9-6-2023

Ex (in) Clusion: an Exploratory Case Study of Student Participation in Dual Credit Coursework

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EX(IN)CLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN

DUAL CREDIT COURSEWORK

RODRIGO LOPEZ

132 Pages

Dual credit programs rely heavily on state-level legislation and other regulations from educational agencies. As dual credit has evolved from the Project Advance program developed by Syracuse University and its partner school districts, policymakers have used their position to craft policies to direct dual credit practitioners to craft programs that are more accessible and equitable for minoritized students. However, the participation of minoritized students has historically been lagging that of white and more affluent students. Research on how dual credit practitioners' interpretation influences their recruitment and enrollment decisions is limited. This case study uses data from seven dual credit practitioners, field observations, and select documents to understand how their dual credit partnership (Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School) has worked to make meaning of state-level legislation and regulations to develop recruitment and enrollment processes. The findings of this study offer insight into how a dual credit partnership has worked to foster a shared vision while addressing issues associated with a limited understanding of legislation, inefficient enrollment procedures, misconceptions, and the goal of developing student-centered practices. Additionally, the study provides insight into how dual credit partnerships can benefit from a comprehensive approach to establishing professional development for key staff at both institutions, including adopting national standards.

KEYWORDS: dual credit; concurrent enrollment; legislation; practices; student eligibility

EX(IN)CLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN

DUAL CREDIT COURSEWORK

RODRIGO LOPEZ

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Educational Administration and Foundations

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

EX(IN)CLUSION: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN

DUAL CREDIT COURSEWORK

RODRIGO LOPEZ

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Papá, has sido mi ángel guardián, mi roca en los momentos más difíciles. Nunca dudaste en mí, y hasta el día de hoy, sé que puedo contar contigo sin condiciones. Te agradezco de todo corazón por tu apoyo y por ser mi fuente constante de motivación. No olvidamos la importancia de nuestra comunidad y la responsabilidad que compartimos de seguir luchando por su bienestar. Juntos, podemos marcar la diferencia.

Thank you to all of my family and friends, especially my brothers Edwin and Rubén. Your constant words of support and encouragement were very much appreciated.

Dr. Gregory Robinson, I extend my sincerest gratitude to you for your invaluable mentorship and unwavering belief in my potential. I am eternally appreciative of the profound influence your guidance and inspiration have had on my journey.

Thank you to the EAF faculty. I am forever grateful for your teaching and leadership. To my committee (Dr. Renn, Dr. Kyei-Blankson, Dr. Schoon, and Dr. Perkins), my sincerest appreciation for your guidance and support. I look forward to continuing this critical work and paying it forward. To my Cohort 5 classmates (Tom, Caress, Whitney, Tiffani, Ken, Brenda, and Sam), I will forever cherish our long weekends in Bloomington-Normal!

To the study participants. Thank you for allowing me to learn about your work and service. You are all an inspiration. May dual credit continue to thrive and be a source of hope for students that are bound by the limitations of educational systems.

R. L.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The attainment of a postsecondary credential is fundamental for social and economic mobility, as evidenced by the correlation between earnings potential and educational attainment (The Lumina Foundation, 2019). In 2021, the median annual earnings for individuals with an associate degree was $45,000, while those who completed high school and had no college experience earned an average of $39,710 (NCES, 2022a). Furthermore, individuals with a bachelor's degree earn an average of $61,610 a year, illustrating the financial advantages of obtaining a higher education (NCES, 2022a). Additionally, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023b) showed that employment rates increase with educational attainment, as individuals with bachelor's degrees are 87 percent more likely to be employed versus 73 of individuals who only completed high school. However, recent reports indicate that precisely 50 percent of people between the ages of 25 to 64 hold a postsecondary credential (NCES, 2022b). Moreover, within 25 to 29-year-olds, African Americans (36%) and Latinx (34%) communities have significantly lower rates of college attainment in comparison to white (56%) and Asian (78%) populations (NCES, 2023a).

Early College Credit Programs

Recognizing the need for further education beyond high school, secondary and postsecondary institutions have worked to strengthen their partnerships over the past two decades by developing college and career pathways that provide students a seamless transition from high school to college, or a career. These pathways have included college-level coursework, allowing students to experience a more rigorous curriculum with the opportunity to earn college credit (Hoffman et al., 2007; PWR Act, n.d.). The increased emphasis on preparing high school students for postsecondary education is evident in the prevalence of options available to students

to earn college credit before high school graduation. Early college credit options allow students to complete college-level coursework; the Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are two options that have historically been most well-known to students. Students who participate in either of these programs obtain credit in escrow for earning benchmark scores on end-of-course examinations. A third option that has quickly gained popularity is dual credit. This option requires that high schools and postsecondary institutions partner to design and manage a dual credit program for high school students to add college courses to their schedule, and if successful, they earn simultaneous high school and college credit. (Barnett et al., 2004; Blankenberger et al., 2017; Fink et al., 2017; Hoffman et al., 2007; Pompelia, 2020).

Dual Credit Programs

Dual credit, also commonly referred to as concurrent enrollment, has become increasingly popular, as evidenced by the increase in partnerships and state-level legislation (Andrews, 2001; Burns et al., 2019; Haskell, 2016; Hugo, 2001; Hoffman, 2003; Kim & Bragg, 2008). The rise in dual credit participation has been primarily credited to the work of policymakers, and as the benefits to students have been readily understood, they have accelerated their use of legislation to lead institutions to increase participation.

In the 2017-18 academic year, 78 percent of public schools offered at least one dual credit course (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). Approximately 34 percent of high school students are estimated to participate in dual credit courses annually (Rhine, 2021). The latest federal report indicates that the number of dual credit participants nearly doubled between the 2002-03 and 2010-11 school years, as the unduplicated headcount increased from 813,000 to 1.4 million (Mehl et al., 2020).

Dual credit offers high school students the unique experience of enrolling in the same college courses as college-age students versus participating in an advanced high school course that relies on a standardized curriculum that does not fully guarantee postsecondary credit upon successful completion. Additionally, research has shown a positive correlation between students' enrollment in dual credit and academic outcomes. Dual credit students have been shown to have higher rates of high school graduation, postsecondary enrollment, and credentials earned (An, 2013; Edmunds et al., 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Taylor, 2015). Furthermore, students who participate in dual credit achieve a higher grade-point average and accumulate more college credits than their peers who do not participate (An, 2012; Digness, 2018; Edmonds & Squires, 2016; Taylor, 2015). However, despite the positive correlation, the expansion of dual credit programming has not led to higher enrollment for minoritized students.

Statement of the Problem

Historically, minoritized students have participated in these programs at lower rates than white students and others from high socio-economic backgrounds (An, 2013; Burns & Leu, 2019; Pompelia, 2020; Stand for Children, 2020). Analyses of data from the National High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 by Shivji and Wilson (2019) illustrate these enrollment discrepancies by race and ethnicity: White (38%) and Asian (38%) students had higher participation rates in dual credit programs compared to Latinx (30%) and African American (27%) students. Furthermore, data from the Office for Civil Rights Data Collection revealed that of all the students who participated in dual credit in the 2015-16 school year, white students (10.3%) had the highest rate of enrollment versus Latinx (5.7%) and African American (4.7%) students. Unfortunately, national reporting on dual credit participation has been lacking, severely limiting the field's understanding of the critical issues contributing to the underrepresentation of

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minoritized students. Although some states have improved data reporting practices, there is limited knowledge and insight on how communities with the largest populations of students of color and low-income students are working to increase overall participation.

In Illinois, the largest providers of dual credit coursework are community colleges. These institutions reported that 75,507 high school students participated in one or more dual credit courses during the 2021-22 school year. Nearly one in five high school students is participating in dual credit programs across the state (Illinois Community College Board, 2023). Despite the consistent growth of dual credit, Latinx (18.8%) and African American (9.1%) students had far lower rates of participation in comparison to white students (58.8%). Moreover, when comparing dual credit enrollment with overall school enrollment in the state, the full extent of the inequity is evident. Statewide secondary school enrollment of Latinx students accounts for approximately 26 percent of the total student population in the state, while African Americans make up 16 percent (Stand for Children, 2020). The gap in dual credit participation is significant at the national and state levels, as in the example of Illinois. Research on student participation has illustrated many policy-related issues (College in High School Alliance, 2019; Fink et al., 2017).

In *Unlocking potential*, the College in High School Alliance (2019) and the Level Up coalition presented policy recommendations to advance equity and quality in dual credit. The report advocates for equal access to dual credit through multiple pathways and removing artificial barriers. However, understanding what is meant by artificial barriers is complicated for both new and experienced practitioners. This report and other policy briefs criticize the legislative language that guides partnerships to implement their program's student eligibility procedures. CHSA and Level Up note that student eligibility policies "can indirectly undermine efforts to get more high school students, particularly from underserved populations and middle-

to-lower achieving students" (College in High School Alliance, 2019, p. 34). As a baseline proposal, they recommend that states adopt policies that restrict partnerships from using eligibility measures higher than required of students matriculating into the same courses post-high school graduation. Although this would ensure that high school students have the same opportunity to enroll in college courses, this is insufficient guidance as our understanding of how student eligibility processes affect enrollment is limited and primarily descriptive.

Student eligibility practices are inconsistent. As researchers have documented states' legislative mandates or guidance, states have adopted policies across a broad continuum. Some states have prescribed rigorous requirements, versus others that have implemented less stringent criteria so that more students gain access to dual credit coursework. In general, the legislation specifies to practitioners the standards they must implement when deciding which students are eligible to participate; however, there are cases in which practitioners must decide on these measures via their interpretation of the legislation. For example, based on their understanding of policy, practitioners may require that students meet an age or grade-level threshold, a minimum grade-point average, or submit a letter of recommendation from their school counselor or principal (Kelley & Woods, 2019; Mehl et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2007; Zinth & Barnett, 2018).

Moreover, analysis of state-defined student eligibility policies shows dual credit programs regularly incorporate requirements beyond the course prerequisites set by the partnering postsecondary institutions (Zinth & Barnett, 2018). Over half of all dual credit partnerships have implemented student eligibility requirements above the postsecondary institution's course prerequisites (Thomas et al., 2013; Williams & Perry, 2020). Rivera et al. (2019) note that while some states have leaned on dual credit to increase educational outcomes

for historically underrepresented students, others have leaned towards limiting participation to high-achieving students. Zinth and Barnett (2018), in their research of student eligibility policies at the state level, found that "by and large, state-set eligibility requirements limit dual enrollment access to only the most academically advanced students, who are likely to pursue college after high school regardless" (par. 2). Their work has created a pathway to expand research on how these policies may be leading to programmatic procedures that are inhibiting student enrollment, especially when the policy lacks clarity or direction.

The State of Illinois is a prime example. The state does not clearly define the criteria practitioners must incorporate into their local partnership agreements. It is problematic because it sets a precarious precedent for practitioners to establish procedures that may inhibit access rather than advance it. The Dual Credit Quality Act (DCQA) requires partnerships to specify the academic criteria for student eligibility. Furthermore, it stipulates that "the academic criteria shall be evidence-based and shall include multiple appropriate measures to determine whether a student is prepared for any dual credit coursework in which the student enrolls" (Dual Credit Quality Act, n.d.). In turn, the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), as part of their administrative rules, requires that dual credit programs ensure "students accepted for enrollment in college-level courses must have appropriate academic qualifications, a high level of motivation, and adequate time to devote to studying a college-level course" (ICCB, 2023a, p. 44). Based on the language in the DCQA and the ICCB's administrative rules, dual credit practitioners have significant discretion when implementing their program's procedures to manage student eligibility. Unlike other states, they must decide how to assess students' "motivation" and "time" available for their studies while confirming that they meet the established academic requirements set by the postsecondary institution.

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It is unknown how dual credit partnerships manage student eligibility in Illinois. The lack of information is problematic, especially if partnerships have adopted procedures that negatively affect the enrollment of minoritized students (Mehl et al., 2020; Williams, 2019; Williams & Perry, 2020). Based on the research, it is highly probable that a wide range of practices are currently in place. However, despite a partnership's viewpoint on student eligibility, we must enhance our understanding of how dual credit practitioners are working to manage student eligibility based on their interpretation of the DCQA and ICCB regulations to gain clarity on what aspects may be limiting the participation of minoritized students (Kelley & Woods, 2019; Mehl et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2007; Zinth & Barnett, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to understand how dual credit practitioners interpret the State's dual credit legislation and other regulations set by state agencies. Additionally, this research seeks to understand how their interpretation has led practitioners to design procedures and processes for managing recruitment and enrollment. Dual credit policies have historically favored white and higher-income students (Taylor & Lichtenberger, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015; Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). Despite the increased attention to prioritizing the enrollment of minoritized students, state and national data illustrate significant enrollment gaps (Mehl et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021).

The information obtained from this research contributes to the literature by enhancing our collective understanding of the variance in policy interpretation, dissemination of information across practitioners, student eligibility practices, and the potential limitations that the actions of practitioners can have on access for students seeking to participate in dual credit programs. The

findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research provide another resource to the dual credit community.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do practitioners interpret the dual credit policies and regulations of the State of Illinois?

2. What practices have practitioners implemented to manage student eligibility for dual credit programs?

3. How do practitioners' interpretations of policies and regulations affect the enrollment of minoritized students in dual credit courses?

Theoretical Framework

A conceptual framework, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is "the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study" (p. 84). The framework incorporates concepts or theories that inform the study, derived from the orientation or stance that a researcher brings to their research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The framework that guided this study includes fundamental concepts of human capital theory, critical race theory, street-level bureaucracy theory, and Schein's model of organizational culture.

Human capital theory was founded on the principle that investment in people results in economic benefits to individuals (Sweetland, 1996). Across societies, education has historically been prioritized over any other type of investment. "Education can, by elevating the learners' intellect, improve their quality of life, but it may also improve the individuals' skills and efficiency in producing useful things" (Machlup, 1982, p. 4). In a study by Rivera et al. (2019), they noted that the variance of policies in dual credit programs illustrates practitioners'

association with the tenets of human capital theory. They claim that a program's policies offer insight into how practitioners prioritize historically marginalized students' enrollment.

Interest convergence, a principle of critical race theory, has been used to analyze and critique educational policies and practices (Milner IV, 2008). Zion and Blanchett (2011) explain that critical scholars must challenge themselves to identify the areas where convergence occurs by exposing how specific policies may be elevating the needs of minoritized individuals and furthering the benefits of the dominant group. The concept of interest convergence "stresses that racial equality and equity for people of color will be pursued and advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of whites" (Milner IV, 2008, p. 333). Secondary and postsecondary systems have strategically constructed dual credit programs on the belief that early access to higher education benefits society; however, enrollment data has historically shown that minoritized people are significantly underrepresented.

Michael Lipsky (2010), the founding scholar of street-level bureaucracy theory, explained that "street-level bureaucrats" hold critical and empowering positions due to the environment they are subjected to daily. These individuals are public service workers who have been given substantial discretion in the execution of their work. Lipsky (2010) stated that "the ways in which street-level bureaucrats deliver benefits and sanctions structure and delimit people's lives and opportunities" (p. 3). Furthermore, street-level bureaucrats often have large caseloads and deal with high uncertainty, leading them to "make" the policies they are responsible for implementing (Lipsky, 2010). In Illinois, the dual credit legislation and regulations do not adequately define the criteria for how practitioners must manage their program's student eligibility decisions. The limited guidance and structure force the practitioners

to determine how the policy should be implemented, which may lead to a conclusion that contradicts the policy's objective.

Schein (2017) states that an organization's culture can be analyzed at three distinct levels, each offering new information that builds to form a comprehensive understanding of its core values. The first level examines observed behaviors, or artifacts, that are easily noticeable, yet their meaning and significance are difficult to understand. The second level surveys the ideologies and rationalizations that sustain the organization's work. The third level contains an organization's underlying assumptions. Schein (2017) states that "to understand a group's culture, you must attempt to get at its shared basic assumptions and understand the learning process by which such basic assumptions evolve" (p. 52). Only after an organization's basic assumptions have been deciphered can its espoused values and artifacts be appropriately understood. Understanding how a program's policies are implemented and managed requires the assessment of the organization's shared beliefs and goals, which would then allow for an understanding of how members of an organization build their collective support of values and norms that may sustain inequitable practices.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for this study. As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, I use multiple data collection methods to analyze participants' understanding and experiences, leading me to identify the key emerging themes of this study (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, a case study approach produced a rich and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. Yin (2018) states that "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident." This study defines the

case as the management of student eligibility by dual credit practitioners (the phenomenon) as part of their year-round recruitment and enrollment processes (the context). The data collected provided insight into the process and factors that dictate how high school students are deemed eligible to participate in their school's dual credit program. The dual credit program is managed in partnership between a high school district and its local community college.

Significance of the Study

In analyzing college attainment by race and ethnicity, the gap between minoritized people and whites is daunting. The rates of college attainment for Latinx (21.9%), American Indian (24%), and Black (30%) people are well below the national average, while white (46.7%) are near the average. Asian (61.7%) people are above average, thus becoming the most educated ethnic minority (The Lumina Foundation, 2019). Minoritized students are less likely to participate in dual credit, directly implicating their future success (Allen & Dadgar, 2012; An, 2012; An, 2013; Ganzert, 2014; Kim & Bragg, 2008).

This research contributes new information on dual credit practitioners' understanding of legislation and how it influences the local policies and processes they develop to manage student eligibility. The findings of this study provide knowledge that is nonexistent at the moment, which could benefit the reconfiguration of policy to improve access and enrollment of minoritized students in dual credit programs.

Statement of Positionality

More than a decade ago, I started my career as a college advisor, not realizing it would be much more than my entry into the higher education profession. I have worked for a not-for-profit organization, a community college, and a public university. My experiences span secondary to postsecondary education, with an emphasis on college readiness and transitions. Working in and

between both systems has enhanced my understanding of students' experiences as they work towards a postsecondary education. For many, their introduction to college begins with enrollment in a dual credit program. I believe dual credit to be a catalyst that can maximize educational opportunities for minoritized students.

The field of dual credit has been my primary focus for the past eight years. As part of managing the dual credit program at a community college, I studied the federal and state policies controlling students' access to dual credit. Furthermore, having served as the government relations chair and president of the Illinois Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (ILACEP), the state chapter of the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, I worked alongside state and national stakeholders to identify procedural improvements and new policies that have the potential to counter the underrepresentation of minoritized students. As a first-generation graduate student and minority, I am committed to improving participation in these programs for minoritized students.

I believe that the inequities in participation today have been sustained by the conventional principles that initially created the concept of "dual credit" in the 1970s and have since stood in the way of a more equitable system that should serve all students. Although our understanding and knowledge of dual credit programs have improved significantly over the past 50 years, the reality is that too many students still do not have equitable access to participate. Mehl et al. (2020) recently stated, "Especially when they are from groups historically underrepresented in college, students can only accrue the full benefits of dual enrollment when programs are deliberately designed to close equity gaps and effectively executed" (p.3). I envision my contributions to the research and continued practice elevate opportunities for communities to make dual credit coursework a consistent part of their programming.

Key Terms and Concepts

The essential terms used in this study include the following:

Dual credit – The field of early college credit programs includes various terms to describe the structural make-up of programs that allow high school-aged students to gain simultaneous high school and college credit by completing a college course. I use the term "dual credit" in this research study to ensure consistency and accuracy with Illinois Community College Board's formal definition – "An instructional arrangement where an academically qualified student currently enrolled in high school enrolls in a college-level course and, upon successful course completion, concurrently earns both college credit and high school credit" (Illinois Community College Board, n.d.).

Dual credit practitioner - Refers to the personnel at both secondary and postsecondary institutions whose primary responsibilities are to provide leadership and manage the daily operations of their dual credit partnerships.

