



# **Traversing the Path Less Traveled: Dual Credit Benefits and Unanticipated Challenges for Rural and Urban Students**

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## Introduction

Upward socioeconomic mobility in the United States necessitates postsecondary education in some form due to various local and global political and economic conditions. For example, most jobs created after the recession were positions that required some kind of postsecondary education and/or credentials (Carnevale et al., 2016). Given the global pandemic caused by COVID-19, the need to obtain some higher level of education beyond high school will only intensify. Unfortunately, students from working-class backgrounds within urban and rural settings have not had the same educational opportunities as those from suburban environments or from wealthy backgrounds. Furthermore, students from marginalized racial backgrounds also suffer from attending under-resourced schools that stratify students after high school. There is a large body of literature that states that many students of color and from working-class backgrounds join the workforce rather than entering a postsecondary institution due to the need to help their families financially. Scholars have indicated that among those who do attend a higher education institution, many enroll at community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014). Therefore, it is paramount to better understand the ways policy makers and educators can ameliorate the educational gap between students from working-class backgrounds in rural/urban communities and those from wealthy suburban environments. This study will showcase the ways in which dual credit programs can promote exposure to a collegiate environment and increase college participation of students who may not have pursued a collegiate pathway beyond high school.

## Literature Review

### Dual Enrollment and Gaps in the Research

U.S. dual credit and early college programs make for a relatively new, reform-based opportunity (Giani et al., 2014) for students to earn college credit while still being enrolled in high school. Generally, two main models of dual credit programs can be identified. One allows high school students to take college level classes taught by college professors or specifically trained high school teachers at their respective high school campuses. The other, usually adopted by early college institutions, allow the high schoolers access to actual college campuses and classrooms located in proximity to the high schools. Existent research on dual enrollment often focuses on the benefits of this educational opportunity such as higher graduation, enrollment and degree earning rates compared to students attending traditional high schools (Johnson, 2017) as well as higher test results (Dixon, 2017; Muñoz et al., 2014). Both those beneficial outcomes of dual enrollment have been shown to be less applicable to low-income students and students of color (Taylor & Pretlow, 2015). With most research focusing on the role dual enrollment plays in the higher education space in general, there is a scant body of literature illuminating the different realities of students from rural and urban backgrounds in their experience when enrolled in dual credit programs.

### Urban Educational Contexts

The urban educational context has traditionally been heavily researched and provided with funding and grants targeting increased access and equity in these areas (Ostrander, 2015; Snyder & Reckhow, 2017). While urban areas have undoubtedly been a focus of educational policies and reforms, the actual results of those efforts are mixed. Authors like Ostrander (2015) point out that initiatives like *No Child Left Behind* and the *Common Core State Standards*

*Initiative* actually had negative impacts on urban school districts. Ostrander (2015) states that specifically the *No Child Left Behind* initiative actually disadvantages urban schools because “it ignores important cultural differences in the education process” (p. 279). In addition to this lack of awareness for diversity, funding for the initiative is based on standardized testing, which creates even more inequities. After all, the educational setting and family background and education is one of the most telling predictors of student success. In urban and migrant areas, families generally tend to struggle more with lower levels of education among the parents and higher levels of poverty. These factors can negatively influence the parents’ ability to support their children in their educational endeavors (Ostrander, 2015). Urban educational contexts hence present a distinct set of challenges for student success (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Cilesiz & Drotos, 2016; Hubbard, 2016; McShane & Wilson, 2017).

### **Rural Educational Context**

As illuminated in the previous section, there exists a large body of scholarly work centered around exploring access to education in urban settings (Green, 2015; Johnson, 2017; Lee & Lubienski, 2017; Schofield & Davidson, 2002; Stone, 1998). When it comes to research on rural education, the limited corpus of literature suggests that various factors impede access to higher education for rural students. These include regional labor markets that are mainly composed of industries 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). Koricich et al. (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).

In rural schools, there appears to be a lack of the resources necessary to support students with the college application process (Farmer et al., 2006; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). This manifests, for example, in limited access to advanced placement (AP) courses (Perna, 2006; Perna & Jones, 2013; Planty et al., 2003), which puts rural students already at a disadvantage when applying to colleges. Another unintended negative consequence and limitation of a rural context is a lack of adequate counseling, which stands in the way of the flow of information regarding financial aid and scholarships for students and hence impedes the whole college application process. Hiring and retaining qualified teachers is also often hindered by the isolation and lack of funding for rural schools (Lowe, 2006; Monk, 2006).

