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Recommended Citation

Garcia, Hugo; McNaughtan, Jon; Eicke, Dustin; and Harwood, Yvonne, "Administrative Perspectives on Dual Credit" (2018). *Latino Public Policy*. 7.

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Administrative Perspectives on Dual Credit

By Hugo Garcia, Jon McNaughtan, Dustin Eicke, and Yvonne Harwood

Executive Summary

- Topic:** Due to globalization and education inflation, college has become a necessity to be competitive in the global workforce. College graduates are more likely to be global citizens than those who do not participate in college as they are exposed to increasingly international curricula and a diverse student body (Yeaton, García, Soria, & Huerta, 2017). Unfortunately, Latinos do not enroll in the same numbers as their middle- and upper-class White peers. To abate the discrepancies in college participation of Latino students as compared to other racial groups, programs that have shown to increase college access need to be explored. Dual credit has been a vehicle to potentially increase college participation of Latino students (García, 2014). While the unit of analysis in the small corpus of research relating to dual credit has been on the student, the research on individuals responsible for dual credit on high school campuses is even more nascent.
- Research Question & Problem:** This study's purpose is to give a voice to the faculty and staff who engage with dual credit programs to better understand their perceptions of dual credit programs, who has access to these programs, and their views of the role school campuses have in supporting dual credit. To sketch a better picture as to how agents embedded within high schools perceive the benefits of dual credit, our study was guided by the following three research questions:
RQ 1: What benefits and drawbacks do high school staff perceive for students engaged in dual credit?
RQ 2: What are the characteristics of students engaged in dual credit, as perceived by high school staff?
RQ 3: How do high school staff perceive the role of the institution in supporting dual credit participation?
- Method:** A purposeful sample of high schools were selected within an urban center of a large rural area. Respondents for this study include high school administrators, teachers, and counselors that directly work with and support dual credit programs. We utilized a qualitative approach in the analysis of the survey items. Specifically, data were analyzed employing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.
- Significance:** Dual credit programs are touted as programs that increase access to all students, including Latinos. The Texas 60x30TX plan to have 60% of Texas residents who are 25-34 years of age to have a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015) will necessitate the use and expansion of dual credit. Thus, it is paramount that a closer examination of dual credit be conducted as to whether dual credit has the intended outcomes policy makers desire. Based on the results of our study, Latinos and low-SES backgrounds are not gaining access to dual credit programs.
- Key Findings:** The overall perceptions of the survey respondents centered on the idea that dual credit participating students tend to be a diverse group, in terms of ethnicity or

race (80% of respondents expressed this perception). This sentiment amongst the respondents indicates that dual credit participation lines are not drawn by race or ethnicity as one may predict, but rather by socioeconomic status and parental involvement: “Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are a large portion of the enrollment at our school which is missing from the dual credit picture” (Respondent 19).

RQ1: The survey respondents cited specific benefits for student participation in dual credit courses that are expected by design: tuition cost savings and the ability to earn college credit while still in high school (80% of respondents cited these two benefits). Additionally, these educators offer a more nuanced perspective on potential benefits for students engaged in dual credit courses: “...I feel that if a student takes and passes a dual credit class they are more likely to move on to college after high school” (Respondent 17). The perception that dual credit courses may prepare high school students for college level academic work and social maturity were mixed with 32% of respondents specifically pointing out the inability of dual credit courses to adequately prepare students for college. Conversely, 20% of participants expressed that student participation in dual credit courses improves the students’ level of academic and social maturity necessary for college.

RQ2: Dual credit participating students tend to be of a high-socioeconomic status, have significant parental support and involvement, and are themselves involved in extracurricular activities on campus. Of those surveyed, 56% of respondents indicated that their dual credit participating students were from a mid to high-socioeconomic background. When asked about their perceptions regarding students or groups that are missing amongst dual credit participating students, 52% of respondents indicated in some way that low-socioeconomic students were underrepresented.

