Illuminating a Path to College: How Dual Credit Benefits Rural Students

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Higher education has been seen as a vehicle for providing upward socioeconomic mobility for students from working-class backgrounds. Unfortunately, rural students have not enjoyed the same levels of access to educational opportunities as their urban and suburban peers (Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018). The research that addresses rural education is limited (Irvin et al., 2012; Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018; Morton et al., 2018). This is problematic as one-third of all public schools are situated within rural environments (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014) and half of all public-school districts are located within rural communities (Johnson & Strange, 2007; Provasnik et al., 2007). While most rural students aspire to obtain a college education (Meece et al., 2013), they face greater challenges than their urban peers (Beaulieu, Israel, & Wimberley, 2003; Provasnik et al., 2007). This study explores one program to address the resulting gap-- dual credit-- and how it may promote access to higher education for rural students.

Literature Review

Rural Educational Context

There is a large corpus of work regarding college access and attainment (Miller, Valle, Engle, & Cooper, 2014; Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013; Ross et al., 2012); however, this work is largely based within non-rural environments (Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018). The limited research on rural education suggests that various factors that impede access to higher education for rural students. These factors include the types of industry within rural communities that do not necessitate a postsecondary education (Farmer et al., 2006), high levels of poverty (Lichter & Johnson, 2007), and cultural norms that do not promote educational advancement (Ali & McWhirter, 2006). Moreover, Koricich, Chen, and Hughes (2018) found that "students from

rural high schools had odds of college attendance that were only 84.6% (p < 0.05) of those for non-rural respondents, which would indicate that by virtue of geographic location alone, rural students were less likely to attend any form of postsecondary education" (p. 293).

Research suggests that rural schools lack the resources necessary to support students in applying to college (Farmer et al., 2006; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). For instance, prior research states that having a robust advanced placement (AP) curriculum is important in promoting access to higher education (Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013), yet rural schools provide limited access to AP courses (Planty, Provasnik, & Dika, 2003). This lack of AP offerings places rural students at a disadvantage when applying to the nation's most selective institutions. Furthermore, rural schools face financial constraints and exist in isolated locations that produce unintended consequences and limitations (Farmer et al., 2006; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). These limitations include a lack of adequate counseling resources. This is problematic as counseling services illuminate the college-going process and information regarding financial and scholarship information for students who may not obtain this information otherwise. In addition, isolation and lack of funding hinder rural schools from hiring and retaining teachers with advanced degrees, which limits the curriculum offerings (Lowe, 2006; Monk, 2006) and lack of AP courses (Planty et al., 2007). Thus, rural communities suffer from factors that promote conditions that limit access to postsecondary institutions not found in non-rural communities. Dual credit may provide a means for creating favorable conditions that promote college aspirations and identity formation, alleviating the conditions that stifle college access.

Dual Credit

Dual credit programs allow high school students to enroll in college courses. These courses may be taken at their high school or a college campus and may be taught by college

instructors or qualified high school teachers. Students who enroll in dual credit on a college campus and are taught by college instructors, are exposed to a collegiate culture and peer network that they would not otherwise be exposed to at their local high school campus. This is particularly important for first-generation, low-SES students of color who may lack the cultural and social capital to develop a college-going mindset and understanding. Furthermore, the collegiate environment allows for students who come from working-class communities to be removed from under-resourced high schools, teachers with low expectations, and peers who lack motivation (Garcia, 2014). Dual credit programs offer a setting with high expectations and students who are intrinsically motivated to be in the college environment.

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Theoretical Rationale

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This study utilizes Stanton-Salazar's (1997) definition of institutionally based *funds of knowledge* framework to provide a lens to guide the interview protocol and help with the interpretation of findings.

