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Dual Enrollment in Community Colleges:

The Importance of Understanding the Student Experience

By Courtney Adkins and Linda L. García



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In Short

- A recent five-item survey of community college students who were previously dually enrolled found that students had been more likely to receive guidance about their dual enrollment coursework from someone who worked at their high school or friends and family than from someone who worked at the college in which they were dually enrolled.
- The findings also illustrated that the majority of dually enrolled students did not matriculate to the college where they took dual enrollment courses.
- When the findings were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, they highlighted the existence of an equity gap in access to dual enrollment coursework: White and Asian students reported taking more dual enrollment courses than did Black and Latinx respondents.

- This data collection led CCCSE to develop and pilot a comprehensive dual enrollment survey of student engagement to help college leaders better understand the experiences of this population while they are active participants in dual enrollment programs—so that the benefits of the programs can be maximized for all students.
- By understanding more about students’ experiences with dual enrollment, colleges can improve student outcomes and foster relationships that lead to sustained enrollment.

In a July 2022 white paper focused on advancing equitable dual enrollment policy and practice, Taylor et al. suggested that a key priority in the work should be to deepen the research on the experiences of dual enrollment students “in ways that can inform policy and best practices” (p. 25). The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) could not agree more. Research on dual enrollment exists—such as that focused on state policy and participation rates, as well as that focused on postsecondary outcomes of dual enrollment students—but what is missing from the equation is information about what students actually experience while they are dually enrolled. We are answering this call in three ways:

- Five special-focus items were added to the spring 2022 administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to collect information from former dually enrolled students.
- In response to what we learned from the 2022 survey administration and what is still unknown, we have developed and conducted a pilot administration of a new survey instrument, the Dual Enrollment Survey of Student Engagement (DESSE), targeted at dually enrolled high-school students. A second pilot will occur in spring 2024. Pilot participants can utilize the data from the first administration to assess areas in need of improvement and implement initial changes to their dual enrollment programs. With the second pilot administration, participating colleges can begin to measure the efficacy of those changes.

- CCCSE regularly conducts focus groups with community college students, faculty, and staff across the country in order to more fully understand the survey data we collect. As such, we mined focus group transcripts from the past few years to hear what students had to say about their experiences with dual enrollment.

All three of these explorations are feeding into an effort to develop and launch the final DESSE instrument at the national level to provide college leaders with information that will help them identify the supports that are needed to successfully assist dually enrolled students—especially those from marginalized populations—and put them on a path of persisting with their postsecondary educational endeavors after earning a high-school diploma. This article shares what we currently know about dually enrolled students, provides recommendations for bolstering dual enrollment student outcomes, and makes the case for a more in-depth investigation of these students’ experiences.

More than a million high-school students in the nation participate in dual enrollment each year, and the vast majority of students who participate do so through a high-school–community college partnership (Fink, 2021). These partnerships are developed in multiple ways. Most often students take the college courses at their high schools, but sometimes they travel to a nearby college campus to take classes. Dual enrollment course delivery and modality are also variable: Sometimes classes are taught by high-school instructors, sometimes by college instructors; additionally, courses can be taught online or face to face. We do know that there are many benefits to students who participate in these

programs. Dual enrollment provides students with a jump-start on gaining college credit and can save them money, and it can also offer social development and vital information regarding transfer and/or career preparation. According to the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (n.d.), students who participate in dual enrollment are more likely to graduate high school, go to college, and complete a degree than students who do not participate in dual enrollment.

Even though dual enrollment can help students fulfill high-school graduation requirements and simultaneously make progress toward a postsecondary degree, some student populations are more likely than others to participate in dual enrollment:

Research consistently shows that Students of Color, low-income students, male students, lower achieving students, English language learners, students with disabilities, foster youth, and students experiencing homelessness participate in dual enrollment at lower rates than their counterparts. Similarly, dual enrollment is less accessible at schools that serve larger proportions of lower-income communities or communities of color. (Taylor et al., 2022, p. 5)

Additionally, would-be first-generation college students are less likely to be participants (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

According to Liu et al. (2020),

This DE [dual enrollment] participation gap is especially concerning because DE can potentially be a useful tool in narrowing equity gaps along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines. ... DE courses, especially those that expose students to college norms and the college environment, may be particularly beneficial to underserved students in preparing and motivating them to become college-bound (p. 8).

