



Creating a Path to Success? Dual Credit Benefits and Challenges for Urban Students

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Introduction

Due to international effects and global economic conditions, a higher education degree is a requirement to be part of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1986; Lehmann, 2009). Indeed, most of the jobs created after the recession were jobs that required some kind of postsecondary education credentials (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Unfortunately, many from working-class backgrounds within urban settings have not had the same educational opportunities as those from suburban environments (Garcia, in press). Furthermore, students from marginalized racial backgrounds also suffer from attending under-resourced schools that stratify students after high school (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Indeed, many students of color and students from working-class backgrounds join the workforce rather than entering a postsecondary institution. Of those who do attend a higher education institution, many enroll at community colleges (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Thus, it is important to better understand the ways policymakers and educators can improve the educational outcomes of students of color and those from working-class backgrounds. This study will illuminate the ways in which dual credit programs can promote exposure to a collegiate environment. This is critical within the state of Texas as it is currently below the national average for the educational attainment of its 25-34-year-old population (Paredes, 2019).

Literature Review

Urban Educational Contexts

There exists a large body of scholarly work regarding access to education within urban settings (Stone, 1998; Schofield & Davidson, 2002; Green, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Lee & Lubienski, 2017). Urban schools have long been subjects of research, along with efforts in funding and grants to improve access and equity (Ostrander, 2015; Snyder & Reckhow, 2017). The results of

these efforts at urban schools and districts are varied. Citing No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards Initiative specifically, Ostrander (2015) criticizes these programs and their negative impacts on urban school districts. According to her, No Child Left Behind disadvantaged urban schools the most because “it ignores important cultural differences in the education process” (p. 279), and funding for these districts is based on standardized testing. As far back as 1968 (Coleman, 1968) scholars have been aware that educational setting and family background and education is one of the most telling predictors of student success: “Parents who raise their families in urban and migrant areas generally have the lowest level of education, the highest levels of poverty, and cannot meaningfully contribute to the education of their child” (Ostlander, 2015, p. 280). Ostlander’s thoughts are supported by other studies (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016; Hubbard, 2016), which only further supports the ongoing perception that urban school districts appear to hold challenges with persistence (McShane & Wilson, 2017).

Dual Credit

Within the last two decades a new effort has been made available to serve students in urban districts: dual credit and early college programs. Throughout this work, we refer to dual credit and early college programs interchangeably. Dual credit programs manifest through two major models: (a) students take college-level classes at traditional high schools, taught either by visiting college professors or high school teachers trained and qualified to teach college-level classes, and (b) students take classes within the traditional college classroom. Originally a reform strategy (Giani, Alexander, & Reyes, 2014), dual credit and early college programs are designed to provide high school students the ability to earn college credits while still in high school, and

early college programs allow students to earn up to a full associate degree before even entering their presumptive first year.

According to Jobs for the Future (2014), students who participate in early college tend to graduate, enroll in college, and earn a degree at higher rates compared to students in a traditional high school. Furthermore, Johnson (2017) posited that early college high school students graduate at a 5% greater rate than students who attend traditional high schools. Results from Muñoz, Fischetti, and Prather (2014) demonstrate that students from urban settings who attended just their first year of an early college high school saw significantly higher test results relative to matched control students.

Regardless of the mixed perceptions of dual credit programs, research on their success is limited to quantitative results within the years during and immediately after dual credit or early college programs (Giani, Alexander, & Reyes, 2014). However, dual credit programs provide intrinsically motivated students with a challenging and rigorous environment that can propel students forward with less college ahead of them. This is particularly important within urban settings, where students are less likely to matriculate into colleges or universities (McShane & Wilson, 2017).

Theoretical Rationale

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. He suggests institutional agents impact students' education greatly because they "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). The

success of urban students hinges on their ability to access funds of knowledge (FOK) in order to secure the support needed to navigate the hierarchy of high school and postsecondary institutions. Stanton-Salazar (1997) defines FOK as “implicit and explicit socialization into institutional discourses that regulate communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream institutional spheres” (p. 11, italics in original). FOK is divided into seven different but complementary approaches:

- institutionally sanctioned jargon that aids in communicating appropriately within the system
- task-specific knowledge, which is essentially academic subject-area acumen
- organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge, described as the knowledge of how the bureaucracy operates within the organization
- network development, which is the knowledge or skill of networking with actors (gatekeepers and agents) throughout the system (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014) and the navigation of relationships with academic peers
- technical funds of knowledge, described as the time-management, decision-making, computer literacy, test-taking, and study skills
- knowledge of labor and educational markets, which is the knowledge of how to navigate the job market and secure employment during and after graduation
- problem-solving knowledge

In navigating FOK, students learn “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” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 12). The result of obtaining funds of knowledge is found in the development of bicultural network orientation. Stanton-Salazar 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).

