

Brief 5: Student Insights on How Dual Enrollment Helped Them Succeed in College

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Introduction

Students who participate in dual enrollment can offer personal insight into the ways this experience impacts their mindset about and preparation for higher education. To better understand how dual enrollment primed them for college success, RDP Consulting met with more than 30 students who took college classes and earned college credit while in high school and then went on to attend a public postsecondary institution in California. These students had this opportunity through community college-high school partnerships involved in the *Dual Enrollment for Equitable Completion (DE4EC)* initiative (see *Sidebar 1.1*).

Looking back, these students shared useful insight on the aspects of a dual enrollment experience that can strengthen students' college success, particularly for those who are first in their families to attend higher education. Their feedback affirms the ways dual enrollment supports students get a jumpstart on postsecondary education while still in high school and increases their ability to thrive in college and beyond (Purnell, Rodriguez-Kiino, & Karandjeff, 2023). It also offers useful direction from students themselves on how to optimize their college experiences, including via dual enrollment, and advance their postsecondary outcomes.

We conducted this research to inform the second year of the *DE4EC* effort, interviewing students who took college courses as part of dual enrollment opportunities offered through three partnership programs led by Fresno City College, Hartnell College, and Madera Community College (see *Sidebar 1.2*). We explored how dual enrollment influenced, informed, and impacted their postsecondary journey after they graduated from high school. As part of our *Advancing Equitable Dual Enrollment Research Series*, this brief summarizes key findings, including participant voices on how dual enrollment helped them “think, know, go, and act” like a college student (Conley, 2012).

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 connected with 31 former dual enrollment students currently attending a California community college, California State University (CSU), or University of California (UC) through nine focus groups.

Participants represented a range of majors and career aspirations. Demographically, over half of indicated they were first in their families to attend higher education (55%). A majority also identified as Hispanic/Latina/o/x (58%).

Over half took their dual enrollment courses at their high school (58%). High school faculty taught most of their classes, either on their own (33%) or in collaboration with a community college instructor (48%). These students completed an average of 3.9 courses through their dual enrollment experience via a mix of modalities (i.e., in-person, remote, hybrid), covering a range of subjects (e.g., animation, transfer-level English, medical terminology).

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

Key Findings

Given the focus on how students perceived dual enrollment prepared them for college success, we leveraged Conley's (2012) comprehensive college and career readiness framework to organize and interpret participants' experiences. Based on extensive evidence, this framework outlines a series of metrics for assessing students' college preparation related to four "keys"—think, know, go, and act (Figure 1).

While we use a framework for college and career "readiness" to help organize these results, it is worth noting that dual enrollment participants are college students. Dual enrollment programs recognize high school students as capable of postsecondary coursework, and at the same time, offer an opportunity to deepen the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to fully realize their postsecondary goals. In this way, they provide a unique and important bridge between students' high school and college educations.

In line with mounting evidence on the positive benefits of dual enrollment participation, students involved in our research described ways, to different degrees, their experiences helped them strengthen all four keys outlined in Conley's definition. We present these results in alignment with the order in which the keys appear in the framework.

Think

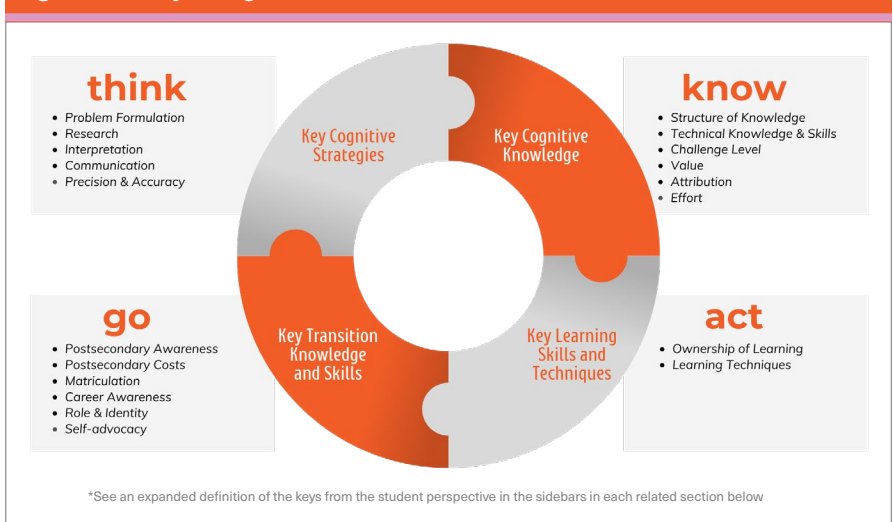
The key cognitive strategies outlined under "think" represent executive functioning skills associated with students' successful management of the rigor and structure of postsecondary classes (see *Sidebar 1.3*). Students described assignments and pedagogical approaches in the college classes they completed through dual enrollment that helped them acquire these strategies. Several shared how they **learned to conduct research and analyze and summarize concepts**—a common requirement in many college courses. Some specifically **recognized the value of developing college-level writing skills** that varied from their secondary preparation. One student explained:

