DUAL ENROLLMENT FOR EQUITABLE COMPLETION

Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series
Brief 6: Activating Dual Enrollment Partnerships for Equitable Student Opportunities
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Introduction

Equitable dual enrollment takes intention and baseline findings from *DE4EC (see Sidebar 1.1)* suggest that partners participating in this initiative are already pursuing strategies to improve high school and college outcomes for historically underrepresented student groups.1 What does moving from a passive "access for all" approach to proactive engagement of specific high school student groups in college courses take? What can colleges and their high school partners do to support those traditionally marginalized in postsecondary education so they succeed in dual enrollment and beyond?

In Year 2, [RDP Consulting](#) met with *DE4EC* representatives to further explore how their partnerships function and what factors impact the success of these collaborations. As part of our *Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series*, this brief specifically elevates the ways colleges and their high school partners are:

- Prioritizing historically underrepresented students in their partnership.
- Engaging participants in ways that make higher education feel both attainable and worthwhile.
- Sustaining the focus on equity in program design and implementation.

It also offers recommendations for strengthening a focus on equitable college completion in dual enrollment programs and lays the groundwork for deeper investigation of these opportunities in *DE4EC's* third year.

Key Findings

Exploratory interviews with *DE4EC* community college and high school representatives *(see Sidebar 1.2)* confirmed earlier research

Sidebar 1.1 *Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion (DE4EC) Overview*

DE4EC is a multiyear collaborative initiative among the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), [College Futures Foundation](#), and [Tipping Point Community](#), carried out with research support from RDP Consulting.

DE4EC supports 10 California community colleges and their high school partners in advancing equitable dual enrollment. These partnerships are building programs designed to increase access and completion outcomes for students underrepresented in higher education, particularly African American/Black and Latina/o/x students and those experiencing economic disadvantage.

Find more information at https://www.r-d-p-consulting.com/de4ec.

Sidebar 1.2 Who Participated?

In spring 2023, RDP Consulting collaborated with five of the 10 *DE4EC* partner community colleges to engage representatives responsible for designing, managing, and implementing dual enrollment programming.

Ultimately, 14 high school and community college administrators, counselors, district leaders, and instructors participated. Representatives were responsible for various activities, including admissions, program development, oversight, and instruction.

For more information on the data and methods for this research, visit the *[Year 2 Qualitative Research Overview](#)*.

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1 Find detailed findings in *Ready, Set, Launch: Baseline Academic Outcomes for Students Participating in* Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion *Partnerships Compared to Their Peers, 2015–2020* (forthcoming) at https://www.r-d-p-consulting.com/de4ec.

2 Find additional information in *Brief 1: Strategies for Equitable Dual Enrollment Participation* and *Brief 2: Characteristics of Successful Dual Enrollment Partnerships* at https://www.r-d-p-consulting.com/de4ec.

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continued to stress that communication, coordination, and collaboration between college and K–12 partners are necessary for effective dual enrollment implementation. They also reinforced strategies for equitable dual enrollment participation, such as making information easily accessible, using inclusive messages, and engaging high school counselors in leading student outreach.

The University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education (CUE) (2020) posits that "equitable policies and practices must target educational institutions and systems, not the students those institutions and systems have not served well" (p. 25). These interviews also revealed additional ways *DE4EC* partners are operationalizing "equity-mindedness" in their work *(see Sidebar 1.3)*. Three themes emerged from these conversations that showed this commitment in action at the partnership, participant, and program levels.

Prioritizing Historically Underrepresented Students in *DE4EC* Partnerships

This research shows that *DE4EC* partnerships recognize that equitable dual enrollment is about disrupting the status quo. Traditionally, dual enrollment in the CCC has been the domain of high-achieving—often White and Asian—students. A recent Education Trust-West report (2022) highlighted that Black, Latinx, and Native American students were "too often locked out" (p. 5) of dual enrollment and underscored a need to "jumpstart" these students' dual enrollment participation. *DE4EC* partnerships have formed with the shared belief that historically underserved and underrepresented students are *the* priority population for their dual enrollment programs. One community college partner articulated this collective commitment:

> Dual enrollment was established to be able to serve those who are possibly not college-bound or underrepresented…. We all have that goal in mind as we are moving forward.

