

EXCHANGE



Dual Enrollment and Retention in Tennessee Community Colleges: Implications for Practice

Matthew Pryor Hunter^a and Joel Eric Wilson ^{b,c}

^aDivision of Distance Education, Walters State Community College, The University of Tennessee – Martin, TN, USA; ^bEnglish Department & Division of Distance Education, Florida Atlantic University, FL, USA; ^cWalters State Community College, TN, Morristown, USA

ABSTRACT

With the increased numbers of dual enrollment students across the country as well as various state initiatives to increase retention among the student population at large, institutions face great challenges when balancing the many initiatives incumbent upon them. However, Tennessee, a state leader in both the free community college and dual enrollment initiatives, the Tennessee Board of Regents System (TBR), and its community colleges are positioned to improve retention rates by giving greater attention to their dual enrollment students. This brief study of one cohort of students at Walters State Community College (WSCC), located in East Tennessee, noted a major disparity in retention between students with dual enrollment experience and those without, suggesting an extant need to give particular consideration to institutional approaches designed to reinforce the dual enrollment programs and the students' experience in said programs. Doing so may not only address the initiative of providing high quality dual enrollment classes to high school students but also improve institutional retention rates.

While researchers have explored various state models for dual enrollment (D'Amico, Morgan, Robertson, & Rivers 2013; Lichtenberger, Witt, Blankenberger, & Franklin, 2014), too little attention has been paid to the State of Tennessee, a true leader in dual enrollment programs across the southern region of the country (Finney et al., 2017; Salgado, 2017). As a result, Tennessee community colleges' administration of dual enrollment programs has positioned the state as a whole to answer Ganzert's (2014) call for community colleges to "meet workforce demands" and "equip students to transition to other educational goals" (p. 792).

Regardless of state or region, however, community colleges across the nation must continue to look at modes by which improvements can be made within their states' dual enrollment programs. And while the student benefits for students enrolling in dual enrollment classes have been well-documented (Andrews, 2004; Boswell, 2000; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008), insufficient attention has been paid to one major benefit to the institutions administering these dual enrollment programs: retention.

True, institutions must seek ways to implement best-practices with regard to student retention across their various populations in an effort to best prepare their students for success in their studies and thereafter. The growing demand within our nation's economy for a skilled and trained workforce requires students to gain skills in postsecondary schooling, skills that cannot be obtained if students are not persisting to degree attainment. Therefore, initiatives, such as Tennessee's Drive-to-55, require postsecondary institutions to not only retain but also to graduate classes of students who

have navigated and completed the college experience. Compound this with the reality of retention rates being used in the calculus of institutional performance and even the formula for state funding, and the need to retain students becomes ever more imperative for institutions, to say nothing of the influence degree holding holds macro-economically-speaking on individual state economies. Dual enrollment, however, has a disproportionate potential to affect the achievement of said goals, in tandem with a host of other institutional and state efforts in order to raise retention rates of traditional and dual enrollment students. In laymen's terms, institutions can "kill two birds with one stone" by providing dual enrollment students quality instruction that will edify the students and, for the purposes of this study, potentially assist institutions in retaining more students, graduating them in higher numbers and with higher GPAs, and potentially provide greater return on investments to states funding such dual enrollment programs.

Background

Research suggests that students who participate in dual enrollment tend to have higher retention than those who do not. Hoffman and Vargas (2010) reviewed data from 3,000 students who graduated from 64 institutions across the nation that had dual enrollment programs and found that dual enrollment students had earned on average 20 or more credits prior to enrolling as first-time freshmen with 86% continuing on to postsecondary institutions. Ganzert (2014), looking specifically at North Carolina, also found increased retention leading to graduation, noting "dual enrollment students graduated at a rate . . . 11.2% higher than students not exposed" to postsecondary coursework while in high school (p. 786).

In a more narrow study than nationwide or state data discussed above, Hinojosa and Salinas (2012) found that the University of Texan-Pan American's dual enrollment students' retention from first year to the second year was at a rate of 80.7%, greater than the retention rate of 62.2% among students who did not take any dual enrollment coursework. Additionally, dual enrollment students had a higher average GPA of 2.74 compared to the 1.99 of students who did not participate in dual enrollment coursework, likely one contributing factor to the rates of higher retention (Hinojosa & Salinas, 2012).

