

# Baccalaureate Degree Completion in North Carolina: Through a Dual Enrollment Pathway

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## BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This study explored the experiences of students who participated in dual enrollment programs at community colleges in North Carolina and successfully enrolled at a University of North Carolina system institution.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of students who participated in dual enrollment (DE) programs at community colleges in North Carolina and successfully enrolled at a University of North Carolina system institution. DE programs allow high school students the opportunity to enroll in college-level courses for credit that can be applied simultaneously toward their high school and college degree requirements. The results of this study indicate that DE participants were better prepared academically for matriculation to a four-year university than students who did not participate in DE and were more likely to be on a pathway towards completion of the baccalaureate degree. These findings suggest that DE programs prepare students to be successful college students by giving them the skills (e.g., time management, autonomy, establishing relationships, registering for courses, and learning how to study) needed to navigate the university environment. Lessons learned from this study suggest that there are practical implications for high school, community college and four-year institution leaders, educators, and policymakers to further identify and understand the institutional structures and practices most effective for optimizing DE programs.

## KEY POINTS

### Students enrolled in DE programs:

- » Noted the appeal of being able to earn college credit was the single most important reason for participating in DE.
- » Described feeling prepared for the transition to a four-year institution because DE helped them develop skills needed to be successful in college.
- » Perceived courses at the community college to require less time and preparation than courses at the four-year institution, which had an increased workload.
- » Experienced receiving various degrees of information on the transfer process and expressed the need for more information about that process.
- » Aspired to continue their education beyond a four-year degree.

## THE PROJECT

DE programs are one of several high school transition programs that provides students with academic pathways intended to support access and success to and through postsecondary credentials. It is a popular method of preparing students for college, but access to it has often been limited to high-achieving students (An, 2012). However, around the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, high schools and colleges began to take steps toward increasing access to DE opportunities for all students, especially underserved students who have historically found college inaccessible due to barriers to entry and lack of college readiness (Karp, Calcagno, Hughes, Jeong, & Bailey, 2007). Research on DE practices must continue to find answers about whether DE programs are addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and that access to DE is not limited only to those students who are high achieving. This study explored the experiences of students who successfully enrolled in a four-year institution after participating in a DE program. This research seeks to illuminate and understand the student experiences that most impacted their successful navigation of the transfer process as well as their motivation to persist. This insight will support institutions in creating deliberate mechanisms to enhance student motivation to persist and complete the bachelor's degree.

The primary data source for this case study consisted of interviews with 20 students currently enrolled at a university, who had successfully transferred from a community college. University and community college pairs were selected based on research that examined top performing transfer partners (Bartek, 2020).

Participants were recruited through institutional gatekeepers, social media posts, and online public record requests. Once potential participants were identified, an online pre-screening form was used to ensure the participants met the criteria of the study. Those who qualified were invited to an interview, which lasted 45 to 60 minutes. **Participant profiles can be found in Appendix: Table 1.**

In North Carolina, Career and College Promise (CCP) is the DE program for high school students. This program allows eligible North Carolina high school students to enroll in college courses at North Carolina community colleges and universities through their high school. Students who successfully complete college credits may be able to transfer those credits post-graduation to an institution in the University of North Carolina system. There are three pathways considered part of CCP: College Transfer, Career and Technical Education, and Cooperative Innovative High Schools. The majority of the participants in this study took DE courses either online, at their high school, or on the community college campus.

**Through multiple rounds of coding and memo techniques, six themes emerged from the interviews.** In the following section, I discuss each them and highlight quotes from the participants that are reflective of each theme.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Appeal of DE

The first theme addressed the appeal of DE. Throughout the interview process, participants consistently and emphatically declared that college credit was the single most important reason to participate in DE. Renee discussed her desire to be a medical doctor and acknowledged the many years of education that would be required. She explained:

*I was thinking of graduating college in two years and that's it...because I want to go into medicine...Those two years that I have already completed while in high school helped me get closer to that goal.*

Jada agreed:

*I wanted to graduate with my associate's degree...I wanted to be more college-ready.*

Many students were able to graduate from high school with a semester or two of college credit, while others earned 60 or more credits and graduated with an associate degree (six students).

