

A Comparison of Rural and Urban Student Participation in High School Correspondence Study

BRUCE BARKER¹ AND SUZANNE LOGAN²

Correspondence study may be considered a viable alternative for providing curriculum diversity in small secondary schools. Research shows correspondence courses are approved by a majority of both small and large secondary schools, but only a small percentage of the students take advantage of the instructional method, usually using it to earn make-up credit. A major reason for the lack of use of correspondence study lies in the reluctance of principals to recommend the method. Visits to small high schools in rural areas by the authors resulted in several recommendations for school officials to consider regarding correspondence study. Using these recommendations, correspondence study may be an acceptable alternative for their students.

The challenge of offering a broad and varied curriculum is one of the most frequent concerns associated with the small/rural high school [1; 4; 7]. Although it is true that large high schools also face problems in planning and organizing their curricula, the problem is generally of greater magnitude in the small high school where low enrollment increases per pupil cost of programs, facilities, and certified personnel.

Departments of correspondence study at major colleges and universities have long promoted the benefits of Independent Study (a euphemism for traditional correspondence study) as a viable resource for providing curriculum diversity in small secondary schools [3]. Of the 73 National University Continuing Education Association (NUCEA) Independent Study member institutions, 32 offer high school correspondence programs. During the 1982-83 school year, these institutions enrolled a combined total of 74,861 students [5]. Student enrollments were reported in terms of one-half Carnegie unit.

From enrollment totals reported by the NUCEA, it is apparent that a sizeable number of students from across the nation do participate in high school correspondence courses. Although it has been inferred by several writers [2; 3; 9] that correspondence courses play a valuable role in providing curriculum diversity in small high schools, this claim has not been documented by empirical research. Do small schools make greater use of correspondence courses than do larger schools? If so, is such use chiefly to supplement the local curriculum? What kind of student typically enrolls in correspondence study coursework; and how readily do school administrators accept correspondence study credits to apply toward high school graduation requirements? The purpose of this article is to report research findings from a national study which answers these and related questions.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Two random samples of operating public high schools in the United States were used in this study. The first consisted of 475 schools with enrollments of less than 500 students each. The second consisted of 900 schools with enrollments in excess of 1000 students each. A mailing list, purchased from Market Data Retrieval Incorporated [6], indicated a total of 5060 qualifying schools in the first sample (this did not include continuation, alternative, or speciality schools, almost all of which enroll fewer than 500 students) and 4,799 qualifying schools in the second sample.

A self-administered questionnaire was mailed during the 1983-84 school year to school principals in each of the two samples. Responses were returned from 319 of the small schools for a return of 38.9 percent. Returns were received from small schools in 46 different states and from large schools from 45 different states.

FINDINGS

Mean student enrollment in the small schools was 296.8 students and in the large schools was 1598.4 students.

Acceptance of credit for university sponsored high school correspondence courses was approved by administrators in 88.3 percent of the small schools and 67.0 percent of the larger schools. The mean number of credits, based on the Carnegie unit, which officials would permit students to apply toward graduation requirements was 2.7 in the small schools and 2.0 in the large. Total student enrollments of participating schools in the two samples were 93,188 and 557,845, respectively. Of these, principals reported that 1288 (1.4 percent) students attending small schools and 2581 (0.5 percent) students at-

¹Bruce Barker is Associate Director of Continuing Education and an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University. He is also Assistant Director of the National Center for Smaller Schools at Texas Tech and serves on the research committee of the national Rural Education Association.

²Suzanne Logan is Assistant Director of Continuing Education, Correspondence and Extension at Texas Tech University.

TABLE 1

Degree to Which Correspondence Courses Are Recommended by School Principals in Small and Large High Schools as a Viable Alternative to Earn Credit*

Rating	Small Schools		Large Schools	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	54	18.7	117	36.4
2	90	31.1	124	38.6
3	71	24.6	43	13.4
4	49	17.0	22	6.9
5	25	8.6	15	4.7

*Reported on a scale of "1" to "5" where "1" represented "not recommended" and "5" represented "frequently recommended": 1984.

tending large schools had enrolled in a correspondence course(s) during the preceding academic year.

