



Why Do Students Participate (or Not) in Dual Enrollment?

Findings from Staff Interviews and
Student Focus Groups from the
CCP Evaluation Partnership

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Background

Dual enrollment (DE), or college courses taken in high school, is becoming increasingly common as a strategy to expand access to college. Career and College Promise (CCP) is North Carolina's statewide DE program that offers eligible students three tuition-free pathways to earn college credit while in high school (see box, p.2). However, not all eligible students participate in DE. This brief reports on reasons why students participate, or not, in North Carolina's College Transfer and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Dual Enrollment Pathways. Our findings come from site visits to four high schools across four districts and through focus groups with community college staff who supported DE across 12 districts in North Carolina in 2020. In total, we did interviews or focus groups with 27 high school or community college staff and focus groups with 22 College Transfer Pathway students, 18 CTE Dual Enrollment Pathway students, and 23 eligible non-participating students. Understanding what motivates or inhibits students' participation in DE programs can inform practitioners, researchers, and policymakers in their efforts to increase the number of students benefitting from DE opportunities.

What does research say about who participates in dual enrollment and why?

Dual enrollment participation varies from state to state, but in general, students in grades 11 and 12 and those with higher levels of academic achievement are more likely to participate in DE. Both findings may be expected given that DE classes are typically aimed at upper-level students and have academic requirements (test scores or prerequisite classes) that students must meet.¹ The research also shows that students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English language learners are less

likely to participate in DE.² However, it is important to note that lack of program availability in some schools, particularly schools that serve lower-income communities or communities of color, may impact participation patterns. Research shows that students themselves give various reasons for participating in DE. For many students, saving money is a primary consideration because DE programs often pay for some or all the course tuition, which can reduce the cost of future postsecondary education for students and their families. However, paying for non-covered expenses, such as course or material fees and textbooks, can be a barrier to participation for some students.³ Researchers report that some students report participating to accelerate or “get ahead” on completing their postsecondary education and/or entering the workforce.⁴ Some students report participating in DE because they want to take more challenging courses than are available at their high school. An added benefit for some students is the ability to be more autonomous by taking courses on a college campus.⁵ Finally, some students report participating in DE to help prepare them for the rigors of postsecondary education.⁶ Our analysis of North Carolina data expands upon this existing research, particularly by adding the perspective of students who are eligible to participate in DE but do not do so.

What did we learn from site visits about why students participate (or not) in dual enrollment?

Students and staff we interviewed provided a variety of reasons why students participate (or not) in DE, including financial advantages, financial barriers, and the opportunity to challenge oneself, explore careers and interests, earn college credits to get ahead, improve college applications, and prepare to do well in college. Participants also discussed how

Key Terms

College Transfer Pathway: Designed for students planning to continue their education beyond high school at a community college or university. College Transfer students can earn credits that will transfer to any University of North Carolina (UNC) System school or participating private institution.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Dual Enrollment Pathway: Designed for students who want to earn a certificate, diploma, or state- or industry-recognized workforce credential in a technical field or career area.

Cooperative Innovative High School (CIHS) Pathway: Allows students to attend an early college or other innovative high school, where students can simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate degree, transferrable credit, or certificate.

families, peers, and advisors influenced participation.

Though views of DE were generally positive, students and staff noted barriers to student participation, including a lack of advising and awareness; logistical challenges, such as transportation and schedule conflicts; and the availability and delivery method of courses. Below we summarize key findings from our interviews.

FINANCIAL

The most frequently reported reason for participating in DE was that students believed that it would help them save money once they went to college. Even eligible non-participating students acknowledged the perceived financial benefits of DE. Although most students described DE as a good opportunity to save money, some went further to say that it played a critical role in making college a reality. On the flip side, financial reasons posed a barrier to some students’ DE participation. Although the state covers the cost of tuition, other costs, such as textbooks, fees,

and course materials, are not always covered by the schools or districts. For some students and families, covering these short-term costs was a challenge. For example, in one district that paid for textbooks but not supplies, a counselor explained that the financial requirements were always part of the advising conversation when CTE Dual Enrollment Pathways students expressed interest in programs with higher costs. This challenge was not isolated to CTE course fees, as one principal shared, “Some parents just aren't going to pay a couple of hundred dollars [for textbooks and fees], even though the tuition is paid for.”

College is very expensive...especially if you're wanting to go to a four-year college...; being able to get those free college credits...[is] so alleviating because me personally, I only have my dad and I have five siblings, so there's a lot of us. So, it's kind of, we're kind of tight with money. So, I've always worried about him stressing because he does want to help me out with college.