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).

We suggest that if a student participates in a dual credit program, they will develop a bicultural network orientation through the FOK obtained via their participation in dual credit. The two research questions that guide our study are: 1) What do administrators, staff, and instructors within community colleges and early college high schools perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for urban students? 2) What are the challenges for dual credit implementation for urban students?

Methods

We followed a similar methodological approach to our previous research regarding how dual credit benefits rural students (García, Li, & Leong, 2019). Using funds of knowledge as a theoretical lens, this study applied a case study approach maximizing the benefits of interviews, site visits, and website analysis. According to the suggestions of Creswell (2007), the reasons to

approach a case study 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). Creswell (2007) defines 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)

We conducted a multi-site study of dual credit programs in an urban region of Texas. Through the use of discriminant 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 a 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

In light of the concentration on urban community colleges, the research team, including two graduate students from Texas Tech University and a faculty member, reached out to five community colleges in two major urban areas in Texas. One community college in each urban area agreed to participate in the study for a total of two campuses in the study. We also recruited

high school professionals from the feeder high schools to these two community colleges. The first community college enrolls more than 12,000 students and is racially and ethnically diverse: about 60% of students are Hispanic, 20% are Black, 10% are White, and 10% identify in another way. At the second community college, roughly 85% of students identify as Hispanic, followed by White (about 7%), Black (2%), and others (6%).

Data Collection

The research team interviewed six participants in total. To obtain perceptions regarding dual credit programs at community colleges, we utilized purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007), which allowed us to gather insights from different roles on both the community college and the high school side. Two of the interviewees oversaw the dual credit programs on their college campuses. The rest of the sample included two early college high school principals, one dean who was also an instructor, and one early college high school counselor.

Data Analysis

All the audio-recorded interview data were transcribed, and pseudonyms were utilized for the protection of participants' privacy. According to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach, we started with "generating categories" (open coding), then developing and linking categories with subcategories (axial coding), and last "integrating and refining" (selective coding). After finalizing the code book, the research team imported the transcriptions to the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12. Aligning with the previous study on rural community colleges and high schools (Garcia, Li, & Leong, 2018), Patton's (1990) approach of inductive data analysis was utilized for coding themes that emerged from the transcriptions. The research team then

discussed and recoded some of the themes to achieve inter-rater reliability. As the themes were developed, we then applied the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge to decipher perspectives on dual credit programs from the community college and high school administrators, instructors, and counselors.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to consider for this study. First, the participants we interviewed were all from early college high schools and their partner community colleges. As aforementioned, an early college high school is one of the forms dual credit programs can take, yet other forms of dual credit programs in urban settings might grant opportunity for further comparison. Second, the data were collected from two urban settings. Thus, our findings may not be transferable to suburban or rural districts.

Findings

RQ 1: What do administrators, staff, and instructors within community colleges and early college high schools perceive as the benefits of dual credit participation for urban students?

College Student Emulation. The first theme stemming from participants is that high school students benefit immensely from taking classes in a college classroom. All our participants pointed out that such benefit is especially true considering that all the high schoolers in the program had on-site college experience. Linking back to the theory, dual credit courses provided in college classrooms offered high school students an opportunity for role rehearsal. Role rehearsal is a form of direct simulation through which the students interact with college instructors, staff, and peers, eliciting a sense of college student identity. For instance, as Collins, an administrator

in a community college, mentioned, his institution strives to offer high schoolers a true college experience and requires faculty to maintain a college-level standard:

When I hear that [faculty worry about the rigor of the program], I challenge the faculty, or challenge the person, to ask them, “Is that the way you teach? Do you change your teaching because you have these [high school] students in there? If you are, you shouldn’t, because those students are aware of the situation [that] they’re in.”

Gina, an administrator in the community college, supported this view, saying she believes emulating college students helps high school students to “start understanding the rigor of the classes” and “start understanding what a college student needs to do in order for them to be successful.” Moreover, Pedro, a high school administrator, explained:

They get to experience what a professor’s really going to look like. They’re not going to be surprised when they have to sit in a lecture or they’ve got to work on real labs and real computer labs, real science labs.