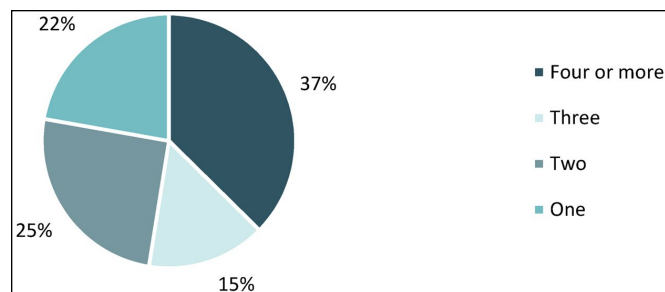
THE INITIAL QUANTITATIVE EXPLORATION

CCCSE first began its quantitative exploration into dual enrollment by adding five special-focus items to the spring 2022 administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. The resulting data set includes responses from over 26,000 formerly dually enrolled students from 180 colleges across 41 states. Two of the items focused on trends in dual enrollment course-taking, with questions about number of courses taken and whether courses were taken through the students' current college or a different one. The other items asked students what their motivations were for taking dual enrollment courses, who provided them with information about the courses they should take, and whether the dual enrollment courses they took helped them feel better prepared for college.

TRENDS IN DUAL ENROLLMENT

How Many Courses Students Take

How many courses for college credit did you take while you were in high school?



Source: CCSSE 2022

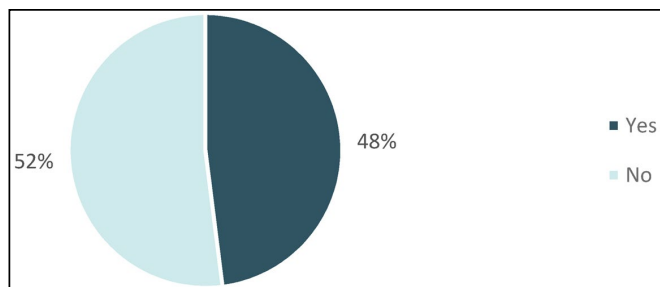
N = 26,631

The majority of the students who reported taking dual enrollment courses for credit while in high school took four or more such courses.

The CCSSE 2022 findings disaggregated by race/ethnicity highlight and echo the existence of an equity gap in access to dual enrollment coursework in that some student groups were more likely to take more classes than others. For instance, 40 percent of White and Asian respondents took four or more dual enrollment courses, while only 29 percent of Black respondents and 31 percent of Latinx respondents did so.

Where Students Matriculate

Did you take any courses for college credit through this college while you were in high school?



Source: CCSSE 2022
N = 26,480

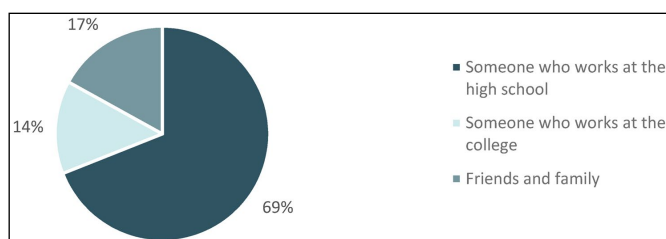
Less than half of CCSSE 2022 respondents indicated that they took dual enrollment courses at the same college as they were currently enrolled. When this finding is broken out by age, 71 percent of students aged 25+ reported taking dual enrollment courses at a college other than the one in which they were currently enrolled. However, 60 percent of 18–19-year-olds said that they took dual enrollment courses at the same college in which they were currently enrolled.

One student in a CCCSE focus group said of their choice of what college to attend, “I chose this college in particular because I’d already done dual credit classes with this college so it’s just easier and it’s closer to home.”

STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH DUAL ENROLLMENT

Primary Source of Guidance About Courses to Take

Who was your main source of information about which courses you should take for college credit while you were in high school?



Source: CCSSE 2022
N = 26,342

The overwhelming primary source of information for respondents about which dual enrollment courses to take was someone who works at the high school. A student’s obvious starting point for obtaining information about dual enrollment coursework would be someone who works at the high school they currently attend, but if someone who works at the high school remains students’ main source of information after they are dually enrolled, this may reflect a missed opportunity for colleges.

In CCCSE focus groups, students expressed wanting more guidance when it came to their dual enrollment experiences:

I wish I had not taken dual credit classes the first semester in the first year of high school because I was already nervous enough about high school as is, and to get all that forced upon you was not the best. I wished after that, that they had really helped us and showed us during the freshman year how to do college and then [I would have taken] the dual credit classes.