Dual credit may provide a means for creating favorable conditions in both rural and urban settings, balancing out the different challenges those contexts bring about and ultimately increasing access and retention to higher education for all students. Even though there may be mixed perceptions of dual credit programs, more qualitative research illuminating the ways in which dual credit programs provide excellent platforms for intrinsically motivated students in both rural and urban contexts is needed to understand how we can best support those student populations according to their specific needs.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

This study utilizes the 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 (FOK) comes by way of Stanton-Salazar (1997), who suggested that institutional agents impact students' education greatly. Stanton-Salazar elaborates on agents' roles, suggesting that agents "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 students hinges on their ability to access FOK in order to secure the support needed in navigating the hierarchy of high school and post-secondary institutions.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) define 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.

- 1) institutionally sanctioned jargon that aids in communication within the system;
- 2) task-specific knowledge, which is essentially academic subject-area acumen;
- 3) organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge, described as the knowledge of how the bureaucracy operates within the organization;
- 4) 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;
- 5) technical funds of knowledge, described as the time-management, decision-making, computer literacy, test-taking, and study skills;
- 6) knowledge of labor and educational markets, which is the knowledge of how to navigate the job market in successfully advocating for employment during and after graduation;
- 7) 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 (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).

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.

Given these challenges students face as they embark on their dual credit program, we sought to answer the following three research questions to guide our study:

- 1) Is there a difference in experience between students who participate in dual credit at their local high school and those who take dual credit on a college campus?
- 2) What do students who participated perceive as the benefits and challenges for their enrollment in the dual credit?
- 3) What would past participants tell educators and policy makers regarding dual credit?

### **Methods**

Using a qualitative research design, the research team interviewed a total of 22 participants in virtual interviews through the online platform Zoom. Stanton-Salazar's social capital and funds of knowledge were used to guide the study, develop the interview questions, and help with interpretation of findings. Students in the study generally described how dual credit impacted their lives after high school. Employing a narrative approach, this study utilized personal experiences in a research design that "provides an understanding of [the subject's narrative] and illuminates the life and culture that created it" (Patton, 2002, p. 115) in order to better understand the experiences of individuals who participated in dual enrollment while in

high school. A virtual multi-site study of dual credit programs in Texas was conducted to respond to the impossibility of face-to-face interviews due to Covid-19. To explore the participants' remarks on a detailed level, we employed semi-structured interviews supplemented with probing and follow-up questions whenever appropriate. Guidance for the development of the interview questions came from relevant literature as well as the theoretical framework.

### **School Sites**

In light of the comprehensive concentration on both urban and rural community colleges, the research team, including one graduate student from Texas Tech University, a faculty member from The University of Southern Mississippi who is a recent graduate from Texas Tech University, and a faculty member from Texas Tech University, reached out to 7 community colleges and 23 high schools in both urban and rural areas in Texas. These schools were selected due to their locations in rural and urban environments with diverse student populations. Recruitment was specifically conducted via email and sent out by staff at the participating community colleges and high schools. By employing the help of the school and college staff, the researchers conducted a first selection of participants.

### **Data Collection and Participants**

Data was collected in the form of qualitative semi-structured interviews with 6 male and 16 female interview participants who were enrolled in dual credit classes during high school within the state of Texas. All were over 18 years of age and had graduated from high school at the time of the interviews. Nine participants had attended early college high schools, while 13 had participated in dual credit programs. All participants except one were attending higher education institutions at the time of the interview: 13 were attending 4-year institutions, and 8 were enrolled at community colleges. All interviews were conducted via the online meeting

application, Zoom, and recorded. All participants were asked to provide a pseudonym for the study. All participants provided a pseudonym, and we use them for each participant in this study to provide anonymity.

### **Data Analysis**

All audio-recordings of the interview data were transcribed using a transcription service. Following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach, the codes were determined through a process of drilling down through the data. Firstly, categories were generated (open coding). Secondly, subcategories were developed and linked to the already established categories (axial coding). The last step consisted of a process of integration and refinement (selective coding). After the code book was finalized, the transcriptions were imported to the qualitative analysis software NVivo 12. Patton's (1990) approach of inductive data analysis was adopted to code the themes emerging from the transcriptions. The research team discussed and recoded emerging themes as needed to achieve inter-rater reliability. The theoretical framework of funds of knowledge was then applied to the developed themes in order to get an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals previously enrolled in dual credit programs.