Funds of Knowledge

Institutional agents are instrumental for all youth since agents' power lies in their ability to provide or withhold *knowledge* (Senntt & Cobb, 1972, as cited by Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Stanton-Salazar (1997) expands on this concept by suggesting that not only do they provide or withhold knowledge, but they also have the power to "situate youth within resource-rich social networks by actively manipulating the social and institutional forces that determine who shall 'make it' and who shall not" (p. 11). These ideas suggest that students must access *funds of knowledge* (FOK) to obtain the support they need to successfully navigate hierarchical systems such as high schools and postsecondary institutions. Stanton-Salazar (1997) defines funds of knowledge as "*implicit* and *explicit socialization into institutional discourses* that regulate

communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream institutional spheres" (p. 11, italics in original). There are seven forms of institutionally based *funds of knowledge*. The first is institutionally sanctioned discourses that illuminate the appropriate ways to communicate. Second is academic task-specific knowledge, which is essentially subject-area knowledge. The third is organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge, which is the knowledge or understanding of how the bureaucracy of the organization operates. Fourth is network development, which is the knowledge of how to skillfully network with actors within the system such as gatekeepers and agents (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014) and develop the proper supportive and collegial relationships with academically inclined peers. Fifth, technical funds of knowledge are the time-management, decision-making, computer literacy, test-taking, and study skills necessary for success. Sixth, knowledge of labor and educational markets, is the knowledge of how to obtain a job and educational opportunities and overcome barriers and meet requisites. The seventh and final fund of knowledge is problem-solving knowledge. Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes it as "knowing to integrate the first six knowledge forms above for the purposes of solving school-related problems, making sound decisions, and reaching personal or collective goals" (p. 12). Obtaining funds of knowledge allows the development of *bicultural network orientation.* Stanton-Salazar (1997) defines bicultural network orientation as,

> A *consciousness* which facilitates the crossing of cultural borders and the overcoming of institutional barriers, thereby facilitating entree into multiple community and institutional settings where diversified social capital can be generated and converted by way of instrumental actions (i.e., where instrumental social relationships can be formed, and social support and funds of knowledge can be obtained. (p. 25)

I suggest that if a student participates in a dual credit program, he or she will develop a *bicultural network orientation* through the *funds of knowledge* obtained via their participation in dual credit. Stanton-Salazar (1997) states that *network orientation* is the various "perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and disposition that inform or motivate the choices an individual makes – whether consciously or unconsciously – in recruiting, manipulating, and maintaining various social relationships and entering into various group affiliations in light of the social structural circumstances that either expand or constrain his/her options" (p. 26). Two research questions guide my examination of why rural students participate in dual credit and the benefits they receive:

1. What do community college administrators, staff, and instructors perceive are the reasons that rural students participate in dual credit?

2. What do administrators, staff, and instructors within community colleges perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for rural students?

Methodology

Utilizing *funds of knowledge* as a theoretical lens, this study utilized a case study approach utilizing interviews, site visits, and website analysis. Creswell (2007) suggests the paradigmatic reasons for using a case study approach include the desire to examine "how individuals are enabled and constrained by social resources, socially situated in interactive performances, and how narrators developed interpretations" of those social interactions (p. 55). Specifically, Creswell (2007) describes a case study as:

A qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a ***case***) or multiple bounded systems (***cases***) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving ***multiple sources of information*** (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual

material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description*, and case-based

themes. For example, several programs (a *multi-site* study) or a single program (a *within-*

site study) may be selected for study. (p. 73, emphasis in original)

For the purpose of this study, we conducted a multi-site study of dual credit programs in a rural

region of Texas. Through the use of discriminate sampling, the researcher "chooses the sites,

persons, and documents that will maximize opportunities for comparative analysis" (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998, p. 211). The interviews were semi-structured to allow for detailed exploration of

participants' remarks through the use of probing or follow-up questions when appropriate. The

interview questions were developed with guidance from the literature on dual credit and the

theoretical frameworks used for this project.

School Sites

Texas has the second largest number of community colleges of any state in the United

States, and most of these institutions provide dual credit programs in collaboration with their

local high schools. The data were collected at two community colleges located in rural Texas.