Other research, however, has not necessarily found data supporting claims of major differences in retention between the two groups. For instance, in a study of one community college, Jones (2014) noted that 89.86% of dual enrollment students "persisted through the first semester of full-time college" (p. 32). In contrast, her research also reveals that 86.23% of students without dual enrollment experience persisted at the community college in question. Furthermore, her research reveals that year-to-year retention of students with dual enrollment experience stood at 74.19% versus 73.95% of those without such experience. With dual enrollment students having only a slightly higher retention rate than those who had not taken such coursework, Jones' (2014) work calls into question whether efforts to increase dual enrollment participation make a great deal of difference in student retention after the freshman year of college.

Methods

Research conducted both at the system-wide level, using data from the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), as well as at the institutional level, using data from Walters State Community College (WSCC) located in East Tennessee, does not follow Jones' (2014) study, however. Instead, in line with Hoffman and Vargas (2010), Ganzert (2014), Hinojosa and Salinas (2012), research from TBR institutions and WSCC demonstrates a far more significant disparity between the year-to-year retention of students with dual enrollment experience versus those without it, suggesting that dual enrollment students do indeed retain at significantly higher rates. Across the TBR system, 14,866 students entered as first-time, full-time freshmen in the academic year beginning Fall 2012. Of this number, 1,694 students had dual enrollment experience. Of that number of students with prior dual enrollment experience, 67.9% were retained from Fall of 2012 to Fall of 2013 by the 13 community

colleges across Tennessee versus only 47.4% of those who had not taken dual enrollment credit. The difference of 20.5% greater retention, defined for this methodology as reenrolling for a second year of full-time academic study, is worthy of consideration.

Results

An analysis of one institution in the TBR system represents an even higher disparity between students with dual enrollment experience versus those without such experience. Among the same grouping of students at WSCC, again defined as the class that began as first-time, full-time freshmen in Fall of 2012 and reenrolled for a second year of full-time study, retention from Fall 2012 to Fall of 2013 among dual enrollment students was, as Table 2 notes, 76.2%, significantly above the 67.9% of the TBR system wide retention of students with dual enrollment experience as seen in Table 1. On the other hand, among the group's peers who lacked the early introduction to the rigors of academia, retention stood at 48.6% (Table 1), similar to the TBR figure of 47.4 (Table 2)

Limitations

As this data have not been disaggregated, it is impossible to definitively identify what factors may contribute to the higher levels of student retention in the TBR system or at WSCC. For instance, D'Amico et al. (2013) noted that students in career programs, such as Associate of Applied Science degrees, have higher retention and more positive outcomes than those who are university transfer or university parallel programs. Additionally, the figures here represent only dual enrollment students who matriculate to community colleges within Tennessee and do not make any claims regarding the dual enrollment students who move to 4 year institutions.

Certainly, one additional limitation of this study is the data collected from one cohort at one institution from 2012 to 2013. It was necessary to collect this data from this cohort to study the effect of rigorous course of study through dual enrollment versus students with no dual enrollment exposure as data from this cohort allowed for fall-to-fall retention analysis as well as GPA analysis for future terms. Additionally, this cohort was valuable due to planned shifts in the distribution of dual enrollment grant funds for Tennessee high schools students taking dual enrollment. These shifts

Table 1. Retention from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 across TBR Institutions of first-time, full-time traditional students.

Retained Fall 2013* Dual Enrollment Crosstabulation			Dual Enrollment		Total
			No	Yes	
Retained Fall 2013	No	Count	6923	544	7467
		% within Dual Enrollment	52.6%	32.1%	50.2%
	Yes	Count	6249	1150	7399
		% within Dual Enrollment	47.4%	67.9%	49.8%
Total		Count	13172	1694	14866
		% within Dual Enrollment	100%	100%	100%

Table 2. Retention from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013 at WSCC of first-time, full-time traditional students.

Retained Fall 2013 * Dual Enrollment Crosstabulation			Dual Enrollment		Total
			No	Yes	
Retained Fall 2013	No	Count	472	48	520
		% within Dual Enrollment	51.4%	23.8%	46.4%
	Yes	Count	446	154	600
		% within Dual Enrollment	48.6%	76.2%	53.6%
Total		Count	918	202	1120
		% within Dual Enrollment	100%	100%	100%

in funding continued forward through Fall 2014 with a leveling of funding distributions beginning in Fall of 2015. The Fall 2012 cohort represented in this study utilized a more evenly dispersed dual enrollment grant funding structure across students' years of high school enrollment than what is currently in place.

Finally, the data presented here may be considered obvious due to the nature of dual enrollment students' higher achievement levels. However, recent research at WSCC indicated that greater rates of retention may also be the case because said students are given greater resources as they ease more gradually into college programs (Wilson, Ludwig, & Todaro, 2017).