### **Findings**

**RQ1) Is there a difference in experience between students who participate in dual credit at their local high school and those who take dual credit on a college campus?**

The purpose of this main question was to get a better understanding as to whether or not student have different experiences based on delivery location (at the high school or college campus) of dual credit programs. Out of the 22 interview participants, over half (12) stated they had taken dual enrollment classes on both their high school campuses and college campuses in the area. Nine participants stated they had taken dual enrollment classes exclusively at their high

schools, and only one participant stated they had taken those classes at a college campus only. While all participants talked about both pros and cons of the high school and college environment in the context of dual enrollment, the majority emphasized that they consider a mixture of both modalities most valuable and beneficial. Kai Ann, a student from a rural region, characterized this mixture as helpful to the transition to college after dual credit:

But if there was, like, a way to transition into college, that would be-- I think that would be more beneficial as well. Like a semester, intro semester at the high school, and then going into the college campus. I think that would help a lot more for people that want to do more in-person classes when they're in college.

The ones who took dual enrollment classes in both settings considered themselves “pretty fortunate in that it was a bit of both” (Dan, student from a rural setting).

### **College Campus Experiences**

Perceptions of dual enrollment on college campuses included both positive and negative impressions, emphasizing the plurality of experiences within dual enrollment. A major positive theme in relation to taking dual credit classes on a college campus emerged as increased confidence and a sense of having earned their place as high schoolers in a collegiate environment as stated by this student from an urban setting:

And it was-- it was a different feeling being in a college course in an actual college, um, institution, compared to just taking dual credit at a high school. It kinda gave me this feeling of confidence that, while I'm actually here, I actually earned my-- like paved my way to be here. It was-- it was honestly very breathtaking, but it was something I was very grateful to be a part of. (Sam)

Despite being significantly younger than the average college student, the high schoolers enrolled in dual credit developed a sense of belonging and pride in their role on college campuses. Their identities merged aspects of high school and college into a unique identity-blend:

I'm a college student, but I'm just, like, a very, very young one. Just a super young college student. And I felt like I belonged there. I'm like, hey, I have a right to an education just like everyone else here. (Ada, student from an urban setting)

At the same time, a distinct feeling of being “out of place” at college campuses could be attributed mainly to social interactions among the student populations and the significant age gap between dual enrollment and regular students:

It was a weird experience. It was a weird dynamic because I didn't know how to approach them. And quite frankly, they didn't know how to approach me, right? They, they realized, you know, "This guy looks pretty young." And I was like, "Yeah. You guys are pretty old, right?" (Tom, student from an urban setting)

Feeling “like I had to prove myself in some way. That even though I was a teenager, I was still serious and mature enough to be taking a college-level course” (Red Sniper, student from a rural setting) could, however, be overcome or at least decreased by having a solid group of friends who were also in dual enrollment programs. “And it was really nice to be able to take college-level courses with them because there was always that support system” (Dan, student from a rural setting).

The feeling of being judged by college professors as being not as engaged and dedicated in their studies emerged as something the dual enrollment students on college campuses found themselves confronted with:

Some professors, like, I don't know if they just wouldn't recognize how young we were. I thought it was pretty obvious. We all had baby faces. But they would say stuff like, "Man, I can't-- I don't like early college students. They always like slack off, screw around." And so we'd just be sitting there like, "Uh." 'Cause some professors we would tell upfront, like, you know, "I'll have to miss occasionally because of X high school event." (Mary, student from an urban setting)

Despite this occasional judgment, students said a positive aspect of taking dual credit classes at a college campus was preparation for future college endeavors. Learning “how to actually study” (Lisa, student from a rural setting) was an important part of the college campus experience, as was the acclimatization to what it actually means to navigate the college space:

So, um, you know, I think it was important that we went and experienced that because if we hadn't, if we had just been in high school, even if taking college classes, I feel like once we had left high school, we would have a very incorrect idea or impression of what college life is like. (Tom, student from an urban setting)

Being prepared in this way facilitated the transition to later college life, which “gradually became something that, um, I felt was normal. Um, because I was just used to going to the campus. And it, it felt very comfortable” (Bri, student from a rural setting). However, there were also experiences of perceived added stress by having to attend classes on college campuses. Sandra Sparks, a student from a rural setting, felt like “trying to do high school work and trying to do college but also having to go to college, I think would be a little bit too stressful for a high school student sometimes.”

The opportunity for personal growth was mentioned as another positive effect of entering the college space as a high schooler through dual enrollment. Larissa, a student from a rural setting, stated that in “college, you learn—you learn about yourselves, what you like, and you gain opinions different from others.” While high school often creates “your little typical high school bubble” (Cindy, student from a rural setting), college campuses broaden students’ horizons and expose them to a multitude of new people and experiences. A factor that seemed to positively influence participants’ perception of their experiences on college campuses is the physical proximity to their respective high schools. With high schools nearby, the students felt better understood and more accepted as the college faculty were used to having high school students in their classes, and this was something that the professors would have known about, because the high school campus was five minutes away. For example, Bri, a student from a rural setting, states, “You know, they regularly send their high school students over. So they would

have known at some point, like, ‘Oh, yeah, there are early college high school kids that come here.’”