The first community college enrolled around 2,000 students, with a dominant ethnicity of White

(55%), followed by Hispanic (31%); around 800 students were enrolled in dual credit. The

second community college was comparatively larger, with a student population of more than

9,000, with a dominant ethnicity of Hispanic (49%), followed by White (42%). Around 1,400

students participated in the dual credit program.

Data Collection

The research team, comprised of two graduate students from Texas Tech University and a

faculty member, traveled to schools in rural West Texas communities to conduct data collection.

The data collection came from interviews conducted at two community colleges with counselors,

administrators, and faculty. Four interviews were conducted in total with two interviewees at each community college consisting of one administrator and one instructor respectively. Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007) was used to obtain their perceptions regarding dual credit programs as community colleges award students' college credits, decide who teaches the courses, where they are taught, and are responsible for students while in the dual credit courses.

Data Analysis

All the audio-recorded interview data were transcribed employing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach of "generating categories" (open coding); developing and linking categories with subcategories (axial coding); and "integrating and refining" (selective coding) to arrive at the themes. The identities of the participants were protected through the use of pseudonyms throughout data transcription. The researchers transcribed the data, which made it possible to confirm initial categories identified during the open coding process of the face-to-face interviews and to discern new ones before proceeding to axial and selective coding. The research team then proceeded to upload raw data transcriptions to the qualitative analysis software NVivo. The interview data were analyzed by coding the themes that emerge from the transcriptions utilizing Patton's (1990) approach to inductive data analysis. I thematically coded the transcriptions and organized the findings using the NVivo software (Bazeley, 2007). Several matrices were developed to display the data as themes emerged. Once data and themes were developed, *funds of knowledg*e was utilized as a lens to explain the findings from the interviews with the community college administrators, staff, and instructors.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to elucidate why students within rural communities participate in dual credit and what the perceived benefits are from the perspective of community college staff, instructors, and administrators. The research findings from our two research questions are presented below.

RQ 1: What are the reasons for participation?

This question is important as it may suggest avenues for high schools and colleges to promote participation. Participants in the study indicated the three primary reasons was for participating in dual credit were: (1) family influence, (2) saving money, and (3) following peers.

Family influence. Family exudes a high-level influence on students. This is particularly true of rural families and Latino families. Thus, it is not surprising that participants in our study indicated that many students' decisions to enroll were based on parents or siblings encouraging them to enroll in dual credit. For example, Adam, the administrator of the dual-credit program at this campus, stated the influence of siblings plays a major role:

…a lot now is their brothers and sisters or siblings or family friends had taken dual credit or gone to college…I think they have an idea of they know what college is because of their siblings and family friends and they want to go that direction.

Indeed, the influence of older siblings seemed to be a major reason why younger siblings enrolled. The fact that parents knew that dual credit had been a positive influence on their older children led them to encourage their younger children to follow in their older siblings' footsteps.

Saving money. Many families across the country have concerns regarding the high cost of attending college. This is particularly true of rural students. Participants in our study indicated that parents and students are attempting to find ways to lower costs even before they embark on

their college endeavor. Bridget, an instructor who teaches in dual credit, stated that parents want to save on college costs by helping their children obtaining credit at a lower cost while still in high school. She offered,

> That's [dual credit] great for them, it's great for the parents, because the dual credit classes are so much cheaper, and especially at the community college versus the university, and they're living at home. Parents aren't paying for them to live away from home and all of that. So, I think that really gives them a good boost.

Dorothy, a faculty member, also references cost savings. She explained that there are students who know they want to go to college and participating allows them to get credits at a lower cost before they go off to college: "[W]ith dual credit, those who want to go on and get those degrees, they're out there and it's [financially] benefiting them."

Peer influence. Some of the participants indicated that peer effects were guiding part of the decision to enroll. For example, Dorothy said that some participate because they have friends who are enrolled in dual credit courses. She noted that there are some students who are "…just in it because of their buddies." This makes sense as many of these rural high schools have a small class in which many of the students are close-knit. Thus, if one peer discloses that they intend on participating in dual credit, it is likely that their friends will follow suit.