One of the classes I took was an English class. So that class itself was a gateway to how I write all my papers in college. Just because the expectations of what you're supposed to write are different. Yeah, I did it in high school, but there was a college expectation on how to write things and do your assignments. So academically, I think it benefited me a lot throughout the rest of the semesters I'd be attending college.

Know

The key content knowledge described in the "know" category includes student acquisition of information and ideas in core subject areas and technical skills related to career aspirations

Figure 1 Conley College and Career Readiness Metrics*



Sidebar 1.3 THINK

Student development of key cognitive strategies such as:

- Formulating hypotheses and developing problem-solving strategies
- Identifying sources and collecting information
- Analyzing and evaluating findings or conflicting viewpoints
- Organizing and constructing work products in a variety of formats
- Producing accurate work

Conley (2012)

(see *Sidebar 1.4*). Reflecting on their transition from high school to college, students described how college classes taken through dual enrollment helped them **gain discipline "fundamentals" that readied them for success in subsequent related coursework**. One student shared:

In photography, they'd show you how to do the "rule of thirds" and angles and different stuff like that. So, in my art classes that I've been taking, that helps a lot when understanding [things] like ... how your drawing would look.

Students also reported having **discipline-specific experiences through dual enrollment that would benefit their college success overall**. For example, one student described how their dual enrollment communication professor encouraged their growth in public speaking, a transferable skill in academics and life:

My professor in my dual enrollment class ... would always encourage us because the class, the communications class, we had to speak a lot in there. So, he would give us tips ... I guess in college, you're going to be presenting a lot. So, in that sense, he kind of helped us to be better in doing that.

Go

When “go” is in play, students are ready to successfully navigate their postsecondary journey in education, career, and life. For example, they are aware of which college courses to complete for their program of choice, how to self-advocate, and what will be expected of them by professors, employers, and peers in different educational and employment contexts (see *Sidebar 1.5*).

Of the keys outlined in Conley’s framework, students discussed developing go-related competencies through dual enrollment most frequently. Time and again, students emphasized the ways dual enrollment helped them strengthen the skills and knowledge needed for a positive college transition.

Some explained how dual enrollment **helped them understand higher education “mechanics.”** For example, students gained insight into the enrollment process and learned how taking college classes through dual enrollment would position them for priority registration down the line. One student explained:

The way that they give you the priority for registration is determined on what your standing is in terms of how close you are to graduation. Coming in, I was able to get higher priority than people who didn’t have any units coming into college.

Additionally, students shared ways enrolling in college coursework through *DE4EC* programs **enhanced their understanding of their postsecondary options and clarified their higher education and career goals.** Faculty helped students explore various career pathways using different techniques, including (a) serving as career advisors themselves, (b) inviting local guest speakers from specific sectors and occupations, and (c) giving assignments focused on future aspirations and planning. One student explained:

At that time, I was considering joining the [military], and [my dual enrollment instructor] would ask me questions about what I wanted to do and why. I guess career-based questions. And that really opened my mind up a little bit more, made me a little bit more open-minded towards other career paths, and got me evaluating [things] like, “Hey, am I really going to be happy in this specific career?” Yeah, it’s cool to fly a jet, but is there somewhere else that would be better for me and better for other people around me?