Early college credit - Any academic program that allows high school students to earn college credit, either in escrow or recorded on an official college transcript, before high school graduation. (Burns et al., 2019).

Latinx – I use the term "Latinx" to capture the intersectionality between gender and ethnicity, the inclusivity of gender non-conforming people, and support for decolonizing the Spanish language. "Latinx" replaces the most commonly used terms; Latino, Latina/o, and Hispanic. Garcia (2017) describes the resistance by stating:

> The conceptualization of the "x" is rooted in the decolonization of the terms
> Latina/Latino on two levels: first, confronting and challenging the gender binary, and
> second, rejecting the silencing and erasure of Afro-Latinx and indigenous languages by

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standard Spanish, the language of the colonizer of much of Latin America and the

Southwestern United States. (p. 2).

Minoritized – I adopted Harper's (2013) description of minoritized, which illustrates "the social

construction of underrepresentation and subordination in US social institutions, including

colleges and universities" (p. 207). Harper (2013) emphasizes that students "are rendered

minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an

overrepresentation of whiteness" (p. 207).

Summary

This chapter provides an introduction and the purpose of the study, which is to

understand how practitioners manage student eligibility for their school's dual credit program.

Participating in dual credit coursework has many advantages for students, schools, and

communities. Students participating in dual credit are more likely to succeed academically. More

importantly, dual credit students have been shown to have higher rates of high school graduation

and enrollment in postsecondary education compared to their peers who do not partake in dual

credit. However, although the Illinois Dual Credit Quality Act (DCQA) has established that dual

credit opportunities shall work to improve curriculum alignment, facilitate the transition to

college and a career, and enhance system partnerships between high schools and postsecondary

institutions, the reality is that not all students and communities are benefiting equally. The

findings of this study aim to further our collective understanding of how dual credit practitioners

may or may not be limiting students' participation. The chapter also includes the research

questions, theoretical framework, and methodology that guided this study.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature on the history of dual credit, focusing on how legislation has influenced program development, management, and enrollment. It also discusses how dual credit practitioners have attempted to address issues with access and student eligibility. Moreover, the literature reviewed in this chapter illustrates the continued struggle to increase the enrollment of minoritized students despite the growth of dual credit programs over the last two decades. Williams and Perry (2020) highlight the problem by stating, "Despite significant research demonstrating the power of dual enrollment to increase college access and completion, access to dual enrollment is not equitable" (p. 1).

Although dual credit opportunities have increased consistently since the first program was incorporated, students of color and low-income backgrounds are less likely to participate today (Xu et al., 2021). Our understanding of what contributes to the unequal enrollment of minoritized students has pointed to multiple problems generally associated with state policies, funding, and conflicting perspectives between partners. While legislation has improved the process by which policymakers and practitioners respond to the ongoing enrollment dilemma, it necessitates further study. One area in particular includes dual credit practitioners and their influence on students' potential participation. Overall, the literature reviewed in this chapter supports the need for this study.

History of Dual Credit Programs

It is important to note that multiple terms have been used when referencing the enrollment of high school students in college courses. The most common are dual credit, concurrent enrollment, and dual enrollment. Although these are referenced interchangeably, they vary in program characteristics and enrollment processes (Edmonds & Squires, 2016; Hofmann

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& Voloch, 2012; National Alliance for Concurrent Enrollment, n.d.). For this chapter, "dual credit" is generally used to describe any program that enrolls high school students in college courses that award both secondary and college credit.

The professional community has acknowledged that Syracuse University and seven local school districts created the first dual credit program, *Project Advance,* in the early 1970s (Andrews, 2001; Edmonds & Squires, 2016; Fincher-Ford, 1997). Like many other educational initiatives, the program has evolved from its original concept. As the first institution to partner with high school instructors to teach its university's courses as part of the regular high school day (Edmonds, 2016), the program served 40 high schools with a total of 180 high school instructors teaching more than 2,000 students annually (Edmonds, 2016). *Project Advance,* and those that followed envisioned dual credit as an innovative strategy to increase student transition to postsecondary education (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). Amongst other benefits, the practitioners claimed that these programs would support an increase in high school graduation rates, secure a more efficient pathway into postsecondary education, and advance college enrollment and completion rates for minoritized students (Hofmann, 2012; Kim & Smerdon, 2012; Robertson et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). However, the history of the early beginnings of dual credit is well documented throughout the literature. Multiple authors assert that the first dual credit partnerships were designed to exclusively serve high-achieving academic students (Giani et al., 2014; Hofmann, 2012; Karp, 2012; Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016).

Early studies on dual credit, primarily descriptive, focused on studying the essence and programmatic composition of all the different models and partnerships that had quickly spurred throughout the nation (Andrews, 2001; Fincher-Ford, 1997). By the early 2000s, dual credit had gained national support, and the concept was rapidly gaining traction mainly because it promised

to improve academic opportunities for minoritized students. Although historically, students of color and low-income backgrounds have not participated at equal rates compared to their peers, and the intent and objective of practitioners to serve the underrepresented population have been difficult to discern. Hoffman et al. (2007) note that in the first national study of student participation by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES):

> Ninety-eight percent of public 2-year institutions had high school students taking courses for college credit during the 2002–03 12-month academic year, compared to 77 percent of public 4-year institutions, 40 percent of private 4-year institutions, and 17 percent of private 2-year institutions. (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005, p. 5)

Establishing dual credit programs aligns with schools' overarching goal to increase college access and readiness (Welton & Martinez, 2014). It has been recognized as an opportunity for students to advance their academic aptitude and a reliable pipeline into postsecondary education. Throughout its existence, multiple variations of how high school students may earn simultaneous credit have been developed (Karp, 2015).

Multiple Configurations

A dual credit program's structure and operational procedures are mainly decided by the postsecondary institution but the secondary institution must agree to them before it being codified in a memorandum of understanding. The institution's agreement outlines components such as course offerings, the location(s) where courses will be taught, the process for approving the instructor of record, financial costs associated with enrollment, and procedures to assess the instruction's quality and rigor. The literature emphasizes the creative thinking of partnerships leading them to design variations of dual credit programs to meet their shared goal of postsecondary completion collectively. The programs that high schools and postsecondary

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institutions have created can be generally categorized into three types; courses taught at the high school building, courses taught at the postsecondary institution, or courses via an Early College High School. Hofmann (2012) captures some of this complexity by stating:

> Dual enrollment comes in many shapes and sizes, but at its foundation is college-course taking. Some programs invite students to the campus to enroll in a course populated with matriculated college students, others combine students from several high schools into one-classroom on the campus. In order to provide the widest access to dual enrollment, many programs have high school students participate in college-credit courses that are offered at the high school and taught by a high school instructor who is appointed as a college adjunct. (p.4)

Across the variations, community colleges have become the leading dual credit providers for several reasons, including their open-access orientation and emphasis on community service (Kim, 2008). In an analysis of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fink et al. (2017) estimate that dual credit enrollment at community colleges in 2015 reached 745,000 students, while four-year institutions enrolled approximately 220,000 students in the same academic year. Community colleges have attempted to strengthen regional completion agenda by leveraging dual credit's unique infrastructure and intentionally occupying the "middle space" (Hofmann, 2012; Karp, 2015).

The most common configuration of a dual credit program includes credentialed high school instructors teaching the community college's courses at their high school buildings. This offers several financial and procedural benefits to high schools and gives students a greater sense of belonging and increased participation availability (Robertson et al., 2001; Taylor & Pretlow, 2015). On the other hand, a model that offers students the opportunity to complete their

coursework at their community college campus may increase the availability of courses and further a student's essential skills; however, it often limits which students can participate because of the costs associated with tuition and transportation. Despite the additional expenses, college faculty have expressed that high school students are better served by taking courses on a college campus despite the likelihood that courses taught at the high school enhance student participation (Ferguson et al., 2015). While both options have pros and cons, there is no consensus on which is the most effective in supporting students' overall academic achievement (Edmunds & Squire, 2016; Taylor & Pretlow, 2015).

Less common, but a potential opportunity for partners is to blend the two traditional models into what is readily known as an Early College High School. These schools "merge aspects of the high school and college experiences to create a new environment dedicated to increasing the number of students who graduate from high school and succeed in postsecondary education" (Edmunds, 2012, p. 82). Jobs for the Future, credited for developing this dual credit model, has advocated that this approach allows for a direct commitment to serve underrepresented students, secure strong collaborations with postsecondary institutions, and prioritize dual credit offerings that lead to the completion of at least one year of college (Barnett et al., 2015; Edmunds, 2012; Nakkula & Foster, 2007). In thinking specifically about first-generation students, early college credit opportunities can be the difference between earning a bachelor's degree or not.

The consistent growth in dual credit enrollment for community colleges has allowed institutions to promote dual credit as a critical initiative toward supporting their region's most marginalized students. Karp (2015) summarized it well by stating:

Dual enrollment is a strategy that, if sufficiently leveraged, can help meet the nation's

postsecondary completion goals. By strategically linking high schools and colleges and

requiring these two types of institutions to change how they operate, dual enrollment

requires educators and policymakers to rethink how they structure and deliver education

(p. 103)

However, despite the structural and programmatic advantages for community colleges to partner

with high schools, there is evidence to question the effectiveness of these programs in equally

serving minoritized students. More than a decade ago, Kleiner and Lewis' (2005) NCES study

found that only 5 percent of all dual credit programs had intentionally worked to serve "at-risk"

high school students. Today, enrollment data indicates that partnerships cannot collectively

enhance opportunities for students of color and low-income backgrounds (Swanson, 2016;

Williams & Perry, 2020). To better understand how institutions have been able to dictate their

program's priorities and values, legislation's impact in manipulating the overall direction of dual

credit must be reviewed.

The Impact of Legislation

Legislation has heavily influenced and dictated student participation in dual credit

programs, especially at the state level (Jamieson et al., 2022). A review of the literature

illustrates the role of policymakers in the expansion of dual credit. History shows that legislators

have consistently advocated for increasing dual credit opportunities to remedy the "gapping"

issues between the secondary and postsecondary systems, which they have firmly expressed to

expedite the preparation of skilled workers. Although we recognize that there have been

enrollment disparities since the first program was created, it has been challenging to argue

against a concept that has been shown to work for some students. For many policymakers and

other advocates, dual credit programs have successfully bridged the secondary and postsecondary systems to establish a more efficient pathway from high school to college for participating students (Karp, 2015).

Not long after the first dual credit programs were established in the 1970s, dual credit began to be integrated into political discussions about identifying solutions to increase high school graduation rates, college enrollment, and postsecondary degree completion. Policymakers argued that dual credit would significantly impact marginalized communities (Hoffman et al., 2007). Conklin and Sandford (2007) explain that our nation's shift to prioritize college readiness was fronted by policy reports highlighting lagging skills attainment, high school graduation, college enrollment, and college degree attainment rates. The underlying motives of these reports, especially their reasoning for the expansion of early college credit programs or criticism of institutional deficiencies, should be questioned. For example, the *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report is referenced throughout the dual credit literature as a critical driver of dual credit institutionalization (Wozniak, 2010; Talber, 2018). The report, infamous for being politically one-sided, argued for considerable school reform that, amongst other items, should establish learning opportunities for students to experience enhanced academic rigor that would accelerate their progression through high school and into postsecondary education (Hunt & Carroll, 2006). However, it failed to acknowledge the resource disparities across communities that limited underrepresented communities and directly restricted marginalized students' academic and social opportunities. Moreover, the report's "call to action" included an intentional but implied approach, to further the success of privileged students.

In 1985, Minnesota was the first state to adopt dual credit legislation by creating the *Postsecondary Enrollment Options program* (Taylor et al., 2015). By 2001, an additional 29

states adopted dual credit legislation, and by 2016 the number of states with established state legislation had increased to 42 (Andrews, 2001; Lowe, 2016). Taylor and Pretlow (2015) share that policymakers' and key stakeholders' interest in dual enrollment has steadily increased. Passing dual credit legislation is significant because it sets a legal mandate for institutions to implement these programs regardless of the amount of support available by enacting legislation. Despite the expansion of policy mandates since the 1980s, our education systems have been unable to demonstrate equitable participation in dual credit by minoritized populations. Tobolowsky and Allen (2016), two of the most prominent dual credit researchers, share the shortcomings of legislation by stating, "Policymakers and educators have attempted a range of structural and programmatic solutions, but so far the results continue to disappoint" (p. 7). Yet, legislators repeatedly promote these policies as a "secured" approach to resolving many issues in education.

Without federal legislation, states can promote and manage this evolving venture. Legislation across states varies in detail and prescriptiveness. The scholarship has illuminated this range within the policies. As of 2022, only two states have instituted state-wide dual credit policies (Jamieson et al., 2022). A descriptive analysis of these policies, completed by Jamieson et al. (2022) and published by the Education Commission of the States, share information on program models, access, courses, finance, and quality. The report shows the wide variance by states across the different areas covered, especially the inconsistency in student eligibility requirements (access). This is critical to ensuring equal opportunity for all students to participate.

According to another study that analyzed states' dual credit policies, Taylor et al. (2015) found that 37 states reference various factors that institutions use to determine which students can ultimately participate. Additionally, while some states prescribe specific parameters to

institutions, others have offered institutions general guidance. The latter gives institutions the autonomy to dictate the student eligibility requirements at a local level. In analyzing these state-defined student eligibility policies, Zinth and Barnett (2018) found that dual credit programs consistently incorporate additional requirements higher than the course prerequisites set by the partnering postsecondary institutions. These other requirements may include an age or grade-level threshold, a minimum grade-point average, or recommendation letters from school officials (Kelley & Woods, 2019; Mehl et al., 2020; Museus et al., 2007; Zinth & Barnett, 2018). The concern issue with implementing student eligibility requirements is that it contradicts the purpose of dual credit. Expanding the criteria to participate, limits opportunities for minoritized students to enroll in dual credit (Williams & Perry, 2020). As a result, dual credit programs continue to serve the most advantaged and prepared students giving them expanded options to early college credit coursework. Whether institutions intentionally develop eligibility criteria to expand access for marginalized communities seems questionable based on enrollment trends.

The Quest for Educational Opportunity

Dual credit practitioners are challenged to find the balance between access and preparedness. Florida's state legislation has indicated that students must have at least a 3.0 unweighted high school grade point average (GPA) for enrollment in general education coursework and a 2.0 unweighted high school GPA for career certificate coursework (Kelley & Woods, 2019). In Illinois, the Dual Credit Quality Act (Dual Credit Quality Act, n.d.) and Illinois Community College Board stipulate students must meet the eligibility criteria established by the partnering institutions, which amongst other factors, will validate that they have "a high level of motivation and adequate time to devote to studying a college-level course" (ICCB, 2023a, p. 44). In both examples, the language implies a varying degree of deficit thinking despite

its attempt to advocate for educational opportunities. In *Unlocking Potential: A State Policy Roadmap for Equity and Quality in College in High School Programs* (2019), the College in High School Alliance, in partnership with Level UP, provided recommendations for policy improvements in response to its finding that policies were generally designed to delimit access. In the realm of course access and availability, the organizations analyzed states' legislation to determine how policy limits access to dual credit coursework. The authors confirmed that a "state's determination for student eligibility for college in high school programs can indirectly undermine efforts to get more high school students, particularly from underserved populations and middle-to-lower achieving students, on a pathway towards postsecondary education" College in High School Alliance, 2019, p. 34). In response, they shared a baseline policy for states to adopt, which states that requirements for high school students are not higher than the requirements college-age students must meet.

Gateways or Gatekeepers

The growth of dual credit programs has not resulted in these courses being the first option for many students. As noted in the sections above, minoritized students have not benefited from equal access despite policymakers' best attempts. Despite its national popularity, these disparities are contrived and promoted at the local and state-level. The first national study to report on students' demographics, including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, was published by Shivji and Wilson in 2019, more than 50 years after the first dual credit partnership was incorporated. Their analysis of the High School Longitudinal Study 2009 noted significant participation gaps between white and minoritized students. The authors found that white (38 percent) students participated in dual credit programs at a higher rate compared to Latinx (30 percent) and Black (27 percent), which adds validation to the data reported by researchers at a

more localized level (Kim, 2008; Taylor, 2015; Taylor & Lichtenberger, 2013; Zamani-Gallaher et al., 2015). Throughout its evolving history, several studies have exposed various deficiencies that exclude minoritized students from participating.

A study by Museus et al. (2007) that studied students' participation in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania showed that white and Asian students enrolled in dual credit courses at disproportionate rates above other students. The authors concluded that the state lack of focus on equity has resulted in the disparity. Pretlow and Wathington (2013) found that a policy change to enhance access to dual credit resulted in fewer opportunities for marginalized students. They noted that although enrollment rates increased for Black and Latinx students, "Black and Hispanic seniors were still significantly underrepresented and white seniors overrepresented in dual enrollment courses relative to their proportion of high school graduates" (Pretlow & Wathington, 2013, p. 47). Similarly, in another study by Zamani-Gallaher et al. (2015), researchers found that Illinois high school districts with the highest percentages of low-income and minoritized students were less likely to have an established dual credit agreement with a postsecondary institution. The driving forces for the differentiation were correlated to the amount of resources available to support dual credit. These schools had fewer resources to recruit or help teachers to attain the necessary credentials to teach the courses. Consistently, studies on participation have shown that white and high-socioeconomic-status students are more likely to benefit from their dual credit programs (An, 2013; Museus et al.,2007; Taylor & Lichtenberger, 2013). Rivera et al. (2019) also found that students' access to dual credit courses depends highly on their prior academic achievement and socioeconomic status.

Furthermore, the authors found that dual credit policies cater to a merit-based framework that advantages students with above-average academic profiles. In a study by Taylor et al.

(2015), researchers analyzed dual credit policies to understand how student eligibility is determined, amongst other factors. They found that about 80 percent of state policies regulated eligibility and that the criteria often incorporated the use of high standards that restrict students from participating.

Program Management and Student Success

Dual credit provides students with several benefits. Dual credit participation has been shown to correlate positively with students' academic success in high school and postsecondary. By and large, students who participate in dual credit achieve a higher grade-point average and accumulate more college credits than their peers who did not participate (An, 2012; Digness, 2018; Edmonds & Squires, 2016; Taylor, 2015). And as previously noted, students that participate in dual credit are more likely to transition into higher education and persist (An, 2013; Taylor, 2015; Troutman et al., 2018). However, these attributes are not as noteworthy when considering that minoritized students are not equally represented in the enrollment data. Advocates searching for solutions that would increase marginalized students' participation have noted multiple factors creating this disparity in enrollment. In a study that examined the impact of dual credit policy in the State of Illinois, Taylor (2015) found that although the policies generally supported the advancement of students, the results revealed that minoritized students did not benefit equally from their peers. It is critical to note that dual credit programs are designed and operated by practitioners from high school and partnered postsecondary institutions. More importantly, it should be explicitly stated that these programs can differ significantly from region to region within any state.

Ensuring equal access for minoritized students rests heavily on the program's administration. The dual credit practitioners are ultimately responsible for developing and

influencing the overall direction of a program's fundamental values. Therefore, their worldviews and perceptions of student eligibility will foster the underlying assumptions that control which students gain participation. Additionally, the approach of dual credit practitioners to maintain the appropriate level of the program's quality and rigor may further limit access to dual credit courses. In *The Dual Enrollment Playbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students*, the authors challenged institutions to cultivate a culture prioritizing equity by focusing on students that would otherwise not meet the prescribed course requirements (Mehl et al., 2020). However, as noted above, the recommendation assumes that those responsible for managing the programs believe that resources should be dedicated to helping students gain admission versus limiting participation to high-achieving students only. In a study by Osumi (2010) that analyzed the influence of school counselors on students' involvement, the results showed that school counselors strongly agreed that students must have the capacity to pass the placement exams and demonstrate personal responsibility. As a student eligibility factor, personal responsibility is subjective and is not commonly defined, which creates problems in that people will interpret it differently.