All participants believed taking a class on a college campus allows students to feel more like a college student than a high school student who simply happens to be taking college-level credit courses. According to most participants, when attending college classes, these high school students were able to blend in. Collins said people “don’t know that they are early college students.” Our participants indicated that high school students gradually formed college student identity throughout the process. Janet, a high school dean and instructor, emphasized the importance of the college setting:

Because it [college setting] sets the tone, it sets the precedence [of] making the education and the academics comes first. ...The students who are doing dual credit are ... better off at a stand-alone college, on a college campus, actually doing the work. ... Because when you're at a traditional high school, whether it's dual credit or not, it's still a high school. And it doesn't have that link, it doesn't have the meaning [of being a college student].

All the participants, whether from high school or community college, shared a preference for offering dual credit in a traditional college setting. As Phil, a high school administrator, explained:

We had this rule of "we will not offer online courses, because of the advantages we have," even though we had the opportunity to. The reason why I had that rule is because I believe the exposure, and inclusion of the student experience, in the college atmosphere, is so beneficial that it cannot be duplicated by online courses.

Funds of Knowledge. Most participants agree that dual credit programs help students acquire funds of knowledge in (1) the institutionally sanctioned discourses which illuminate the appropriate ways to communicate (social development), (2) the understanding of how the bureaucracy of the organization operates (understanding the organization), and (3) the technical skills that are necessary for success (skill development).

The importance of interaction with college students and personnel was mentioned by all the participants throughout our interviews. In addition to helping high school students assimilate, as discussed earlier, participants discussed how these interactions helped high school students attain the communication skills necessary for success in college. When asked about high school

students' interaction with college instructors, Lisa, a high school counselor, pointed out that their students might have different experiences in the same college class:

Because there's some kids that walk out of class and go, "God, I get it. That was the best lecture ever." And another kid will walk out and go, "I have no clue to what the professor just said."

However, the students who were facing learning obstacles were able to initiate communications to address their challenges:

...and [they] are either getting together with their peers and having them explain it or going to their professor and saying, "You know, I don't understand what you were trying to get at." And just getting them to be able to speak to professors and not be intimidated by the process [is a great start].

Similarly, Gina stated,

I feel like it's beneficial to both [social and academic development] because they start interacting with just a different population, even if they're asking the instructor a question, they know what to ask, how to ask.

Meanwhile, Janet declared their students "mature a little bit more" when they interact with their college peers:

They are up taking college classes ... with people who are in their 20s, and people who are in their 30s, and 40s and maybe even their 50s. So they really learn how to communicate on a different level, they learn how to be more thoughtful. They learn a

lot of appropriate social skills ... because they are with a wide range and variety of people [and] they are treated as adults.

Some participants also noted dual credit helped students, particularly those who are low-income and first-generation, navigate through the college system. Gina commented:

It [the program] just helps [bring] some opportunities and for them to get to know the higher education side and actually consider it... [this program] helps the student understand how the college process works and just gives them a better idea of... requirements and we guide them here.

The technical skills are essential for students to survive the collegiate environment, and it is no surprise that the dual credit program could better prepare high school students with practical skills which will help them in the long run. Some community colleges offered a workshop to assist these high schoolers to have a smoother transition, as Gina indicated:

I offer various workshops to the students here on a bi-weekly basis, I'm meeting with students, making sure that they comprehend just the different things like how to do note-taking, how to organize your time, how to write an email to the instructor when you encounter a challenge or you just have a quick question like how to do that or how to utilize our two portals that we have.

On the high school side, Janet also indicated their dual credit students will have advantages in terms of skills for college:

They've already learned how to organize their time, they've already learned what they need to do to be successful, they've already learned what works for them and what doesn't work for them as far as studying is concerned and so it really puts them at a great advantage when you compare them to their peers at the same age who haven't had a dual credit early college experience.

As we apply FOK to these findings, we see that dual credit students obtain the FOK of technical skills and network development.

RQ 2: What are the challenges for dual credit implementation for urban students?

Parents. Due to the large number of participating students in the program, communication with parents, either formal or informal, was essential to students' success. All of our participants mentioned some form of information sessions to support, inform, and educate parents. As Collins indicated, school districts "hold parent nights" which is a "very committed and developed process" to update information for parents. He also stated that on the community college side, there are interviews for parents prior to students' acceptance into the program, which ensures the parents have a thorough understanding of the program. Pedro's high school offers workshops "so that parents feel comfortable with some of the stuff that the kids are doing." Janet's school provides information sessions for parents. Furthermore, Janet said that for "students [who] don't have someone at home who's been to college," she and her colleagues "kind of step in and fulfill that parent role."

