

Rethinking Dual Credit as a Trailhead to Talent Strong Texas Pathways

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategy for Tapping a Huge Potential Supply of Talent for Texas

Texas employers across industries are seeking diverse talent to fill entry-level, career-path jobs, which pay living wages and benefits and offer opportunities for learning and advancement. Even at the entry level, these jobs typically require at least an AAS and increasingly a baccalaureate—plus evidence of an ability to communicate effectively, collaboratively solve problems, and rapidly learn new skills.

Research suggests that students who participate in dual credit (DC) are more likely to enter and complete college, but there are gaps in access for students of color and for students from low-income families. Moreover, historically, most DC can be characterized as “random acts”—general education core courses with limited advising and planning assistance from colleges. Just taking college courses with little guidance is not sufficient to motivate many students, particularly those who do not have clear college plans, to pursue career-path degree programs after high school. P-TECHs and field-focused ECHSs have been shown to be effective in this regard, and Texas is proactively expanding the number of students served by these models, but far more Texas students still experience random acts DC.

Texas colleges lead the nation in implementing “guided pathways” reforms with the aim of ensuring that all students are helped to explore, choose, plan and complete (in a reasonable time and cost) programs that prepare them to secure living-wage, career-path jobs directly and/or transfer to a baccalaureate program with no excess credits in fields of interest to students and value to their communities.

Texas colleges could make DC a more effective and equitable entry point to postsecondary career-path programs by applying guided pathways practices to DC offerings and students. CCRC calls this approach “dual enrollment equity pathways,” or DEEP. Few Texas colleges have extended pathways program onboarding supports to DC students at scale, but a growing number are trying to do so.

Across the colleges we visited through our DEEP fieldwork,¹ we saw practices that together could transform random acts DC in ways that motivate and prepare large numbers of underrepresented students to pursue career-path degree programs after high school—and thus help colleges meet goals for student success and equity, regional talent development, and college enrollment.

¹ With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CCRC and Professor Lauren Schudde and her team at UT Austin are studying how community colleges and their K-12 partners in Florida and Texas are implementing DEEP practices, their costs and incentives, and metrics to inform and motivate DEEP reforms. The findings presented here are based on site visits to 6 colleges and 12 high schools in both states which were identified for having strong results in terms of access and success for Black, Latinx, and low-income dual credit students, and those sites that were further along in implementing Guided Pathways reforms. Research focused on effective college partnerships with Title 1 comprehensive and technical high schools. In Texas, CCRC conducted in-depth fieldwork at Lee College (2 HS partners), Navarro College (2 HS partners), and San Jacinto College (1 HS partner).

Specifically, we see an emerging model in which community colleges partner with schools to 1) embed selected career-path program foundation courses into high school career academies and CTE programs, and 2) provide advising and other support to help DC students explore interests, connect with people and programs in fields of interest and develop a degree program plan to pursue after high school. High school career academies are already widespread among Title 1 Texas high schools, providing an opportunity for colleges to scale DC trailheads to their career-path degree programs. Texas's proposed House Bill 8 would provide funding and further incentives to rethink random acts DC as an onramp for underrepresented students to postsecondary career-path programs, fortifying Talent Strong Texas Pathways.

Key Takeaways from CCRC Field Research on Scaling DEEP Practices in Texas and Florida

Across the colleges we visited, we saw promising practices that together have the potential to transform “random acts” DC into an onramp to college career-path programs after high school.

- **Outreach:** Prioritizing underserved HS's and students; educating students, parents, school leaders about DC pathways starting early on; and removing eligibility barriers.
- **Alignment:** Mapping HS academies to college AAS and pre-major baccalaureate transfer programs; and easy and transparent “transcripting” of high school CTE credit.
- **Early Exploration, Advising, and Planning:** Cross-training counselors; shared advising; advising DC students on nuances of major-specific transfer; and required education plans and checkpoint advising.
- **Instruction and Academic Support:** Scaffolding of HS courses and instruction to ease students in; structured support for online DC; intentional selection and professional development for teachers; consistent quality control of instruction.

Title 1 schools have laid the groundwork for community colleges to scale dual credit as an entry point to college career-path programs after high school by embedding DC into career academies and providing career and college advising and planning assistance to DC students.

- The strategy of embedding DC foundation courses and college advising in HS career academies is scalable, avoids tracking, and can motivate and prepare students to pursue postsecondary education after high school.
- Title 1 schools are motivated to take this approach by the need to offer value to attract students and families in an “open choice” policy environment.
- Students, families, communities, schools want “dual credit with a purpose”—DC designed as an onramp to postsecondary degree programs that lead to career-path employment in high-demand, high-opportunity fields.
- Rural high schools are eager to expand embedded DC in CTE programs.

Texas community colleges see the benefits of rethinking dual credit as a trailhead to career-path degree programs, but at most colleges this is still mainly an aspirational work in progress.

- Colleges typically have not yet extended guided pathways practices to DC students.
- DC offerings in Texas are still mostly “random acts” general education core courses with little career and college exploration, advising and planning.²

² While colleges typically had not extended much of their guided pathways onboarding/advising to DC students, a few Texas colleges had, including San Jacinto College, which helps DC students connect with program areas and develop individualized

- Student experience with instructional quality varies, which may contribute to inequitable outcomes; colleges and schools we visited are exploring how to ensure access to effective instruction.

We observed a shift in mindset across college and K-12 partners implementing DEEP practices.

- Shared vision of DC as mechanism for talent development and expanding college enrollment.
- Change in DC focus from “random acts” course-taking and AA in general/liberal degrees to a “head start” on AAS or structured pre-major bachelor’s transfer programs in high-opportunity fields.
- Requiring students to choose a field of focus in high school should be designed to help them explore interests and develop a sense of purpose and plan for education after high school without limiting their options.
- DC is no longer seen as mainly for “high-performing” students who are already college-bound, but as a means of motivating and preparing students without a college plan to pursue postsecondary education after high school.

Recommended Steps to Expand Equitable DC Trailheads to Career-Path Programs After High School

- ❑ Backward map college career-path AAS and pre-major baccalaureate transfer programs to high school career academies/CTE programs and embed program foundation courses as DC in the HS academy/ CTE program curriculum.
- ❑ Involve “regular” college academic programs and advising staff to assist DC staff in ensuring that all DC students are helped to explore interests, connect with people and programs in a field of interest, and develop a post-high school education plan.
- ❑ Provide consistent quality control for DC instruction across modalities and locations to ensure a “light the fire” learning experience for DC students.
- ❑ Collaborate with K-12 schools to market career pathways-focused DC on-ramps in high-opportunity fields to students, families and communities starting in elementary and middle school.
- ❑ Partner with K-12 schools to explore new ways to recruit, train, and certify academic and CTE DC instructors (including mid-career professionals interested in teaching) to teach DC courses designed and taught as a trailhead to a talent pathway.

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educational plans. Lee College was moving in this direction and other colleges we interviewed via phone (e.g., Paris Junior College) help all DC students develop an individual program plan.