RQ3: Campuses supported dual credit enrollment by informing students and parents utilizing individual meetings, campus wide announcements, electronic communications, print communications, and presentations to both individuals and large groups. According to the respondents, teachers carried the bulk of work regarding informing students and parents about dual credit opportunities through in-class announcements (40% of respondents).

6. **Innovation:** We have attempted to provide a voice to faculty and staff within high schools who participate in dual credit within their school. Our results show how to promote student populations that come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.
7. **Limitations:** First, our study was collected in an urban area. This may not be transferrable to rural regions of the State of Texas. Second, most participants (92%) were White. This lack of diversity representation may explain why many stated that it was not a racial issue, but a SES issue, regarding access to dual credit.
8. **Policy & Practice Recommendations:** Policy needs to be developed that help alleviate the financial burden to participate in dual credit. As it stands now, families from low-SES backgrounds may not be able to afford to participation in dual credit even if they are eligible academically to enroll.

Policy Brief

Topic

Due to globalization and education inflation, college has become a necessity to be competitive in the global workforce. College graduates are more likely to be global citizens than those who do not participate in college as they are exposed to increasingly international curricula and a diverse student body (Yeaton, García, Soria, & Huerta, 2017). In addition, higher education has proven to be both a public and private good (Bowen, 1977) as it has shown that obtaining a college degree provides various benefits to the individual student and the U.S. (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Students who matriculate and graduate from college are more likely to have higher incomes, lead healthier lifestyles, and be more engaged civically. In addition, the earth is getting smaller due to globalization effects which necessitates international experiences. Indeed, the “College for all” has infiltrated various state and federal level conversations (Savitz-Romer & Boufard, 2012). Unfortunately, Latinos do not enroll in the same numbers as their middle- and upper-class White peers. In order to abate the discrepancies in college participation of Latino students as compared to other racial groups, programs that have shown to increase college access need to be explored. Dual credit has been seen as a vehicle to potentially increase college participation of Latino students (Garcia, 2014). While the unit of analysis in the small corpus of research relating to dual credit has been on the student, the research on individuals responsible for dual credit on high school campuses is even more nascent. In what follows, we will review the scant but growing body of literature regarding dual credit.

Growth of Dual Credit

In the interest of increasing college readiness and postsecondary enrollment and decreasing the cost to degree, students, institutions, and states are actively interested in the incorporation of dual credit opportunities into student pathways to postsecondary education (Thomas, Marken, Gray, Lewis, & Ralph, 2013; Zinth, 2014). In 2011-2012 over two million high school students were participating in dual credit opportunities (Thomas et al., 2013) and 82% of U.S. Public high schools offered some sort of dual credit opportunities for students (Zinth, 2014). While many students need to receive recommendations from teachers or counselors and/or have a minimum GPA in order to participate in dual credit (Thomas et al., 2013), there have been efforts to expand access to these programs to students who may not meet high school academic qualifications but can successfully pass standard assessments used by community colleges (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2015). In order to understand efforts to expand dual credit access, it is important to look at benefits that have been associated with dual credit participation in the literature.

Benefits of Dual Credit

The impact of dual credit on student postsecondary success has been the topic of much of the existing literature. Comparative studies indicate that dual credit participation has been associated with success at the postsecondary level in several ways, including, higher grade point averages (An, 2015; Jones, 2014; Ganzert, 2014), less need for remediation (Grubb, Scott, and Good, 2017), increased persistence (Jones, 2014; Phelps and Chan, 2016), greater likelihood of transfer from two to four-year institutions (Blankenberger, Lichtenberger, & Witt, 2017; Ganzert, 2014), and higher levels of postsecondary degree attainment (An, 2013; An, 2015; Blankenberger, Lichtenberger, & Witt, 2017).

In addition to academic success measures, students who have participated in dual credit opportunities have reported that the benefits included feelings of academic independence, early exposure to the postsecondary level class environment and expectations, as well as hidden tips for success like the importance of faculty interaction (Kanny, 2015). For some students, participating in dual credit opportunities may reinforce existing self-efficacy beliefs (Ozmun, 2013) and intention to pursue postsecondary education (Hanson, Prusha, and Iverson, 2015), while students who may not have been as committed to higher education indicate that their dual credit experience helped them clarify their postsecondary choices and begin to self-identify as a student through dual credit opportunities (Lile, Ottusch, Jones, & Richards, 2018).