Furthermore, students' ability to self-select or share their interests was highly valued, increasing their odds of participating. In another study that inquired about the strengths and weaknesses of dual credit programs as perceived by administrations, Payne-Bartlett (2003) found that the students' supposed immaturity was the main weakness expressed by those responsible for managing their dual credit programs.

Implementing and managing a dual credit program requires responsible dual credit practitioners to be skilled and knowledgeable about all its complex features. In a report by Cassidy et al. (2010) about lessons learned on school-level implementation, the authors detail the

procedural elements associated with four broad areas, including relationships between partners, funding responsibilities, and student eligibility processes. They acknowledge that dual credit programs have all the same elements but are not all implemented the same way. Cassidy et al. (2010) shared that:

> Across various contexts, schools attempting to increase Dual Enrollment face common implementation challenges. High school-college partnerships work within a variety of state and local policy contexts that necessarily impact how they implement Dual Enrollment programs. State policies vary in specifying components of high school-college partnerships, the articulation of college credits earned, funding requirements, and student populations and attendant supports. (p. 5)

Undoubtedly, dual credit practitioners are eager to build and implement programs that will provide as many students as possible with the opportunity to experience a rigorous curriculum that will benefit them both academically and socially. It is a delicate balance that practitioners must establish, and in doing so, one of the most crucial components is instituting the requirements that determine which students will be allowed to participate (College in High School Alliance, 2019). The criteria may be prescribed by state policy or set collectively by institutional partners. It is a significant challenge regardless of the basis for determining a program's requirements.

Student Eligibility Standards

In their analysis of states' dual credit eligibility requirements, Zinth and Barnett (2018) stated that "state-set requirements for dual enrollment eligibility may be indirectly undermining efforts to get more high-schoolers on a pathway to college" (p. 1). Additionally, they remarked that contrary to states' use of eligibility criteria that limits participation to the highest-performing

students, the consensus within the research community is that students that perform at a lower level can be successful if provided with equal access and support services. However, programs have struggled to change their perspectives and procedural approach as it requires critical examination of long-standing merit based eligibility requirements. Depending on the state's policy, dual credit practitioners may be provided with detailed instructions on managing eligibility or given limited guidance. The latter can potentially exacerbate the risk of implementing local procedures that do not prioritize increasing access for minoritized students (Cassidy et al., 2010; Williams & Perry, 2020).

Dual credit programs that have the discretion to set their student eligibility often seek guidance from other programs within or outside their state for setting criteria. As an alternative, programs may find that the accreditation standards of National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) provide a firm foundation. However, these standards may encourage programs to restrict access based on their interpretation due to the lack of specificity. Last revised in 2020, NACEP's accreditation standards on student participation note that students must meet the exact course prerequisites as non-dual credit students. They also state that no guidance on program eligibility requirements is provided, implying that a program may set additional conditions above those already instituted at the course level (National Alliance for Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships, 2022). Ultimately, dual credit practitioners are confronted with a high-stakes decision that should appropriately address their specific legislative mandate, program enrollment goals, and issues of inequality. Again, when a program can set its local procedures, its approach to minimizing program-based requirements will depend on their perception and interpretation of dual credit's purpose (Taylor & Lichtenberger, 2013).

In determining how dual credit practitioners manage dual credit eligibility or work to improve access, the existing research has not adequately investigated the role of dual credit practitioners and the process leading to implementing their program's student eligibility procedures. Furthermore, once these procedures have been implemented, research has also not studied how practitioners interpret their program procedures and the varying effect that they can have on student access. Enhancing our understanding of these practices is critical to improving practices that result in expanded access for minoritized students. Most of the research agrees that student eligibility practices pose a barrier to increasing participation (Duncheon & Relles, 2020; Edmunds et al., 2022; Pompelia, 2020; Taylor & Lichtenberger, 2013, Williams & Perry, 2020; Zinth & Barnett, 2018). Many point to the limitations experienced by dual credit practitioners due to their state's corresponding legislation. In contrast, others claim that practitioners should take a more aggressive approach to challenge the status quo practices they have designed.

The State of Illinois is one of many states that does not provide dual credit programs with specific guidance on student eligibility criteria, which enables each program to decipher its local procedures based on its collective interpretation. Dual credit practitioners in this state are steered by the Dual Credit Quality Act, the state's key legislation, and the Illinois Community College Board's dual credit regulations. Both documents include language that does not direct practitioners on the specific criteria to manage student eligibility. Thus, it relies on each program to identify the standards to determine if a student may participate. Because the resulting outcome is expected to differ across programs, learning from dual credit practitioners in this state sets up the ideal environment for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The research on dual credit, specifically regarding access and participation, has increasingly acknowledged the enrollment disparities and structural inefficiencies that have upheld the underrepresentation of minoritized students. This study intends to learn more about how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility, and based on previous research, the conceptual framework guiding the research incorporates principles from multiple theories that will help to elevate critical thinking and denote the underlying assumptions and intentions of dual credit practitioners.

Human Capital Theory

The idea that investment in education produces economic benefits for society is derived from human capital theory. Schultz (1971) claimed that education improves the financial capacity of individuals, which collectively results in an increased benefit for society at large. One of the early pioneers of this theory, Mincer (1958), revealed findings from one of his first studies on formal and informal training that the time spent in attaining an education versus working was eventually compensated at a higher rate. This was attributed to certain occupations that demanded or valued education above work experience. Furthermore, the research by Gary Becker on education and its return on investment initiated the exploration to quantify the society's value earned for supporting individuals through the completion of formal education (Sweetland, 1996). Although the construction and application of the theory have been criticized for their deficit connotations (Tan, 2014), the core tenets provide us with an understanding of the use of education systems to leverage the economic interests of the larger society. However, there are many issues with this general claim because it assumes that everyone benefits equally from the collective effort of individuals.

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Furthermore, it also promotes a merit-based system that acknowledges individuals that can participate and complete an education at a higher standing over others, particularly marginalized members of our society. Human Capital Theory has not been widely used in dual credit research; however, in a study by Rivera et al. (2019), the theory was discussed as part of their research on access to dual credit coursework. They firmly claimed that policies in dual credit programs across the states indicate partnerships' worldview that aligns closely with the underpinnings of human capital theory. In general, policies are structured by practitioners who do not prioritize the enrollment of historically marginalized students and highly value a meritocratic perspective that further supports the status quo.

Interest Convergence

Interest Convergence, a core principle of critical race theory (CRT), specifically addresses the inequity in systems and processes designed intentionally to preserve the majority's interests while slightly benefiting the minoritized population. CRT conceptualizes that the beliefs of the dominant group dictate the policies and treatment of underrepresented students, specifically students of color. Race and racism are at the center of the analysis to explicitly challenge dominant paradigms that consider students of color academically and socially deficient (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sablan, 2019).

> From its legal origins to uncover patterns of racial discriminatory practice in schools and colleges, it [CRT] has been utilized to address ideological forms of racism that are historically ingrained in institutions, organizations, patterns of teaching and learning and every-day ways of thinking and acting about race and racism (Amiot et al., 2020, p. 200)

CRT has six central tenets, including interest convergence, that have been used to deconstruct systems of oppression. They supplement each other to form a critical framework that not only

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explicitly delineates the existence of racism but also challenges the ingrained concept of whiteness throughout all aspects of our lives to give voice and power to those that have been marginalized (Amiot et al., 2020).

Interest convergence is essential when analyzing decisions or processes attempting to benefit minoritized populations while maintaining or improving the advantages for whites. In *Brown v Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma*, Bell (1980) stated:

> I contend that the decision in Brown to break with the Court's long-held position on these issues cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision's value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation. (p. 524)

The education systems have undoubtedly progressed since Bell's comments on Brown v Board of Education; however, we also know that inequity and inequality are a constant issue in schools. The continued underrepresentation of minoritized students in dual credit programs is a prime example of this inequity. Despite the best efforts of policymakers and practitioners, the design and implementation of policies have been shown to favor whites and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Whether inequity and oppression are built into the legislation or the policy implementation is causing the most harm, attention must be afforded to analyzing these components thoroughly.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

Street-level bureaucracy theory has also been integrated into this study's conceptual framework. Dual credit practitioners are placed in a complex situation when dealing with multiple or shifting policies. As the leading interpreters and implementors of the policies, they

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must extract the intended purpose and formulate procedures that will be operationalized within their respective communities. Furthermore, their environments and often lack of resources force many into using criteria that simplifies student selection yet negatively impacts which students have access. Moore (1987) noted that "The persistent needs of street-level service workers force them to ration energies, leading to both rationing of services and service inequity among different demographic, racial, and other groups who seek such services" (p. 76). In other words, street-level bureaucrats can be regarded as the "actual" policymakers.

Developing and managing procedures intended to support practitioners' assessment of students' eligibility has its challenges. The high demand and caseloads may influence faulty decision-making or foster a culture that will ultimately lead to collective thinking that prioritizes certain aspects of students' academic and personal profiles instead of other criteria. This is possible due to the wide range of discretion that practitioners are afforded as part of their roles (Brodkin, 2012). Street-level bureaucracy theory has not been readily used or referenced in education research. However, it serves as an invaluable mental lens when studying the actions of individuals responsible for working directly with receivers of services. By and large, studies that have incorporated this theory have found that "street-level bureaucracies produce disparities in the provision, even to the point of excluding access for some populations, especially those that are least well equipped to navigate the barriers of bureaucratic "red tape" and confusing or complex agency processes" (Brodkin, 2012, p. 946).

Schein's Model of Organizational Culture

Understanding how dual credit practitioners, on behalf of their institutions, collaborate to develop the required components of their program is critical. As noted throughout the literature, dual credit programs have been designed to meet the needs of their communities. Although they

have a lot of things in common, they are also different in many aspects. Schein's model of organizational culture is incorporated into the conceptual framework to support the analysis of evidence. Decisions are rooted in beliefs, values, and artifacts that an organization has sponsored or endorsed. Schein (2017) states that an organization's culture can be analyzed at three distinct levels, each offering new information that builds to form a comprehensive understanding of its core identity.

The first level requires an examination of observed behaviors or artifacts that are easily noticeable, yet their meaning and significance are difficult to understand (Schein, 2017). Within this level, it would be essential to learn from dual credit practitioners their interpretation of the leading policies that have molded their programs. At the second level of the model, beliefs, values, and norms are explored for more profound meaning and connection to the development of programmatic procedures. And within the third level, Schein's (2017) model denotes the exploration to understand an organization's underlying assumptions, which are often taken-for-granted, but are the building blocks for the dual credit program.

Summary

This chapter concentrated on the literature that is most relevant to the issue of the underrepresentation of minoritized students. Specifically, the chapter included sections on the early beginnings of dual credit and policymakers' role in influencing its popularity. Furthermore, studies on the participation of minoritized students were discussed to outline the critical conversations on the conflicting issue of how programs have been unable to increase equality for marginalized students. Lastly, a review of the theoretical principles and their applicability to this study was also examined.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology and procedures used in this study. An overview of

the research design and rationale for utilizing a case study approach is followed by sections that

describe the process for selecting participants, data collection and analysis procedures, potential

ethical concerns, and how the study's trustworthiness was addressed. Lastly, a statement of

positionality is included to detail the biases/subjectivities that I bring to this study, and the basis

for conducting a study that advocates for increased enrollment of minoritized students.

Research Design

The methodology for this study was qualitative. Creswell (2014) notes, "The process of

[qualitative] research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the

participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and

the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (p. 32). As the primary data

collection and analysis instrument, qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to study individuals'

perspectives and experiences within an established phenomenon (Patton, 2015). In this study, I

sought to understand how dual credit practitioners interpret dual credit legislation and other

state-level procedures, the practices that dual practitioners implement to manage student

eligibility, and how their decisions affect the enrollment of minoritized students.

Due to our limited knowledge of how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility,

this research employed an exploratory case study approach to examine the contemporary

phenomenon in its real-life context using multiple methods of data collection (Yin, 2018). Case

studies are most effective when asking "how," "why," "what," and "who" questions that are too

complex for other research methods, especially when there are no pre-determined outcomes

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Yin, 2018). The 'case' in this study was defined as the management of

student enrollment procedures by dual credit practitioners (the phenomenon) as students are

learning and engaging in the application process (the context). Focusing on how one high school,

alongside the community college, has managed the selection and enrollment of dual credit

students meets the requirements of a case that is bounded by time and place (Yin, 2018).

Ultimately, using multiple data collection methods allowed for an in-depth analysis of how dual

credit practitioners' interpretations of key legislation influences their implementation and

management of student eligibility practices.

Dual Credit Partnership

The selection of the dual credit partnership used a "two-phased" screening procedure

(Yin, 2018). As explained in the prior section, the phenomenon of interest is encapsulated in the

work of a dual credit partnership. The first phase identified the community college. The

identification of the community college was completed by analyzing the State's annual dual

credit report, a comprehensive report on dual credit enrollment. Upon identifying the community

college, I secured the participation of the college with the approval of its institutional research

department and division of community and workforce partnerships. I then moved to contact and

recruit the director of educational partnerships as my first participant. I proceeded to recruit other

college employees using a snowball sampling technique. In learning about the college's dual

credit program, I was guided to recruit one of their high school partners to participate as part of

the second phase of this process. Due to the complex nature of each partnership, I decided to

only work with one of the college's high school partners to ensure that a thorough and detailed

examination of their experiences was captured. As discussed in previous chapters, dual credit

partnerships may share many similarities, but they also function in different ways that too

complex to compare across one another.

Northern Community College

The dual credit annual report, referenced above, details the enrollment of high school students at the community college level. The report is critical, as it illustrates community colleges' involvement in offering dual credit courses compared to state universities. In fiscal year (FY) 2022, a total of 75,507 high school students across the state enrolled in at least one dual credit course via their school's program, with white students accounting for 57.8 percent of all dual credit enrollment among the 48 community colleges, followed by Latinx (18.7 percent) and African American (9.5 percent) students. Furthermore, community colleges in the northern region (39,541) enrolled the most students, with most of those courses offered in the high school buildings.

Northern Community College was selected based on having the second highest enrollment of dual credit students in the state, as well as the diverse set of communities that they serve. The college served 20,056 students across its three campus locations in fiscal year 2022, including 2,228 dual credit students, representing 11 percent of the overall enrollment at the college. Furthermore, the college serves a high percentage of Latinx students (32 percent) but has struggled to increase the participation of African American students (6 percent). The college serves 24 high schools across the county. The student demographics across these high schools vary significantly; therefore, in consultation with the study participants at the college, Sub-Urban High School was identified as the secondary institution due to its diverse student population and growing dual credit program.

Sub-Urban High School

The "City of Greenville" has 22 schools, including "Sub-Urban High School", serving 14,000 students. Most students enrolled in "Greenville School District" identify as Latinx (80

percent), while Black students (12 percent) make up the second most enrolled demographic. White students (3 percent) are the minority, an anomaly compared to the state's overall student enrollment (46 percent). Furthermore, 69 percent of students reside in low-income households, and 44 percent are categorized as English learners.

Students at Sub-Urban High School are divided across two campuses. The north campus serves 9th and 10th graders, while the south serves 11th and 12th graders. All students have access to early college courses. However, only upper-division students have consistently enrolled in dual credit courses. The lower-division students are allowed to enroll in advanced placement courses. In the school year 2021-2022, 531 students completed an early college course; 408 students completed at least one advanced placement course, and 154 students completed at least one dual credit course. This accounts for 11 percent of the total student population enrolled at Sub-Urban High School.

Study Participants

A total of 7 dual credit practitioners participated: four employees from the college and three from high school. The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Stake (1995) also notes that study participants shall offer insight and perspective to understand the general phenomenon within context.

By incorporating a snowball sampling approach, I moved to recruit other dual credit practitioners at the college based on the recommendations of the director of educational partnerships. From my initial interactions with the director and other employees, Sub-Urban

High School was identified as the partner institution, which led me to contacting the high school with the help of the college. After receiving approval form the school district's institutional research department and sponsorship from the associate superintendent, I proceeded to identify other high school employees that play a critical role in leading its dual credit student recruitment and enrollment operations. As a dual credit practitioner my knowledge of the organizational structures within both types of institutions helped to request the participation of key individuals from the high school. Like the college, the participants from the high school have varying levels of responsibility and oversight regarding the management of their dual credit program.

Table 1

Study Participants Overview

Name	Institution	Position	Dual Credit Responsibilities
Samantha	College	Director	Strategic planning, partnership development, advisory Council, program evaluation
Stacy	College	Manager	Staff supervision, program implementation, student referrals, data reporting
Julie	College	Coordinator	Program awareness, student recruitment, enrollment processes, student support
Marisol	College	Coordinator	Program awareness, student recruitment, enrollment processes, student support
Joe	High School	Associate superintendent	Strategic planning, program development, partnership development, supervision of operations
Eve	High School	District Coordinator	Program development and implementation, recruitment, and enrollment processes
Ethan	High School	Assistant Principal	Management of support staff, course selection processes, student referrals

Qualitative Data Collection

The evidence collected for this study was derived from interviews, field observations, and the analysis of select documents. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 108). Evidence collected from the observations made in the field will contribute immensely, given that the unit of analysis, also referred to as the phenomenon in this case study, cannot be isolated from its context. Lastly, the analysis of documents was incorporated into the research to "corroborate and augment evidence from the other sources" (Yin, 2018, p. 113), ensuring the triangulation of evidence.

Interviews

The interviews used a semi-structured protocol, the most common approach used in qualitative research designs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This technique ensured that participants could share information about their programs without restrictions and elicit detailed responses about their decision-making processes or complex experiences. Overall, this approach allowed for flexibility to focus on the unit of analysis and steer the conversations toward information that I believe was the most essential to the study's exploratory nature (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

All interviews were conducted online via Zoom, a video-telephony platform. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The decision to hold all conversations online was due the convenience that resulted after the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviewees were presented with a participant consent form, and only those that signed it were included as participants in the study.

An interview guide was used to conduct the interviews. In describing its value, Patton states, "An interview guide is prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued

with each person interviewed" (p. 439). Unlike an interview guide that contains specific questions asked to all interviewees, the questions in this study's protocol were only available to me to ensure my line of inquiry was focused on the unit of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Yin, 2018).

Field Observations

The evidence collected from the interviewees was supplemented by evidence derived from observations made in the field. I selected events to engage in that allowed me to observe conversations and interactions in their natural environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As part of this process, I requested an invitation to attend scheduled discussions at each institution. (Patton, 2015, Yin, 2018). Additionally, I participated in an annual summit organized by the state's practitioner-led dual credit organization. This event allowed for two unique observation opportunities, which enabled me to "perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone "inside" a case rather than external to it" (Yin, 2018, p. 124).

Four observations were conducted in settings where dual credit practitioners held conversations and interactions related to program design, operations, and legislative requirements. These observations took place over several months due to specific events' scheduling, including a statewide summit and an administrative retreat. All observations included at least one of the study participants and were purposefully selected based on the content and its relevance to this study. Two observations were held in public settings, and the other two required permission to attend departmental meetings. No students were present at any of these observations.

