Getting a head start on college
Dual-enrollment program gives high schoolers a jump
By Peter Schworm, Boston Globe Staff | October 13, 2008

The University of Massachusetts at Boston instructor scribbled algebraic equations on the blackboard at a breakneck pace, a blur of variables and exponents. As the chalk flew, three students in the class took notes just as furiously, filling page after page in their college-ruled notebooks.

Sitting side by side, they stood out from the other students. They were a little smaller, a little shier, and sat up a little straighter. They are, after all, still in high school.

Jeanne Tran, a senior at Excel High School in South Boston, is taking three college-prep classes this term, but said the UMass-Boston math course runs at a different speed. It isn't easy, but she's learning to keep up.

"Everything is so much faster," she said. "I just have to adapt."

Tran is one of hundreds of high school students in Massachusetts taking college courses this fall for an early introduction to college-level work and a head start on a degree. Now in a few schools, such as UMass campuses in Boston and Dartmouth, state education leaders this fall are expanding the programs to public colleges and universities across Massachusetts to expose more students to advanced classes. The goal is that a greater number of students will attend college, and be better prepared when they do.

State lawmakers approved $2 million this summer for what are known as dual-enrollment programs, which allow students to receive high school and college credit simultaneously. State education officials are urging high schools, which steer students to the college programs, to target students from families who have not attended college, and students interested in math and science.

The program is a cornerstone of Governor Deval Patrick's campaign to overhaul education. About 70 percent of Massachusetts high school graduates enter college, but thousands arrive unprepared and must take remedial courses for no academic credit. Frustrated by the slow progress toward a degree, many drop out.

The state's effort joins a national push for dual-enrollment classes, which proponents say give talented students in mediocre schools the chance to tackle more rigorous material and motivates struggling students to work harder.

For students like Syed Munna, who took psychology and precalculus at UMass-Boston last year as a high school senior, the experience turned college from a dream to an expectation. Munna, who emigrated from Bangladesh when he was 12, started off nervous, worried he was in over his head. But once he realized he could handle the workload, his confidence surged.

Now starting his freshman year at UMass-Boston, he's ahead of the game.

"For me, the first day was just like high school again," he said.

Paul Reville, state education secretary, said the classes give students "a sense of possibility" that motivates them to work harder and take more college-preparatory courses. The more time they
spend on a college campus, the easier it is to picture themselves there full time, and the more they feel they belong, he said.

Reville said the classes aim to boost college attendance rates and retention by improving skills and self-confidence alike.

A 2007 study by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University found that students who took dual-enrollment courses were more likely to graduate high school, enroll in college, and succeed academically.

Aundrea Kelley, acting commissioner for the state Department of Higher Education, said she hopes to triple the number of students now taking college courses by the spring. The costs vary by the arrangement between the college and high school. Classes are often free or cost less than regular tuition, allowing students to reduce their overall college costs.

Getting a preview of the pace and culture of college classes, students say, cuts both ways. For Linrosa Thach, Tran's classmate at Excel High School, the math class has made the prospect of college less intimidating.

"When you think of college, you think of 10-page papers and long, complicated lectures," she said. "We were so scared. But now it doesn't seem that much different."

But for Carmen Torres, a UMass-Boston freshman who was the valedictorian of her senior class, the C-plusses she received in psychology and sociology at the school were stern wake-up calls.

"Getting grades like that was a shock, but those two classes were good experience," she said. "It taught me what college is like. Now I listen to everything the professor says, write everything down, and I read a lot more carefully."

Donald Honeman, associate vice chancellor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, said the classes demystify college, and are superior preparation to high school advanced placement tests. They also challenge bright students who may feel bored with their high school courses and let them study subjects they couldn't otherwise, proponents added.

"It really does provide students an opportunity to shine in their area of expertise," said Gillian Thorne, director of the University of Connecticut's Early College Experience, which teaches some 5,000 high school students.

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