Some students also described how the college courses they took via dual enrollment included applied and experiential learning, which also **helped them confirm or change majors.** One student explained:

My [veterinary] science class, we did a lot of hands-on stuff When I was still a [high school] senior and thinking about being a vet technician, it was helping me get that hands-on experience. I remember one time [the instructor] brought ... all of the organs from a pig, and then we had to name them and stuff. Yeah, it was

Sidebar 1.4 KNOW

Student development of key content knowledge, including:

- Understanding “big ideas” in core subject areas and recognizing their value
- Developing technical knowledge and skills associated with career aspirations
- Identifying the personal effort necessary to learn content and why they succeed or fail in mastering this knowledge

Conley (2012)

Sidebar 1.5 GO

Student development of key knowledge and skills to transition to life beyond high school, including:

- Knowing which high school course to take for college admission
- Understanding financial aid
- Identifying a career pathway/major
- Understanding college and workplace norms and expectations
- Knowing how to self-advocate in higher education

Conley (2012)

very hands-on, and I got to be with like animals every day, and that’s what I thought I wanted to do. But also, I changed my mind.

For some, dual enrollment **opened doors to program possibilities and offered a jumpstart on future plans.** Students shared ways that dual enrollment helped them meet certain college requirements and ultimately create flexibility in their schedule once enrolled fully in a postsecondary institution. Some students specifically noted that their dual enrollment program allowed them to complete college General Education (GE) coursework, opening space for them to tackle major-related courses more quickly. This opportunity saved students both time and money. One explained:

Oh yeah, definitely earning units. It has helped me a lot, specifically since I’m on the pre-med pathway. I already met several requirements, and I don’t have to focus on the General Education [coursework], and I can focus on my major.

Another noted:

One of my [dual enrollment] classes got me into the future nurses’ program at [CSU]. So, I believe that certain classes do give you more of an advantage, and it’s very helpful in the future. And it also shows you if that’s really what you want to do.

“Go”: Spotlight on First-Gen Students

Over half of students interviewed for this research indicated they were “first gen” or first in their families to attend college. These students were **more likely than their non-first-generation peers to note that dual enrollment helped them develop key transition knowledge and skills**, including:

- Better understanding of what college entails
- Experiencing the rigor and pace of college coursework
- Navigating the processes and procedures required to access platforms, services, and supports

First-gen students explained the ways that building these competencies through dual enrollment **boosted their confidence and made college seem more attainable**. One shared:

When you sit in class in college, and you hear the professor explaining the syllabus to you and all the work for the whole year, for some people who [are] first-generation ... they freak out, you know? But for me, when ... I heard everything, I was like, oh well, I've heard it before. Yeah, I was in a dual enrollment class, so I'll be fine.

The first-gen dual enrollment students in this study were also **more likely to express the desire to serve as role models** for their siblings and/or to make their families proud. One explained:

You want to not only make yourself proud but your parents proud too. Yeah, if I can be the first person to do it and being the older brother ... I want to show an example for my younger siblings that, “Hey you, we can do it.” Like, I'm the first one to do it now if you guys want to continue this path like I did. I created it, you guys can follow it, or you guys can make your own path.

Act

This key emphasizes the soft skills, learning techniques, and behaviors that students need to “act” as successful college students. Students frequently shared how they honed these skills through dual enrollment participation, which ultimately helped them to navigate college effectively and develop an openness to academic support.

Students described ways dual enrollment **helped them develop the capacity to own their learning**. For example, some students shared how they received an introduction to academic resources and services during their dual enrollment process that would allow them to seek help once enrolled fully in college. One explained:

What I liked about it is that they did provide a lot of resources ... For example, in one of the scheduled classes that I had, they, at the beginning, introduced the resources that we had as [college] students. And so basically, they give us like flyers that had the timelines of the [college] tutoring services that they offer and the timing of who to ask ... I still have the flyer to this day. So, whenever I feel the need to get extra support, I'll just look back at the flyer and set up a meeting with the tutor from [the college].

Students also highlighted how dual enrollment **exposed them to the learning practices required for college-level work and success, including how these practices differed from those found at the high school level**. A significant level of maturity is required in the transition from high school to college, and students particularly underscored the ways the college courses they took through dual enrollment helped them understand workload expectations and manage time accordingly. One student explained:

For me, I feel like it's mostly the time management part because I feel like for me, I need to dedicate a specific amount of time to studying and ... I'm really involved outside of my classes ... I need to make sure that I have this schedule that I stick to because I

Sidebar 1.6 ACT

Student development of key learning skills and techniques, including:

- Owning their own learning (i.e., goal setting, persistence, self-awareness, motivation, progress monitoring, help seeking, self-efficacy)
- Mastery of learning practices (i.e., time management, study skills, strategic reading, memorization techniques, collaborative learning, technology skills, self-monitoring)

Conley (2012)

do have a Google calendar where I have basically every hour of my day laid out. And I feel that I kind of got ... my ability with time management, like that skill kind of improved from taking dual enrollment in high school.