—CTE Dual Enrollment Pathway student

EARNING COLLEGE CREDIT TO GET AHEAD

Several students described choosing to participate in DE out of a desire to “get ahead.” The notion of getting ahead was conveyed in several ways, with some students expressing this in a general sense that was not tied to a specific plan or goal. For most students, getting ahead meant loading up on college credits in high school to decrease their time in college or reduce the number of courses they needed to take in college to graduate. In general, students who knew

what they wanted to do after high school were more purposeful in using their DE courses to get ahead, either trying to complete a desired pathway or earning as many general education credits as possible to avoid needing to do so in college. As one student put it, “I usually don't take a class that doesn't help my major.” Students who were more certain about their plans after high school also reported seeing DE as an opportunity for a career head start, as one student said,

I wanted to go into psychology. That was my major before I had narrowed it down. And I knew that you had to go to school a long time for that. I was thinking, if I go ahead and get a head start, I could probably start my career earlier, and I'll save a lot of money.

Although many students saw DE as an opportunity to make progress toward a college degree, some students who were eligible to participate did not do so out of a concern that DE credits would not transfer, particularly for those students who planned to attend non-UNC System schools or out-of-state schools. For example, one student explained,

If the credits were taken [accepted] at private and out-of-state universities, I would have considered it, but I'm going to a private school that won't take them at all. So, it would have been a waste of my time to take a harder course when it's not going to affect me any more than taking honors here [at my high school].

Some students who were concerned about credit transferability took Advanced Placement (AP) courses instead, believing that the AP college credits would be more transferable generally or at the out-of-state or private institutions that they planned to attend. However, some students noted that college credit for AP courses was based on performance on the AP exam, which these students saw as unfair given that credit was determined by a single high-

stakes test. Students in general appreciated how DE courses allowed them to earn credit based on performance in a college-level class where students had multiple assessment opportunities. Taken together, issues of course transferability were a concern among students. Although students, overall, appreciated that DE offered an opportunity to earn college credit based on course performance, students who believed that this credit would not transfer to the institutions that they planned to attend gravitated toward AP as a seemingly more viable option for accumulating credit.

RIGOR/QUALITY

Staff and students described how the rigor or perceived quality of DE courses played a role in students' decisions about participation.

Some students reported participating in DE because they wanted to take more rigorous courses in general, and DE offered the opportunity to take college-level courses beyond, or in addition to, what was available at their high school. Some students explained how these courses offered greater autonomy and flexibility than high school courses, which was appealing to them. However, several eligible non-participating students reported not participating in DE specifically because they did not want to take a more challenging course; they were concerned that the course would involve more work than a regular high school class or that they might not do well in the class.

Some students took advantage of all available college-level courses that their schedules would permit, whether AP or DE, but others expressed a preference for either AP or DE based on perceived differences in the rigor and quality of the two options. Most students believed that AP courses were more rigorous than DE. Students who wanted to challenge themselves preferred AP, whereas students who wanted something more advanced than regular high school classes, but were concerned that AP

courses were too hard, preferred DE. One eligible non-participant summed it up, saying,

I think if you aren't an AP-level student, but you want to challenge yourself and you want those credits, the community college has a stigma of being an easier version kind of AP. So, if you don't want the high stress, lots of work of AP, then that's the next route that you would take.

I did [DE] because I was always interested in HVAC and I wanted to experience it before I got out of high school and dove into it. So, I wanted to dip my feet in the water and test it and I ended up liking it. So, this gave me an opportunity to try it out.

—CTE Dual Enrollment Pathway student

COLLEGE AND CAREER EXPLORATION AND READINESS

Students also described taking DE courses to explore and prepare for college and careers. Although staff described students' participation in terms of preparing them for the rigors of college or understanding college expectations, students described DE as an opportunity to explore and be exposed to potential pathways in college or careers of interest. For example, one student shared, "I just like science, so I took [DE] psychology and sociology, and I just took them to see if I'd be interested in them as well." Students who were less sure of what they wanted to do after high school tended to report taking courses that seemed interesting more so than to make progress in a pathway. Even students who were more certain about their future plans appreciated the opportunity that DE gave them to confirm their interests before they got "too deep," as one student described it. Although several students across pathways described participating in DE to

learn more about college and careers, we found that the students in the CTE Dual Enrollment Pathway were more likely to report participating in DE for career exploration or to explore an interest in a specific academic topic, whereas students in the College Transfer Pathway were somewhat more likely to report participating to earn college credits to get ahead.

