

Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series

Brief 3: Insights on Dual Enrollment Students' Experiences

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Introduction

In California, more and more high school students are involved in dual enrollment programs. Dual enrollment affords high school students the opportunity to enroll in college courses. Understanding students' dual enrollment experiences is increasingly important as a growing number of colleges and high schools embrace this strategy to prepare students academically, emotionally, and socially for postsecondary success—particularly students with low incomes, students of color, and students who are first in their families to attend college.

[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, and dually enrolled students and their parents. 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 spotlights initial insights from students and high school and community college personnel about their dual enrollment participation. It describes approaches that strengthen students' dual enrollment experiences, highlights the positive impacts of taking part in these opportunities, and shares challenges that might impede students' success in these programs. This brief can support the work of high school and community college counselors, faculty, and support professionals involved with students across their dual enrollment journey—from the beginning of their dual enrollment experience through high school and/or college graduation—offering ideas for optimizing students' dual enrollment experiences and advancing their outcomes.

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

Approaches that Strengthen Students' Dual Enrollment Experiences

This research highlighted different approaches that contributed to positive dual enrollment experiences, called out by students and educators alike. Taken together, they offer a window into how a holistic dual enrollment experience can foster students' college confidence and academic self-efficacy.

Supportive Instructor and Counselor Relationships

High school and community college counselors are a driving force of dual enrollment. They work relentlessly to facilitate the success

of dual enrollment students by recognizing and attending to their emotional and academic needs.

This research showed that students' dual enrollment instructors frequently hold both the role of high school teacher or counselor AND college instructor. Participants indicated that the immediate connection with high school teachers and counselors puts students at ease because they are more familiar. Students explained that part of this deeper connection could be also attributed to the fact that the majority of their dual enrollment courses were offered on their high school campus.

These educators understand they are working with high school aged students who are at a different stage of emotional and academic development and foster that understanding with other personnel involved in dual enrollment program delivery. One high school district administrator explained how she collaborated with the college to demonstrate flexibility with young people, knowing from a developmental perspective, a 14-year-old student has socio-emotional needs that are distinct from the traditional 18-year-old college student:

We learned early on that you can't put a 14-year-old in a college class and just walk out the door. They need to learn some executive functioning skills. We also quickly realized the social emotional lift that it is. It's a lot of pressure on a young person. We had to work with our college counseling team. Once we had one adjunct counselor assigned to us, we really went through like, "Hey, it's not a 25-year-old that you're building that schedule for; [the schedule] needed to be balanced. Put a hard [course] in with two that aren't so hard. Let's leave some time in the day so they can go to the tutorial center."

These instructors are flexible and accommodating of high school students needs while maintaining rigor and high expectations. For example, course readings, assignment deadlines, and assessments are in alignment with college level requirements.

Campus Connections

This research indicates that dual enrollment provides students a supported introduction to the college and begins to build comfort with and awareness of the campus. Students described how college communications and listservs inform them of college supports, resources, activities, and updates about schedules, deadlines, and requirements. They also indicated that family and friends who attend the college served as an important bridge to the campus community, offering insider information about how to navigate the campus and contextualize their dual enrollment experience. One student shared:

I would say [I feel connected], because in our [college campus] email, we always get notified about the events going on at [college campus]. I'm always up to date on what's happening, what programs they offer, especially for high school students.

And since I also have a cousin who went to [college campus], I feel like she would give me more advice on what to do, what not to do for college and what they do at [college], what they offer. It's just like a big resource for me.

Support Services Designed with Dual Enrollment Students in Mind

Dual enrollment programming offers student access to college supports and resources to promote their educational success. Participants in this research particularly focused on ensuring dual enrollment students' use of academic supports, emphasizing a primary interest in facilitating students' course success. Partners described developing and/or leveraging a variety of approaches to best support the needs of a dual enrollment learner, including embedded and supplemental tutoring provided both remotely and in-person.

Dual enrollment students pointed out that tutoring services need to respond to their specific needs. They indicated a desire for flexible approaches (i.e., offering in-person and online support, expanding hours of operation, etc.), and an awareness of the numerous demands on the time of a dual enrollment learner. Students work, participate in extracurricular activities, and have family responsibilities that may limit their ability to utilize tutoring services. These are critical considerations as partners design tutoring support.

Coursework that Builds Students' Understanding of Professional Pathways

This research showed that some dual enrollment offerings can serve to both inspire and inform students about potential careers and provide insight into the educational requirements for different professional pathways. Students described the positive impact of taking dual enrollment offerings that oriented them to program options related to specific career paths. They also shared ways these courses helped them make connections with and gain insight from those working directly in the field/sector, receiving a first-hand account of what is possible and what it takes to travel that path.

Students described ways these courses helped them think aspirationally, allowing them to explore "what can my future look like?"; one student shared:

One of the opportunities that our class offers is ... they bring a lot of guest speakers and all of them have a different career path that they pursued. And they were all extremely successful, which gave us a really big insight that everybody has a different path and we shouldn't be pressured to take another path that somebody else wants because you're able to do it in any way, as long as you put your mind to it.