Discussion

The revelation of the disparity between the two groups of students both in the TBR system and WSCC is significant for a number of reasons. For one, Tennessee continues to see an increase in its dual enrollment program participation throughout the state. These increases are aided by the funding from the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship program, which is used to fund the Dual Enrollment Grant opportunities for high school students in Tennessee. Secondly, students earning college credit also earn the needed credits for high school graduation requirements. Additionally, these dual enrollment credits potentially lead to high school honors such as a note of distinction on a high school diploma. Furthermore, dual enrollment programs make available to high school students the ability to accomplish several goals while in high school:

- (1) Facilitate and foster the transition from high school to college
- (2) Quicker path to degree completion
- (3) Reduction and cost savings for postsecondary education expenses
- (4) Introduction of greater coursework rigor within the curriculum
- (5) Elimination of remediation needs once at the postsecondary institution (Ashburn, 2007).

Implications for practice

Given, then, these reasons for dual enrollment's popularity as well as the likely continued growth and the potential impact it can have on institutions' overall retention rate, attention must be given to the kind of welcome dual enrollment students as well their parents arriving on-campus receive, in addition to which instructors are selected for dedicated dual enrollment courses, which courses are offered for dual enrollment credit, and where courses for dual enrollment are physically offered. Many dual enrollment classes take place on local high school campuses, and community colleges may use adjunct faculty or local high school faculty credentialed by the college to staff such courses. Both options may potentially present conflicts of interest or lack of familiarity with college policies on dual enrollment programs. Complicating matters are full-time faculty members who may object to "teaching high school" as it were, suggesting dual enrollment is beneath them. However, with the importance of dual enrollment to the students, and as this study has suggested, for the community college, selecting effective and capable instructors to send to local high school campuses must be seen as fundamental to the success of the students, the program, and the host institution.

While this brief discussion of one beneficial policy worthy of adoption is by no means comprehensive, it does present one imperative: By strengthening the institutional and instructor approach to dual enrollment programs and dual enrollment students, institutions must address the concern of retention. Due to the outsized effect dual enrollment students entering community colleges as full-time freshmen may have on institutional retention rates, institutions must continue to offer quality and rigorous dual enrollment programs, and foster such students' matriculation at the respective community college offering said programs.

ORCID

Joel Eric Wilson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2023-3608>

References

- Andrews, H. A. (2004). Dual credit research outcomes for students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 28(5), 415–422.
- Ashburn, E. (2007). Some community college students fall through the cracks in their first month. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 54(12), 98–120.
- Boswell, K. (2000). Building bridges or barriers? Public policies that facilitate or impede linkages between community colleges with local school districts. In J. C. Palmer (Ed.), *How community colleges can create productive collaborations with local schools* (pp. 3–15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- D'Amico, M. M., Morgan, G. B., Robertson, S., & Rivers, H. E. (2013). Dual enrollment variables and college student persistence. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 37(10), 769–779. doi:10.1080/10668921003723334
- Finney, J., Leigh, E. W., Ruiz, R., Castillo, W., Smith, E., & Kent, D. C. (2017). *Driven to perform: Tennessee's higher education policies and outcomes—A case study*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania.
- Ganzert, B. (2014). Dual enrollment credit and college readiness. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38(9), 783–793. doi:10.1080/10668926.2012.719483
- Hinojosa, M., & Salinas, M. (2012). *A review of prior college hours earned by entering freshmen at UTPA*. Edinburg, TX: University of Texas-Pan American.
- Hoffman, N., & Vargas, J. (2010). *A policymaker's guide to early college designs: Expanding a strategy for achieving college readiness for all jobs for the future*. Washington, DC: Jobs for the Future.
- Hoffman, N., Vargas, J., & Santos, J. (2008). Blending high school and college: Rethinking the transition. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2008(144), 15–25. doi:10.1002/he.322
- Jones, S. (2014). Student participation in dual enrollment and college success. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38(1), 24–37. doi:10.1080/10668926.2010.532449
- Lichtenberger, E., Witt, M. A., Blankenberger, B., & Franklin, D. (2014). Dual credit/dual enrollment and data driven policy implementation. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38(11), 959–979. doi:10.1080/10668926.2013.790305
- Salgado, J. (2017, September 19). When community college is free. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/opinion/free-community-college-chicago.html>.
- Wilson, J., Ludwig, P., & Todaro, C. (2017). A tale of two populations: Recognizing the need for a Composition II revitalization. *TYCA-Southeast Journal*, 50(1), 34–45.