While proximity to high schools is perceived as positive, the opposite is true for larger distances between high school and college campuses, since students “may not have the time to get there” (Sinclair Robinson, student from an urban setting). Cindy, a student from an urban setting stated:

(...) our closest college campus that we take dual credit through is actually 45 minutes away. So it’s kind of one of those, “Do you want to drive 45 minutes to an hour to go that class and then turn around and come home?”

Thus, it is clear that while students can take classes on the college campus, sometimes the distance justifies the courses being taught on the high school campus to avoid an undue burden on the students and families who would have to find their way to a college campus and, in some cases, pay for parking.

### **High School Campus Experiences**

One of the main themes that emerged as a positive experience of dual enrollment on a high school campus was being able to remain a teenager and experiencing adolescence without feeling like having to prove oneself as particularly mature and grown-up:

I feel the, the high school setting gives you more of that high school experience. You could be with your, your peers, and you feel more, like, uh, like you're adolescents, like you, you, you, you, you still have that experience of your adolescence. But I mean, your adolescence's so short, so you're gonna hop into your-- to your adulthood, your young adulthood (Ada, student from an urban setting).

The idea of the high school campus as a “comfort zone” that facilitates communication with both peers and teachers was mentioned, for example, by Tee, a student from a rural setting:

You know, you know who you're around. Like, you know who your instructor is. You're going to know them. You're going to be more comfortable with them. With, like, communicating with them. Because communication is really a big thing. You're going to be more comfortable communicating with them and all stuff like that.

At the same time, the theme of the safety bubble was not perceived positively by all participants, as it was considered limiting the “full college experience”:

But having that, uh, I think if I would've had that like going to at least one, one campus for like a college class, I think it would've helped me a little more because you're meeting people outside of your little typical high school bubble. You're, you're meeting new people (Cindy, student from an urban setting).

Overall, the participants expressed the desire to be able to choose the modalities of their dual enrollment experience and seemed to prefer combining advantages of both campus locations. The importance of agency in the choice of location hints at the need for offering more flexible learning modalities within dual enrollment.

## **RQ 2: What do students who participated perceive as the benefits and challenges for their enrollment in the dual credit?**

The purpose of the second question was to obtain what students who have participated in dual credit reflect on what they believe was beneficial and/or challenging as they traversed through college courses while still in high school. Participants discussed several benefits, such as learning how to navigate collegiate and academic environments to get a sense of what they can expect if they decide to matriculate into a postsecondary institution after high school, and a few challenges that we discuss below.

### **Benefits**

While the interviewees mentioned both benefits and challenges they experienced while being enrolled in dual credit programs, the overall experience was perceived as a highly valuable, enriching and positive one. The following quote sums up the general opinion. Tom, a student from an urban setting, states that “I don't have any regrets here. I think it was well worth my time, my investment.” One of the most prevalent benefits perceived by the students was the

fact that they felt like dual enrollment helped them in their transition to college. Kai Ann, a student from a rural setting, mentioned that “it made it a lot more smooth of a transition” overall. Particularly the dual credit classes on college campuses were seen as a major help in terms of getting ready for the “real” college experience after high school:

I think by having both, um, high school and college, like being both a part-- being part of both campuses is the best way to get these students prepared to what to expect for college. Because, say for example, it's only high school, just explicitly high school. The students who take dual credit don't ever feel like they're college students. They just feel like, "Oh, I'm just taking a dual credit class in high school." That's all they'll ever think. But, like again, it's just a whole different experience being able to walk into a college classroom, sit down with the professor and have-- and just be in that environment (Sam, student from an urban setting).

Besides easing the transition to college, another perceived benefit was the significant improvement the students saw in their ability to navigate collegiate and academic environments after having participated in dual credit programs. Essential tasks like schedule building and navigating course catalogues and syllabi were just some of the areas the students felt like dual enrollment prepared them for succeeding in college:

Uh, so I, I didn't feel any different. You know, I knew how to make my schedule. I knew how to read the catalog. I knew how to read my syllabus. I knew how to email my professors, and properly. Like so many people don't know how to email a professor. And I already knew all of those things 'cause I have been doing it for, you know, the past six years, literally (Amy, student from an urban setting).