RQ2: What do administrators, staff, and instructors within community colleges perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for rural students?

Most participants agree that dual credit programs help students in both academic and social development. Participants indicated that rural high school students learn how to socialize better and understand the college culture, which helps them develop a college identity. Chris, an administrator, stated,

I think they gain tremendously from it because, you know, a lot of them figured out how much more they have to study in college courses versus what they are doing in high school for one thing and they suddenly realized that, you know, the high school course isn't nearly as hard as [the college course] was.

Adam explained that the social aspect of dual credit exposes rural students to a collegiate environment and culture that promotes a better understanding of what college is and what it is going to be if they matriculate after high school:

Well socially I would say they, benefits is they are exposed to [is] that type of environment or culture or things they can discuss in class, and, or, in papers, probably being more open to asking questions about what's college about. You know, having [to] develop some sort of plan after high school to continue on whatever they are working on.

Chris indicated that dual credit exposes students to critical thinking skills that they may not be exposed to in high school:

[Dual credit courses have] more emphasis on that critical thinking skills that they have never been exposed to…. [I]f they stay strictly in high school environment and high school courses they are not gonna have that benefit when they come into the college, so I think it benefits them a lot.

Dorothy indicated that high school students who participate in dual credit are "better prepared for college. They are aware that there's expectations – that you have to do the work – that there's no kind of...you know they have learned that you don't get a passing grade just because you showed up for class." Chris suggested that dual credit illuminates and demystifies what college is:

I think those that come straight in don't have the concept of what they are gonna face in college and they have no idea of what study skills are needed and how to interact with

people…and I think those kids that have been through dual credit… understand better

how to.... How do you navigate college, how do you...you know what's acceptable and

what's not.

Chris also highlighted how students learn how to communicate like college students in dual

credit classes:

I can't tell you the number of emails I get that [say] "hey you" and "hey you" is not how I

am gonna answer an email. But that's just... and you know the instructors would tell

[them] the same thing and it's just frustrating [to] walk in and say…here is how we do

things…. Well, dual credit has already filled that out.

This better understanding of appropriate communication in college is one of the ways in which

dual credit students are taught to approach college instructors and other institutional agents.

Indeed, high school students are not expected to contact instructors via email, but email is a

primary way in which communication occurs on college campuses. By elucidating the salience

of communication within a college environment to students still in high school, dual credit

facilitates the transition to a full-time college student.

Validating their academic success. For those rural high schools who are already high

achieving, dual credit is a way to validate that they are ready for college. Bridget said that in her

classroom, the high school students tend to outperform college students. Many of the students in

dual credit are at the top of their high school classes academically – a group that typically goes to

four-year institutions – so the community college students are typically less adept in the subject

matter. She explained:

The ones in the community college, some of those that I get in the online classes, have

taken the class a time or two and failed it and they're still struggling to pass it. And there

might be one or two [community college students] that just excels and looks at the same

proficiency as the upper dual credit students.

Bridget's comments suggest that dual credit high school student participants are clearly capable

of achieving academically in a collegiate environment. Coming from under-resourced schools

that do not provide a broad AP curriculum makes it difficult for them to prove what they can do

on their college applications, and dual credit programs give them a chance to show they can rise

to the challenge to excel academically.

Discussion

In this study, we attempted to better understand why students from rural communities

enrolled in dual credit and the benefits they receive from enrolling in these programs. Clearly,

participating in dual credit has created conditions that benefit students. Dual credit helps

illuminate and demystify the college environment for rural students. The results of this

qualitative study indicate that aspects of funds of knowledge can account for why rural students

enroll in dual credit and how they benefit.

Based on participant responses to our research question one, a desire to pursue funds of

knowledge 4 (network development) and 6 (knowledge of educational markets to overcome

barriers) drive students to participate in dual credit. Family and peer networks play a crucial role.