Documents and Artifacts

The last set of evidence collected was from selected documents relevant to the study. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) note that "data found in documents can be used in the same manner as data from interviews or observations" (p. 182). As the third subset of evidence, documents provided additional clarity and context to the information obtained from interviews and field observations (Yin, 2018). The selected documents detailed programmatic and procedural information about the dual credit partnership, including standard operating procedures, reports, meeting minutes, and marketing materials. Also, as previously noted, documents published by the Illinois Community College Board and the Illinois General Assembly websites were included in this study. All records were assessed for their authenticity and accuracy, and once confirmed, they were securely stored in an online drive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

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Data Analysis

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The analysis was supported using a case study database to compartmentalize the data throughout the collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The data was analyzed using a two-cycle coding process to identify major themes across all data sources. "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). As part of the coding process, I aimed to infer beliefs, values, and attitudes from the qualitative data to understand the relationship between causes and outcomes (Saldaña, 2016).

Thematic Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify major themes. Incorporating various strategies, like structural coding, strengthened my understanding of how dual credit

practitioners manage student eligibility. As part of the first coding cycle, I chunked data into six broad structures; actions by individuals/groups, compliance/rules/legislation; enrollment process, institutional organization, partnerships/relationships, and student eligibility. I documented my approach using an analytic memo to describe the coding process in real time, which was beneficial for the initial identification of emerging patterns, categories, and concepts (Saldaña, 2016). In the second cycle, I incorporated an In-Vivo coding strategy to analyze the data line-by-line. I then moved to categorize all codes, which allowed me to condense the data into smaller units, leading me to identify major themes. This process in the analysis provided clarity and confidence in interpreting the evidence derived from the interviews.

The field memos written to capture the evidence from the field observations were also analyzed using the two-cycle coding technique described above. In coding this type of evidence, I emphasized common themes and those contradicting the findings from the interviews. The analytical memos used to record my reflections and preliminary analysis of the evidence were also subjected to the coding process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, the documents collected were verified for their accuracy and authenticity and analyzed using the same strategies noted above. Patton (2015) states that document analysis "provides a behind-the-scenes look at the program that may not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through documents" (p. 390). Furthermore, the coding of select documents contributed to the triangulation of evidence by collaborating initial findings from the other data sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 182).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness is critical to substantiate in qualitative research designs. The primary method used to establish rigor and validity was triangulation. Triangulation requires that the

researcher acquires data from multiple sources to compare and cross-check (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The evidence collected throughout the research study included perspectives from varying individuals and situations. Stake (1995) claims that "data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under difference circumstances" (p. 113).

Moreover, as a secondary method, I used a member-checking technique, which relied on additional support from the study participants. In member-checking, study participants were requested to review drafts of writing for accuracy (Stake, 1995). Feedback from the participants will be reviewed and considered for any necessary revisions. By incorporating triangulation and member-checking to establish trustworthiness, the study's findings are more likely to be accurate and validated (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Issues

Using this research design, I acknowledge the various ethical issues that may have implicated the study's process and findings. In preparation for gaining approval to conduct the study, I completed the mandatory CITI Training for researchers in the social science field. I specifically learned about the three ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and justice (Glesne, 2016). As the primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study, I aimed to maintain a high degree of awareness throughout the process to avoid potential harm to participants.

As per the ethical principle of respect and as required by the Institutional Review Board at each institution, I documented individuals' willingness to participate via a signed consent form. Furthermore, in response to the ethical principle of beneficence, the form included descriptive information about the study's purpose, relevant research protocols, and the benefits of participating. Moreover, I shared potential ethical issues that the participants might have

experienced throughout the research process, the procedure for maintaining their privacy, and how participants may request to excuse themselves from the study altogether. Lastly, all original data was safeguarded, and pseudonyms were incorporated to protect participants' privacy.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology and research methods for this study. By incorporating a case study approach within a qualitative design, I addressed the research questions to gain an in-depth understanding of how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility, also referred to as the unit of analysis. Upon receiving approval from the institutions and willing participants to participate in the study, I collected evidence from interviews, field observations, and select documents. Data analysis methods and strategies were consistent across all three sets of data by using a two-cycle coding process. Lastly, a description of how the research intends to assure trustworthiness and validity was addressed, and a discussion of potential ethical issues was included.

CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study aimed to understand how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility based on their interpretation of state-level policies and regulations. Additionally, this study sought to understand how practitioners' interpretation of said policies and regulations may affect the enrollment of minoritized students. A qualitative exploratory case study was used to learn specifically from a dual credit partnership between a community college and a local public high school district.

The chapter provides an in-depth description of the study's findings by discussing the five emerging themes. In advance of the discussion, brief descriptions of the dual credit partnership, institutions, and study participants are shared to offer critical context used in the development of the themes. I conclude the chapter with an acknowledgement on the triangulation of data that includes highlights from the field observation and documents that were analyzed.

The Dual Credit Partnership

Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School established their dual credit partnership in 2014. Students were initially limited to dual credit courses offered at the college's main campus, but that has changed in the past couple of years since the high school expressed a strong desire to increase dual credit offerings at their building. Today, high school students can participate in dual credit via four different models: courses taught by an approved high school dual credit instructor, career and technical education courses offered at the area career center, or courses taught by college faculty at any of the college's campuses. Students at Sub-Urban High School now have access to 10 courses in their building, 15 at the area career center, and eight at the college's campuses. The courses range from general education to career-technical education and represent multiple disciplines.

The dual credit partnership's recent progress has been attributed to their dual credit committee, which has been in existence for several years but has only recently been meeting consistently. The "Dual Credit Committee" is co-chaired by Samantha (College; Director) and Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) and includes staff that are responsible for working with staff at their respective institutions to guide students into their dual credit program. Although the "Dual Credit Committee" has recently started to meet on a monthly basis, some members of the committee have critiqued its value and others have become frustrated with the lackluster approach of a few participants. In the 2022 fall semester, the committee launched two workgroups, one on recruitment and another on enrollment.

Select members from this committee also participate in a regional "Dual Credit Advisory Council," which includes educators from the other 23 high schools that Northern Community College serves within its region. At these Council meetings, dual credit practitioners prefer to discuss broader topics related to legislative changes, program and curriculum updates, dual credit resources, and operational best practices. However, their intent is to focus on the following areas: the strategic expansion of dual credit, partner roles and responsibilities, and opportunities for collaboration beyond the region. A total of seven practitioners participated in this study.

Northern Community College

The division of community and workforce partnerships is home to the department of educational partnerships, which is responsible for leading all dual credit initiatives in collaboration with administrators, faculty, and staff. The department is well staffed with eight full-time employees: two administrators, six program coordinators, and one administrative assistant. The size of their team is unusual as most dual credit teams at community colleges are half the size or even limited to two people. The manager, the only other administrator in the

department, is responsible for supporting the program coordinators and overseeing the cyclical operations that lead to students' enrollment in dual credit courses. They are also charged with strategizing how to improve communications with stakeholders, both internally and externally. The six program coordinators each serve at least four high schools and spend the most time with students, high school teachers, and school counselors.

Sub-Urban High School

The high school has an exclusive dual credit partnership with Northern Community College. They currently do not work with other postsecondary institutions, although there have been internal conversations on whether the district's interests have not been adequately taken into consideration. These debates have raised the question about the value of building additional partnerships with other postsecondary institutions. This line of thinking is supported by the frustration of some staff over the college's rigid requirements or "ineffective" enrollment processes. The team responsible for bringing these concerns to the community college is headed by the associate superintendent of equity, innovation and accountability, the assistant principal of student support services, and the college and career readiness coordinator. It is important to also note the district's "partner rich" status. They are currently benefiting from the consultation services of two renowned outside organizations with extensive knowledge and experience in the college and career readiness sector. One of those organizations has facilitated the development of the high school transformation plan which is divided into four pillars and addresses several college and career readiness goals, including dual credit participation.

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Study Participants

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This figure below is included to enhance clarity leading to the descriptions of the participants ahead of discussing the study's emerging themes.