In contrast, most of our participants thought keeping a close relationship with parents was essential for high schoolers to succeed in dual credit programs. However, the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA, stood out as a challenge when working with parents. As Gina pointed out, even if parents properly navigate the FERPA process and sign the proper consent forms, “somehow, parents just forget that FERPA is in place.” Working with frustrated parents who ask schools to reveal and share their children’s information is a big challenge. Most of our participants said they understand that it is hard for parents to change their mindset because their children are still minors. Pedro said parents tend to misunderstand FERPA:

[The parents would ask], “How do we not have a way for a high school student ... [to] share their progress with a parent because of FERPA?”

However, these participants should have a better understanding of the FERPA, because they do have the right to inform and share school information with parents. According to the Department of Education,

If a student is attending a postsecondary institution — at any age — the rights under FERPA have transferred to the student. However, in a situation where a student is enrolled in both a high school and a postsecondary institution, the two schools may exchange information on that student. If the student is under 18, the parents still retain the rights under FERPA at the high school and may inspect and review any records sent by the postsecondary institution to the high school.

(Department of Education, 2020)

Therefore, if the student's college information is shared inversely with the high school, parents have the same rights and access to any academic information the postsecondary institution provides to the high school.

Texas Success Initiative (TSI) Test. One of the requirements for high school students in Texas to be placed in a college level classroom is to pass the Texas Success Initiative Assessment (TSI). However, one of our participants felt there are some misalignments regarding the TSI test. Collins, when asked about the TSI, said, "I don't know what the test is demonstrating, because I talk to a lot of these students. ... There's some disconnect [in the TSI]. Something's going on." He added:

I was trying to help [a student] out, he's the first time in college, and we're trying to get him set up, and he's telling me, "Man, I am great at math." He showed me his STAAR, or whatever scores. He was like a point or two from the commended, or whatever, the master level, yet he can't pass the TSI. ... I don't want to say initiative, but we try to have students not cold test, so we offer boot camps for students, to get them ready. But even still, not everybody passes. We see good success when somebody does that, but what is it telling me when [this student] has a nearly commended score and can't test out of the TSI?

Even though some students demonstrated readiness for dual credit programs, the TSI stood in their way of enrolling when or how they wanted.

Recruitment. Two of the four high school personnel mentioned recruitment for their program as a sustainability challenge—typical of districts with smaller student populations. Dual credit programs are limited to their districts, or feeder schools, for recruitment purposes. Janet

complained of having “a very small feeder pattern.” And Phil, the principal of another high school mentioned when school districts have funding issues, they “tend to put money into the bigger schools, understandably, because they’re bigger population, more need to that building.” The growing number of programs also introduced competition between schools for students, as Phil explained:

As more and more early colleges open up, and especially the school within the school models... So there are now a lot more choices, which makes it harder to recruit, because kids, if they can stay in their own neighborhood, [they] often prefer to do that.

Burnout & Stress. Even though only one of our participants mentioned burnout and mental stress as a challenge for dual credit students, we included it in the findings given the depth of the discussion. When asked about the challenges of implementing dual credit, Pedro shared his concern beyond students’ graduation, stating that his “biggest challenge right now is the burnout number because what [do] you do with these kids after they’ve gone...for four years?” Attending college level courses early on is beneficial to students; however, “burnout,” or being stressed beyond mental acuity, is having a toll. Furthermore, Pedro shared:

Because I see firsthand what you have to sacrifice, what part of life you sacrifice in order for you to get your two years of college while you’re in high school. Not only socially, but also developmentally. And so what happens to a child that young, I don’t know the psychological implications, but I’m telling you that the stress level has started way too young in my opinion.

Even if the majority of the students could graduate from a four-year university in the end, there are still some students who “will show up to university, and they will take a break and then never go back.” Pedro expressed his concern with the program when he saw the stress that his students are dealing with:

But when you look at the kids every day, whether you're dealing with possible suicide thoughts, strong depression, high stress level, shaking, institutionalism, being instituted based on the stress that you deal with here when they could've been across the street at the high school playing soccer, probably you got to ask yourself real questions about the early college high school movement.