There is also evidence in the literature that dual credit participation can provide better college preparation (Esther, 2001; Ganzert, 2014) and narrow postsecondary enrollment and achievement gaps for first generation students (An, 2013), students from underrepresented minority groups, and low-income socioeconomic backgrounds (Taylor, 2015). Analysis of postsecondary enrollment and completion through propensity score matching indicates that for students of color, “92% of dual credit students enrolled in college and 43% completed college, whereas only 66% of non-dual credit students enrolled in college and 29% completed college” (Taylor, 2015, p. 371). Similarly, Taylor (2015) found 86% of low-income students who participated in dual credit enrolled in a college or university and 34% successfully completed, compared to 56% enrollment and 18% completion among students in the same income category who did not participate in dual credit.

There is also evidence that underrepresented students may be more likely to participate in dual credit than other programs like credit through examination, accelerated programs, or advanced placement (An, 2015). A study by An (2015) revealed that among students at nineteen liberal arts institutions who had participated in accelerated or advanced placement programs in high school, only 7% were underrepresented and 81% had at least one parent who had completed a four-year degree. Comparatively, among those who had participated in dual credit programs, 16% were underrepresented and 64 % were not first-generation.

Research Questions and Problem:

As previously stated, the majority of research on dual credit has focused on the perspective of students participating, or the characteristics of those students. The purpose of this study is to give a voice to the faculty and staff who engage with dual credit programs to better understand their perceptions of dual credit programs, who has access to these programs, and their views of the role school campuses have in supporting dual credit. To sketch a better picture as to how agents embedded within high schools perceive the benefits of dual credit, our study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ 1: What benefits and drawbacks do high school staff perceive for students engaged in dual credit?

RQ 2: What are the characteristics of students engaged in dual credit, as perceived by high school staff?

RQ 3: How do high school staff perceive the role of the institution in supporting dual credit participation?

Method

A purposeful sample of high schools were selected within an urban center of a large rural area. There was a total of six schools invited to participate, and three campuses approved participation in the study. Respondents for this study include high school administrators, teachers, and counselors that directly work with and support dual credit programs. After accepting the invitation to participate in the study, a representative from each of the school districts we were working with contacted via email individuals engaged in dual credit and invited them to respond to a twelve-question survey. A total of twenty-eight respondents from the three schools responded, but after cleaning the data, three cases were removed for non-response leaving a total of twenty-five respondents for analysis ($n = 25$). The majority of respondents are faculty (68%), while administrators and staff make up 16% of the cases each. The mean number of years the respondents have spent teaching or supporting dual credit programs is six and a half years. Additionally, 92% of respondents have a master's degree level of education or higher (Table 1). After collecting the responses to the survey, they were coded and analyzed to identify themes occurring in the data.

Table 1: Percent distributions of selected characteristics for survey participants with a position of administrator, counselor, or faculty.

	All Participants	Administrators	Counselors	Faculty
Sex				
Male	.360	.222	.000	.778
Female	.640	.125	.250	.625
Highest Degree				
Bachelors	.040	.000	.000	.059
Masters	.920	.750	1.00	.941
Doctorate	.040	.250	.000	.000
Years Involved in Dual Credit				
01–05 years	.520	.717	.786	.732
06–10 years	.280	.089	.077	.090
11–15 years	.160	.041	.032	.041
> 16 years	.040	.039	.027	.038
<i>N</i>	25	4	4	17

Notes:

-8% of participants are non-white (1 Asian and 1 Hispanic), while 92% (23) are white
-No missing cases

Data Analysis

We utilized a qualitative approach in the analysis of the survey items. Specifically, data were analyzed employing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stage, the data was coded in chunks with each response coded based solely on the text (Glaser, 1978) to develop preliminary codes. The responses continued to be coded until no new codes emerged, thus ensuring saturation had been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). One researcher coded all of the data, which was then cross-checked by another researcher to increase validity. Axial coding was employed to ensure that associations across themes were identified and to attempt to draw our overarching themes of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Following this robust process, selective coding was used to code all data and come to the final set of themes.