Figure 1

Dual Credit Partnership – Organizational Chart

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                         │ Dual Credit  │
                         │ Partnership  │
                         └──────┬───────┘
              ┌─────────────────┴─────────────────┐
      ┌───────────────┐                   ┌───────────────┐
      │   Northern    │                   │ Sub-Urban High│
      │  Community    │                   │    School     │
      │   College     │                   │               │
      └───────┬───────┘                   └───────┬───────┘
  ┌───────────────┐                           ┌───────────────┐
  │  Samantha*^   │                           │    Joe*^       │
  │  (Director)   │                           │  (Associate    │
  └───────────────┘                           │ Superintendent)│
  ┌───────────────┐                           └───────────────┘
  │   Stacy*      │                           ┌───────────────┐
  │  (Manager)    │                           │    Eve*        │
  └───────────────┘                           │  (District     │
  ┌───────────────┐                           │ Coordinator)   │
  │  Julie and    │                           └───────────────┘
  │  Marisol*     │                           ┌───────────────┐
  │ (Coordinators)│                           │    Ethan*      │
  └───────────────┘                           │  (Assistant    │
                                              │  Principal)    │
                                              └───────────────┘
```
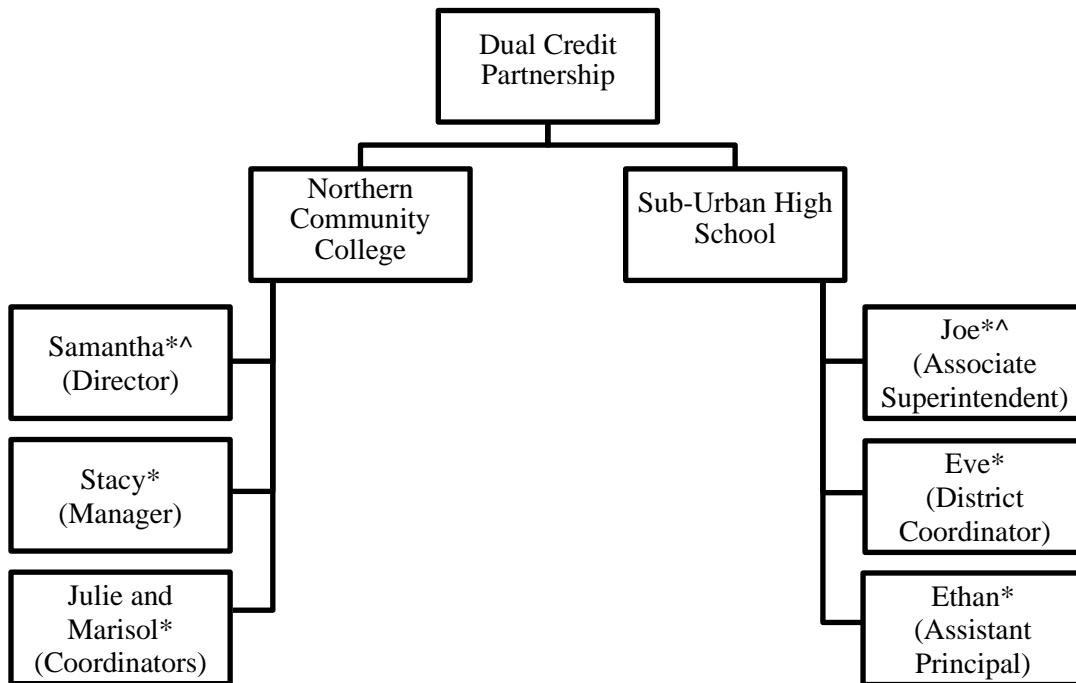
Note. * Membership in Dual Credit Committee; ^ Membership in Dual Credit Advisory Council

Samantha

Samantha is the director of the department of educational partnerships charged with "setting the direction of the department in terms of the mission and the vision.". She leads all operational elements of the dual credit, including partnership engagement. She describes the department as more "external facing" because of their work with high schools. Samantha reports directly to the vice president for community and workforce partnerships, which affords reliable and immediate access to the college's executive leadership team. Samantha has been afforded the opportunity to cultivate the department's mission and vision using strategies that support a high-quality dual-credit program. She has also stressed the identification of practices that sustain equitable access to and through dual credit. She dedicates most of her attention to developing and

fostering relationships between the high schools and the college. In learning about her professional experiences, Samantha highlighted her work in various roles leading up to director position and underscored the importance of having the institutional knowledge required for this "work." She claims to have built the dual credit program around "two anchors," high-quality practices and equitable access. It has also been critical that her staff come to embrace diversity and proactively work to identify gaps in their enrollment procedures that may limit student access.

Stacy

Stacy stepped into the manager position a few years ago after the college's top leadership agreed to increase its resources. The newly created position was a direct response to high schools' demand for more dual credit coursework. Over the past eight years, she has witnessed the growth of dual credit participation and acknowledges the many turbulations along the way with the growth of dual credit in the region. Stacy is mainly responsible for managing the enrollment tasks carried out by the program coordinators, which has been challenged by the fact that the community college works with 24 high schools that have varying practices to identify eligible students. Although she is highly involved in all aspects of the dual credit program, she describes her role as more "behind the scenes," focusing on ensuring there is a high-level of efficiency when it comes to recruitment and enrollment. Stacy also offers administrative support in the assessment of state and regional policies to ensure that the college's dual credit program is compliant with the requirements. Her experience working with key stakeholders, including student services staff, teachers/faculty, and high school administrators has provided her with a unique perspective that has aided the department when contemplating the implementation of new

procedures. Stacy is also a vital member of the regional dual credit advisory council, as well as the dual credit committee that includes members from Sub-Urban High School only.

Julie

As one of the veteran program coordinators, Julie has the most experience in the position and has served multiple schools in the county over the years. Julie describes her role as "the liaison between students and the college's systems." Like the other program coordinators in the department, she spends most of her time working with high school representatives, including teachers and school counselors. She shared that most of her interactions are positive but noted that it has been challenging working with staff that often dismiss the college's efforts in support of recruitment. Julie is also heavily involved in other work outside her department position, which she claims allowed her to gain a unique perspective as it relates to students' transition to college coursework. She is an adjunct faculty member and has taught courses designed to help first-year students acclimatize to the college campus. Like Samantha, her own institutional knowledge is invaluable to the department, however, she is cautious not to overextend herself beyond role's responsibilities, especially in the case of assessing or developing policies. Although she shared examples of having to make decisions in the moment that determined a student's enrollment, she claims that she is far removed from policymaking.

Marisol

Marisol, a program coordinator in the department at the college, is assigned to work with Sub-Urban High School. Growing up in the community she now serves, Marisol takes pride in supporting students from Sub-Urban High School. She describes her role as a "liaison between the college and the high schools," but admits to pushing the boundaries of her involvement. She has procured opportunities to increase her engagement with students because she believes the

leadership could do more to increase student access. When she is not working with high schools to lead dual credit informational events or assisting students during course selection, she is meeting with her colleagues across the college about how to increase enrollment. Marisol speaks Spanish fluently, which references is the reason why parents from the City of Greenville gravitate to her for help in planning their students' postsecondary goals. She is well-known in the community and often goes out of her way to meet with parents about the dual credit program to ensure accurate information is being disseminated. As the co-chair of one of the dual credit committee's workgroups, she has focused on improving recruitment and enrollment processes by creating standardized operating procedures and timelines with specific benchmarks to guide staff at both institutions.

Joe

Joe is the associate superintendent of equity, innovation, and accountability at Sub-Urban High School. He has a wealth of experience which can be noted by his dedication to the profession. He has been a teacher, dean of students, and high school principal. Joe has worked in multiple large public-school systems across three states and has worked with dual credit in various capacities during that time. Prior to Joe being appointed to lead the dual credit initiatives at Sub-Urban High School, the school had been struggling to increase enrollment in dual credit courses. The superintendent's directive to Joe has been to "make dramatic changes" rather quickly. Under his leadership, the district engineered a school transformation plan built around seven levers, including institutional partnerships and student support services. He is also responsible for managing several contractual partnerships that support students' postsecondary goals. Joe co-chairs the dual credit committee alongside Samantha (College; Director) from Northern Community College, and like Samantha (College; Director), he has emphasized the

district's responsibility and commitment to prioritizing equity. He has heavily advocated for students to have multiple opportunities to participate in early college credit courses and has cautiously examined the many challenges limiting students' increased participation.

Eve

Formerly a wellness professional at Northern Community College and an administrator at the high school level, Eve now holds the position of college and career readiness coordinator at the district level. Under Joe's (High School; Associate Superintendent), Eve is tasked with leading overseeing the recruitment and enrollment initiatives, especially as they relate to the district's transformation plan. Eve is a fierce advocate of supporting students' enrollment in dual credit courses, which she has prioritized as part of her work in college and career readiness. She believes that dual credit is a key strategy to supporting students' learn about careers, postsecondary options, and financial independence. Like Marisol (College; Coordinator), she is also present at multiple community-wide events. She has stressed the importance of engagement with families outside of regular school hours and in non-school-related functions. Eve also co-chairs one of the workgroups from the dual credit committee and is working to help the partnership support staff and faculty, especially in relation to their knowledge and understanding of dual credit opportunities in their district. Her experience at both institutions and her undeniable passion for helping students transition to postsecondary education has been noted by her colleagues as being invaluable to the district.

Ethan

As assistant principal of student support services at Sub-Urban High School, one of Ethan's main responsibilities is to oversee the counseling department. His work with school counselors has been challenged by the pessimistic and often "dismissive" attitude of the team

surrounding dual credit discussions. Although Ethan has also been frustrated with some of the operational decisions both at the high school and the college, his experience working to overcome similar experiences at other school districts has influenced his leadership around dual credit programming at Sub-Urban High School. He strongly believes there should be a clear separation between the high school's and college's enrollment processes. Ethan has leveraged his administrative discretion to modify the course selection process in favor of dual credit, a move that has many at the high school questioning his intent. Ethan holds a firm education and student access philosophy, which he attributes to his father's experience as a faculty member at Northern Community College. He openly acknowledges that his connection to the community college as well as his critical viewpoints of postsecondary institutions have allowed him to address the systemic issues affecting their dual credit partnership from a unique perspective.

Thematic Results

The key findings of this study are presented across five themes that emerged from analyzing the data. I describe these in this section while incorporating the voice of study participants to exemplify the essence of each theme. First, I will detail how individuals' experiences and beliefs have influenced the partnership's shared vision. Second, I describe how legislation has been integral to the partnership's work yet there are varying degrees of understanding. Third, I will explain the partnership's challenges with repairing inefficiencies within their enrollment process. Fourth, I articulate how misconceptions have both plagued the partnership's progress and informed them about the most critical knowledge gaps. Finally, I discuss the impetus behind the partnership's work to developing student-centered practices.

Shared Vision for Equity and Access

This theme encapsulates how the partnership has worked to craft a shared vision around equity and access, while noting the power that individuals' experiences have had in developing it. Through conversations, it was evident that participants have worked to build a sense of community, and although they might not agree on the particulars of how to best serve students, they are united by their personal and professional commitment to help students succeed. Through my interactions with participants, I learned that they each hold strong beliefs and opinions on why they support dual credit.

Leadership at Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School articulated their institutional commitment and drive to adopt an optimistic and realistic approach to their work. When asked about her willingness and eagerness to improve their dual credit partnership, Samantha (College; Director) shared:

> OK. I overheard someone at a conference a few years ago say that talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not. And I feel like that really resonated with me. I think that's where my beliefs come from is that I believe that all of our students are capable. They all have goals and dreams that are very individual and that the role that we have as educators is to try to even that playing field to give students equal opportunities based on their individual goals.

She added that she believes dual credit is one of the most impactful ways to accomplish this, primarily if "used and implemented correctly." It is believed that dual credit is a tool that can increase students' aspirations and identify clear postsecondary goals. This idea that dual credit can be a source that elevates student success was unequivocally stated throughout the research.

Similarly, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) from the high school spoke eloquently about the importance of enhancing the current infrastructure allowing for critical dialogue on what matters most; he stated:

> There is that strong relationship with the community college and that we're talking the same language, that our efforts are joint in the way that we message stuff to parents and whatnot and that there's a free flow of ideas and information between us. And this dual credit committee that we established, it started off pretty slow. I'm going to be honest, it started off with Samantha (College; Director) and her team trying to get together with folks of our team and just having conversations like you and I are having right now about values. What do we value? What's important? What's not?

Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) and his team have come to embrace the power of bringing like-minded practitioners together to craft a unified and consistent message on the importance of dual credit, he noted that:

> So, I think that just speaks to the power that these groups and these committees can have. If everyone's committed to the work and everyone's committed to kind of make this happen, and you're bringing in people along the way to help, the opportunities are really endless.

The dual credit committee, co-chaired by Samantha (College; Director) and Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent), has been a secure space for the team to construct a collective understanding on how to increase student participation most effectively. Although some have criticized their efforts, it has not deterred their commitment to change the mindsets and beliefs of their most prominent critics.

The high school team shared that teachers and school counselors have questioned the value of dual credit altogether, especially as the district has been working to open access. Marisol shared a story about a time when she helped lead an information event for students to learn about their dual credit opportunities and overheard school counselors talking negatively about the school's intent:

> The counselors were actually talking really bad about the people from the high school that were there presenting. They're like, oh, they opened it up to more students that didn't meet the prereqs. These students are in credit recovery. Why were they being spoken to about dual credit?

Not knowing about the story that Marisol had shared with me, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) commented on his work of how he has focused to influence school counselors to accept dual credit as an equal alternative to advanced placement courses. He said, "They're still not 100 percent confident in all of it, but we're working through that." In his rationale for why he has isolated school counselors, he mentioned:

> In cases like dual credit and even AP, if we truly are about all students and having all students be successful, then if a student is demonstrating the competence and the wherewithal to want to enroll in one of those classes, who are we to tell that student that they can't or they shouldn't or they're not qualified or et cetera?

Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) emphasized the importance of institutionalizing their vision. He noted that leading all district staff to adopt a progressing view of dual credit is in their best interest. He added, "Right now, students or even staff will say, oh, you don't want to go to community college. You shouldn't take dual credit. And that's the furthest from the truth." However, the ramp up to accomplishing this monumental goal is steep. As program coordinators,

Julie (College; Coordinator) and Marisol (College; Coordinator) highly support the high school's

shift to increasing awareness and finding new opportunities to elevate students' best interests.

Despite reserving criticism on some of the high school's past decisions, they agree that

instituting a progressive view on dual credit participation serves the community well. Marisol

(College; Coordinator) remains optimistic that Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) and

his team will be successful:

> I mean, I think we're in a better place than we were six years ago. At least we have more
>
> people listening, where before we had no one listening. So, I guess sometimes whenever I
>
> get – I don't get depressed where I feel defeated at times, but I'm just like, OK, well, why
>
> are we still dealing with this? If it's not one thing, there's another barrier. But I think at
>
> least we have more people involved and more people listening now.

Legislative Fog

One of the main objectives of this study was to understand how dual credit practitioners

have come to interpret state-level legislation and policies regarding dual credit programming.

This theme describes the paradox of the partnership's relationship with legislation. From my

interactions with participants as well as my observations, I learned that all individuals

acknowledged the dual credit legislative act as being a primary source to aid them in managing

their program, yet their baseline knowledge differs significantly.

Interestingly, their current knowledge varies significantly. When asked about how the

team at the high school has interpreted components of the state's dual credit legislation act,

specifically segments on student eligibility, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) openly

shared the following:

I've got to be honest, Rodrigo, I'm not as familiar as I should be with that act. And I

don't know when it recently has come down. I think our legal department – I had a

question a couple months ago, and she said she had to kind of keep herself abreast of the

[dual credit legislative] Act as well.

Yet, because of his experience working in multiple large school districts and dual credit in

general, his perception of the legislation was that:

The act is put in place to ultimately – if I think of the directions that a lot of districts are

moving, the act has been put in place to really expand dual-credit opportunities for kids

and not limit students who participate.

Furthermore, he acknowledged the need to take greater accountability as he reflected on his

team's limited understanding of the Act as well as the potential of using the legislation to

reinforce their vision. He noted the following:

So, it really triggered for me that, number one, when I spoke earlier about educating our

counselors with information on dual credit, having them be familiar with the [dual credit

legislative] Act, to me is a great starting point, a great entry point for us to say, hey, as

you can see, we're starting to offer more dual credit classes as a district. I want you guys

to understand and be aware of what the [dual credit legislative] Act says around these

things because then that maybe then – it naturally will have them start to question some

of the eligibility criteria that they've set up for themselves, kind of lead them to that

answer on their own.

The leadership has been challenged to maintain an open space for criticism to freely enter

conversations. Julie (College; Coordinator) has tried to avoid discussions that deal with policies,

she said:

I'm not a policymaker. I'm not somebody who is really in touch so much with the laws as, say, Samantha (College; Director) is, or I don't make decisions about courses and curriculum. But I help facilitate those decisions. And once those decisions are made, then I help execute all that and make it happen at the schools.

Although it makes some participants uneasy or uncomfortable, Samantha (College; Director) finds these interactions invaluable to their partnership and credits the team's commitment to not dismiss or fall too far back into their own interests. As an example, Marisol (College; Coordinator) shared a specific story about the time that Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) questioned why the college was not working to expand programming leading to dual credit students earning an associate degree. Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal)'s criticism came from his understanding of how a neighboring community college leveraged legislation. Marisol (College; Coordinator), shared that high school personnel often misinterpret legislation and the community colleges' enrollment policies which results in a presumption that the college is attempting to limit student access. I learned from Samantha (College; Director) and Marisol (College; Coordinator) that this situation allowed for the team to clarify and affirm their dedication to increasing participation, and more importantly, it created an opportunity to discuss legislation and other state-level policies.

Discussing legislation is a topic that tends to produce the most tension amongst team members. Over time the college has been asked to lead these conversations while the high school has reserved itself to a more passive role to ensure they have a clear understanding on any legislative changes. As legislation has become a common topic, they are working to gain an in-depth understanding of it to help them in identifying initiatives aimed at increasing equitable access for students.

61

When Eve (High School; District Coordinator) was asked to share her perspectives on how dual credit legislation has influenced the high school's direction and planning, she diverted to college-career readiness legislation that has been widely recognized in the state. However, she was forthright and confident in sharing how important it is for practitioners to be up to date on legislation:

> I tell people all the time that if you're not reading every once in a while about the new legislation that is in your craft, then I don't understand why you're – in your profession, you need to know there's always something coming down the pipeline.

Considering that each team has varying degrees of experience and knowledge, Northern Community College has accepted the responsibility of briefing the partnership on dual credit legislative updates. The reliance on the college to educate members from Sub-Urban High School and the other 23 high schools in the region has given the college a considerable amount of leeway to influence how equity and access should be operationalized. Samantha (College; Director) had the following to say:

> So, if I know that these are my legislative or accreditation requirements, how can I be in compliance with that and still be concerned about making sure that we are offering, again, equal access to and support through our dual-credit programming? And what I find a lot of times is many of the things, not everything, but many of the things that I think are impacting our equitable access and success are not tied to our compliance issues.

When asked to share how high school personnel in general have responded to legislative conversations that focus on student eligibility and enrollment, Samantha (College; Director) exclaimed:

I feel like a lot of the information, especially in the [state's legislative act], is power for our high school partners. Like, if they really understood all of the rights that they have under that act, I think they would feel a little bit less like they've felt in the past in that community colleges make all the decisions and have all the power and arbitrarily kind of make up rules.

She elaborated that over the years she has studied the legislation to the degree that her expertise has been invaluable to the region, which she believes equally benefits both the college and the high schools. She concluded by stating:

And so, trying to get the knowledge to them, I see as being key in building our partnerships because I really feel very strongly that the students we're serving through dual credit are shared students. They are both of our students. And the high schools want as much as we do to open up opportunities for the students, but to open up high-quality opportunities. And I think making sure they have the knowledge about these rules and regs is really important and really moving our partnerships forward.

Curious to learn more about how the college has managed their obligation to upkeeping its compliance requirements while responding to the high school's demand for improved equitable practices, I probed the Northern Community College participants to speak about how their interpretation of specific state-level policies may or may not align with high schools' requests for "greater equity" or "increased access." The college team noted that the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the trauma, set a window of opportunity for them to push ahead and expand its multiple measures policy. They relentlessly worked to adopt additional mechanisms for students to gain access to dual credit courses, which aligned with the partnership's shared vision of improving student access.

Inefficiencies in Enrollment Procedures

The partnership, indeed, is focused on increasing student participation in dual credit courses. In the conversations with study participants and the observations at their respective institutions, they highlighted their student enrollment practices. They shared mixed emotions, as some felt that their processes adequately supported their shared outcomes, while others criticized the effectiveness of their approach altogether. Yet, there was a clear indication that both parties sought an organized and well-coordinated plan to work on leading students into dual credit collectively.

The Northern Community College team discussed the "dual credit orientation" as the most consistent point of contact with new dual credit students. They noted that orientation was required of students, although it was previously optional. The orientation is designed to accomplish two main objectives; it is an opportunity for college staff to emphasize the benefits of dual credit and guide students through the application process. To enroll in dual credit, students must complete the online admissions application and a paper enrollment form, which is distributed and collected by the program coordinators during the orientation. It is important to note that the college has allowed the educational partnerships department to enroll students past the regular semester timeline. This means that students may be actively engaged in learning while not officially enrolled in the course. When asked if this complicates things for the college, Samantha (College; Director) noted the following:

> It's not always the first week, but, yes, we try to get in as quickly as possible. And I won't go into this now because I think it will muddy the waters a little bit. But we are planning to move that up so that students are enrolled, but I don't like that students are not – that the class is running for maybe a month before the students are enrolled. So,

we're hoping to move that up and working with our high schools on how can we get

access to the students before they're in the class to work on some of this. But that is still

in the planning stages.

Julie (College; Coordinator), one of the most veteran program coordinators, shared similar

concerns with the application process. She mentioned that in addition to managing an online and

paper application, the process is often more difficult due to issues accessing students,

technology, or scheduling conflicts. Therefore, the team is sometimes obligated to shift from

their standard operating procedures. Julie (College; Coordinator) noted this by stating:

So, it's such a gargantuan effort to get everybody on the same page. And then to have

several different high schools that will then say, well, you know, if you're not going to

really enroll them until November, then what's the point of having you come out in the

spring and do all that? So, yes, it is all different ways that we do it. We do not have one

set way for each high school.

Despite shifting away from the "regular" process or differing perspectives, Julie (College;

Coordinator) felt there was inconsistent collaboration between the college and the high schools.

She was interested in learning more about the college's role in meeting with students, especially

before the required orientation. Participants were asked to respond to how the college supports

local recruitment efforts at Sub-Urban High School and whether enrollment information was

shared during these engagements. Julie (College; Coordinator) summarized her partnership with

teachers by stating:

We have some teachers that remind the kids every day and chase them down and have

Excel spreadsheets about who's done what. And we have some teachers who don't really

want to participate, but their administration wants them to, so they are. And so, they're

not as helpful.

The inconsistency was intriguing, which allowed for further questioning into what staff groups

are more likely to meet with students on their dual credit options.

The college staff pointed out that "the high schools identify the students for the classes

through the typical conversations and the course selection that happened between the students

and the counselors." They elaborated that the college has limited involvement in recruiting

students into dual credit courses. A member of the team stated:

If a student is placed into the class, most likely there was some behind-the-scenes

counselors' work to make sure that the students are eligible, and then we would just go

out in the beginning of the year to tell the students, this is a dual-credit class.

On the other hand, when asked if the college believed there were opportunities for greater

collaboration in the recruitment phase, Stacy (College; Manager) shared optimism about

supporting the high school's efforts but also noted that it was highly dependent on "high school

politics." Stacy (College; Manager) had the following to say:

I feel like a lot of buy-in for dual credit really comes down to the counselors and

administrations in the high school, whether they support dual credit or not. We've been

told where students are kind of discouraged to take dual credit because they should go the

AP route, or dual credit conflicts with their scheduling.

Marisol (College; Coordinator) repeatedly noted this point. In working with Sub-Urban High

School, she mainly expressed frustration and disappointment with the overall enrollment process.

However, this has pushed her to foster relationships with the high school beyond the norm,

allowing her to join in on various recruitment activities or meetings.

While Marisol (College; Coordinator) agreed that the college's "two" application requirement is inefficient, she focused on discussing how she has worked with high school staff to modify existing practices. Marisol (College; Coordinator) commented that most of this work falls within the dual credit committee; however, she questioned the high school's presence and engagement. She said it had taken years to get the committee to meet consistently. Marisol (College; Coordinator) shared the following regarding extending her role to support Eve (High School; District Coordinator), the college and career readiness coordinator at the district:

> As the coordinator, I was the chair for the college side. I think it was really difficult to try to get a chair sometimes from the other side that wasn't already doing a lot of the heavy lifting. And a lot of it is, like, we were trying to do these committees so that other people could help with the heavy lifting.