### Skills

The second theme to emerge was related to developing in high school the skills needed to successfully navigate college. Participants noted that they learn how to manage their time and successfully navigate their college courses while in high school. Joy recounted:

*During high school, I was a really bad procrastinator. Then coming to Carteret and doing online courses through DE, you have to schedule everything yourself. Maybe there was an occasional email to remind you but other than that you had to keep up with your assignments and plan stuff [assignments] out yourself.*

Donna shared:

*Biology...was definitely the most demanding course. It was difficult...because the labs were in class, but the lecture was out of class [online]...We were responsible for learning the material on our own. So that was tough, with time management because...he [instructor] would tell you to read from chapter A to chapter B, and you'd have to figure out what was important and make your own study guides and prepare yourself for the test. So, that was hard, but I had the best teacher. I learned so much from that class.*

Participants suggested that adjusting to college life was still challenging, but they appreciated the opportunity to learn some of the skills needed to be successful in high school.

### Course Rigor and Workload

The third theme to emerge addressed the rigor and workload of the community college courses. When discussing community college coursework and whether or not it was comparable to the university coursework participants felt there was a distinction. Bobby expressed:

*It didn't prepare me as much as I thought it would have. [The university] classes feel so hard. The course load at [the community college]. There wasn't light coursework, but here [the university] I went from a level three to a level 10.*

Susan felt she had the skills to be successful in a university course, but she felt underprepared for the amount of time university courses require and the level of difficulty. She shared:

*The classes here are a lot harder. That's what they didn't prepare us for... They [instructors and advisors] all talk about how the classes will be different. While they do prepare you skill-wise, they don't prepare you... [for the] workload.*

While many participants felt they were not initially prepared for the rigor and workload of four-year universities, their time management skills helped in the transition and the benefit of accumulating college credits while in high school reduced time involved in pursuing the bachelor degree.

### **Information About Transfer**

The information participants obtained about the transfer process was critical to their success or lack thereof. This was the fourth theme that emerged from the data. All study participants enrolled in DE programs planned to attend a four-year university upon graduation from high school. The participants were typically taking courses that would transfer and serve the purpose of a general education or elective course at the university. Alicia articulated:

*Mr. Smith was the advisor for all the dual enrollment kids at the high school. He would come every Monday during lunch if you had a question or something ... I also had my high school counselor, Sarah ... You were assigned to one, but you could talk to other counselors ... They did not really make sure the courses we were taking were transferable. We were kind of on our own for that one. Honestly, I don't think anyone came up to me and said, "Oh, this won't transfer." No one said that and I think I just signed up for things that sounded interesting or that I knew could be a gen ed.*

Colby shared her experience with the advising center and a transfer coordinator:

*Every semester I went to the advising center... I also talked to the transfer coordinator about completing the associate's degree in my last semester and talked specifically about going to college.*

The presence of a college employee to help DE students navigate both the high school and community college environment seemed to make a difference for the participants who had that as an option.

### **Continued Education**

The fifth theme to emerge was related to students continuing their education beyond a four-year degree. When asked about their future goals and life after undergrad, half of the 20 participants reported that a four-year degree was not enough and they knew they wanted to go to graduate or medical school. After being on the university campus and speaking with advisors and learning more about their major and career goals, many students decided they wanted to continue their education.

Some participants are pursuing life-long goals while others were influenced by their experiences with DE and the four-year university they attended. Some of the students were influenced by their parents and siblings, all solidified this interest when they transferred to the four-year institution.

## **Lack of Diversity**

The last theme was centered around the lack of diversity among the participants. Information was collected from each participant to verify their ethnicity, first-generation status, and sibling information. The majority of the participants identified as white. These findings support the research that students of color are not participating in DE programs at rates equal to their white counterparts (Stuhl & Vargas, 2012). **The findings are illustrated in Appendix: Table 2.**

## **FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON PRACTICE & POLICY**

Decision makers at community colleges who want to promote DE should:

- » **Train high school staff and faculty** on different university admission requirements. Use planning guides to recommend courses that students should be taking to gain the most credit toward transferring to a university. Require staff and faculty to know which courses students should complete based on the university they wish to transfer to. If students are on a transfer pathway, ensure they are only taking courses that transfer to a university. Align DE courses and advising with college prerequisite courses. Review transcripts and help students select courses to help students attain their goals.
- » **Stress and give opportunities for students** to gain the skills needed to be successful in college. ACA 122, College Success Course incorporates many of the skills needed to be a successful college student.
- » **Establish a peer mentor program** that pairs former DE students who have successfully transferred to a university with current DE students. This would be especially helpful for those students who have no parents or siblings with prior college experience.
- » **Collaborate with all stakeholders** (high school, community college, and the four-year institution administrators and instructors) to ensure the expectations of the academic components are implemented. For example, provide a dedicated liaison between the high school and the community college who is responsible for advising and communicating to students the expectations and benefits of the DE program.
- » **Broaden entry requirements** to include, for example, fulfillment of pre-requisite requirements and/or demonstrated proficiency in the subject for which they wish to enroll or recommendations of an academic or career advisor and give students multiple points of entry into DE programs that transfer. This may allow more students of color to participate in DE programs, which would address some of the program's lack of diversity.
- » **Focus on actively recruiting students of color and first-generation college students** to DE programs. Offer a targeted approach (e.g., college-preparation in the high schools) to help prospective DE students become college-ready and therefore build up the credentials to

become eligible for DE. This is especially important for students of color. To truly achieve educational equity, policymakers and equity advocates must support the allocation of resources and opportunities that students need to succeed. Some resources and opportunities include positive and diverse school climate and strong school leaders who look for students of color for opportunities like DE. This may allow states to achieve true racial equity in the pursuit of educational justice.

## CONCLUSION

The findings represent the experiences of 20 students across three UNC System institutions who participated in DE. Obtaining college credit was the main appeal for students participating in DE. While students expressed the need for more information about the transfer process, they felt academically prepared for the four-year university environment; yet, not fully prepared for the rigor and workload. Half of the participants have aspirations to continue their education beyond a four-year degree. **This emphasis on post baccalaureate work is encouraging and reinforces DE as a possible equity strategy, although perhaps now underutilized.**

North Carolina recently expanded CCP to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, including Career and Technical Education, expanding the transfer programs to include Associate in Fine Arts and Associate in Engineering, and non-credit pathways. The participants in this study were enrolled in DE prior to many of those changes.

With a rising demand for postsecondary education and training beyond high school in North Carolina (myFutureNC, 2018), policymakers, administrators, and educators continue to look for opportunities to improve college access and success for all students. Community colleges play a significant role in the college access and completion agenda as they help students transition from secondary to postsecondary education and/or entry into the workforce, namely through DE programs that provide high school students the opportunity to complete at least some postsecondary education and training before graduating from high school.

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Battle, K. A. (2020). *Baccalaureate Degree Completion in North Carolina: Through a Dual Enrollment Pathway*. Raleigh, NC: Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1**  
**Participant Profiles**

Pseudonym	DE Experience	Number of Credit Hours and/or Degree Earned	Race/Ethnicity
Colby	Middle College	60 (AA)	white
Richard	Online	9	white
Michael	Traditional	60 (AA)	white
Michelle	Online	12	white
Georgia*	Traditional	45	white
Donna	On HS Campus	34	white
Catherine	Online	12-14	white
Jacqueline	Middle College	40	white
Kathy	Traditional/On HS Campus	16	white
Joy	Online	18	white
Renee	Traditional	60 (AS)	Black
Susan	Early College	60 (AS)	white
Zillow	Online	3	Asian
Jennifer	Traditional	21	white
Alicia	Online	21	Asian
Joshua	Traditional/On HS Campus	60 (AS)	Asian
Andrew	Early College	60 (AA)	white
Jada	Traditional	60 (AS)	Black
Bobby	Traditional	26	Asian
Heather	Traditional	21	white

**Note:** \*All participants attended public high schools except Georgia, who was homeschooled. Traditional is defined as face-to-face courses on the community college campus unless otherwise denoted.

AA is defined as the Associate in Arts degree.  
AS is defined as the Associate in Science degree.

**Table 2**  
**Diversity of Participants**

Aspect of Diversity	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
white	14	70
Asian	4	20
Black	2	10
<i>First-Generation College</i>		
Yes	9	45
No	11	55
<i>Siblings with College Experience</i>		
Yes	10	50
No	10	50