Another said:

I think that you get an insight into what a college education will be like. Because in high school, at least at my high school, I didn't feel like any of my other classes prepared me for the type of work that we would get in college ... I think maybe a lot of students thought, “Oh, college is just going to be a continuation [of] high school,” but it's a completely different workload.

Others spoke to **gaining familiarity with technology systems and platforms** commonly used at postsecondary institutions through their dual enrollment experience, which also eased their college transition. One student shared:

[Taking college courses through dual enrollment] definitely helped me in my first semester at a [CSU]. Just seeing how Canvas works, especially, gave me a head start against all my other

peers ... I found myself having to help my friends ... That gave me confidence.

Conclusion

Students who discussed their *DE4EC* dual enrollment program were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. They expressed that having access to college-level coursework in high school helped them transition fully to higher education with success.

In line with Conley's (2012) framework for college and career readiness, these dual enrollment participants reported multiple opportunities to practice cognitive strategies needed to **think** like a college student. Courses helped them **know** discipline-specific fundamentals—core concepts that would both serve as the building blocks for more advanced coursework and facilitate their success across the curriculum.

Hands-on assignments and support with educational planning helped them understand the requirements necessary to **go** to and through college successfully and make connections between their higher education choices and their post-graduation goals. Students shared that college courses taken through dual enrollment helped them realize the difference between high school and postsecondary expectations, hone skills to manage their learning, and recognize the importance of using available services and resources—all necessary to successfully **act** as a college student.

Combined, these experiences made students—particularly those who were first gen—feel confident in their capacity to navigate and manage the expectations and demands of higher education.

TAKE ACTION

Given the perspectives and experiences shared by students in this research about how dual enrollment prepared them for higher education success, RDP Consulting offers the following recommendations.

Incorporate assignments and opportunities into dual enrollment experiences that specifically allow students to explore college and career options and plan their educational journey. Focus group participants specifically emphasized the ways learning key transitional skills and knowledge made higher education attainable, especially those who were first gen. Ensuring that each dual enrollment participant explicitly has these experiences can ensure this strategy leads to more equitable college completion.

Emphasize how postsecondary coursework differs from high school coursework and explicitly teach students about college readiness skills. For example, participants shared how college coursework taken through dual enrollment exposed them to the difference in rigor, depth of analysis, and writing expectations of postsecondary versus high school classes. Being aware of such requirements and ready to commit the time necessary to engage in college-level work fully can help students manage and be confident about their ability to succeed as college students.

Introduce systems and tools and promote practices that are commonly used in higher education to ensure students know how and why to use them. For example, help students adopt the college's Learning Management System (LMS) to engage with the course syllabus and content; utilize multiple virtual communication platforms to share information; hold office hours; and promote and incentivize the use of supportive services.

Engage college faculty and high school teachers in professional development to increase their awareness of Conley's college and career readiness framework and support their intentional teaching of these competencies to teenagers. Further, ensure instructors are familiar with the psycho-social and developmental needs of high schoolers who are growing and maturing differently than adult undergraduate students.

Provide dual enrollment students curricular and cocurricular opportunities on the college campus. Students in this study perceived themselves to be especially prepared and capable when they had completed courses taken through dual enrollment on the community college campus versus the high school. At the same time, most students engaged with their college courses at the high school or virtually. While courses taught at the high school have their advantages, on-campus exposure provides fully authentic college experience.

Continue honoring the value of students' perspectives and input on dual enrollment programming. Find ways to embed feedback loops into college courses taken through dual enrollment where students can share how the experience is working for them and what might need to improve. Consider engaging former dual enrollment participants as program ambassadors to offer their perspectives to high school students and encourage participation. Recognize that students (like those who participated in this research) can be strong collaborators on program design and delivery and offer them a seat at the program partnership table.

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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