Although she understands it is risky, Marisol (College; Coordinator) was unapologetic about her intrusive and rushed approach when trying to get high school staff to articulate their internal processes. Marisol (College; Coordinator) said:

> A lot of the times [I] ask these questions, like where are the barriers or where are the – what is the process internally – but again I sometimes feel like I walk a fine line since I'm an external person, and I don't want to, you don't want to sound like you're telling K through 12 people what to do.

She also shared examples of conversations she has had with high school staff regarding their course selection guides or communication in general. In making these inquiries, she also offers to help develop or modify existing documents to clarify the options available to students as they transition from one grade to the next. She mentioned that she probes the high school staff to have them openly share their internal process by asking questions such as, "What are you telling

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students to take freshman and sophomore year so I can create a pathway, so I can visibly and physically write down this is what students will take this year." Or, when working with school counselors, she said, "I wish I could be as candid and say, hey, can we just do this? But it's like, I don't want to step on people's toes, and I'm this outside person."

Marisol (College; Coordinator) summarized her experiences by saying, "There's a lot of internal logistical or administration issues," but that has not stopped her from proactively inserting herself. She stated, "I'm definitely more engaged or more involved in the school, where sometimes I have to sit with counselors and say, hey, can you move the student's lunch period to here or do this." She understands that, ultimately, how the high school has managed its student eligibility and enrollment processes is out of her control, and she can only hope that students can advocate for themselves when meeting with their school counselors. If that does not work, she recruits students during the school's scheduled pickup event as a last resort.

Eve (High School; District Coordinator) from the high school appreciates Marisol's (College; Coordinator) eagerness to help more students enroll in dual credit courses. She is also critical of their enrollment processes, especially if students are potentially left out of the program. In describing the high school's outreach and student engagement plan, she notes that their "recruiting efforts have not" been stellar and that much depends on "word of mouth." She also affirmed that school counselors are uniquely positioned to recommend students and that dual credit teachers are increasingly building a coalition to lead their recruitment efforts. Furthermore, throughout her time in the district, Eve (High School; District Coordinator) has noticed increased attention on dual credit from the administration. She noted that this has resulted in more personnel being brought into the mix. She does not dismiss that additional people help to support outreach and recruitment tasks. Still, she believes it has made it more

challenging to get things done because the group has focused on outlining clearer procedures. In her opinion, the bureaucracy is negatively impacting enrollment. She encapsulated this point by saying:

> I think they're making more barriers than they have to make. So, prior to me just dealing with dual credit, I just actually – and maybe I'm wrong, right? So, I just actually said, these are the dual-credit classes we're going to offer, not really going to curriculum council, not really going to the board to have them approved. And the new people coming in feel like it needs to be approved for a curriculum council, it needs to go to the board. And that could take almost a year or two years to even – all these steps, extra steps. So, during all these extra steps, it's stopping the progress of dual credit.

Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal), assistant principal at the high school, also acknowledged the need to improve how students learn about dual credit and eventually are guided into enrollment. Most recently, he worked with his team to advocate for students to default into dual credit courses as they progress through sequence. He shared:

> What I did was, I defaulted to a [dual credit] course, and then teachers would have to change that if they wanted to. And so, we saw our dual-credit enrollment spike because I did not default to AP. Instead, I defaulted to dual credit. And that was purposeful on multiple rationales. One being our district has placed an emphasis on dual-credit opportunities.

This newly created practice is going into effect starting in the 2023-2024 school year. He anticipates there will be backlash from teachers but is confident that this decision aligns with the district's direction and goals. When asked how the college's enrollment requirements and procedures aligned with the high school's, he was not shy to express his disappointment with

some of their practices. Like Marisol's (College; Coordinator) criticism of the high school, Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) is critical of the college. He shared, "I struggle with the college specifically because I know that we've asked other times throughout my educational career, why do we have to do it this way? And we got told it's because of accreditation,". He said, "What I have found in particular with working with the college is, some of their policies don't jibe with my philosophy."

Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent), not surprisingly, shared a mixed perspective. He was positive yet cautious not to overemphasize the high school's progress towards improving the recruitment and enrollment processes at the high school. He is incredibly proud of the progress made with engaging curriculum leaders. He mentioned that discussing aspects of the dual credit program "that naturally led to other conversations about recruitment and looking at the course offering guide and trying to establish these more clear pathways." Bringing people together is an essential strategy, he stated:

> If everyone's committed to the work and everyone's committed to kind of make this happen, and you're bringing in people along the way to help, the opportunities are really endless. And we have to do a much better job in "Sub-Urban" of doing that.

Overall, both the college and high school discussed some challenges in managing an efficient and effective recruitment and enrollment process. They were both critical of each other's roles and responsibilities. Yet, they expressed a desire to improve the current infrastructure to run a process that maximizes opportunities for students to enroll in dual credit courses.

Troubled by Misconceptions

In conversations with all the study participants, they commented on their experiences and observations about how teachers, school counselors, and other staff provide inaccurate

information about the dual credit program. While it does not surprise some participants, others question if some are silently protesting against dual credit. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) talked about his focus on working with teachers, especially teachers that have the credentials to teach dual credit courses; he noted:

> So, I think it's really shifting the mindset of some of our teachers around, hey, you have a master's degree in psychology, have you ever thought about teaching dual-credit psych? Have you ever thought about teaching this class? And really pulling on that lever as a principal to kind of motivate them to do so. I think that's been another challenge is finding the staff on campus who are willing to make that leap to do it.

As Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) described, the main challenge is that he believes most teachers are "very protective" of their classes. They are safeguarding their curriculum and students. In his opinion, it is more about keeping what they are comfortable with rather than stepping into that will not produce the same benefits for students. However, in some instances, he shared that teachers often hold negative perceptions that are based on misinformation.

When discussing with staff at the high school, Marisol (College; Coordinator) referenced her experience working with school counselors and their approach to advising students during the annual course selection process. She shared the following:

> There's a lot of leaks in the pipeline or cracks that – even today I was there earlier, and I have counselors tell students, oh, you can only do either tech campus and you can't do dual credit, vice versa, or you can't do additional dual credit at Lakeshore, you can only do this, like really limiting students.

On multiple occasions, Marisol (College; Coordinator) shared that when witnessing these interactions between high school staff and students, she was not only troubled but had to

intervene to provide the "correct" information. When inquiring about why she believes this is a

constant issue, she relayed that more training and professional education is needed. She also

mentioned that she believes that it is connected to the high school's "culture." Marisol (College;

Coordinator) added:

> So, I think just the culture in general. I'm a "Sub-Urban High School" alumna, and when
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> I was there, there wasn't dual credit. And now that there is, I think there's just that shift
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> in the culture that needs to be made. And that is a start, but I sometimes even hear from
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> my teachers that I had when I was there, they're like, oh, if you – we have Psychology for
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> regular credit, we have AP Psychology, and we have dual-credit Psychology if you're
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> going to "Northern Community College."

The teachers' comments about dual credit "only counting" if students enroll at the community

college post-high school graduation are situations that significantly trouble Marisol (College;

Coordinator). She questioned, "Why are you [teachers] discouraging students from taking a class

where they are guaranteed the credit if they pass the course versus taking an AP test?"

Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) corroborated Marisol's (College;

Coordinator) concerns about some teachers sharing misinformation. He alluded to this by saying:

> I think one of the biggest challenges that I've seen in the short time that I've been
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> working with the high school is just kind of the misperceptions around dual credit. I
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> shouldn't say misperceptions. Misconceptions around what dual credit is.

Despite admitting to these challenges, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) was hopeful

that the dual credit committee has the potential to improve communication and knowledge across

the school district. Most participants also agreed that the committees' combined experience will

drive them to develop a plan that can methodically address common misconceptions and

establish a consistent narrative. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) shared a case that the committee recently discussed related to the varying degrees of knowledge that staff have regarding dual credit functions at the district:

> What we're finding is that if you ask a counselor about it, if you ask a partner about it, if you ask an assistant principal about it, chances are you're going to get three different answers. So, we realized really quickly that there's a lot of inconsistency out there that's impacting our ability to really recruit kids and get kids into dual-credit courses.

School counselors were referenced by all study participants as being hostile at times and responsible for maintaining certain misconceptions. They discussed the critical role they hold in helping students learn about dual credit, and they also noted that they have a considerable amount of influence on a student's dual credit enrollment. One participant specifically questioned school counselors' commitment to the community and student body by saying:

> My take has always been like, our students are from a marginalized community, and they need all the help they can get and all the savings they can get for not going into debt. You need to treat them as if they – because to be honest, a lot of our counselors are not from this community or these type of communities.

When pressed to elaborate, they expressed disappointment in some school counselors' view of students' capacities. They mentioned that many school counselors doubt students' academic aptitude, regardless of if students met the prerequisites.

Despite the issues linked to school counselors' actions or beliefs, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) remains committed to providing the space and resources for the counseling team to acquire the necessary knowledge and lead major components of the district's

transformation plan. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) confidently assured their role by noting:

> I'm going to be honest, it starts with having a really strong counseling team and maybe through your counselors know what it is, because they're the ones that talk to students much more frequently than I do, of course, than the principal, than the assistant principal. So, what I found, when we've had the biggest impact in the schools that I've worked in, it's that our counselors, number one, they bought into the idea of dual credit, but number two, they had a really solid understanding of what it is and what opportunities it can create for students.

Similarly, maneuvering through internal conflicts or misunderstandings is something that Samantha (College; Director) has experienced throughout the college. She discussed her struggles and "battles" with college administrators, faculty, and staff. Samantha (College; Director) described it as follows:

> I'll say historically, which is pretty common in many places; when I first started working with dual credit, it was hard. I was still making the case for dual credit internally and externally. And so, there was a lot of I think misinformation and distrust. We still face a little bit of that, but every time we were trying to start a new program, almost every time, it was a battle internally to get the support that we needed. It required a lot of really strategic planning and conversations to build awareness about what dual credit is, about the benefits not only to the students but to the high schools, to the college, to the community. And so, things took a lot longer.

When asked if there was a group at the college she works with most often on this issue, she referenced that faculty have been very "engaged" over time. She said:

So, I think faculty are the group who have the most questions for us about dual credit. And their charge is really to advance their department, to protect their faculty. And so, they have a lot of questions about – sometimes have a lot of questions about how does dual credit fit into their work, and is it something that advances their work, or is it something that can create problems or challenges for them, especially in relation to adjunct assignments? So, if we offer all these dual-credit classes, then do we have students coming to the college to take their classes? And if we don't, then are they not able to offer courses to adjuncts, or are they not able to maintain the same number of full-time faculty positions?

In considering Samantha (College; Director)'s response about why the faculty have dedicated significant attention to learning about dual credit, follow-up questions were asked to better understand their concerns. Samantha (College; Director) answered by stating, "Sometimes the concerns are based on misinformation. And so, that's an opportunity to share the true information." She added that faculty often blame dual credit for decreased enrollment in their programs; however, in analyzing the data they have shown that dual credit is not to blame. Samantha (College; Director) has developed a practical, data-driven, and honest approach to her work. She shared:

It's always hard when working with partners. You are balancing so many things. You want to maintain positive relationships. You want to advance programming. There are so many moving parts. You don't want to step on toes. You don't want to get into the middle of internal issues on their side. And so, I think, again, to me, part of the first piece is listening. Where do you get your information? Who needs the information? And then

it's about working with others who are supporters, who are proponents of dual credit to

help us get the information out to the people who need it, who may not have it.

While she recognizes that there are limitations to people's capacities, she has challenged her

team to consistently work to address misinformation and misconceptions whenever they are

previewed to it.

The Promise of Student-Centered Practices

A key focus of this study was to learn from participants about their practices that guide

students to enroll in dual credit courses. It was also important to decipher how their decisions

were influenced by their understanding of state-level policies. This theme exemplifies the

partnership's goal of manufacturing new policies that may be interpreted as unconventional but

geared towards maximizing opportunities for all students.

Because the college holds control over most of the decisions regarding enrollment

procedures, any efforts to increase access and participation depend on the college's overall

effectiveness. However, the high school has worked to clarify their intention to increase student

participation while acknowledging that they may have been preventing access. Joe (High School;

Associate Superintendent) shared an interesting perspective on how he has challenged the high

school team:

> I think it's a paradigm shift in how we – in the mindset in terms of how we approach it
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> that there was a point in time where, yes, we had criteria for regular classes, we had
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> criteria for honors, we had criteria for AP, we had criteria for this. There was a point in
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> time when that was the thinking. I think if we're really going to be a district that values
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> equity and values kind of a growth mindset and continuous improvement, we have to
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> move away from some of those eligibility things.

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He shared the following to illustrate the high school's shift from a conservative to a progressive view on students participating in dual credit:

> When I started working with the high school two years ago, there was a set criteria that students had to quote-unquote "meet" to be dual-credit eligible. And when I asked questions about who created that criteria, why was that criteria in place, nobody really knew, to be honest with you. So, that started setting off red flags in my head right away. It was like, OK, we have this criteria that may be a little antiquated, or we have these things, these expectations that have been in place, but nobody really understands why.

When asked if the college has attempted to influence which students can participate in dual credit coursework as a way to counter the high school's attempt to exclude students, Samantha (College; Director) shared the following:

> We have not taken a stance on high schools doing anything else, I think partially because I may be incorrect, but I'm not aware of much of that happening. My impression, and again, this is not well informed, but my impression is that it's not so much that high schools are putting in place policies or procedures that are excluding students so much as they're just not talking about it enough for students to know about it. And so, I don't think it's necessarily intentional exclusion.

Overall, Samantha (College; Director) was cautious with her responses. However, I learned that Samantha (College; Director)'s leadership to increase access all around was intentional and instrumental at the college. The COVID pandemic significantly reduced access to students' opportunities, mainly because students were not able to complete routine tests. As an example, students did not have adequate access to take the college's placement exams. Therefore, Samantha (College; Director) and her team worked with the college's leadership to implement

additional measures to allow students to participate in the dual credit program, which were adopted college-wide and enabled non-dual credit students to enroll in college-level courses.

Samantha (College; Director) noted that the foundation for advocating for additional measures was due in part to her prior success with allowing students to use scores from the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) as well as high school class rank:

> I advocated many years ago to get PSAT added as an option in addition to SAT. I advocated for – we used to be able to look at high school class rank after at least, I think it was seven semesters of high school. So, I was able to get that reduced to five semesters because obviously seven semesters isn't helpful for our dual-credit students.

Stacy (College; Manager) talked about their response and decisions when faced with the difficulties of the pandemic. She said, "During the pandemic, because a lot of schools hadn't taken some of the SAT exams, we bumped that placement measure (English and mathematics) down to three semesters." She went on to explain that their success in advocating for this policy change was grounded on the language from the state's dual credit legislation, but also noted that this change had been a long-term project and believed other colleges continue to struggle with adopting more progressive policies:

> Our multiple measures of placement, we've advocated for that for many years, and it's taken a long time, and I think there's other institutions who don't have as much of placement measures, and they're just a little bit more strict and defined. So, we are trying to do our best to advocate for students and be equitable and have various measures, because students don't always test well, so that's why we want other options in there as well.

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Realizing the success of using students' grade-point average (GPA), her team worked with the college to pilot the use of class rank to meet the English and mathematics requirement. She noted that she had to proactively convince the high schools to change their fundamental perspectives on how they viewed the use of this measure before bringing a proposal to the college:

> I went to our high schools to ask them – again, I shared the pain point, like, this is the problem we're trying to solve. And then I went to the high schools and I said, hey, if you're looking at the top third in class rank, what is that GPA typically going to be?

After analyzing the data, she noticed the advantages of incorporating class rank as a multiple measure, although some high schools were unsure about its potential.

> I again went to our high schools, and I said, how much does your students' rank or GPA change from semester to semester? And then always what I've said is, let's use this as a pilot, and if it doesn't work – we'll look at data, if it doesn't work, if we're seeing success rates plummet, we can revisit it, but let's at least try.

When asked about dual credit students' success since implementing this new policy, Samantha (College; Director) claimed, "We're finding that our dual-credit success rates are higher than our standard success rates." The high schools have benefited from the college's newest placement policies, as students now have greater access to dual credit than before the COVID pandemic.

In addition to working on clearing up misunderstandings and creating an environment where more students can be offered the opportunity to participate, the high school team has worked on multiple communication strategies to increase awareness. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) summarized this point by stating:

The more information you have, the more empowered you feel about it, the more chances

are you're probably going to look into it, pursue it, whatever the case might be. So, really

empowering people with it in what it is and what it's not, just so they're clear.

From a building perspective, Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) stressed his support for

instituting practices that advance the district's goal of student success. His team at the high

school has worked to include former and current dual credit students in their recruitment plan.

This initiative is taken from Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent)'s previous experience

at another school district. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) described it as such:

We would have kids that were in the class, they would be the recruiters for the teachers.

So, they would go to other classes and say, hey, my name's "Joe", I'm currently in dual

credit 101, whatever the course was, these are the things that we've learned, these are the

things I'm learning about, this is the expectations of the course, it's really no different

than a high school class you take except the curriculum is a little more rigorous, et cetera

As Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal)'s team plans to continue this strategy, he is

confident it will strengthen their commitment at implementing other strategies that stress the

value of student-centered practices. He partially described this perspective by saying:

I think we need to provide those [dual credit] opportunities for kids and say, yeah, we're

willing to let you try. And we have a support system here in case you fail. We should be

the safe place to fail because unlike – at college, you're in a class, and then all of a

sudden you're like, whoa, I'm way over my head. I'm dropping this sucker. In high

school, we can put you in that course and say, you know what, you're over your head,

let's drop you down a level without penalty, without a gap in your schedule, to just slide

you down, and that's OK.

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Once in the dual credit courses, he highlighted the value in continuing with the positive reinforcement and the intentionality behind the messaging:

> If we can then within that classroom have the messaging and the advertisement of, you are completing college coursework, we're then able to say to a child, you can do this. So, you have the capabilities of being college bound whether you did or did not think you were.

Overall, members from both institutions are focused on building onto their infrastructure to ensure that their actions improve students' opportunities to participate in dual credit courses.

Field Observations

This section summarizes key data collected from the four field observations that were conducted over the course of the year and supported the identification of the key themes described above.

Public Observations

Dual Credit: Today's State of Affairs. At this year's dual credit summit, the keynote speaker gave an overview of dual credit legislation, both from a historical and practical standpoint. The speaker's intent was to illustrate the enrollment disparities across student populations while noting dual credit's overall growth and progress. The presentation made several references to the difficulties with deciphering the existing legislation, a point that came up repeatedly in conversation with the study participants.

Moreover, in her comments about issues that are believed to be impacting student enrollment, the speaker briefly shared that issues surrounding student eligibility practices are mounting like the ongoing challenges of inconsistent teacher credentialing procedures. In reading parts of the state's dual credit legislation, she noted, "eligibility must be evidence-based and

include multiple appropriate measures," which was followed by a statement that claimed the language has been problematic due to its vagueness and varied interpretation from practitioners. Altogether, the speaker's remarks were in alignment with the experiences of the dual credit partnership and helped to support the identification of the *legislative fog* theme.

It Takes a Village. As part of a conference presentation, Marisol (College; Coordinator) and Eve (High School; District Coordinator) discussed their progress towards establishing a collaborative and strategic partnership grounded on "shared values and goals." Most of the time was dedicated to outlining their partnership's organizational structure, course offerings, student participation, and teacher involvement. Throughout the presentation, there was a direct and intentional focus on sharing their thinking leading to key decisions that have stressed their attention to equity and student-centered practices. Moreover, they were also transparent about issues that they are currently experiencing regarding the "unwillingness" of some staff to support dual credit enrollment in the high school.

The presenters also stated that the dual credit committee has been working to dismantle a culture at the high school that has "overemphasized" advanced placement courses. As one of them shared, "We are fighting the AP culture." Overall, they were consistent in their message and confident in their statements. They concluded by saying, "We have to change people's perspectives," and stating that "sometimes the systems and foundations that we create hurt students." The data collected from this observation supported the identification of the following: *shared vision for equity and access* and *the promise of student-centered practices*.

Private Observations

Sub-Urban High School: Transformational Planning. Sub-Urban High School has been fortunate to have multiple organizations flock to support their college and career readiness

initiatives. This summer, a small team of high school administrators and staff met with members of UnifiedEdu to discuss the district's progress on enrollment, equity, persistence, and freshman on-track/FAFSA completion. The overall tone of the meeting was optimistic, yet the group talked extensively about the need to increase school counselors' engagement with college and career readiness initiatives, improve processes to support school counselors' engagement with students, improve relationships between school counselors and college-career staff, and increase accountability standards for school counselors.

At one point, the question of who is responsible for managing formal agreements, including their dual credit agreement with Northern Community College, was brought up to emphasize the need for a more efficient process. The district leadership also shared that it was not uncommon for organizations to target them because of their student demographics or school metrics. Regardless, the district team shared an immediate need to improve access, organization, and data sharing with key stakeholders (school counselors, college and career readiness department, and teachers). This field observation supported the development of the *inefficiencies in enrollment procedures* theme.

Dual Credit Department Meeting. The department of educational partnerships recently hired a new college and career readiness manager. An invitation from their director was extended to observe an internal meeting that provided an overview of the department's policies and procedures regarding student enrollment. There were several items that stood out. For example, the college team talked intimately about their discontent with the current process which requires students to complete a dual credit enrollment form in addition to the regular admissions application.

The paper form in specific was criticized by the staff due to its ineffectiveness and the issues that it causes in completing a student's enrollment. The team also remarked that the form precludes several students from participating in the dual credit program. As the team shared an overview of the recruitment and enrollment processes, they commented, "High school teachers have a lot of discretion with enrollment decisions." They were critical of the power that teachers have on the enrollment of students, which they believe is a disadvantage for many students. Furthermore, when discussing how their practices aligned with the state's dual credit legislation, the group admitted that their understanding of dual credit policies was not up to par and questioned if their program was in alignment with the requirements of the legislation.

Document Analysis

Throughout the research process, documents were collected from the study participants and other sources. This section highlights data that was retrieved from two types of documents and used to enhance the findings in the study.