IMPROVING COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

Whereas some students were interested in DE to help them prepare for college, other students saw taking DE classes as a way to help them get into college. Students interested in DE for getting into college described participating in DE to enhance their college applications, particularly by boosting their GPAs since DE courses are weighted. A few staff members expressed concern that students took DE courses to “play the GPA game” to get into college more so than seeing it as an opportunity to prepare for college. As evidence of this, some staff noted an uptick in students participating in DE versus AP when policy changes made AP classes equal to DE classes in GPA quality points.⁷

SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND AWARENESS

Students’ awareness of and decisions to participate in DE were often influenced by family members, peers, and advisors and other school staff. A barrier to participation was lack of program awareness. For eligible students who did not participate, many indicated that they were not aware of DE or believed that they learned about DE too late to meaningfully participate.

Staff and students reported that parents often pushed participation, particularly for the cost savings. In some cases, parents took an active role in pushing their students toward specific pathways, as one advisor said, “Mom and Dad have said, ‘Listen, this is what you're going to do. You're going to get your

associate's degree, or you're going to get this welding certificate,’ or whatever. So, those kids come in with an exact plan.” Also, older siblings who took part in DE raised awareness and encouraged participation.

I kind of learned of [DE] before high school even. My brother is one of the... I think, the only people in the county to graduate with two associate's degrees. So, whenever I was in middle school, he started planting in my head about being able to take these classes, getting the early step into college, and getting your associate's before you really figure out what you want to major in or that leads you up to your major. So that's where I started.

—College Transfer Pathway student

Although most comments on parents’ influence was positive, we also learned that some parents were less familiar with DE and so were less supportive of participation. One eligible non-participating student shared, “My brother went here, and all he took were APs, and so that's what my parents knew about...; the DE was a little bit newer, so they pushed me to do APs.” Also, some parents favored AP courses over DE based on perceptions that AP was of higher quality, as one staff member reported,

I see students are more eager to move forward [with enrolling in DE] but sometimes parents have these ideas, “Oh you're not going to a community college, you are going to a four-year school, and you're going to take AP classes, and then you're going to go to the four-year school.” So, I see some of it coming from parents.

Our interviews also revealed that peers can influence DE participation in positive ways. Several students

reported that it was their friends who made them aware of DE or provided informal feedback about courses or pathways. In fact, several advisors reported that their conversations with students about DE were the result of peer referrals. In addition, some students participated in DE because they wanted to spend more time with their friends by taking the same courses.

Outside of families and peers, our interviews revealed that school staff play an important role in raising awareness and encouraging participation in DE. Much of DE's promotion came from announcements, grade-level or school-wide meetings, or through one-on-one advising, particularly during course registration periods. However, staff buy-in for DE influenced how purposeful schools were in promoting DE. In schools where buy-in was high, staff reported more targeted efforts to promote DE. Where buy-in was low, awareness-building activities tended to be more passive and less frequent. One principal noted that lower-effort awareness-building was less effective, saying, "I just have to think lack of information is the biggest obstacle. If all [students] know about [DE] is what I say on the announcements, then they don't know much."

Not surprisingly, the main reason eligible non-participating students did not participate in DE was lack of awareness, as one non-participating student shared, "I didn't know [about DE], no one sat down with me." Others were aware of DE but felt that they did not know enough to participate. We also learned from eligible non-participating students that timing of awareness activities was important. Some students who knew about DE chose not to participate because, by the time they learned about it, they felt it was too late for them to meaningfully participate. Some students suggested that staff do more to raise awareness earlier so students have time to think about DE, as one eligible non-participating student

explained,

I feel like maybe if I was more aware, [I would have participated in DE]. Even coming into my freshman year, so that it was already in my mind, and I could start thinking about it. Whereas if it comes up when I start registering for classes, then it's kind of drastic.

COURSE DELIVERY METHOD

Some staff and students reported that participation was impacted by how DE courses were offered — whether on the high school campus, the college campus, or online. Some students wanted more courses taught online or on the high school campus if possible, for convenience. However, some students participated in DE specifically because they wanted to be on a college campus. Students' academic and behavioral readiness for college courses appeared to influence their preferences. For example, staff and students reported that some students were more comfortable remaining at the high school. One staff member explained, "There may be students who are intimidated by the fact that [DE] is on a college campus. So even though they have the ability, they may not have the confidence to go over there." In terms of course format, some students preferred online courses because they were convenient or self-paced. In contrast, other students preferred face-to-face courses because they believed these courses offered more opportunities for instructor interaction and support. Students who expressed this latter view sometimes reported having had limited success in online courses in the past, or that they anticipated struggling in an online course and believed that a face-to-face course would provide more substantial support and timely feedback from the instructor.