As prior research has shown, most students who participate in dual credit at the national level are

high achieving, continuing-generation students (i.e., non-first-generation college students),

female, White, and from middle-class backgrounds. Thus, obtaining information from families

regarding dual credit, or friends who are going to participate in dual credit, influenced their

decision to enroll. While our findings suggest that some of the rural students are middle-class

non-first-generation students, many students who are first-generation and from working class

backgrounds are also participating in dual credit. For instance, participants in our study indicated that students in the community colleges in rural areas are from a mix of socioeconomic status. However, most participants from working-class backgrounds did mention the influence of family and family finances in the decision to enroll in dual credit program. Funds of knowledge suggests that students and families want to limit financial barriers to higher education. This mirrors prior research showing that families from rural communities come from lower-SES backgrounds (Farmer et al., 2006; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008).

For our second research question, participants indicated that there were various benefits to participation in dual credit. The Funds of knowledge that help us better understand these benefits are: FOK 1 (ways to communicate), FOK 3 (understanding the organization and bureaucratic function of schools), and FOK 5 (time management and study skills necessary for success). This included demystifying what college was going to be like, how to navigate college, and proper ways to communicate with faculty, staff, and students within postsecondary institutions. Stanton-Salazar (1997) indicates that "of the seven forms of knowledge listed above, *institutionally sanctioned discourses* deserves special attention. Simply stated, discourses are socially accepted ways of using language and engaging in communicative behavior" (italics in original, p. 12). Our findings from our second research question suggest that students who are participating are understanding and developing institutionally sanctioned ways of communication with various members of the community college. The milieus of high schools and colleges are distinct; thus, without participating in dual credit, rural students, who may come from working-class communities and have parents who did not attend college, will not know how to communicate within college. Communication is critical in obtaining other forms of funds of knowledge; thus, the funds of knowledge acquired by students who participate in dual credit

would suggest that students are developing a bicultural network orientation that they would not have developed had they not participated in dual credit. They are learning how to communicate with college faculty, learning study skills to promote academic success, lowering education access barriers by obtaining free or reduced-price college credits, and developing social networks with high-achieving peers. All of these elements will increase their college access. While prior research suggests that many rural students increasingly want to participate in higher education (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin, & Wiess, 2010), participation in dual credit seems to amplify their desire to go to college.

Policy Implications

The results of this study have several policy implications. First, counselors and teachers should work with families to provide information regarding the benefits of dual credit. It is clear that many students participate based on their parents' and siblings' encouragement. In addition, it was evident that peers played a role in students' decision to participate in dual credit. Thus, high schools and community colleges should inform students about dual credit and encourage them to pass along the information to peers about the benefit of participating in dual credit. As educators, we sometimes forget the effect of peers and how they may play a major role in setting the norms, attitudes, and behaviors of students. Second, data suggest that dual credit is beneficial for rural students in multiple ways. These benefits may help alleviate some of the financial burdens that rural families face by providing college credit at a lower cost than four-year institutions. Thus, high school and community college staff should work in partnership to expose the ways in which dual credit benefits students to create a culture of dual credit participation. A culture that permeates both sectors of education will send a message to students and families that their education beyond high school matters. Finally, results indicated that high school students did just as well, if not better, than many of the community college students as perceived by participants

in the study. Thus, postsecondary institutions should not be concerned that enrollment of high school students in college courses will compromise the rigor of their courses. It is evident that high school students take their dual credit seriously and they are successful in collegiate environments.

Conclusion

Rural students face several obstacles to college access and attainment. These challenges include geographic isolation, under-resourced schools, narrow curriculum, and working-class backgrounds. Results from this study suggest that dual credit may alleviate some of these challenges by providing funds of knowledge to promote a college-going mindset. Thus, dual credit should be encouraged within high schools and policy makers should ensure that high schools and community colleges are provided funding and resources to promote the success of students within rural communities.

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