Students also shared ways these courses provided them practical guidance about career paths, helping them to understand "what do I need to do to get there?"; one student explained:

Last semester, I took [a course on] helping careers. I wanted to get into the health field. I took it and it made me understand more about the health laws and different equipment, different stuff, different occupations. And for our final, we had to do a project of searching [and] researching for a career. Like about the annual salary. What they do in a daily life. What do you need to do in order to become that career? What colleges you might have to go to? Or what degrees you might have to have in order to have to get that career?

Sidebar 1.2 Dual Enrollment Advantages and Limitations

Besides earning college credit and saving money and time, students identified the following advantages:

- Gain critical time management skills
- Become aware of college and career options
- Complete some college admission requirements
- Enroll in an academically demanding curriculum with support
- Learn to seek help and support as a college student

At the same time, students noted the following limitations:

- Enrolling in an independent, self-paced college curriculum requires an adjustment from high school; assignments can be challenging to track and accomplish, given the self-paced structure of dual enrollment coursework.
- Students must have strong, functional Wi-Fi to complete assignments and do research at home.
- Low performance in a dual enrollment course can have a lasting impact; grades below a C remain on a student's college transcript.
- Fluctuating between various LMS, such as Google Classroom and Canvas, can be challenging to manage.

Dual Enrollment Student Impact

This research also underscores how these positive dual enrollment experiences can ultimately impact students, helping them believe that college is a place where they can indeed succeed. This research adds to the growing body of evidence that students who participate in dual enrollment reap a range of academic benefits. One of the most compelling assets a student can acquire from dual enrollment participation is a belief that they can succeed at the college level. This attitudinal shift is also known as college and academic self-efficacy, "...operationalized as one's confidence in one's ability to successfully perform pro-academic self-regulatory behaviors".

Participants in this research—both students and parents involved in dual enrollment and educators tasked with leading and carrying out these programs—noted the numerous ways students' dual enrollment experience was helping them develop academic self-efficacy. Examples included:

- Asking questions in class
- Being resourceful (e.g., understanding the physical campus location, institution's website, learning management systems (LMS), books)
- Developing long-term academic plans along with backup plans
- Holding oneself accountable for one's own actions and choices
- Learning to self-advocate
- Enrolling in an independent, self-paced college curriculum requires an adjustment from high school; assignments can be challenging to track and accomplish, given the self-paced structure dual enrollment coursework.
- Students must have strong, functional Wi-Fi to complete assignments and do research at home.
- Low performance in a dual enrollment course can have a lasting impact; grades below a C remain on a student's college transcript.
- Fluctuating between various LMS, such as Google Classroom and Canvas, can be challenging to manage.

Challenges to Students' Dual Enrollment Success

While dual enrollment programs can boost students' college confidence and academic self-efficacy, this research also revealed some important obstacles to students' success in these experiences.

Limited Student Contact with College: Dual enrollment students participating in this research have minimal in-person contact with the community college campus when all courses are offered online or at the high school. This research indicated that the lack of on-campus experiences results in students feeling disconnected and unprepared to effectively access college student support services.

Academic Load: For some students, balancing the rigors of dual enrollment coursework with their other academic and personal commitments can be challenging, especially if colleges do not take into account these numerous responsibilities when developing dual enrollment program schedules and composition and course requirements.

Student Use of Supports: Partners made several references to students not accessing tutoring, and their struggle to help students understand how tutoring can be pivotal to the dual enrollment journey. One high school partner described attempting multiple tutoring models to increase student use of academic assistance:

...on Fridays, the [community college] tutor came into the [high school] library at lunch and students, even though it was on their campuses, didn't really access it that much. Our better dual enrollment teachers structure their class to where three days a week or four days a week, depending on the number of units, are college time, and the other days become tutorials. And the teacher provides support—tutorial, reading time, homework

time—those pieces. But [students are] not accessing [tutoring] at [the community college].

Sidebar 1.3 Spotlight on Fostering Equitable Dual Enrollment Student Experiences

To learn more about how the Fresno Unified School District and Fresno City College partner to mentor their dual enrollment teachers as part of their Teacher Mentorship Program, go to page 26 in the full report.

Inadequate Professional Development: No or limited professional development is offered to support high school teachers in becoming college faculty who cultivate classrooms rooted in postsecondary preparedness and independence. Further, some college partners might view high school teachers, even those who meet the college's minimum qualifications, as not prepared to offer "authentic college courses."

Conclusion

This research shows that a holistic approach to dual enrollment can increase students' college confidence and academic self-efficacy.

High school students are motivated to take dual enrollment courses primarily because they can work toward completing college admissions requirements and get a jumpstart on earning college credit for free. This research indicates that a variety of approaches contribute to a positive dual enrollment experience for students. Participants called out strong student relationships with counselors and instructors; student connections to the college campus and access to support services; and coursework that introduces them to professional pathways. Combined, this type of dual enrollment experience can increase students' confidence in their ability to succeed in college and beyond.

Identifying methods to strengthen students' connections to the college and offering professional development to high school teachers who teach dual enrollment courses can only increase the positive impact dual enrollment has on students with low incomes, students of color, and students who are first in their families to attend college.

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](#).