Having already been exposed to a collegiate environment while taking dual credit classes, the interview participants felt more prepared to succeed in an environment that many other freshmen often struggle to adapt to. This reduced their stress level when entering college and overall improved their transitional experience:

For sure. Yeah. Because, I mean, when I went into college, right, like, I didn't need anyone to explain to me my degree plan. I already knew how to do that. I knew what, what my degree plan was. I knew what I needed to do. I knew how many credits I needed. Uh, I knew how to plan it to where it wasn't too difficult

one semester and then the next semester was super easy. I mean, I already knew all of these things. I would imagine the incoming freshmen probably don't. Um, but for me, like, I already knew this, so that transition was very easy. Um, I wasn't stressed out about like, "What do I need to take? Where-- when, where, how?" Like, I, I knew how to do this. I knew where to find it. I knew where to look. And if I had problems, I knew who to talk to. Um, and yeah, I mean, logistically, that would be it, but academically, like I said, I'm not having any trouble (Tom, student from an urban setting).

Another benefit of dual enrollment that emerged throughout the interviews is that taking dual credit classes helped the students to picture themselves going on to college after having graduated high school. Bri, a student from a rural setting, states that "It was nothing very well-defined. I knew that I liked math. I knew that I wanted-- I wanted to get an education after high school. I wanted to go to college. Um, but I didn't really know what, what I wanna do. Um, I was hoping to figure it out as I went." While she did not have concrete ideas on what to major in, dual enrollment had solidified in her the urge to pursue a higher educational degree. Being exposed to a more demanding environment in dual enrollment also resulted in the students living up to the challenge and "shape up":

Like I can't even really put it into words, but it's just-- it makes you feel like you need to shape up or shape out. So it's just like-- it's just you have to actually stand up to the expectations and meet the expectations that these professors are expecting of you. It's no longer your high school teachers. It's professors, college professors who've been doing this for a long time (Sam, a student from an urban setting).

Wanting to participate in dual credit courses was a huge source of motivation for the students and increased their willingness to put in the effort and reach their goals: "And I really, like, like-- it really was, like, one of my motivations in, like, doing good in school since-- like, if I get good grades, then I could go-- or, like, I could-- I could, uh, be part of this dual credit" (Ada, a student from an urban setting).

While aiding the students in their academic and educational development, dual enrollment also seems to have a beneficial effect on personal growth. When asked if dual enrollment influenced her personal development as a teenager growing into an adult, Red Sniper, a student from a rural setting, for example, answered:

I-- it did. I-- in high school, you don't realize that-- all these things that are happening to you, you don't realize that you're growing more independent, you're changing, you're becoming less insecure about yourself and you're starting to find yourself a little bit. You don't really realize that until after you've graduated.

### **Challenges**

There were numerous students who discussed the added stress they experienced trying to be both high school and college students. The high expectations they were attempting to live up to often caused a particularly high level of mental stress and exhaustion:

Uh, fundamentally, it was very stressful. Um, as much as I wanted a challenge and whatnot, I, I can most definitely say that I was not prepared for the-- for the commitment, for the time management required, and just, uh, perhaps the stress. Uh, one thing that you learn in early college really is time management, how to work with whatever limited time you have. And so while it was a good environment and the teachers were very supportive and understanding, um, you know, it was still very stressful. It was very stressful because you're doing both at the same time (Tom, student from an urban setting).

This stress was perceived as particularly high during the initial transition phase from the high school to the collegiate environment. “It was a little bit tough for the transition, definitely. I mean, moving to a new school, especially in high school, is gonna be tough trying to make new friends and things like that” (Avery Jackson, student from a rural setting). While the stress levels were definitely perceived as elevated and had a great impact on the students’ lives, they also made them more resourceful when it comes to finding strategies for stress reduction. Lisa, a student from a rural setting, mentioned:

Um, 'cause that's very stressful. And that would be what causes, like, burnout and stuff is, um, keeping things for last minute. Ah, I would say that it's hard, but you

have to, you know, keep going, keep yourself motivated, but take breaks when needed. Um, but, you know, really, ah, keep up with your time and learn how to study proficiently.

The challenges of dual enrollment were definitely a stressful experience for the students, “but I feel very prepared, like, I feel confident enough to, to just push myself out there. And I, I understand that the real world is gonna be much more difficult than dual credit itself” (Tom, student from an urban setting). The skills acquired throughout their dual credit courses helped them recuperate faster and deal with stressful situations better. “I did, every now and then, just get stressed and get a little overwhelmed, but I was right back to whatever I needed to do” (Chuck Finley, student from a rural setting).

Some female students discussed how one challenge they faced on college campuses were related to gendered experiences. Of the 22 participants, zero of the six male participants mentioned encountering gendered experiences. However, of the 16 female participants, nearly half (7) discussed having a gendered experience.