Advice I’d have for anyone enrolling in this community college would be to really do your homework. Make sure that your classes transfer. If you are dual enrolling, make sure you’re aware of where you want to go and what those programs would be because you don’t want to put the work in and find out you can’t transfer credits.

Some colleges are doing this work in earnest already. In a CCCSE focus group, an administrator from a college invested in the work of guided pathways shared the following about their partnerships with K–12:

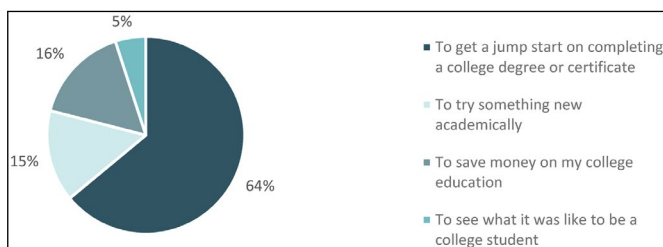
We assign every dual enrollment student an advisor and require that they have a guided pathway developed also. They go through the same process as a student who is a fully admitted college student.

Another administrator shared the following about their college’s work with their K–12 partners:

Our annual counselors’ conclave is where we invite not just high-school counselors but middle-school counselors as well. We talk about things like guided pathways and have discussions about, what are you doing for career explorations for your students so that they start thinking about those kinds of things and can try to make some decisions early on, before they get here. We share our website that has all of our guided pathway templates out there to give students an idea, this is what it would look like if you chose this career versus that career.

Main Motivator for Taking Dual Enrollment Courses

What was your main motivation for taking courses for college credit while you were in high school?



Source: CCSSE 2022
N = 26,437

“To get a jump start on completing a college degree or certificate” is the primary motivator for all students and for all subgroups when this finding is disaggregated by race/ethnicity. American Indian and Alaska Native students were most likely to report this, with 68 percent confirming getting a jump start on college completion was a main motivator. Sixty-six percent of White students and 65 percent of Black students reported this as a main motivator as well.

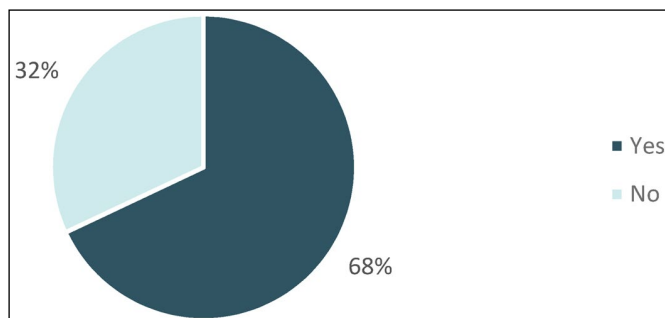
A CCCSE focus group participant reiterated this motivation for taking dual enrollment coursework:

I decided to attend this community college because I wanted to get credits in before I actually graduated high school and just get my experience early on in my high-school career to be ready when I actually get into a

four-year college or continue my credits here.

Participation in Dual Enrollment as Preparation for College

Did you feel better prepared to take classes at this college because you had taken courses for college credit while you were in high school?



Source: CCSSE 2022
N = 26,470

Almost 70 percent of respondents who took dual enrollment courses while in high school reported feeling better prepared to take classes once they got to college. Traditional-age students were more likely to report this than were nontraditional-age students, with three-quarters of respondents aged 18 and 19 confirming they felt better prepared to take college classes because they had taken dual enrollment courses. Perhaps still being so close to the experience of taking dual enrollment courses bolstered the feeling of preparedness for this group.

A recent qualitative CCCSE study focused on what helps students persist beyond the first semester found that when many students initially arrive on a college campus, they feel confused, lost, and terrified. Additionally, many participants in the study spoke about being unprepared for the rigor of college-level work (CCCSE, 2022b).

Students in CCCSE focus groups have described the dual enrollment experience as one that helped them feel more prepared for college in terms of familiarity, motivation, and academic readiness:

I felt like having the college experience early on when I was 17 helped push me in the

direction of wanting to continue to go to college afterwards. Absolutely, I would recommend [the dual enrollment program] for other high-school students.

I have like my business credit out the way because of high school. It actually helped a lot as ... the stuff that we're doing now, I remember from high school because I already did it, so now I'm like, more advanced and I can help others ... because I really had experience with it in high school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Set Students Up for Future Success Through Academic Advising

Taking dual enrollment courses is the earliest interaction many students will have with a community college, so it is likely this is also their introduction to academic planning, career and transfer exploration, and available support services at the college. For most students, much of this information is likely to come from an academic advisor.