Standard Operating Procedures

In detailing their recruitment and enrollment activities, participants referenced multiple documents that provide guidance to staff and maintain uniformity in processes. For example, during one of my field observations, the college team shared a set of documents, the "student enrollment decision tree", and the "student enrollment process". Both documents delineate the step-by-step procedures a program coordinator must follow to complete a student's dual credit registration. Although each task is clearly described, the complexity of the documents makes it difficult for an outsider to follow.

Additionally, another procedural document that was discussed in meeting with the study participants was the "dual credit – timeline and roles 2022-2023." This document plays a pivotal

role in the work between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School. While it is similar to the college's "student enrollment process" document, it is specifically tailored to the unique needs of the high school. The evaluation of standardized operating procedures provided significant insight into how the partnership works through their enrollment operations. These documents allowed the opportunity for a more focused conversation on how staff generally feel about these resources, which was integrated into the development of the *inefficient enrollment procedures* theme.

Meeting Agendas

The team provided copies of past meeting agendas for the "dual credit advisory council" and "dual credit committee." These documents illustrate the proactive and forward-thinking approach the partnership has attempted to undertake to address their most critical issues. They also depict their focus on refining and optimizing recruitment and enrollment procedures. What sets these agendas apart is their unwavering commitment to communicating precise and timely information to a broad array of stakeholders that emphasize the importance of transparency in their collaborative efforts. The agendas repeated the usage of "accountability," "remove barriers," and "build awareness".

Moreover, the mention of legislation, rules, and regulations is noteworthy and coincides with the evidence collected from the interviews and field observations. Based on the language and the structure of the agendas, it appears that the college has cautiously maintained a neutral stance on this topic. However, it was clear that the responsibility of providing updates or leading the groups in conversations about legislation was placed on the college. The agendas made it evident that the high schools did not have a role in this matter. The assessment of these

documents helped to support the development of the *legislative fog* and *shared vision for equity and access* themes.

Data Triangulation

The use of a case study design required collection of data from three sources; interviews, field observations, and documents. The triangulation of data in this study was not only necessary but essential to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Dual credit partnerships, in general, rely on the experiences of the dual credit practitioners as well as the available resources within the environment of which they operate. Thus, they are uniquely different in many ways, especially in how they process common information that leads them to deciding on their local practices.

In this study, the dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School was represented by the seven study participants interviewed. Their stories and the information they shared were the primary source of data used to identify the key findings. However, in order to gain further insight into their relationships, operations, and decision-making processes, it was important to step into their environment as authentically as possible. The field observations helped offered a different perspective that otherwise would not have been made available from simply conversing with the participants in a one-on-one setting. By observing the study participants in their natural element, the authenticity of their experiences were noted and considered along with their interactions. Furthermore, the evidence collected was used to identify key documents and affirm that the documentation provided throughout the research process were essential to the cultivation of the emerging themes in this study. Each set of documents evaluated, as those referenced in the previous section, provided detailed accounts

of the dual credit partnership's approach to planning and actions focused on improving student access to dual credit coursework.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the findings of the study. The analysis of data collected from interviews, observations, and select documents identified five themes: shared vision for equity and access, legislative fog, inefficiencies in enrollment procedures, troubled by misconceptions, and the promise of student-centered practices. The thematic analysis results were described in this chapter, corroborating with statements from all seven study participants. The themes help to understand how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility, interpret state-level policies and regulations, and the effects their decisions might have on the enrollment of minoritized students.

This chapter also described the dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School. Profiles of each of the seven participants and a description of four observations were also included. Lastly, a summary of two types of select documents was outlined to affirm the connection between the data collected from interviews, observations, and documents. The next and final chapter will discuss my interpretations of these findings, implications, and limitations. Recommendations for future research and practice will also be presented.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The emphasis of this final chapter will be on discussing and interpreting the findings presented in chapter four. The analysis of data collected from interviews, observations, and select documents identified five themes: shared vision for equity and access, legislative fog, inefficiencies in enrollment procedures, troubled by misconceptions, and the promise of student-centered practices. The discussion will provide my interpretation of the findings as it corresponds to the study's research questions, conceptual framework, and existing literature on dual credit. This chapter will also present the limitations of the study, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Overview of Study

It is evident that in today's labor market, people that complete a postsecondary education will benefit by having access to jobs and careers that will not only provide a livable wage but carve a pathway for future economic and social mobility (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Moreover, projections indicate that postsecondary education and training will undoubtedly reward those who have access to it and, more importantly, can obtain on-demand credentials. As the K-12 education system works to establish authentic career awareness, development, and engagement experiences for students, they must also account for the classroom learning that will support these opportunities. Additionally, educators should identify programming that most effectively positions students to enroll in a postsecondary program of study upon high school graduation.

Among other early college credit options, Dual credit has prominently become a favorite for school districts. It is unique in many ways, including the infrastructure that it operates under and the direct link to state-level legislation. Because it requires a school district and

postsecondary institution to come together and agree on an overall concept, it has created programs that come in all shapes and sizes. However, research has shown that minoritized students have consistently lagged behind their white and more affluent peers in enrollment rates (Mehl et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). The quest for more dual credit has left students of color and low-income backgrounds further behind. Legislation and varying practices have been a central source for sustaining this disparity. Although dual credit advocates have rightly used legislation to advance opportunities for students in underrepresented communities, the language and guidance have often caused more problems than solutions (Burns et al., 2019; Andrews, 2001; Haskell, 2016; Hoffman, 2003; Hugo, 2001; Kim & Bragg, 2008).

Based on their interpretation of legislation and other state-level regulations, dual credit partnerships develop programming procedures to manage their program. Everything from financial obligations to the selection of courses, institutions must be agreed on by the partnered institutions. Research on dual credit programs has informed the field on the consequences and opportunities of practitioners' decisions. However, limited research has been done on how dual credit practitioners are led to the practices used to manage student eligibility.

Research Questions

The study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do practitioners interpret the dual credit policies and regulations of the State of Illinois?

2. What practices have practitioners implemented to manage student eligibility for dual credit programs?

3. How do practitioners' interpretations of policies and regulations affect the enrollment of minoritized students in dual credit courses?

Purpose of the Study

This research study was conducted to understand how dual credit practitioners manage student eligibility based on their interpretation of state-level policies and regulations. The seven study participants representing their institutions, Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School, shared considerable insight into their dual credit partnership. They detailed and commented on the many operational procedures that have been implemented to support their recruitment and enrollment goals. These findings add to the existing literature on how dual credit practitioners work together to cultivate student eligibility practices from policies, institutional goals, or individual experiences.

Research Design and Methodology

The research design used for this study was a qualitative exploratory case study design. This approach allowed the opportunity to learn from individuals representing a dual credit partnership between a community college and a local public high school district. Seven dual credit practitioners participated in this study: four from the college and three from the high school. A semi-structured interview technique was used to interview all participants at least once. In addition to the interviews, a series of observations were conducted in public and private settings. These included a summer retreat meeting at the high school where an outside organization helped update its transformation plan and a college staff meeting to onboard new employees. Lastly, select documents were collected directly from participants and the institutions' websites. All data was coded using a multi-phase coding process leading to the thematic results presented in chapter four. Moreover, the study's trustworthiness and rigor were addressed by the triangulation of data collection and analysis, as well as using member checks throughout the research process.

Dual Credit Partnership and Participants

This study focused on learning from one dual credit partnership. The partnership included Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School. Both institutions have shared accountability and are responsible for managing various aspects of their dual credit program. Northern Community College serves the third largest county in the State and is home to approximately 20,000 students. It is one of the most diverse community colleges, with a high percentage of Latinx students.

Furthermore, it is currently in partnership with 24 high schools and offers a variety of dual credit courses. Sub-Urban High School, one of the largest unit school districts in the State, has had a dual credit partnership with the college since 2014. The high school also serves a high percentage of Latinx students but has had limited dual credit enrollment overall. The college and high school recently established a dual credit committee to address several recruitment and enrollment concerns.

The study recruited participants from both institutions utilizing purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. They are also members of the dual credit committee and are responsible for managing or leading different recruitment and enrollment processes on behalf of the partnership. The list of participants included both administrators and staff. They also have diverse experiences working with dual credit programs and have held multiple leadership positions within the education systems.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The data collected in this study underwent a multi-cycle coding process. Saldaña (2016) describes a code as a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." The

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coding process incorporates several techniques. The initial cycle used structural coding to "chunk" data, and the second cycle used In Vivo coding to analyze the data line-by-line. Codes and subcodes were organized into categories, then used to derive the four themes thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter. In this section, I provide my interpretation of the key findings related to the study's research questions and conceptual framework, as well as the existing literature on dual credit.

Dual Credit Legislation

The themes of *shared vision for equity and access* and *legislative fog* correlates with the first research question regarding how dual credit practitioners interpret the State's dual credit policies and regulations. The dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School must operate under the State's "dual credit legislation." Like most states, the State's general assembly has cemented the opportunity for postsecondary and secondary institutions to co-develop a dual credit program. The "dual credit legislation," originally signed into law in 2009, was created to set quality outcomes for all dual credit partnerships. Since its passage, the "dual credit legislation" has been amended twice, and each time has brought a series of changes aimed at clarifying roles and responsibilities or enhancing access to dual credit offerings. It should be noted that other laws related to or specifically about dual credit have been passed. Although they tend to hyper-focus on one issue, the "dual credit legislation" is the primary and dominant law in the State.

In addition to the "dual credit legislation," the community colleges must abide by the supplemental rules set by the State's community college board. Secondary institutions currently do not have a set of "rules" or guidelines their respective state agency has adopted. Therefore, community colleges must ensure they attend to the "dual credit legislation" and the rules

included in the board's manual. Ultimately, a dual credit partnership must codify its local policies and practices into a memorandum of understanding in alignment with the aforementioned "dual credit legislation" and "rules."

Learning about the dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School revealed that they have progressively worked to adopt a shared commitment to improve their overall programming. They talked extensively about how they each perceive dual credit as a mechanism for high school students to elevate their current and future academic achievements. The participants' viewpoints about the benefits and intrinsic value of dual credit programs aligns with the core tenets of human capital theory. The dual credit partnership overwhelmingly holds the position that all students will benefit from participating in dual credit coursework. Additionally, they have adopted the idea that dual credit participation reinforces future academic success, enhances students' odds of completing an academic program of study, and ultimately leads students to "successfully" enter the workforce. In one of our conversations, Samantha (College; Director) stated the following:

> And I think dual credit is one of the best tools we have to do that because it is really blurring the lines for students between K-12 education and higher education. Seeing themselves as college students, building that confidence, building those aspirations, letting them explore different disciplines and career opportunities and start building credit toward a degree or a certificate that will help them meet their goals.

She went on to explain that part of the program coordinators' responsibility when working with schools is to share this information directly with students. They are put in a position, as long as high schools will allow it, to elaborate on the benefits of participating in the program. Moreover,

the coordinators are also tasked with supporting students' transition out of dual credit and into the community college, if that is their first choice upon high school graduation.

Although all members of the dual credit committee have a wealth of experience with dual credit, it was revealed that, except for Samantha (College; Director), they have a limited understanding of the State's dual credit policies and regulations. The committee, as well as the region, has defaulted to Samantha's (College; Director) knowledge and interpretation. During the interviews, all members were asked to share their knowledge of the State's dual credit policies and regulations. Surprisingly their responses varied significantly. Samantha (College; Director) and Stacy (College; Coordinator) identified the "dual credit legislation" and referenced the community college board's rules, while some noted other college and career readiness legislation. A couple mentioned that they could name it but did not have a strong understanding. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) shared that he was not current with the legislation; however, because of his experience working in other states, he commented that he was familiar with these legislations. He stated that dual credit policies have historically been enacted to increase opportunities for students, especially those in underrepresented communities.

Joe's (High School; Associate Superintendent) acknowledgment of dual credit legislation aligns with how the literature describes the purpose and outcomes that policymakers have historically pursued. The dual credit literature has covered legislation's role in developing and maintaining programs (Jamieson et al., 2022; Karp, 2015). Taylor et al. (2015) and others have detailed the early beginnings of dual credit legislation, which dates to 1985 with the passage of the *Postsecondary Enrollment Options* program in the State of Minnesota. Today, all but two states have enacted dual credit legislation, and the consensus has been that these laws are designed to support secondary schools' efforts to provide students with meaningful and quality

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early college opportunities. While each State's legislation varies, they all aim to offer potential dual credit partners with the parameters they must operate within. Some even lay out specific procedures that must be implemented (Taylor et al., 2015; Zinth and Barnett, 2018), like in the case of student eligibility.

Furthermore, Samantha's (College; Director) interpretation of the State's dual credit legislation is more profound, that when coupled with her experience and perspective on dual credit being a driver to increase equity, she has strategically advocated for new policies in favor of students. Throughout our conversations, Samantha (College; Director) referred to her views of educational systems, saying that she believes "adults" have created a lot of structures that often contradict the goals of access and equity. This has pushed her to lead a shift in how leadership at the college perceives dual credit while also affirming that increased access does not equate to lowering academic rigor or a subpar program. She emphasized that her preparation and lead into conversations with others revolves around legislation, policies, and regulations:

> When I have conversations with leadership, and I'm trying to advocate for changes or for our programs and our students, my foundation is what is the state legislation? What are the legislative requirements? If I know that these are my legislative or accreditation requirements, how can I be in compliance with that and still be concerned about making sure that we are offering, again, equal access to and support through our dual-credit programming?

Samantha's (College; Director) unyielding focus and approach to shifting the institution's narrative on dual credit over the years aligns with how Schein (2017) articulated their model of organizational culture. The model indicates that an organization can be studied by its three distinct levels; surface-level behaviors or artifacts, held ideologies or rationalizations, and its

underlying assumptions. In learning about Samantha's (College; Director) longevity at the college and dedication to dual credit, I found that she has acquired an in-depth understanding of the college's operations and procedures, leading her to study the basis for most decisions that impact student access and enrollment. She is now working to decipher the college's assumptions, especially regarding dual credit and similar programming. In her quest, she has armored herself with the knowledge and tools offered by key legislation or other state-level regulations. When she reiterated her experience with developing or supporting equity initiatives, she said:

> What I find a lot of times is many of the things, not everything, but many of the things that I think are impacting our equitable access and success are not tied to our compliance issues. They're additional things that we've put in place as a college. So, that's a lot times where my conversation is. Look, I understand this is the requirement, but we have this additional rule, and if we got rid of this rule, it would not put us out of compliance.

However, what I found to be more insightful was her dedication to uplifting the high schools' interests and needs. On multiple occasions, she emphasized that, in her opinion, the State's legislation gives secondary schools an advantage.

Contrary to Ethan's (High School; Assistant Principal) belief that the college, or legislation, is enacting barriers and preventing further access for students, Samantha (College; Director) shared that the legislation is the ideal blueprint for partnerships to advance their collective agenda, and sometimes quoting the State's dual credit legislation was all that it took to defend against opposition to the dual credit committee's objectives. These types of situations can alleviate the high schools' fear or worry that the college is unlikely to attend to their needs, and Samantha (College; Director) recognizes that this strategy is working:

I think as they start to see that we are working really hard to advocate on their behalf,

which is really on behalf of their students, which is really on behalf of our students, right,

because we're serving the same communities.

Furthermore, I found that as the dual credit partnership has entrusted Samantha (College;

Director) with equipping the team with the knowledge and updates on key legislation, they have

started to recognize that it should be a shared responsibility and that it must be incorporated into

the professional development of staff. Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) alluded to

this shift when he acknowledged his shortcomings. Within the context of student eligibility, he

reflected on the value of requiring his team, especially school counselors, to engage in training

concerning dual credit legislation. This reflection came as we commented on what had already

been shared with me regarding the dual credit committee and Samantha's (College; Director)

role in leading the group through these conversations. Others, like Eve (High School; District

Coordinator) and Marisol (College; Coordinator), also expressed the importance of the

legislation; however, their limited understanding or inability to identify it indicated that the

group has not worked to interpret it beyond what has been shared with them by Samantha

(College; Director).

Managing Student Eligibility

The second research question, "What practices have practitioners implemented to

manage student eligibility for dual credit programs?" was addressed by the following themes:

inefficiencies in enrollment procedures and *troubled by misconceptions.* As I learned about the

partnership's infrastructure, organization, and personnel, I spent significant time inquiring about

the practices the team currently uses to manage program awareness and student enrollment. Like

the partnership's commitment to establishing a standard set of goals and outcomes, they agreed

on two fronts. First, they discussed the need to improve their organization and practices around how students learn about dual credit and the enrollment process. Second, they noted that a challenge to developing, implementing, and managing practices that support student enrollment deals with contesting misinformation and misconceptions in their buildings.

Throughout the conversations, I explicitly asked the study participants to outline how they work to inform students about the dual credit program, including the requirements needed to enroll in courses. The team from Northern Community College was thorough and shared several documents that referenced their standard operating procedures. They also shared several anecdotes to detail specific components of their work. For example, Marisol (College; Coordinator) and Julie (College; Coordinator) highlighted the benefits and challenges of having a strict process. Marisol (College; Coordinator), in her work directly with Sub-Urban High School, talked about how she often has to go "off script" because the high school staff is not well-informed or unable to lend the necessary support. She shared the following regarding extending herself beyond the norm:

> I'm being reactive in the fall and having to recruit students even during schedule pickup. And it's sometimes a little bit too late for our classes where we either have to cancel them, and I don't have the paperwork for them, I don't have the transcripts. So, there's really no system in place or process in place, and we have piecemeal, either by teachers that are doing some work.

Similarly, Julie (College; Coordinator) discussed the need to be agile and calm when working with high schools. Although the college's procedures provide a roadmap for the program coordinators, it does not always go as planned. She articulated this point by saying:

You know, that is an interesting question because sometimes I walk in there, and I am the first time they have even heard about this. We have a lot of – we are growing exponentially at this college for dual credit, so we have a lot of new teachers, which means that the teachers who have been there for a few semesters know the drill, and they're like, OK, so the coordinator's going to come in, and this is what it is. But there are a few classrooms I've gone into this year, even, where it's been like, the teacher's been like, I don't even really know what it is that you do.

On the high school side, Eve (High School; District Coordinator) and Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) agree that their processes should be improved. They recognize that they are not doing a good enough job at introducing dual credit to students and families. Although they noted a few procedural items that needed to be refined, such as teacher recommendations and class schedules, what I found to be most intriguing was their focus on describing the overall attitude and perspectives of others in their school district. It appears that as much as they would like to focus exclusively on adopting new standards and guidelines for students to navigate the enrollment process, they are consumed with the pressure of combating others' opposing views on dual credit.

Everyone from the Sub-Urban High School team acknowledged the misinformation flowing through their district and the misconceptions it has helped to nurture. As Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) stated:

I think one of the biggest challenges that I've seen in the short time that I've been working with the high school is just kind of the misperceptions around dual credit. I shouldn't say misperceptions. Misconceptions around what dual credit is.

Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) also commented on this point by sharing some of the actions that he has taken to help others learn about dual credit:

>And I'm not sure how well we've done here specifically at advertising the dual-credit option. So, this past year I changed our practice with how we recommend students. So, in the past, it had been teachers would just make a recommendation based upon what class they thought the student should go to next.

Eve (High School; District Coordinator), similarly, holds a strong opinion on the deficiencies within their system, especially the beliefs of some of her co-workers.

>We are having to educate everyone again. And so, we're at a standstill right now. And to be honest, I think that's what our [school] counselors want because most of our counselors are AP focused. But if you don't have anybody either at the school level, the principal or the curriculum people or somebody from the district saying this is what it is, then they're going to have it their way. So, I don't know. I can't say if they don't have the knowledge anymore, or it's the fear behind it.

The dual credit committee, initiated by the college, has been adopted as a secure environment for the team to discuss ensuring consistency of information and identify tasks to improve their overall engagement with students. As I learned more about how students learn and are led into dual credit courses, it was apparent that teachers and school counselors possess control over a student's potential enrollment.

Research on student participation has noted the disparity between white and minoritized students. Furthermore, it has highlighted specific findings for this sustained trend, including the beliefs and actions of particular groups of people in our school systems. In a study by Osumi (2010), they showed the influence that school counselors possess in the enrollment of students.

They also indicated that school counselors commonly believe that students must show high-level autonomy and academic aptitude to enroll in dual credit courses. In other studies, Rivera et al. (2019) discovered that students' access to dual credit courses is highly dependent on their previous academic achievements, which is strongly correlated to their socioeconomic status. Taylor et al. (2015) found during their research on student eligibility policies that most states include language in their legislation to regulate which students can participate in dual credit. However, more importantly, they noted that states, by and large, have incorporated "high standards," which restrict access.

The findings from this study corroborate the research that school counselors believe academic merit to be a reliable source to determine which students should be allowed to participate. Samantha (College; Director) pointed to the role of school counselors during our conversation by stating that by the time her team engaged with students to lead them through the "dual credit orientation" process, school counselors had already dictated who would participate. Marisol (College; Coordinator) shared an experience in which she overheard school counselors' comment on a group of students' ability to participate in dual credit during an informational event:

> The counselors were actually talking really bad about the people from the high school that were there presenting. They're like, "oh, they opened it up to more students that didn't meet the prereqs. These students are in credit recovery. Why were they being spoken to about dual credit?"

Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) openly shared that early into his tenure as the lead on the dual credit program, he asked for clarification on how staff were determining which students were eligible to participate. Although he could not explicitly relay the criteria in place at

the time, he stated the policy itself was unclear and was being practiced inconsistently throughout the building.