Respondents expressed instances where they took precautions to ensure their safety as a female. Amy explained that when working on group projects with students from the community college, she always informed them that she is 16 years old. Similarly, Sam, a student from an urban setting, explained that she disclosed her age when working in groups in order to prevent advances. She stated “You do have to meet outside of class. So again, it created a-an opportunity for these inappropriate relationships. Um, personally for me, I made it very clear early on that I'm 16 for any male that I interacted with.” Sam provided further explanation after discussing how she experienced unwanted advances from an older male student, saying:

So because of that, I mainly surrounded myself with my early other college fe-- uh, peers, those who were around my age group. And only rarely when I needed to, I would, um, interact with some of the college students. I did make some female friends that I do feel like my friendships with them continued to stay on, just because despite the age

difference. But once I attended university full time, once I graduated high school, then it was only then that I had to start interacting with these people because these were actually my peers who I may one day be working with, because we're all in the same major. So it just-- it's a balance. Then you have to be socially responsible and socially aware of yourself, what you're wanting to get yourself into. And again, that's why I say, it really comes down to you and if you draw that fine line.

Bri, a student from a rural setting, said female students would walk together to avoid being alone while at the college campus. She stated “we would kind of travel together a lot. Um, and so it was not like I was-- I was ever usually alone.” Ada, a student from an urban setting, explained that in addition to utilizing safety resources at the institution (i.e., police or safety officer escorts), she would carry pepper spray for protection. She stated:

I would not tell no one I was carrying pepper spray with me, but for me, I, I feel, you, you just need to be smart, especially as a woman. You just, like-- I-I'm not gonna be like, hey, like, hmm, take your precautions, of course. And one thing we learned early on is, there in [the university], there is also-- there is people you could talk to, like, and report. You can report them, like, something's happening and you feel uncomfortable, you could just go and report them, like-- and fortunately, that never happened.

While enrolled in dual enrollment, the female students expressed engaging in strategies to ensure their safety. This ranged from disclosing their age to walking in groups. In some cases, the need to engage in safety measures resulted from the sexualization respondents experienced.

### **RQ 3: What would past participants tell educators and policy makers regarding dual credit?**

Students were asked, “If you could speak directly to educators and policy makers, what would they tell them about dual credit?” Respondents indicated that they would encourage the expansion/marketing of dual credit and they advocated for more funding to support students.

#### **Help Expand These Programs and Market Dual Credit Programs**

Due to the benefits our participants believe dual credit programs offer to students and families, several indicated that dual credit programs need to be expanded to maximize

opportunity to students who are motivated to enroll. For example, Avery Jackson, a student from a rural setting, states the following:

...I would say to promote it more. Because I never really heard about it when I moved to school X. I heard about it when I was at school Y. So I don't think that they had pushed it as much when I went to school X. And so I had asked about it, and once we were able to start and get a class going, I think that's when they started to kind of push it. But I will say, like, just push it as much as you can. That has been my saving grace. That is what I needed for school. Not only did it help me discipline myself to prepare myself for college, but it also helped me in high school. So that's what I would say. I would just advertise it to as many as you can. Once my brother's of age, he's gonna start that too.

So, the student had the benefit of attending two schools where one school was promoting dual credit and the other was not. If the student had never attended the prior school, the student may have never participated in the program from which the student benefited immensely. Another student stated that it should be an opportunity for all students:

I think that, um-- hmm. I think that there should be more opportunity for dual-credit classes 'cause I almost-- I had almost missed that opportunity myself, where I think that if I-- if I had, um, it would've been a complete loss for my personal education...I really think that dual credit should be, um, an opportunity that every student gets to have because it's absolutely wonderful. If they want it, they should be able to have it. (Kai Ann, student from a rural setting)

Another recommendation former dual credit students indicate would be beneficial for educators and policy makers to know is that there needs to be more marketing of the program.

For example, Dan, a student from a rural setting, states:

I would say try to-- well, I guess, try to advertise it a little bit more. Do something a little bit better when it comes to pushing it out there to everyone else because it's a really nice program for those that actually want to take advantage of it. And I feel like it's not as hidden as a gem as it used to be. But it's still kind of-- you have to move around a couple objects before you can actually find it. At least, that's how it was in my experience.

This student also states that while it should be marketed to students, the real target should be parents. Dan states the following:

Mainly go...for the parents because if they're anything like me, you don't know what you want to do in middle school, so you kind of just do what your parents tell you to do. But I mean, on top of that, you do have to keep an open mind. And I don't know how you can do anything about that. But try to make it a little-- don't try to hide it as much as it currently is. Even though they're not trying to hide it. It's just they haven't done, in my opinion, a very good job of getting it out there.