Significance

Dual credit programs are touted as programs that increase access to all students, including Latinos. The Texas 60x30TX plan to have 60% of Texas residents who are 25-34 years of age to

have a certificate or degree by 2030 (THECB, 2015) will necessitate the use and expansion of dual credit. For instance, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board states, “College will mean earning associate degrees through dual credit or early college high school programs” (THECB, 2015, p. 7). Thus, it is paramount that a closer examination of dual credit be conducted as to whether dual credit has the intended outcomes policy makers desire. Based on the results of our study, it is clear that Latinos and low-SES backgrounds are not gaining access to dual credit programs. There are several reasons for this as it will be discussed in greater detail below.

Key Findings

In the preliminary analysis, shared perspectives from the respondents began to emerge around the three research questions. The overall perceptions of the survey respondents centered on the idea that dual credit participating students tend to be a diverse group, in terms of ethnicity or race (80% of respondents expressed this perception). This sentiment amongst the respondents indicates that dual credit participation lines are not drawn by race or ethnicity as one may predict, but rather by socioeconomic status and parental involvement: “Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are a large portion of the enrollment at our school which is missing from the dual credit picture” (Respondent 19). Of those surveyed, 52% of respondents expressed concern for the lack of low-socioeconomic students participating in dual credit courses at their respective campuses.

Research question 1. *What benefits and drawbacks do high school staff perceive for students engaged in dual credit?* As alluded to above, the survey respondents cited specific benefits for student participation in dual credit courses that are expected by design: tuition cost savings and the ability to earn college credit while still in high school (80% of respondents cited these two benefits). Both lowered tuition costs and early college credit are expected benefits and are embedded in the design of dual credit programs. Additionally, these educators offer a more nuanced perspective on potential benefits for students engaged in dual credit courses: “...I feel that if a student takes and passes a dual credit class they are more likely to move on to college after high school” (Respondent 17). This is an interesting observation that those students participating in dual credit programs are more likely to continue onto college. It is not possible to identify if these students were or were not already on a college pathway before enrolling in a dual credit program. Furthermore, students who enter a dual credit program may be more likely to continue onto college, but this does not indicate an academic or social maturity level that is sufficient to persist to college graduation.

Despite uncertainties regarding successful transition from high school to college, responses regarding the social maturity of dual credit students once they enter college life were not unanimous. The perception that dual credit courses may prepare high school students for college level academic work and social maturity were mixed with 32% of respondents specifically pointing out the inability of dual credit courses to adequately prepare students for college. Conversely, 20% of participants expressed that student participation in dual credit courses improves the students’ level of academic and social maturity necessary for college. Respondent 16 expressed that student participation in dual credit courses “...increases their comfort levels enormously...”. There was clear indication of survey participants’ concern for students’ academic identity, and thus a concern for these students’ abilities to adapt to their elevated starting position once enrolled in college.

Perhaps one of the most interesting themes to emerge from the survey participants, the conflict between dual credit and AP courses, was a perspective shared by 28% of participants. These respondents expressed concern that while both dual credit and AP courses have the potential to earn college credit for the student, dual credit courses were not as academically challenging as the AP courses. This view is clearly expressed here by Respondent 10:

When students are taking AP, dual credit is unnecessary, because a student should be able to meet standards for college by qualifying on the AP exam. Students who are not taking AP can benefit from Dual Credit because it allows them to earn credit hours toward college and possibly save money. However, the curriculum for dual credit programs is often not nearly as rigorous as the curriculum for AP or IB, so I feel students who opt out of AP to take dual credit are generally not getting the same level of preparation.

Nearly a third of all survey participants indicated some level of concern for the conflicts that exist between dual credit and AP courses.

