

Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series

Brief 2: Characteristics of Successful Dual Enrollment Partnerships

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Introduction

Across California, an increasing number of community colleges are partnering with their local K12 systems to provide dual enrollment programs. Dual enrollment affords high school students the opportunity to enroll in college courses. A strategy for improving equitable higher education access and outcomes, dual enrollment helps prepare students academically, emotionally, and socially for postsecondary success. This opportunity can be particularly powerful for students with low incomes, students of color, and students who are first in their families to attend college.

As this strategy surges in popularity, [RDP Consulting](#) is working with the *Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion (DE4EC)* initiative to learn more about what constitutes equitable dual enrollment and how it benefits students who are historically underrepresented in postsecondary education (see Sidebar 1.1). To inform this effort, RDP Consulting conducted interviews with nearly 100 dual enrollment program participants representing seven *DE4EC*-funded partnerships in 2022.

Participants included faculty, staff, and administrators from California high schools and community colleges. We also connected directly with students and parents who identify as African American/Black, Latina/o/x, and/or experiencing economic disadvantage to amplify their unique experience in dual enrollment programs. Interview questions explored the intersection of equitable best practices and effective K12 and college partnerships within *DE4EC* communities.

As part of the *Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research* series, this research brief focuses on the characteristics that make *DE4EC* partnerships productive for students, K12 schools, and community colleges alike. It highlights (a) what constitutes a successful dual enrollment partnership and how to build relationships that advance equitable dual enrollment programs, and (b) calls out barriers to these collaborations. Community college personnel responsible for designing, directing, and leading dual enrollment efforts may find it particularly helpful as they work to strengthen their own K12 connections in service of equity-driven programming.

Sidebar 1.1 Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion Overview

Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion (DE4EC) is a multi-year collaborative initiative among the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), [College Futures Foundation](#), and [Tipping Point Community](#), carried out with research support from RDP Consulting. *DE4EC* helps California community colleges and their high school partners build dual enrollment programs centered on strengthening equitable access and completion outcomes for students underrepresented in higher education, particularly African American/Black, Latina/o/x, and students experiencing economic disadvantage.

DE4EC includes the following 10 colleges and their high school partners: Berkeley City College, Compton College, Contra Costa College, Cuyamaca College, East Los Angeles College, Fresno City College, Gavilan College, Hartnell College, Madera Community College, and Skyline College. Each of these collaborations represents different levels of capacity and stages of dual enrollment program implementation.

Key Findings

Characteristics of Successful Dual Enrollment Partnerships

Interviews with community college and high school personnel alike underscored the indispensable role strong relationships play in their collective efforts to advance equitable dual enrollment programs. *DE4EC* alliances enabled partners to accomplish four components they identified as integral to effective dual enrollment programming: (a) regular meetings to support high school and community college alignment; (b) joint identification and implementation of structured academic pathways; (c) orientation of and ongoing support to dual enrollment teachers and instructors; and (d) continuous review of student data to design robust and supportive efforts.

So, what makes these partnerships particularly effective? This research indicates that an intentional focus on coordination, communication, and collaboration are all key.

Coordination

Based on this research, we define coordination as activities managed, monitored, and directed by designated people who are responsible for helping both community college and K12 partners to realize a common goal. Dual enrollment involves several processes that must occur in a timely and orderly fashion to ensure that underrepresented high school students can access, enroll, and succeed in their college courses. Representatives carrying out *DE4EC* partnerships identified a number of specific examples, including outreach and recruitment, registration and enrollment, selection and scheduling of courses, and student progress monitoring to organize proactive supportive services.

In the context of *DE4EC*, a community college dual enrollment coordinator, director, or high school counselor frequently led this coordination, launching and managing these processes—in some cases with the support of student workers. Other administrators and coordinators spoke about working closely with various college departments to facilitate dual enrollment outreach, enrollment, and supportive services for their students. One college administrator shared the following example related to student enrollment:

My area works with the [college's] admissions and records (A & R) office. We have a database for submission of the dual enrollment forms. So it gets uploaded from the [high school] to the [shared database]...and A & R confirms that [the school's] documentation has been submitted and admissions and records does the registration, the student doesn't have to go in and register for the class. It is completed by admissions and records.

Communication

In the context of *DE4EC*, communication involves the regular exchange of information (in person or by email) between community college and high school partners to support and maintain the partnership. *DE4EC* partners described how prompt communication with each other about policies, practices, and logistics reaffirmed their common commitment to equitable dual enrollment.

The substance of the communication varied by level. Internal conversations among district-level leaders (community college or high school) focused on developing a shared understanding about the benefits of equitable dual enrollment, and what is needed to effectively support it. Similarly, communication between high school and community college partners routinely centered on who should have access to and succeed in dual enrollment. Information sharing on program updates and logistics typically occurred at the school site level, often supported by a dedicated staff member responsible for keeping partners apprised of program events and changes.

