

Executive Summary

MAY 2019

Illuminating a Path to College: How Dual Credit Benefits Rural Students



Higher education has been seen as a vehicle for providing upward socioeconomic mobility for students from working-class backgrounds. Unfortunately, rural students have not enjoyed the same levels of access to educational opportunities as their urban and suburban peers. The research that addresses rural education is limited. This is problematic as one-third of all public schools are situated within rural environments, and half of all public-school districts are located within rural communities. While most rural students aspire to obtain a college education, they face greater challenges than their urban peers. This study explores one program to address the resulting gap-- dual credit-- and how it may promote access to higher education for rural students. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to elucidate why students within rural communities participate in dual credit and what the perceived benefits are from the perspective of community college staff, faculty, and administrators.

Dual credit programs allow high school students to enroll in college courses. These courses may be taken at their high school or a college campus and may be taught by college instructors or qualified high school teachers. Students who enroll in dual credit on a college campus and are taught by college instructors are exposed to a collegiate culture and peer network that they would not otherwise be exposed to at their local high school campus. This is particularly important for first-

generation, low-SES students of color who may lack the cultural and social capital to develop a college-going mindset and understanding. Furthermore, the collegiate environment allows for students who come from working-class communities to be removed from under-resourced high schools, teachers with low expectations, and peers who lack motivation. Dual credit programs offer a setting with high expectations and students who are intrinsically motivated to be in the college environment.

Two research questions guide my examination of why rural students participate in dual credit and the benefits they receive:

1. What do community college administrators, staff, and instructors perceive are the reasons rural students participate in dual credit?
2. What do community college administrators, staff, and instructors perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for rural students?

Utilizing funds of knowledge as a theoretical lens, we conducted a multi-site case study of dual credit programs in a rural region of Texas utilizing interviews, site visits, and website analysis.

Research
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Findings

RQ 1: What are the reasons for participation?

This question is important as it may suggest avenues for high schools and colleges to promote participation. Participants in the study indicated the three primary reasons for participating in dual credit were: (1) family influence, (2) saving money, and (3) following peers.

Family influence. Family exudes a high-level influence on students. This is particularly true of rural families and Latino families. Thus, it is not surprising that participants in our study indicated that many students' decisions to enroll were based on parents or siblings encouraging them to enroll in dual credit. Indeed, the influence of older siblings seemed to be a major reason why younger siblings enrolled. The fact that parents knew that dual credit had been a positive influence on their older children led them to encourage their younger children to follow in their older siblings' footsteps.

Saving money. Many families across the country have concerns regarding the high cost of attending college. This is particularly true of rural students. Participants in our study indicated that parents and students are attempting to find ways to lower costs even before they embark on their college endeavor.

Peer influence. Some of the participants indicated that peer effects were guiding part of the decision to enroll. One indicated said that some of the students are close-knit. Thus, if one peer discloses that they intend on participating in dual credit, it is likely that their friends will follow suit.

RQ2: What do administrators, staff, and instructors within community colleges perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for rural students? Participants in the study indicated that dual credit demystifies what college is, and it validates that they will be successful academically.

Demystifies college. Most participants agreed that dual credit programs help students in both academic and social development. Participants indicated that rural high school students learn how to socialize better and understand the college culture, which helps them develop a college identity. One participant explained the social aspect of dual credit exposes rural students to a collegiate environment and culture that promotes a better understanding of what college is and what it is going to be if they matriculate after high school. Another indicated dual credit exposes students to critical thinking skills that they may not be exposed to in high school. Another suggested high school students who participate in dual credit are better prepared for college because they know what to expect from an academic standpoint. Students are exposed to the ways they should communicate with faculty and learn to prepare well in advance.

Validating their academic success. For those rural high schools who are already high-achieving, dual credit is a way to validate that they are ready for college. A faculty participant indicated that in her classroom, the high school students tend to outperform college students. Many of the students in dual credit are at the top of their high school classes academically – a group that typically goes to four-year institutions – so the community college students are typically less adept in the subject matter.

Policy Implications

The results of this study have several policy implications. First, counselors and teachers should work with families to provide information regarding the benefits of dual credit. It is clear that many students participate based on their

parents' and siblings' encouragement. In addition, it was evident that peers played a role in students' decision to participate in dual credit. Thus, high schools and community colleges should inform students about dual credit and encourage them to pass along the information to peers about the benefit of participating in dual credit. Second, data suggest that dual credit is beneficial for rural students in multiple ways. These benefits may help alleviate some of the financial burdens that rural families face by providing college credit at a lower cost than four-year institutions. Thus, high school and community college staff should work in partnership to expose the ways in which dual credit benefits students to create a culture of dual credit participation. A culture that permeates both sectors of education will send a message to students and families that their education beyond high school matters. Finally, results indicated that high school students do just as well, if not better, than many of the community college students as perceived by participants in the study. Thus, postsecondary institutions should not be concerned that enrollment of high school students in college courses will compromise the rigor of their courses. It is evident that high school students take their dual credit seriously and they are successful in collegiate environments.

Conclusion

Overall, rural students face several obstacles to college access and attainment. These challenges include geographic isolation, under-resourced compulsory schools, having a narrow curriculum, and coming from working-class backgrounds. Results from this study suggest that dual credit may alleviate some of these challenges by providing funds of knowledge to promote a college-going mindset. Thus, dual credit should be encouraged within high schools, and policy makers should ensure that high schools and community colleges are provided funding and resources to promote the success of students within rural communities.

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