Research question 2. *What are the characteristics of students engaged in dual credit, as perceived by high school staff?* Students engaged in dual credit courses at the campuses participating in the survey shared specific characteristics that emerged in the analysis. Most notably, dual credit participating students tend to be of a high-socioeconomic status, have significant parental support and involvement, and are themselves involved in extracurricular activities on campus. Of those surveyed, 56% of respondents indicated that their dual credit participating students were from a mid to high-socioeconomic background. This theme is articulated well here by Respondent 25:

In my experience, most of the students in our dual credit courses come from mid-to-high SES families. These are typically students who are involved in one or more extracurricular activity and have parents who attend many (if not all) school functions.

When asked about their perceptions regarding students or groups that are missing amongst dual credit participating students, 52% of respondents indicated in some way that low-socioeconomic students were underrepresented. Most survey participants alluded to this being the result of the cost of taking dual credit courses. This is plainly expressed here by Respondent 1: “Our lower SES students miss out on this opportunity because they usually can't afford to pay for the courses”. Although low-socioeconomic students may benefit the most from reduced tuition costs in college, these are the students that appear to be the least likely to engage in a dual credit course.

Research question 3. *How do high school staff perceive the role of the institution in supporting dual credit participation?* Respondents shed light onto the methods that high schools use to inform students and their parents about opportunities to enroll in dual credit courses. Campuses supported dual credit enrollment by informing students and parents utilizing individual meetings, campus wide announcements, electronic communications, print communications, and

presentations to both individuals and large groups. According to the respondents, teachers carried the bulk of work in regard to informing students and parents about dual credit opportunities through in-class announcements (40% of respondents). Some campuses utilized a varied set of approaches similar to the ones described here by Respondent 25:

The school hosts mandatory meetings each spring for parents of students who wish to take a dual credit course. Postcards are also sent to students who qualify for dual credit. In addition, multiple announcements are made both verbally and over our television system to alert students to the options and requirements for dual credit courses.

The survey participants were asked what types of support high schools should put in place to help students missing from dual credit programs become engaged. The responses overwhelmingly (48%) indicated that high schools should offer some form of financial assistance to help low-socioeconomic students increase their representativeness in dual credit courses. Respondent 5 plainly indicated this recommendation to high schools with two simple words: “financial aid”. Continuing with this theme of economic support for low-socioeconomic students, Respondent 23 offered these simple words; “free opportunities for dual credit”.

Innovation

In this empirical study, we have attempted to provide a voice to faculty and staff within high schools who participate in dual credit within their school. Our results offer new light on how they can promote Latinos students and other student populations that come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Limitations

As with any study, our project has limitations. First, our study was collected in an urban area. This may not be transferrable to rural regions of the State of Texas. Second, the majority of participants (92%) were White. This lack of diversity representation may explain why many stated that it was not a racial issue, but a SES issue, regarding access to dual credit.

Implications

There are several policy implications that can be derived from this study. It is clear from our study that participants in our study have concerns regarding access to dual credit for working-class families. Latinos and students of color are overwhelmingly represented in this category. Because our data suggests that dual credit access is an issue due to high cost of participation, policy needs to be developed that help alleviate the financial burden to participate in dual credit. As it stands now, families from low-SES backgrounds may not be able to afford to participate in dual credit even if they are eligible academically to enroll.

Future Research

Based on our research, there are clear conflict between AP and Dual Credit regarding variation in rigor. Therefore, research should examine if there is a difference between the two programs in terms of rigor. Are students more likely be successful if dual credit is given at the college campus versus the high school campus? Should there be an academic requirements for students to participate? These are research questions that need to be answered.

Conclusion

In this study, we have attempted to shed light as to how dual credit may be a vehicle for promoting or hindering access to college for students. Our data has mirrored prior research that most participants in dual credit are middle-/upper-class students, White, and already on their way to some type of postsecondary education. Latino students and low-SES students who are less likely to matriculate in college post-high school, are less likely to participate in dual credit. Policy makers must implement policies that promote access to dual credit for all students, not just those who are already on their way to college.

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