Another student from a rural setting added:

Um, I'm not sure how it is in every high school, but I would say they should really help and make it like a resource for students in high school and make it available for them and known to them. 'Cause not every kid knows about dual credit.  
(Larissa)

Another from a rural setting stated:

I feel like-- and this may not answer your question, but I feel like scholarships should be offered more and maybe even advertised to, um, high schools, and show them ways to get ahead. Um, I feel like the resources aren't advertised enough, um, such as the food pantry. Um, I feel like the food pantry should be more advertised, because I know there's a lot of kids out there that don't have a lot of food and that can utilize that... And so, um, just things like that I feel like they could be advertised more. Um, just to get people involved...in the college community. (Dr. Seuss)

### **Increase Funding**

One of the more prominent themes that emerged from this question was the advocating for more funding and support. Several students from both rural and urban communities indicated that funding was a perceived concern. For example, Tom, a student from an urban setting, states:

I think that early college, while it's not for everyone, it is for many people. I think that the benefits it gives are astounding. There's a lot of them. And I think there should be more of them, to be honest. I think there should be more, and they should be more [dual credit programs] you know, well funded, given what they're trying to accomplish, right? Um, specifically, I think they should be in areas of low academic achievements, if you will, because it's an excellent opportunity for people to really get the ball rolling on their academic life. Um, yeah. I mean, I just think-- I think there should be more of them, to be honest.

Another student from a rural area stated there needs to more attention paid by educators and policy makers regarding dual credit and increasing funding to support students:

Oh, so first of all, we definitely need more attention. It was, um-- our school was full of amazing students. They did amazing work. Um, we had a killer debate

team. Uh, we went to, uh-- our debate team went to, like, um, state levels. We were, um-- we did very well in competitions. We had amazing STEM teams. We did amazing in our coding challenges. We, uh, flourished very well, especially considering that we had much less funding than our, uh, larger high school counterpart. So there were only two high schools in school district Z. There was XY Early College High School, and right across the street from us was WZ High School. And they got all the funding, all the publicity, all the attention, all the everything. Um, but we were an amazing high school, and we never got credit for that. And we-- most frustratingly, we never got funding for that. And I know that that was a huge problem. Like, we were always worrying about money. Um, things like getting textbooks for college. Like, that was a huge part of our budget. Um, and it was-- it was frustrating. All the policies and the-- you know, things like that, uh, made it hard to do. Um, you know, and things like-- things like having a building. Like, that was-- we didn't have a permanent building in our school until 10 years into its, um, development. (Bri)

This same student continues to discuss how they did not have arts programs:

Uh, things like having an arts program. We didn't have an arts program until about a dozen years in. Um, we didn't have a single art teacher. Like, that was-- like, you could not take an art class. You had to go to the college to do that. Um, and so, you know, I'm-- there's like a bazillion things I could talk about funding, about, like, what-- examples about what we didn't have. Um, but in general, the idea was that we got no attention. It was very frustrating that, you know, nobody really knows about us even though we are amazing-- uh, an amazing program. You know, like, uh, the kids at my school, um, had all sorts of challenges that they were facing at home. And we were trying to give them the means to overcome those challenges, and they flourished amazingly. Like, I am so proud of every single one of my students-- my students. My classmates. Um, my classmates. And, um, they deserve so much more recognition than they ever got. And so I think, um, knowing that, you know, these schools exist, and these schools need a lot more funding. (Bri)

Another student from an urban setting added:

It's a really good program, and I don't think they should try and limit the amount of things students are trying to do in those programs. But definitely please more funding, more resources for the students. Give them better mental health coping mechanisms. And of course, more funding will help with that. (Mary)

Increasing funding to the programs can aid in further marketing the dual credit to increase engagement in rural communities through the state. Additionally, funding can be used to enhance the resources available to students enrolled in dual credit programs, such as technology for

students to access the courses from a distance, dual credit centered advising, and mental health resources to aid in stress and time management.

### **Discussion and Policy Implications**

Policy implications that emerge from the results of this study point at the need to increase the support provided for participants in dual enrollment programs. These include an increase in the expansion and marketing of dual credit, increasing funding for students and programs, mental health support, support in navigating a collegiate campus as minors while traversing an adult world, and the increasing of communication between high schools and postsecondary institutions.