They indicated they are motivated by the power and potential for equity-minded dual enrollment to facilitate mobility for students, families, and whole communities traditionally left out of economic and social opportunities. One community college partner stated:

> If we're truly invested in creating a future for ourselves, for the generations that are going to come after us, dual enrollment is truly a way to close equity gaps and ensure that … students who may not have considered college for themselves get in the door and are ultimately provided with opportunities to flourish. Dual enrollment is equity work. Dual enrollment leads to economic mobility. Dual enrollment leads individuals to have more opportunities in the workforce to provide better opportunities for their families.

This departure point is an essential foundation that directs all aspects of their programs' design and delivery. To ensure they are specifically reaching students who might not otherwise consider higher education, *DE4EC* partners described setting goals for dual enrollment

participation among specific student groups based on an assessment of data. Both high school and college representatives cited these goals and aspirations. For example, one high school partner shared:

> The biggest piece for me is making [dual enrollment] available to our students who don't get the advantage. Specifically speaking, our students with disabilities and our [English Language Learners] (ELL) students are the ones I'm really going to go after.

Another college partner reflected on the importance of intentionally serving low-income, multi-lingual learners in the college's service area, stating:

> Our students speak Spanish. Our students speak Arabic. They speak Chaldean Neo-Aramaic in the local high schools. [We have] a large number of Black and African American students, Hispanic students. We have a large Native and Indigenous student population in the area where we serve. And, and so, truly, by default, we're kind of serving these underrepresented populations just based on where we're geographically located. And when you couple that with the very intentional, leadership-driven equity mindset and effort to address these gaps, I think that we're, in a way, checking a lot of the boxes.

These partners expressed a personal and programmatic commitment to equity-minded dual enrollment, and interviews highlighted that there is also broad investment in this approach across the community colleges and high schools involved. This shared commitment is reassuring and motivating and serves as a helpful foundation when working through the challenges of redesigning historically inequitable systems and structures. One community college partner explained:

> I think that we have a shared vision [with our high school partners] for what we want the program to be for the most part. And knowing that I have partners at the high school with the same level of buy-in that they have at the college has made for a

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> *strong partnership that we make it work regardless of some of the barriers or constraints in terms of the organizational structure and resources.*

Engaging Participants in Ways That Make Higher Education Feel Both Attainable and Worthwhile

This research underscored how making good on the commitment to prioritize historically underrepresented students for dual enrollment requires strategic efforts to engage participants who might not have been college-bound. It means actively opening the door to higher education to these student groups and implementing approaches that support them in experiencing early postsecondary success. Through these intentional efforts, historically marginalized students involved in *DE4EC* partnerships see the completion of college credentials as a real possibility for themselves. One community college partner explained:

> *The goal of [our dual enrollment program] was to take the middle, take those kids, and [give] them that experience of college and taking classes and realizing that they can do that. And hopefully ... the expectations become higher for them for themselves [which has happened]. They realize they can do it.*

Partners described how these opportunities uniquely benefit ELL students, offering an introduction to college that is reinforced and encouraging, and increases their understanding of the available resources and supports. One community college partner shared:

> *An immigrant or refugee ELL whose needs are not being met by anything else perfectly in the system, they need extra tutoring. They need extra translation both for marketing and ... maybe in the classroom ... [if] their parents aren't familiar with the US education system. They have a unique future at the college in that they'll probably be taking English as a Second Language classes and also major classes. So, they have a lot of unique needs, and dual enrollment classes would help them ... because they'd get a step up.*

DE4EC partners reported they are beginning to see the radiating impact of an equity-minded approach to dual enrollment. They noted that participants are providing an example for others in their lives who might also believe higher education is out of reach. Partners described the way that engaging just one first-generation student can catalyze the involvement of others in their family or community. One community college partner shared:

> *Now, we are at the point where older brothers and sisters have come here and gone through the program. We have a family where we've had one, two, three, four siblings [who] have come through. The last one, the youngest one, is a senior now, with the two oldest ones already having their bachelor's degrees. And they're all first-generation college students.*

Partners recognized that while they understand the transformative power of higher education for historically marginalized students and see positive effects for dual enrollment participants, they also acknowledged that they are fighting growing public skepticism about the importance of college. They indicated that dual enrollment opportunities become even more critical to building first-hand experience with the value of higher education given current counter-narratives. One high school partner explained:

> *It's about time that we put the students at the center of their education and think about their future because it doesn't end at [high school] graduation. It only begins. So, how are we preparing them for their next steps.... It's not just 9th through 12th grade, right? We're a high school district, so we really concentrate on that. We really have to think about that carefully.*

Further, they also recognized the importance of using dual enrollment to address the perception that college "isn't for me" and show the relevance of continued education to students' life goals and needs. One high school partner shared:

> *I really felt the "crack" before COVID-19 became the Grand Canyon. We have this opportunity to dramatically shift the way we think about education and make it more relevant to our students. And if we do not get ahead of that, we are going to continue to see the attendance issues.*

These interviews indicated that partners will need to work with purpose to further leverage dual enrollment to make the case for postsecondary education. Engaging historically underrepresented and first-generation (first gen) students and their families while they are still in high school and ensuring they have the needed information about both the potential return on this investment and the support they can receive along the way will be key.

Sustaining the Focus on Equity in Program Design and Implementation

Interviews indicated that these partners are intentionally assessing program delivery models to disrupt systemic racism and exclusion, designing opportunities that welcome students to higher education, and putting them on a path toward attainment of meaningful educational and career goals.

For example, this research suggested that many partnerships are taking an equity lens to the courses they are selecting through their dual enrollment initiatives. They are prioritizing offerings that engage participants in programs and pathways that facilitate mobility, such as transfer to university or completion of credentials that lead to employment with family-sustaining wages. They are also strategizing how to maximize the experience in a way that increases educational options for participants while potentially saving precious time and resources. One community college partner explained:

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> *Spanish 101, right? One year of college-level dual enrollment Spanish counts for two [high school years]. Whoa. There, we just opened up a whole other year [for the high school student]. And that is specifically for my EL students or my [Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)] students who have to take this class instead of their elective, and they can't get to a [Career Technical Education (CTE)].... It just opened up a year and a half's worth of classes for them.*

Partners indicated they are also shifting their own practices to meet dual enrollment students—who are often first gen—where they are with what they need (rather than placing the ownership for dual enrollment success on participants alone). Partners indicated they are rethinking where courses are offered to optimize participation and ensure access to high-quality facilities and instruction. One community college partner offered this example:

> *This semester [Introductory Computer Information Systems Course (CIS101)] is partially taught online and partially taught at the college on the campus... Although that may be moving next year to the high school campus because the high school has a grant so that they can build the computer lab that their students need. Their students are in [city], so that is not close, and they're having to bus students down and that kind of thing. It's working for right now, but not a great long-term solution for them.*

They are carefully assessing participants' strengths and vulnerabilities and designing support to ensure a productive and positive experience. One community college partner shared:

> *I've asked [high school teachers] how we could best support English Language Learners at the [high] school, and I'm also trying to help these [English as a Second Language (ESL)] students at [the high school] transition to college. So as an ESL teacher, I'm coming at it from an ESL point of view because there were a lot of dually enrolled ESL students at [the high school].*

In some cases, partners reported iterating on how they deliver support to better center the needs and realities of dual enrollment students, bringing assistance closer to students in the dual enrollment classroom and/or on the high school campus. One K–12 partner described their approach:

> *We have structured [academic support] into our [high] school day, four days a week. So...every day except for Thursday, which is our early day, is a 30-minute, built-in time. And the teacher can either flag [the student] to come to their classroom if [they] need to retake a task, make up an exam, or learn something new. If [the student] is not flagged by a teacher, [they] can choose to go make up an exam or go to study, whatever [they] choose.*

