ADDRESSING IMPLICIT BIASES IN DUAL CREDIT PROGRAMS

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Introduction

Implicit bias is widespread when it comes to dual credit education. Administrators and educators at both the high school and college levels are influenced by their subconscious biases, which often include seeing dual credit students as too underprepared and immature to manage the rigors of college courses. Such bias negatively impacts dual credit programs by keeping them from meeting the needs of the students who could benefit from them the most. In particular, they can further exacerbate existing barriers to participation in dual credit courses for middle- to low-achieving, low-income, and racially underrepresented students. This article explores three common implicit biases towards dual credit students and the impacts they have on active and potential dual credit students. If administrators and educators can identify implicit biases in their dual credit programs, it may make it easier to come up with solutions to eliminate those biases. Doing so can help cultivate better learning environments and strategies that allow dual credit students to thrive and maximize their educational experience.

Implicit Bias #1: High School Students are Underprepared

In my 19 years of working in dual credit education, I have heard from college and high school educators alike that dual credit students are too underprepared to succeed in their dual credit programs. They note that students need to be responsible enough to manage rigorous coursework on their own, but that high school policies allowing students to turn in work late for full credit or to redo their work multiple times before receiving a final grade do not prepare them to do so. The consensus among college professors seems to be that K-12 is not adequately preparing students for college, so starting students in a college course while they are still in high school is problematic (Cedor et al., 2025).

A common measure of students' dual credit readiness is performance on standardized math and reading exams, which many educators believe to be an accurate measure of ability. While high-achieving students may have an easy time attaining acceptable exam scores, middle- to low-achieving students can find meeting these scores difficult. As a result, middle- to low-achieving students may have limited access to dual credit programs. However, Lee and Villareal (2021) found that when low-achieving students were allowed to participate in dual credit programs, those students benefited from their participation. According to their findings, "students perceived as low achieving should not be discouraged from DE [dual enrollment] participation due to the presumptions that their past test performance predicts their future capability to succeed in rigorous college courses" (p. 6). This means that as educators, we need to be aware that our implicit bias toward using standardized testing as a means of assessing ability and dual credit readiness can be a flawed way of making decisions, harm student development, and raise barriers to our goal of expanding college access instead of just advancing high-achieving students.

Implicit Bias #2: High School Students are too Immature

Regardless of the academic preparedness of a student, high school students are often viewed as too immature for college classes. College professors say dual credit students are too noisy as they move around campus and are disruptive in the classroom because they are always on their phones or talking to each other during lectures. Others complain that dual credit students cannot keep up with their coursework, turn in assignments late or not at all, and need too much handholding to complete courses.

I have taught dual credit students on their high school campus, on my college campus, and online. While these students can be immature, we as educators should not be biased against them because of this. Working with immature students is challenging, but the very nature of teaching is challenging. Our role as educators is not only to teach these students the content of our courses, but to help them develop their maturity and become better versions of themselves than when they started the course. We do this through coaching, mentoring, and a variety of other techniques, making our bias regarding student maturity levels a poor excuse for limiting a student's access to higher education. It has been a privilege to watch my (often highly immature) freshman and sophomore literature students evolve into quite capable students, who, by the end of their junior or senior year, are quite different than the students who walked into my dual credit English 1301 class. These students have learned time management, responsibility, ways to regulate their emotions, and hopefully, useful English skills along the way. They have matured, and dual credit students have reported that their experience in a dual credit course helped them become more mature (Kanny, 2015).

Implicit Bias #3: Bias Against Minority and Low-Income Students

Racial and ethnic minority students and students who rely on low-income programs such as meal support are often underrepresented in dual credit programs (Lee & Villareal, 2021). According to Spencer and Maldonado (2021), schools with high numbers of racially minoritized students are the least likely to have dual credit programs. However, even when such schools do offer dual credit programs, racially minoritized and low-income students are less likely to participate in those programs than their more affluent peers in other school districts. Access to dual credit may be limited because "schools often rely on the recommendations of counselors, seventy percent of whom are white, to identify students for dual enrollment" (Field, 2021). According to Education Trust, a non-profit focused on equity in education, such judgments "'may be shaped by implicit (or even explicit) racial bias'" (as cited in Field, 2021, para 52).

A report from the Teachers College's Community College Research Center and The Aspen Institute (Mehl et al, 2020) suggests such biases toward dual credit students are raising barriers and negatively impacting dual credit programs across the country. According to this report, among students who participate in dual enrollment programs, roughly 12% are White, 8% are Hispanic, and just 7% are Black. The report also found that only 20% of dual enrollment programs had successfully narrowed or eliminated race and income gaps. According to U.S. Department of Education data, during the 2022-23 academic year,

> Black students were underrepresented in dual enrollment in every state except for Massachusetts. And Black students had equal or greater representation in dual enrollment at only 74 community colleges—fewer than one in ten community colleges serving dual enrollment students nationally. (Fink, 2024, para 6)

The barriers raised by an implicit bias against low-income or racially underrepresented students do not end with access to dual credit. Like most dual credit students, low-income and racially underrepresented students admitted to dual credit programs still face a lack of advising, an incomplete understanding of the benefits of participation, and few financial opportunities. With high school counselors handcuffed by their administrative tasks and community colleges having overextended resources, advising support for these students ranges from non-existent to severely limited, and training often does not exist for counselors to learn ways to support underrepresented students (Hooper & Harrington, 2022). Without advising, students are left to flounder on their own, and this can increase the success gaps seen in dual credit programs.

Conclusion

Dual credit programs can save students time and money, improve college readiness, and boost graduation and persistence rates. Implicit bias in dual credit programs presents barriers to accessing these advantages, often for those students who could benefit from them the most. Administrators and educators must examine their implicit biases toward both active and potential dual credit students—not just in the three areas covered in this article, but in all areas. Then, they should re-examine their programs through an unbiased lens, assessing where bias may have erected barriers. Finally, they should commit to creating educational partnerships and programs responsive to all populations. Dual credit can change a student's life in unimaginable ways. It is time to stop letting our preconceived notions of preparedness, maturity, and ability get in the way of change.

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