Therefore, I find that the current unorganized system is essentially the "gates," which is the source that staff have used to maintain the enrollment disparity between white and minoritized students. As participants articulated when and how students are informed of their admission into dual credit courses, I noted that they lacked information on how those decisions were made. For example, when asking the college team if the high school had established criteria that staff use to determine eligibility, they opted to share the fact the college has not instituted additional requirements beyond the course prerequisites and that those decisions, if any, were left entirely to the district. On the other hand, the high school did not share any specific process or guidelines that teachers and school counselors, as the two primary groups responsible for recruitment, use to determine which students are moved into the enrollment phase.

The absence of consistent guidelines for teachers and school counselors to reference creates a situation where these professionals must rely on their knowledge and autonomy to make decisions based on their individual understanding of the school's "standards". Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy states that public service personnel are often set up to make critical decisions "in the moment" and often outside of their purview. They are forced into situations that require them to rely on their interpretation of the "policy" in place. Therefore, their work in these cases affords them a substantial amount of discretion, and as a result, their decisions are at risk of being inconsistent. Whether or not school counselors and teachers are actively and intentionally maintaining the status quo in dual credit programs should be critically examined. The findings of this study suggest that the "misconceptions" or "misinformation" that participants referenced throughout the research process is being upheld, and potentially

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promoted, by the deficit viewpoints of the personnel. On multiple occasions, participants discussed instances in which they sensed or overheard staff talk disparagingly about dual credit. In other cases, participants noted that staff appeared to intentionally not engage in the recruitment and enrollment processes, leaving them with limited opportunities to learn about the changes that partnership is working to implement. These findings beg the question about these professionals' unconscious bias and positional power to limit dual credit enrollment, especially that of minoritized students. Overall, participants did express concern about how the work of school counselors may be constraining the efforts of the partnership.

Policy to Practice

The theme of *the promise of student-centered practices* described the dual credit partnership's efforts toward increasing enrollment in dual credit courses. This theme addressed the third research question, "How do practitioners' interpretations of policies and regulations affect the enrollment of minoritized students in dual credit courses?". The information learned from participants, observations, and documents outlined how Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School are collaborating to create new opportunities for students to experience the benefits of dual credit.

In chapter four, I described both institutions and noted that they serve a large Latinx student population. Sub-Urban High School's enrollment of Latinx students is above 80 percent. The high school also serves an above-average student population categorized as living in low-income households. Latinx students are one of the two minority groups with the lowest rates of participation in dual credit in the State and the nation (An, 2013; Shivji & Wilson, 2019; Burns & Leu, 2019; Stand for Children, 2020). As I engaged with all participants in this study, I asked them to share their experiences supporting marginalized students. They unanimously indicated

their goal of ensuring more students of color and low-income backgrounds had the opportunity to participate in dual credit courses. A few of them talked extensively about the critical nature of disturbing the current structures and how they have encouraged the group to challenge deficit thinking, which is believed to be limiting access altogether. Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) spoke eloquently about his beliefs on how dual credit programs should operate to increase equitable access. In one of our conversations, he shared his thoughts on why dual credit programs should be opting to institute different procedures and expectations for students in dual credit courses that those that are in existence for college-age students that are enrolling at the college's main campus:

> If you listen to equal-opportunity schools that's affiliated with the State, too, and some of their messaging is really all about opening access to kids. And in particular in areas where – we may be or the students in this building may be the first high school graduates, maybe the first child that is looking to go to college. And so, if we are able to provide them that college experience while they're here in a safe environment that is safe to them culturally and socially and with academic advisement and support that we provide, and from a high school perspective we do more handholding than a college would. And so, we'll do more hounding you about your homework and hounding you about your attendance, because we're still high school teachers. And so, we want you to be here.

As we went back and forth on discussing the parameters in place to confirm which students are "eligible", the topic of course prerequisites became the focus of our conversation. In short, Ethan (High School; Assistant Principal) admitted to having a radical view on requiring students to meet specific testing or academic requirements before being allowed to enroll in dual credit courses. He fully understands the concept and its connection to things like institutional

accreditation; however, he finds it to be an enormous contradiction in the context of dual credit programs.

> I think we need to provide those opportunities for kids and say, yeah, we're willing to let you try. And we have a support system here in case you fail. We should be the safe place to fail because unlike – at college, you're in a class, and then all of a sudden you're like, whoa, I'm way over my head. I'm dropping this sucker. In high school, we can put you in that course and say, you know what, you're over your head, let's drop you down a level without penalty, without a gap in your schedule, to just slide you down, and that's OK

Ethan's (High School; Assistant Principal) perspectives on dual credit programs' student eligibility policies are consistent with what the research has discovered. Several researchers have studied how legislation, or other state-level policies, have guided the dual credit partnerships in this area, and the one consistent finding is that dual credit programs are using procedures that limit student enrollment (Thomas et al., 2013; Williams & Perry, 2020; Zinth & Barnett, 2018).

In thinking about the theoretical concept of interest convergence, dissecting the information shared by the participants to better understand the "intent" of their local policies to serve minoritized students is necessary. Ethan's (High School; Assistant Principal) comments and stories indicated that the college is working to limit access, however the actions of the college show that they are proactively seeking to increase enrollment in dual credit. Regardless, we can question if the college is operating under an alternative intent that better serves their interests. Dual credit requires that dual credit partnerships address all legislative mandates, which the college has shown to be doing very well, yet they must also balance their own interests. In *Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High school with College Makes Sense and How to Do it*, Venezia et al. (2007) discuss the importance for the two educations systems to settle on common

ground and not distract away from their mission of educating students. They state that reforms in both sectors have been depended on their respective interests. On the secondary side, educators have been pressed to significantly increase the number of college-going students, which directly benefits postsecondary institutions. In the case of dual credit, community colleges are specifically put in a position to benefit. However, enrollment in community colleges is constantly in flux, which means that community colleges must manage the constant risk or low enrollment, especially when the nation's economy thriving. In analyzing the data from this study through the lens of interest convergence, one may disagree with Ethan's (High School; Assistant Principal) perspective and instead focus on the colleges' eagerness to grow their dual credit programs and even go as far as to claim it as a strategic enrollment initiative first and foremost. The growth in dual credit participation would certainly result in financial gains for the college.

In reflecting on Ethan's (High School; Assistant Principal) comments and the dual credit literature, I am conflicted with how dual credit programs can operate under different student eligibility measures, but also do it in an effective way that does not completely alter their institutional expectations and goals. The research is unclear regarding how postsecondary institutions can or should look to override existing institutional, State, and regional procedures to attain greater accessibility for students. Furthermore, the work of practitioners that must balance a community college's course prerequisites with the factors that high schools adopt to determine student eligibility is poorly understood. Time and time again, I probed the study participants on this topic. Their responses mainly focused on describing the college readiness benchmarks in English and mathematics, however, a few participants acknowledged the natural encounters between staff and students to informally assess other academic and social factors.

Despite the dilemma of what dual credit practitioners can or cannot do as a dual credit program, Samantha's (College; Director) leadership and expertise with the "dual credit legislation" has propelled the region to consider new ways for high school students to enroll college courses. Samantha (College; Director) and her team have paved the way for the dual credit partnership to enact alternative routes for students to access dual credit courses. They have focused extensively on identifying multiple measures that students can use to meet the English or mathematics prerequisites as required by most courses.

As Stacy (College; Coordinator) mentioned, "We've [the college] tried to be more equitable and have various placement measures so students weren't just placing in off of a test score." The tests she referred to are the placement tests administered by the college or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) that most high school students complete in the 11[th] grade. The limitation to tests has been a concern of the college team and many of the region's high schools. However, the college team took the initiative to research potential alternatives for placement other than exams. Consequently, they found support and reassurance in the "dual credit legislation." The college team acted quickly after the "dual credit legislation" had been amended to require dual credit programs to address the following in their agreements:

> The establishment of academic criteria for granting eligibility for high school students to enroll in dual credit coursework. The academic criteria shall be evidence-based and shall include multiple appropriate measures to determine whether a student is prepared for any dual credit coursework in which the student enrolls.

Samantha (College; Director) commented that their work to adopt grade-point averages and class rank as multiple measures was difficult. Since the community college board had not adopted guidelines for institutions, Samantha (College; Director) and her team were put in a position to

formulate a grassroots initiative that advocated for multiple measures. Their success in incorporating GPA and class rank, the college team radically changed the institution's understanding and vision of equitable access. Their leadership is significant.

The purpose of multiple measures considers students' academic and social factors as an alternative to standardized exams. The dual credit literature has not readily addressed the practice and policy of multiple measures. However, in a study by Dyer et al. (2022), researchers found that students' "positive self-concept has the highest correlation as a predictor of achievement in dual credit classes based on dual credit GPA" (p. 22). More generally, the research of multiple measures assessment in higher education has demonstrated that a model inclusive of academic metrics (e.g., GPA) in addition to standardized test scores or as an alternative, is a stronger predictor of student achievement. The use of standardized tests alone inadequately places students in developmental coursework (Cullinan & Kopko, 2022).

In this study, participants from Northern Community College referenced the use of multiple measures to address their regional goal of developing and maintaining equity-based practices. From Samantha (College; Director) to Marisol (College; Coordinator) and Julie (College; Coordinator), their shared focus and determination to consistently evaluate opportunities to address inequities align with the recommendations that have been documented in the dual credit literature (Duncheon & Relles, 2020; Edmunds et al., 2022; Pompelia, 2020; Taylor, 2013; Williams & Perry, 2020; Zinth & Barnett, 2018). Their advocacy in the area of multiple measures shows that they have worked to be responsive and intentional on the guidelines that have recently been published by the Community College Research Center in *The Dual Enrollment Playbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students* (Mehl et al., 2020). Similarly, Joe (High School; Associate Superintendent) at the high school understands the

criticalness of evaluating internal policies as an opportunity to identify barriers preventing them from enhancing equitable practices. A significant component of the college's success in adding GPA and class rank to its list of multiple measures is attributed to Joe's (High School; Associate Superintendent) leadership and collaboration. Although it is apparent that the dual credit partnership's collective effort to challenge existing policies is a priority, it appears that the partnership has a way to go to fill its knowledge gap when it comes to understanding the essence of multiple measures assessment, which is not uncommon in the dual credit field.

Implications for Practice

Based on the information and knowledge gained from studying the dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School, I present three recommendations that dual credit practitioners should consider adopting into their operations. These all can potentially improve opportunities for students; however, practitioners not actively addressing these areas may continue to experience challenges that revolve around organization, engagement, and procedures. These recommendations are not meant to address all issues that dual credit practitioners are experiencing while trying to increase student participation altogether.

Strategic Engagement and Planning

The dual credit partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School discussed their journey towards establishing a collaborative environment to come together and address their main concerns, specifically with student recruitment and enrollment. Learning about their failed efforts before securing a consistent space via the dual credit committee, I find their pursuit to identify the most efficient and effective approach to engaging in deep dialogue essential. What started as an opportunity for representatives from both sides to articulate the challenges they were experiencing with accomplishing many of their day-to-day

operations has turned into an intentional and secure setting for the partnership to outline shared goals and objectives.

The committee has since adopted group and meeting norms, a schedule or routine, and workgroups. They have also worked to share each other's internal processes and detail areas for improvement, especially in cases where there is potential for collaboration. Furthermore, the teams have referenced their shared commitment to accountability, equity, and transparency. Essentially, the partnership is working towards manufacturing a system that allows them to further their planning and organization. Their arrival to this phase of their collaboration has been reactive. Still, otherwise, it has improved their overall relationship and understanding of how they can better support one another.

In 2011, Kania and Kramer (2011) published an article titled "Collective Impact" that introduced the concept and rationale for why "large-scale social change" can be accomplished most effectively via strategic collaboration that includes multiple organizations. In this groundbreaking article, they outlined the elements needed to achieve collective success. They stated, "Collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that produce true alignment and lead to power results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations." (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39). As I reflect on the actions of Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High Schools members to bridge their understanding and goals, I reflected on how their strategic engagement and planning resembles some of the key elements of the collective impact framework as introduced by Kania and Kramer (2011). Dual credit partnerships are challenged with the development of a joint program that must balance the demands of two education

systems. Each institution brings with their institutional culture, which may complicate the partnership development processes by limiting engagement and collaboration.

Additionally, by adopting the framework and reorganizing themselves under each of the elements, Sub-Urban High School and others alike will benefit from a centralize source for other community-based partners to come together and provide their expertise and resources. For school districts, and dual credit partnerships in general, that have additional partners beyond the local community college, it would be advantageous for all involved to come together and partake in bridging their individual goals with those of other organizations.

Professional Development and Training

The study participants had invaluable experience and knowledge of dual credit. Throughout our conversations and the observations that took place at their respective institutions, I noted that they all had worked to acquire a deep understanding of dual credit programming. The level of knowledge ranged across the group, which is expected in any organization; however, what stood out the most was that the team lacked a consistent knowledgebase of the dual credit legislation. On the other hand, they all mentioned the general lack of knowledge about dual credit programming among staff and faculty at both institutions, especially in terms of the what their dual credit program offers and how works in collaboration with student services, as well as the curriculum and instruction team.

Legislation. The dual credit literature has documented the critical role of legislation in dual credit. This study revealed that the State's "dual credit legislation" has significantly contributed to development of the dual credit partnership between Northern Community college and Sub-Urban High School. However, in this case, only one member from the college and no one from the high school had extensive knowledge and understanding of the legislation. The

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partnership has put Samantha (College; Director) in position to relay legislative and procedural information to the group. Their reliance on one individual's interpretation may not be the most effective approach. Legislation, in general, is dense and can be complicated to understand. Furthermore, in the case of dual credit, the legislation's language is vague and lacks clarity. Therefore, I recommend that dual credit partnerships work to prioritize the development of in-house professional development that leads members of both sides in deep discussion about the state's legislation and other regulations that governed the programming of dual credit. These training opportunities should be organized in collaboration and highlight the value in learning about how dual credit legislation, regulations, and procedures are commonly understood. However, most importantly, these sessions should intentionally make time and space for partners to learn and reflect on their practice.

Program-Partnership. The results of this study showed that members from both institutions have had to attend to issues grounded in misinformation or misconceptions. The study participants shared their experiences learning about their colleague's misinterpretation of the dual credit program. They indicated that people's understanding of the dual credit program is often incorrect, which leads to misconceptions and negative commentary about the partnership. Additionally, they shared instances in which people were not up to date with specific processes or operations, which made it difficult for them to accomplish their tasks effectively. Along with incorporating professional learning opportunities for key members of the dual credit partnership to increase their knowledge of legislation, the team would benefit from leading professional development on dual credit and how it operates in their region. This opportunity should also include a diversified group from both institutions. It is critical that staff from both institutions combined their professional development efforts by organizing a series of trainings that focus on

the various components that make up their dual credit program. For example, dual credit partnerships may benefit from leading training on the following topics: recruitment and enrollment, course offerings and sequencing; curriculum and instruction, and faculty-teacher collaborations.

Program Model: Standards-Based Approach

Learning about the dual credit partnership's efforts to assess, modify, and create new processes to increase their effectiveness around student recruitment and enrollment revealed that the team has struggled to agree on their general approach. Members were critical of each other and their institutions' direction, leading students through the enrollment process. Moreover, similar comments were shared regarding different aspects of the dual credit partnership. For example, they noted their guidelines on reviewing and approving high school instructors to teach dual credit courses. This was another area of contention by the high school, as they questioned how the college's procedures aligned with other community colleges in the State.

In thinking specifically about developing policies and procedures at the local level, supported by legislation, I believe dual credit partnerships would benefit from engaging in the difficult work of developing their own standards that are rooted in evidence and best practices. As noted throughout this study, the field of dual credit has been built to allow local partnerships to uniquely design their programs according to their interpretations of policy and their individual experiences. The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP), the nation's sole accrediting body for dual credit partnerships has produced a standards-based approach to developing and managing dual credit programs. However, in the 16 standards that provide guidance on faculty/instructors, assessment, curriculum, students, and program evaluation, student eligibility is not readily discussed. The standards do not provide guidance on

how partnerships can work to incorporate student-centered practices that have the potential to increase dual credit enrollment. However, their long history and success in support partnerships enhance their programs' quality is a valuable resource for institutions to reference and model in their quest to improve their overall effectiveness.

Limitations of Research

The methodology for this qualitative research used a case study design. Yin (2018, p.12) states, "Case studies are preferred when the relevant behaviors still cannot be manipulated and when the desire is to some contemporary event or set of events." The essence of a case study requires that the researcher secures the "case" around parameters that bind it and not allow for other factors to be considered. Thus, the findings of this study are limited to the partnership between Northern Community College and Sub-Urban High School and cannot be applied to other dual credit partnerships.

Furthermore, the study participants that shared their experience and knowledge were selected using sampling techniques that excluded vital stakeholders, including students, parents, school counselors, and faculty. Additionally, the relationship between the two institutions in this study does not represent the college's interactions with its other partnerships. As a reminder, the college currently offers dual credit courses in collaboration with 24 high schools. The educational partnerships department acknowledged its advantage over other community colleges in the State by noting that it has been privileged to have a larger team than the average institution. Therefore, the resources dedicated to high schools are unlikely to be the same in other regions of the State.

Lastly, this study did not collect student participation data. Therefore, the data collected from interviews, observations, and select documents did not allow the opportunity to evaluate the relationship between the dual credit partnerships' actions and their effect on student outcomes.

Future Research Recommendations

The findings of this study lead me to make the following recommendations for future research. This study was conducted due to the gap in the literature regarding how dual credit practitioners interpret dual credit legislation and, more importantly, act on that understanding to institute practices that ultimately determine which students are eligible to participate in dual credit coursework. Future research should continue to focus on this relationship to understand further the intricacies that influence dual credit practitioners' decisions.

School Counselors in Practice

As noted in this study, dual credit has been heavily legislated. Procuring an agreement between a postsecondary and secondary institution relies extensively on the legislation of each State. The impact of legislation on the work of school counselors is not readily understood. The study participants in this research frequently referenced school counselors; however, no school counselors were interviewed, limiting the findings. Furthermore, the data suggests that school counselors hold a critical role in students' academic development. They are held responsible for supporting students in making decisions about their courses. At times, they are locked in a position that requires them to make those decisions on behalf of a student. Therefore, future research must study the impact of dual credit legislation on the work and responsibilities of school counselors. As the findings of this study revealed, dual credit partnerships' goals of increasing access are challenged by the limitations of their infrastructure, including how various personnel are included in the process of leading students through the dual credit program.

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In the case of school counselors, research should focus on studying on how their profession has worked to understand and conceptualize dual credit programs by taking into account their experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the research should use a critical framework that allows for in-depth analysis of how individuals' biases and subjectivities affect their judgement and the services that they provide to aspiring dual credit students. Lastly, research should also focus on how dual credit legislation is influencing the school counseling profession in secondary education, specifically as it relates to increasing opportunities for students to partake in early college credit coursework as part of career pathways or tailored programs of study.

Student Eligibility Standards

Research on student eligibility practices and procedures needs to be enhanced. As practitioners, our understanding is limited to the work of select partnerships, often institutions that reside within one State. Like the literature has stated, this study found that dual credit practitioners' interpretation of legislation and other factor leads them to develop local processes to manage student eligibility, which may be entirely different than their neighboring communities. The risk of inconsistency and the impact on equity should be alarming. The field would greatly benefit from additional studies incorporate a wide range of research methods.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods should be used to study this emerging phenomenon further. Aside from research that sheds more light on this topic, we are in dire need of gaining a fuller understanding of how the different criteria that are in place affects students' outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, college transition, etc.). Study participants referenced their commitment or belief in equitable practices throughout the research process. However, this study did not collect data on student enrollment or outcomes. Therefore, future research should

focus on examining the relationship between dual credit practitioners' decisions and the enrollment of students. The research community and practitioners would greatly benefit from studies investigating the effectiveness of practitioners' decision-making processes.

Recruitment and Eligibility of Dual Credit Instructors

Students' access to dual credit coursework is highly dependent on the availability of high school instructors that meet the qualifications to teach college courses. Although this study did not examine the procedural elements that allow for a high school instructor to teach dual credit courses, the participants noted on several occasions that overall engagement of instructors was limited. In one particular conversation with the associate superintendent, it was noted that high school instructors with the qualifications to teach tend to sidestep the opportunity to teach college courses. For this reason, dual credit research should continue to advance the literature to include studies that investigate the experiences and perspectives of potential dual credit instructors. Moreover, studies should also consider examining the impact that local policies used to determine the availability of dual credit instructors has on the opportunities for students to enroll in dual credit coursework.

Conclusion

The education community continues to invest in developing and growing its dual credit programming. As one of the fastest-growing early college credit programs, postsecondary and secondary institutions have been quick to reinforce their internal infrastructure and dedicate more resources to support their dual credit enrollment. Compared to other early college credit programs, the benefits have intrigued communities to extend their course offerings and increase student participation. The research community is challenged with keeping up with the growing pace of dual credit participation. The legislation appears only to have enabled the opportunity for

high school students to complete college courses and, as a result, start their journey into higher education with the support and financial assistance that otherwise does not exist. However, the fact that each State has outlined the parameters by which dual credit partnerships can operate has complicated the ability to identify the most effective practices to support students' progression.

The success of any dual credit program depends immensely on the practitioners responsible for developing, implementing, and managing the day-to-day operations. Although many states afford institutions the autonomy to set policies and direction for their regional dual credit programs, the reality is that the experiences of students are going to differ across communities. Dual credit programming has not been available for as long as other similar opportunities, and it is significantly different in structure and management. Our collective understanding of the best practices and policies to support student participation and maximize its benefit is limited to our overall knowledge. Community colleges, as the primary servicer of dual credit courses, are in a unique position to help students attain the credentials required for sustainable economic and social success.

Yet, dual credit programs are not well understood or practiced. This study aimed to illustrate the complexities of dual credit practitioners' understanding of legislation, which heavily influences decisions that dictate which students will be allowed to participate. Dual credit programs have the potential to resolve some of the inequities within our educational systems; however, we must continue to enhance our understanding of effective practices, especially as policymakers will continue to press for progress.

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