#### **Increase Funding for Dual Credit Programs**

While we acknowledge that given the financial concerns we are currently experiencing, it is difficult to increase or reallocate funding, our participants indicated that funding was a concern for them. Most of the students in our study went on to some kind of postsecondary institution after taking dual credit courses, and other research indicates that high school students who participate in dual credit programs are more likely to pursue and obtain some level of postsecondary education (Grubb et al., 2017; Hoffman et al., 2009). This is aligned with the Texas 60x30 plan which aims to have at least 60% of Texans obtain at least an associate degree or college certificate by the year 2030 (THECB, 2015). If Texas is going to achieve these goals, dual credit programs will be a major role. In addition, given the large student loan debt this country is experiencing, students and families can limit their college costs, which is also aligned with the Texas 60x30 plan (THECB, 2015). Finally, given that many dual credit students graduate with a high school diploma and several college credits, many students can hasten their time to degree which also enables them to join the labor force much faster than students who do

not come with college credits after high school. Thus, it is paramount that funding be allocated to programs such as dual credit to ensure that economically disadvantaged students from rural and urban settings can continue to take advantage of these programs.

### **Mental Health Support**

Many of our participants from both rural and urban environments discussed the additional pressure of achieving high academic standards while attempting to still be teenagers and having family responsibilities. Many of our staff and teacher participants in the previous white papers indicated that high school students can perform at the collegiate level, and students validated those findings. However, educators also suggested that some students may be thrust into an environment that adds stress to an already stressful time of their lives. Students also validated this as many suggested that we must be careful when adding additional stress by having minors in an adult world while still having to deal with pressures at home. Thus, mental health support is critical so that dual credit students know they have somewhere to go. Indeed, mental health is an area that deserves closer attention from policy makers and educators alike. As suggested in the existent literature, young adults are particularly vulnerable to external stress since they find themselves in transitional stages in their lives (Chan et al., 2019; Suldo et al., 2008). Providing resources like mental health centers and counselors working specifically with dual enrollment students is an important step in acknowledging this increased need for mental health support. Since many dual enrollment students are first generation college degree seekers, providing adequate support to help them navigate the college environment is particularly crucial.

### **Dual Credit Students on College Campuses Need Additional Support**

Support is also needed to ease the transition from a high school to a highly sexualized college environment, particular for female students as it relates to sexual harassment. This could,

for example, be in the form of assigned female counselors that are trained in dealing with sexual harassment and assault. Implementing mandatory training sessions for students and staff involved in dual enrollment is another option to provide adequate support. This idea of increased training translates over into the institutional level. Dual credit programs present an example of how successful collaboration between K-12 and higher education can benefit the students, which is why those collaborative efforts need to be kept up and even enhanced. A deepening of existing relationships between high schools and colleges will make those connections more effective and will ensure the safety and educational outcomes of adolescent students who are navigating an adult world while still minors.

### **High Schools and Colleges Need to Work Together**

Communication between colleges and high school staff is essential to ensure students do not fall through the cracks. Students who are taking college classes at the college campus cannot be directly observed by high school staff and teachers to ensure they are safe. While college staff do not necessarily need the burden of keeping an eye on students to ensure they are safe, there are options that should be considered to ensure the safety of students. These include having a campus security available, if requested, to escort high school students on campus, creating a “buddy system” so students are not alone around the college campus, and clearly indicating on identification badges that a student is still a minor. While some students may not like being identified as underage minors, given the findings, it should be considered for the safety of all students.

Overall, policy makers need to be aware of both the tremendous potential dual enrollment programs hold in molding and advancing students’ lives as well as the potential dangers that lie

in the blending of the high school and college environments and demands. Ensuring adequate support throughout dual enrollment needs to be a major policy focus.

### **Conclusion**

Dual credit has been seen as a potential way to broaden the pathway to a college education for rural and urban students. Research conducted by this grant funded project has empirically shown that it can help increase the interest of students considering college by demystifying what college is and showing how they can leverage dual credit to get a head start on college credits and save money as they embark on college education. However, there are some pitfalls that need to be avoided to ensure that students and families have a positive experience. High schools and colleges need to work together to ensure students are not being overly stressed by the pressures to perform academically. Mental health was a major obstacle that students deal with based on their busy lives on and off campus. In addition, these minor students may not be prepared to navigate adult interactions with other students. Thus, high schools need to work with students and parents to ensure they know how to respond to advances by adult college students who may not realize these high school students are still underage students taking college courses. Overall, our participants indicated that dual credit was worth it and would do it again. However, to ensure it is a more positive experience, we must always remember that we are dealing with minors in an adult world. Doing our due diligence to keep them safe while supporting their academic pursuits will allow us to ensure dual credit programs provide their intended outcomes of providing a rigorous and life altering education so that students are reaching their full potential.

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