Further, partners discussed the importance of continuing to use data and inquiry to sustain the focus on equity in their dual enrollment

delivery. Partners recognized that while these conversations can be challenging and uncomfortable, they are essential to ensuring that their programs are staying focused on equity goals. One K–12 partner illuminated:

> *Just getting down to the granular level, having the conversation with...our high school teachers, asking, "Are we closing this opportunity gap?... Are your CTE programs in line with our school [population]? So, how many Latinx? How many White? How many male, and how many female? How many students are we retaining? How many are going on to a postsecondary [institution]?" Having these conversations is uncomfortable now only because they haven't been had before.*

At the same time, deepening cultural competency among participating faculty and improving their capacity to engage students with culturally relevant pedagogy emerged as a key area of opportunity for fully realizing an equity-minded approach in dual enrollment. One partner explained:

> *You have to think critically about how your students learn the culture of their learning. What does that look like, and how do you adapt to meet the current needs of the students in your classroom today? Not who you taught two years ago or what are you doing in your pedagogical practices, your assessments. Are you having these high-stakes assessments or these cycles of inquiry assessments? So, all of that matters as it relates to working with diverse learners, diverse populations.*

Conclusion

Embracing an equity mindset, *DE4EC* high school and community college partners view dual enrollment as a vehicle for surmounting both individual and societal barriers to postsecondary attainment. These partners see it as an intentional strategy for making higher education feel attainable to African American/Black, Hispanic/Latina/o/x, and economically disadvantaged students who might not otherwise consider college and ensuring they are prepared for and succeed in early postsecondary experiences. To arrive at this perspective, these partners are engaging in uncomfortable conversations related to longstanding inequities, setting goals for the participation of student groups historically marginalized from higher education, and intentionally assessing program delivery models to disrupt systemic racism and exclusion. This research reinforces that equity-minded dual enrollment requires careful attention and thought and is more than just an enrollment growth opportunity. RDP Consulting offers K–12 and community college partners the following recommendations for further advancing equity-minded dual enrollment in their work.

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Commit to serving equity populations in dual enrollment programs. Utilizing CUE's Equity Minded Indicators (2016) as a resource can help center equity in your dual enrollment partnership priorities. This resource is a useful tool for facilitating conversation among partners and boosting their individual and collective work to understand and address systemic barriers to dual enrollment for minoritized student groups. Actively engaging with this set of indicators and revisiting them regularly can reinforce current strengths and identify other concrete opportunities for further centering equity in your dual enrollment programming.

Leverage dual enrollment to make the case for higher education to historically underrepresented students and their families. Ensure courses are engaging and relevant to students' lives. Consider selecting "light the fire" courses[3] that make connections between college content and students' lived experiences. Additionally, programmatically, use the dual enrollment experience as a venue for providing information on higher education return on investment (ROI). Assisting students and their families to develop college and career plans—including access to specific information on their postsecondary options (i.e., degree and institution types), college costs, resources for paying for higher education, and the occupational options upon completion—can help demystify the finances of attending college and completing degrees.

Make dual enrollment design and implementation choices that disrupt the status quo of serving high academic achievers and build proactive support into the standard student experience. For example, structuring in corequisite support has unique advantages that can improve college course rates for high school students historically marginalized from postsecondary opportunities (Zinth & Barnett, 2023). Dual enrollment models that currently include a four-day teaching week on the high school campus might infuse corequisite support on the fifth day. Not only does this approach offer students more structured time grappling with the course content, but it also makes logistical sense for students and partners.

Find more information on *DE4EC* and all publications in the *Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series* at https://www.r-d-p-consulting.com/de4ec.

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Acknowledgments

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3   Find more information on "light the fire" courses as part of the Community College Research Center's Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan (ACIP) framework onboarding students into a program of study at https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/acip-reimagining-onboarding.html.

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