Principals in both samples did not highly recommend correspondence study as a viable alternative to earn credit. On a Likert-style scale of "1" to "5" where "1" represented "not recommended" and "5" indicated "frequently recommended," only 8.6 percent of the small school principals, compared to 4.6 percent for large schools, indicated they frequently recommend correspondence study as an approved means to earn credit. At the same time, 18.7 percent and 36.4 percent, respectively stated they did not recommend correspondence courses (see Table 1).

The reasons given for student participation in correspondence study were especially interesting. It was determined that the principle use of correspondence courses in small schools was not as a vehicle for curriculum enrichment. In fact, when asked to rank order the major reasons why students in their schools enrolled in correspondence courses, three out of every four principals in both samples ranked "to earn makeup credit" as the number one reason. "To resolve scheduling conflicts" and "to supplement the curriculum" were agreed upon by principals in both samples as distant second and third reasons.

Also of interest was the relationship between academic achievement and student participation in correspondence study. In each sample, principals stated that over one-half of those who enrolled in correspondence courses were "D" or "F" students (see Table 2).

REMARKS

Though not highly recommended by school principals, correspondence courses are an approved means for earning additional credit in most small and large high schools. Evidence from this study would suggest that acceptance of correspondence coursework is more widespread in small schools than large ones. As supposed by many university sponsored departments of correspondence

TABLE 2

Academic Level of Students Enrolling in Correspondence Study Courses*

Academic Level	Small Schools		Large Schools	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
"A"	30	13.4	25	12.8
"B"	26	11.6	15	7.6
"C"	30	13.4	49	25.0
"D" or "F"	138	61.6	107	54.6

*As perceived by principals of small and large high schools; 1984.

study, however, their major use in the small school is not to supplement the curriculum. Instead, present use in both small and large schools is chiefly as a resource for remediation; and according to school principals, such courses are used mostly by students performing at the lower echelon of academic achievement.

Over 30 major colleges and universities sponsor high school correspondence courses. In most cases these courses are accredited as a part of the university's overall accreditation. In addition three proprietary schools offer high school correspondence courses under accreditation standards of the National Home Study Council [8]. Whether provided by universities or proprietary schools, quality of courses varies not only from one institution to another, but also within the same institution. Some courses are extremely well written; others are not.

In addition to completing this study, we have visited a combined total of almost 200 small high schools in rural areas across nine different states in the past two years and inquired about their uses of correspondence study courses. Based on the findings of this study and observations gained through personal visits, we offer the following recommendations to school officials who either use or are thinking of using correspondence study in their schools.

1. Consider the tuition price for student enrollment. In 1982-83, the average tuition for a one-half unit course was \$43.75 [5].

2. Ask to have the course material mailed to the school, without charge, for a ten-day review. This provides school officials an opportunity to look over content and determine how well the course is written.

3. Request to review examinations in order to determine if grading procedures and student expectations are in harmony with regular policy adopted by the school. Receipt of credit for most correspondence study courses is contingent upon passing a supervised examination.

4. From the correspondence study department, find out who the instructor for the course is and whether or not the teacher holds a valid teaching certificate. Some correspondence courses are computer graded; others are scored by university professors or graduate students. From our experience, the best courses are written and taught by high school teachers who instruct cor-

respondence students as an addition to their regular classroom teaching assignment. Overall, we have found these teachers to be more sensitive to the expectations of high school students and best able to provide written comments of substance on students' completed lessons.

5. To help assure that students who enroll for correspondence study complete their lessons and earn credit, assign a teacher or counselor to keep in close contact with those students. This will make the students accountable for their studies and keep school personnel informed of student progress.

The fact that the major use of correspondence study courses is by students who need to earn make-up credit does not limit the value of correspondence study as a tool for curriculum enrichment. By following the recommendations outlined herein, school administrators who have not previously made use of correspondence study or have felt uncomfortable with this medium, may yet find this delivery system to be a viable alternative to enhance learning opportunities for students.

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