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our interviews with staff and students identified logistical issues that created barriers to participation, particularly transportation and scheduling for DE classes offered at the college campus. In terms of

transportation, staff and several students discussed the challenge that some students faced with taking DE courses off-campus if the school or student could not arrange transportation. For example, a principal said, “We've only got about 70 kids that drive to school out of 1,000-something kids, so transportation, if it's going to the college, is an absolute obstacle.” Similarly, an eligible non-participating student shared,

I couldn't travel. I'm very young for my grade, and so I wouldn't have been able to drive and take community college classes until the second semester of my junior year. So for me, it's just easier to take classes here [at my high school], where I didn't have to worry about getting other transportation.

Staff and students also described scheduling challenges, with high school and college class times on different schedules, making it difficult for students to attend classes at both locations in the same day. Also, some students reported that travel times between campuses made it difficult to participate in extracurricular activities. Our interviews suggested some schools were committed to solving these scheduling challenges, particularly where staff buy-in for DE was high. For example, one high school in our study collaborated with their community college to align schedules so that students took their DE courses in the morning and high school courses in the afternoon; the aligned schedules accommodated student travel between campuses and allowed them to participate in extracurricular activities.

What are the implications of these findings?

Results from this study suggest several areas that schools, districts, and colleges should consider to increase DE participation (see Figure 1). First, lack of

awareness is a primary reason that eligible students do not participate. Schools, districts, and colleges need to create high-quality advising and comprehensive recruitment efforts that raise awareness and provide guidance to students and families. Broad-based dissemination strategies can raise awareness, but our results suggest that individualized advising is necessary to address the unique motivations, concerns, or misconceptions that students and families may have about DE (e.g., quality, impact on GPA or college admissions, transferability of credit) so that they can make informed decisions.

For me, I mainly took AP classes just because I didn't really know about the dual enrollment classes as much because, in order to find out information on them, like, you have to know what they are so you can ask the right questions. And so for me, I just always had a better understanding of what AP classes were, and they were, I feel, maybe easily more available to me, so I just ended up taking it.

—Eligible non-participating student

The timing of advising is also important as several eligible non-participating students said that they would have participated had they known more about DE earlier in their academic career. Second, although the long-term financial savings associated with DE were universally acknowledged, participation can create short-term costs (e.g., textbooks, course or materials fees, transportation). Where possible, districts, schools, and colleges must identify ways to address these costs. Third, greater levels of collaboration between high schools and colleges is necessary to overcome scheduling challenges. Our

interviews suggest that when high school, district, and college staff collaborate to align schedules, more opportunities for DE participation are created for students. Finally, although the course delivery method is based on local policies and resources, our findings suggest that, however DE courses are offered, appropriate student supports need to be in place. For example, schools that provide courses on college campuses may increase participation by identifying and supporting students who are academically prepared but are intimidated by being on a college campus. Similarly, schools that provide courses online may increase participation by ensuring that students have sufficient academic support, particularly those with concerns about the quality of instructor interaction in an online environment.

Figure 1. Recommendations Based on Study Findings

- 1 Schools, districts, and colleges need to create high-quality advising and comprehensive recruitment efforts that raise awareness and provide guidance to students and families.
- 2 Where possible, districts, schools, and colleges should identify ways to address short-term costs that can come with DE participation (e.g., textbooks, course or materials fees, transportation).
- 3 Greater levels of collaboration between high schools and colleges is necessary to overcome scheduling challenges (e.g., to better accommodate student travel between campuses and extracurricular activities).
- 4 Based on the format in which DE courses are offered--college campuses vs. online--appropriate student supports need to be in place (e.g., transportation).



For more information about the study, please contact Julie Edmunds, the Principal Investigator, and Director of the Early College Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro: 336-315-7415 or jedmunds@serve.org.

Footnotes

¹ An, B. P., & Taylor, J. L. (2019). A review of empirical studies on dual enrollment: Assessing educational outcomes. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 34*, 99-151.

² Taylor, J. L., Allen, T. O., An, B. P., Denecker, C., Edmunds, J. A., Fink, J., Giani, M. S., Hodara, M., Hu, X., Tobolowsky, B. F., & Chen, W. (2022). *Research priorities for advancing equitable dual enrollment policy and practice*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah.

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⁷ Starting with the ninth grade class of 2015-16, AP and DE courses received one quality point. Previously AP received two quality points. North Carolina State Board of Education Policy CGC-L-004.

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