Previous CCCSE data have illustrated that advising is the cornerstone of student support: Students who reported that an advisor helped them develop an academic plan were more engaged across all of CCCSE's benchmark areas than those who did not receive this guidance (CCCSE, 2018, p. 9). However, many students receive guidance from sources other than advisors. Among colleges that participated in the 2021 Survey of Entering Student Engagement, 39 percent of respondents reported that friends, family, or other students were their main source of advising (CCCSE, 2021). If colleges could begin to show students while they are still in high school that meeting with an advisor who can assist them in developing an academic plan of study will help them build a strong foundation for the future, then students may be less likely to depend on the advice of people who might not have the knowledge to steer them in the best direction.

Expanding or scaling up a comprehensive advising model for dual enrollment students may be cost prohibitive for some colleges. However, colleges can evaluate their advising processes and

consider which aspects of their existing models might be used, in a modified form if necessary, for dually enrolled students. Colleges also can consider group advising, which provides opportunities to scale services and encourage relationships among students. As high-school counselors are likely the first people to provide information and support to potential dual enrollment students, colleges can work with and share information with them to ensure that the guidance students receive is clear and consistent.

Maximize the Dual Enrollment Experience with Career and Transfer Exploration

Eighty-two percent of 2022 Community College Survey of Student Engagement respondents reported that obtaining an associate degree is a reason/goal for which they are attending college (CCCSE, 2022a). The majority of CCSSE respondents (63 percent) also reported a reason/goal for attending college is to transfer to a 4-year college or university. Likewise, "To get a jump start on a college degree or certificate" is by far the main motivator for students to take courses for college credit while they are in high school. Most community college students want to earn a degree, and most dually enrolled students want to get a jump start on earning that degree, so the dual enrollment courses students take should help them achieve those goals. While not all dually enrolled students will know what they want their college major to be, early career and transfer exploration may help ensure they take classes that will be useful to them after they graduate high school and begin college.

Increase Retention by Bolstering Students' Sense of Preparedness

Through our quantitative data collection and focus group interviews, we know that being dually enrolled helps students feel better prepared for college. Participation in dual enrollment programs can expose high-school students to the rigor of college-level work, provide an introduction to the pathways of study available to them, make them feel more comfortable in general about attending college, and help them form relationships with college faculty and staff.

While students can transfer dual enrollment credits to colleges other than the one in which they take dual enrollment courses, it stands to reason that if they develop academic plans of study and form connections with others through their dual enrollment course-taking at a particular college, they will be more likely to attend that college after they graduate. At a time when community college enrollments are down, retaining experienced students who are better prepared to achieve successful outcomes will be beneficial to colleges.

NEXT STEPS

As illustrated in *The Dual Enrollment Playbook*, community colleges around the country are employing recommendations such as the ones above and revamping their dual enrollment programs to provide equitable access and opportunities for success for all students (Mehl et al., 2020). Yet to fully understand how to ensure better access and produce better outcomes for all students in dual enrollment programs, community colleges need to understand the dual enrollment experience from the perspective of students who are dually enrolled.

CCCSE developed DESSE, still in its pilot phase, to help college leaders do this.

When DESSE is launched at the national level, colleges will be able to augment the demographic and outcomes data they collect about their dual enrollment students with information provided

by the students themselves. For instance, to learn more about why dual enrollment course-taking differs among student groups, the DESSE pilot includes items that ask students about how they learned about the opportunity to take dual enrollment courses and who encouraged them to take dual enrollment courses. The instrument also explores the potential barriers to taking dual enrollment courses in order to provide insight into why some students are more likely to participate than others. The survey also asks students about how they take dual enrollment courses—whether they are taught by a high-school or college instructor and whether the classes are online, in person at the high school, or in person at the college—so that we can better understand how course location, instruction, and modality may affect success. Additionally, DESSE examines dually enrolled students' awareness, use, and satisfaction of support services, such as orientation, advising, tutoring, skill labs, and basic needs assistance, among others. Based on previous research, we know that increased student engagement is a proxy for improved student outcomes (McClenney et al., 2007). As such, DESSE includes several items focused on students' engagement with course material, students' engagement with their peers and instructors, and the level of rigor of the courses they are taking. CCCSE plans to launch a national administration of DESSE after the second pilot and will invite community colleges across the country to participate. ☐

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