Board, in a news release. "Students can earn between three and 12 college credits per exam, giving them the possibility of saving between \$600 and \$2,400 tuition dollars. As families look for ways to save, CLEP is definitely an education bargain."

Those who take CLEP tests can choose a school to which they want the credits sent, or they may store them at the College Board's credit bank, where credits are kept on record for up to 20 years.

Kristen Chenoweth is the communication program coordinator for the Career Development Center at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Her office administers the CLEP tests, and she said CLEP takers should be careful about which tests they take.

For example, UIS accepts one CLEP composition exam, but does not accept a different version of the CLEP composition exam. So a student should check to see whether his or her desired college accepts a particular version.

"They can be two different tests, taken two different ways," Chenoweth said. "But in this case they actually differ in who grades them." One test is graded by the school in which it was taken, and the other is graded by a board of CLEP members.

UIS' guaranteed tuition plan for fall 2010 is estimated at \$270.25 per credit. Classes can be three to four credits each. There is generally an administration fee for a CLEP test, so it comes to about \$100. Chenoweth said she is not aware of a limit to CLEP-test credits accepted by UIS, but she says UIS does not accept all 33 administered CLEP tests.

Chenoweth says most students who take the CLEP test are often the age of a typical undergraduate college student, but she says she's seen students as young as 17 and as old as 50.

Lincoln Land Community College will accept up to 30 hours of CLEP testing. LLCC's administration fee is \$15, meaning a CLEP test costs \$92 to take.

Home-schooled sophomore Blaine McPherson Kneller contributed to this story. Farah Tamizuddin is a senior at Springfield High School.

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