One administrator described the cumulative impact of these multiple levels of engagement and the resulting cascade of information:

What has worked well is ensuring that the [school] district has a good understanding of dual enrollment...top-down from the superintendent's office all the way down to the school site... the impact, the protocols, all the nooks and crannies of [why] it is important. What we've done is had frequent...consistent meetings with leadership and then local leadership, and then also with practitioners at a summit on a semester basis. And I think that's worked well because there's clarity in the process. There's support provided.

Collaboration

For *DE4EC*, collaboration involves collective action between community college and K12 partners to create policies, procedures, and processes supportive of equitable dual enrollment and related approaches and activities. The primary area of collaboration identified by *DE4EC* partners as vital to their efforts to design and deliver equitable dual enrollment programs centered on establishing alignment between their systems, calibrating high school and college approaches, processes, and requirements. Other partners noted how they had supported collaboration by accessing various equity-focused funding streams (e.g., College and Career Access Pathway, Local Control and Accountability Plan, Student Equity and Achievement Plan, and Title V).

This research underscored the time and intention required for these collaborations to gel and generate results. One high school administrator explained:

We have a collective lift, and it took many years to build.... We really [listen] to our [high school] deans when they say, "Here are the instructional moves that need to happen on the high school side to prepare [students] for this class, to prepare [students] for this level".... We really take accountability to make sure that we are working with our college partner on academic planning. We started with our community college courses, and we mapped everything backwards. And when we did that, we saw a huge shift in academic success.

DE4EC partners noted that collectively reviewing disaggregated student-level data has also been particularly important to advancing programmatic alignment. They reported that a shared commitment to data-driven decision-making has strengthened their collective efforts to ensure students' success in dual enrollment offerings. One college administrator shared:

With my team, we look at data. We analyze to identify if there's a demonstration of successful completion...then we continue [the course]. If we see that there's a decrease in enrollment or

successful completion, then we [ask], “Oh, is there a trend here that’s...demonstrating that this might not be the right course for the students at this particular time?” And we have those conversations with our partners and identify what’s happening. “Is it...our faculty? Is it our students? Is the course itself not aligning with the program at the school?” So, we look at data, we look at the metrics and outcomes that we have to ensure that we’re being mindful.

Sidebar 1.2 Spotlight on Practices for Successful Dual Enrollment Partnerships

To learn more about how some of the partners train and employ college student ambassadors, fund and support teacher upskilling, and organize regular collaborative spaces, go to page 22 in the full report.

Challenges to Shared Dual Enrollment Program Implementation

DE4EC partners noted systemic issues, structural barriers, and misalignment of business processes as impacting their collective efforts to carry out dual enrollment programming. Three specific challenges emerged in this initial research.

Misaligned academic calendars: This research noted that with different start and end dates and holiday breaks, staffing issues and gaps can emerge between community colleges and K12 partners. For example, one partner might find itself providing coverage when technically on vacation.

Use of different learning management systems (LMS): The absence of a common LMS requires students, community college faculty, and high school teachers to switch platforms (e.g., Google Classroom to Canvas) between the high school and the college. Transitioning between the two can cause confusion for students and may be a deterrent for high school teachers who may need to transfer information from their school’s LMS to the college’s LMS at the start of the college term. Identifying a single LMS that can be used by both system could be game changing.

Staffing limitations: Expansion of college course offerings to high school students may be hampered by the limited number of faculty/teachers who meet minimum qualifications to teach at the community college. With these restrictions in place, dual enrollment partnerships can find themselves unable to serve all students who are interested in and can benefit from this opportunity, and in turn, falling short of their program’s equity goals.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that strong relationships between community colleges and K12 systems are paramount to advancing dual enrollment programs that improve equitable college access and attainment. It underscores the importance of intentional coordination, communication, and collaboration to the success of these partnerships. These interviews spotlighted the critical role dedicated program coordinators and staff play in achieving this functionality. Moreover, they called out how partners’ continuous focus on alignment at the district, program, and classroom levels—supported by the regular review of disaggregated data—can ultimately promote the success of dual enrollment participants.

At the same time, this research also surfaced systemic issues, structural barriers, and misalignment of business processes as impacting partners’ collective dual enrollment efforts. Continuing to identify and address these challenges will allow these partnerships to build on their positive progress and further pursue scaled and sustainable equitable dual enrollment approaches.

Take Action

Advancing equitable dual enrollment programming will require high schools, community colleges, and dual enrollment partnerships to continue strengthening and scaling effective practices while simultaneously addressing the obstacles called out in this research.

Visit [Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research series, Brief 4: Recommendations for Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment](#) for possible actions to take at the school/program, community college, dual enrollment partnership, and/or student/family levels.

Find detailed findings and recommendations from this initial research in our full report, [Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Initial Findings from the Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion Initiative](#).