In the end, as Pedro pointed out, these students are just teenagers who are attending college level courses which bring challenges to their social and psychological development. Thus, the burnout and stress issue should raise the attention of educators, administrators, and policymakers.

Discussion

In this study, we attempted to better understand how administrators, instructors, and staff in urban community college and early college high schools perceive dual credit programs for the student participants. We also delved into the challenges that students within urban environments might encounter in their dual credit program experience as perceived by administrators, instructors, and staff.

According to our participants' responses to the first research question, role rehearsal and direct simulation are crucial benefits for students, a concept we termed college student emulation. High school students experience a positive peer influence that improves their social and academic

abilities when sitting in a classroom with college students who have a variety of backgrounds. Urban students also exhibited the acquisition of funds of knowledge. Similar to findings from our previous study (Garcia, Li, & Leong, 2019), the “institutionally sanctioned discourses that illuminate the appropriate ways to communicate” (funds of knowledge 1), the organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge (funds of knowledge 3) and the skill-related funds of knowledge (funds of knowledge 5) were presented as urban students experienced college-level courses. However, the network development (funds of knowledge 4) and knowledge of educational markets to overcome barriers (funds of knowledge 6) were not primary drivers for students to participate in dual credit.

For the second research question, the challenges of implementing dual credit in urban settings involve working with parents, recruitment, TSI, and stress issues. Firstly, when our participants are working with parents, especially when it comes to understanding FERPA, there are challenges. All the institutions in our study had informative ways to communicate both prior to and during students’ participation in dual credit programs. Such communication sheds light on both students and parents. However, we find that parents often have problems understanding and abiding by FERPA. A possible reason is that the schools in our sample held information sessions for parents and students separately. Especially for students as young teenagers, they might not be aware of the power of consent that FERPA has granted them.

Secondly, recruitment is another challenge caused by the concentration of funding in bigger schools and communities, leaving some institutions with a very limited feeding pattern, as well as the fierce competition due to the growing number of schools offering dual credit and early college high school programs. This a challenge embedded in the growth of dual credit programs and should be thoroughly researched by school and policy-makers.

Thirdly, the TSI, as the benchmark that gauges whether a high school student can participate in college-level coursework, is another concern one of our participants had. Students may fail the TSI and lose the chance to earn dual credit even if they have exhibited sufficient ability on another standardized test.

Lastly, student's mental health raised our attention even though only one of the participants mentioned the issue. As dual credit students are taking higher level courses in advance, it is natural that the college experience may introduce a higher level of stress and anxiety.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The results of this research have several policy implications. Addressing the benefits and concerns as outlined above, college student emulation, funds of knowledge acquisition, dealing parents' concerns regarding FERPA, TSI, recruitment, and burnout and stress, we make the following recommendations: First, it is important for not only students, but also their parents to acquire organizational funds of knowledge. Dual credit programs and schools need to be forthright about FERPA requirements as they communicate with students and their parents. Parents are naturally familiar with a broader oversight into the progress of their students, as they are accustomed to the level of access in traditional high schools. As students participate in dual credit classes, FERPA maintains the parents' right to stay informed on class grades and progress. Parents need timely and important information about their students throughout dual credit programs, and administrators running dual credit programs must properly understand FERPA regulations and provide access.

Second, dual credit programs in Texas are squaring off with the Texas Success Initiative, or TSI, which limits younger students' access to these programs. We align with Bahr et al. (2019)

and suggest using multiple measures in determining readiness, particularly easing away from the TSI as a roadblock. According to Bahr et al., GPA is the best predictor of college readiness, so it is worth considering as an alternative measure for assessing readiness for dual credit programs. Third, recruitment needs to be realigned to ensure continual growth and sustainability of dual credit programs. Funding is lacking to adequately pursue the positive marketing dual credit programs hope for and need.

Fourth, professional counseling staff should be hired to combat stress and burnout. Minoritized populations may not be aware of the various resources offered to them, and dual credit programs often lack mental health support. Because dual credit high school students are placed in college-level courses when they may not be prepared emotionally and/or psychologically, professional counseling staff is paramount to student success and abating various stressors.

Conclusion

Our study has found that dual credit programs benefit students in various ways. They promote role rehearsal and give students opportunities to develop the funds of knowledge to navigate college after high school. However, there are challenges that may hinder students' ability to be successful. These include stressors brought by the challenges of being college students when they may not be ready emotionally. In addition, FERPA creates confusion surrounding parent access and administrators must understand the regulations. High schools and colleges need to be aware of these challenges to better support students and parents.

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