

3 *This chapter provides a theoretical framework through which to understand the experiences of dual enrollment students. Through anticipatory socialization and role rehearsal, participants “try out” the role of college student and develop the skills necessary for future postsecondary success.*

“I don’t know, I’ve never been to college!” Dual Enrollment as a College Readiness Strategy

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As referenced in Chapters One and Two of this volume, there is some evidence that positive academic outcomes in high school and college are related to dual enrollment participation for middle- and even low-achieving students. But the reality is that most dual enrollment programs are intended for students with at least some basic level of college academic skills, as they require students to meet entry or college-readiness standards (Hughes et al. 2005; Kleiner and Lewis 2005; Waits, Setzer, and Lewis 2005). Given this reality, should we really view dual enrollment as an intervention that boosts students’ academic skills? Why work to improve the academic proficiency of students who are already, at least by some measures, proficient?

There is a more compelling explanation for the importance and potential of dual enrollment. Creating an overarching framework that explains why dual enrollment programs can contribute to college preparation, broadly defined, can help focus our expectations and articulate to policy-makers why this intervention is an important strategy for increasing college success rates.

Transition from High School to College

Low rates of student success in college have been well documented. Less than 50 percent of new college students earn an associate’s degree within three years or a bachelor’s degree within six [Provasnik and Planty 2008; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2011]. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), 25 percent of full-time freshmen at

four-year institutions and 39 percent at two-year institutions do not return the following fall. The rates are even lower for part-time students.

To some extent, poor postsecondary outcomes are related to low levels of academic preparation (Roksa et al. 2009; Bailey, Jeong, and Cho 2010; NCES 2011). But even students who are ostensibly academically prepared struggle to persist in college. For example, a recent study of one cohort of first-time community college students in Virginia found that nearly 25 percent of students who enroll in a first-level college-credit English or math course do not pass (Roksa et al. 2009). In one cohort of new Virginia community college students, barely more than one-third of those who did *not* place into developmental coursework earned a credential within four years (personal communication with S. W. Cho, June 2011). That academically proficient students also have trouble persisting in college indicates that college readiness encompasses more than academic skill.

It is not a new notion that a successful college transition requires additional forms of knowledge. Researchers such as Attinasi (1989), Dickie and Farrell (1991), and Shields (2002) found that, among other things, new college students must learn to navigate a complex system of bureaucratic requirements, learn new study habits and time-management strategies, and engage in new kinds of social relationships. Students who do not have this knowledge are unlikely to be successful in college, even if they have the required academic skills.

Recently, authors and policymakers have refined this argument and tried to specify the types of nonacademic knowledge and skills necessary for successful secondary–postsecondary transitions. Conley (2005, 2007, 2010) presents a model of college readiness that includes academic content, academic behaviors, cognitive strategies such as analytic thinking, and “contextual skills and awareness” such as understanding college culture and processes. Byrd and MacDonald (2005) find that students who successfully make the transition to college have strong time-management skills and goal orientation, can advocate for themselves in order to get help, and understand college systems and procedures.

There is evidence that helping students learn the nonacademic facets of postsecondary education can lead to academic success. Most tellingly, studies of student success courses, which aim to help students acclimate to college, find that they positively influence student outcomes (Derby 2007; Cho et al. 2010; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno 2010): they improve academic outcomes without specifically focusing on academics, thus suggesting that college preparation must be viewed broadly.

Dual Enrollment’s Social Dimension: A Theoretical Framework

Dual enrollment can be seen as a social intervention in which potential college students learn about the norms, interpersonal interactions, and behaviors

expected for college success. By “trying on” the role of a college student, dual enrollees benefit from early exposure and practice, coming to feel comfortable in a college environment and ultimately becoming successful once they matriculate.

In sociological terms, roles are the “parts” that people play when they interact with others. They include the behaviors and attitudes that go along with any socially identifiable position, such as a student or a parent. We all understand how people enacting certain roles are to behave and that, if they do not adhere to these expectations, we are likely to view them negatively. Any time a person takes on a new role, she needs to learn how to enact it or learn the behaviors and attitudes a person who is playing her new “part” is expected to demonstrate.

The transition into a new role can be smoothed by various processes. One, *anticipatory socialization*, helps individuals learn about the broad set of behaviors, attitudes, and values of those who inhabit the role to which they aspire (Merton 1957; Ebaugh 1988). Anticipatory socialization happens in many ways, from daydreaming about the new role to watching others who already embody it, but it does not always provide the opportunity to practice a role. *Role rehearsal* does. A form of learning by doing, this second process occurs when someone has a chance to act temporarily as though he were already in a new role. Through internships, apprenticeships, or even activities like babysitting, individuals learn role-related expectations by trying to act accordingly and gauging others’ reactions to their attempts to do so.

We can conceive of dual enrollment as an opportunity for anticipatory socialization and role rehearsal. Dual enrollees get ready for college success by learning—before they actually matriculate—*all* aspects of the college role. They acquire the technical demands of how to do college-level work. They also learn normative expectations—the habits, attitudes, and behaviors of successful college students—and discover strategies to enact these expectations successfully by seeing how other people react to their “college tries.”

Dual enrollment might support postsecondary success because, after learning about and practicing the role, students do not need to spend their initial months in college acclimating to the college classroom. They already know what is expected of them and have experienced the difference between high school and college first hand. When viewed this way, dual enrollment becomes a strategy that broadly addresses the secondary–postsecondary transition. It also becomes appropriate for a wide range of students, because even those with strong academic skills need help learning normative college behaviors.

Substantiating the Framework: A Study

To evaluate the framework, I engaged in a semester-long study of dual enrollment students. Data collected included a series of semistructured

interviews with twenty-six high school students enrolled in dual enrollment courses offered through two community colleges in New York City and in-depth observations of those dual enrollment courses. All participants took their college courses on a high school campus and were taught by high school instructors certified as college adjuncts.

Participants were first-time dual enrollees, which enabled me to examine their understanding of the role of college student prior to and after dual enrollment participation. Students were juniors and seniors and enrolled in one of five dual enrollment courses. The sample included fifteen males and eleven females. Four students were white, two were black, seven were Hispanic, twelve were Asian (primarily southeast Asian), and one was multi-ethnic. Only eight students spoke English at home.

I interviewed the students three times: at the beginning of the semester to gauge initial perceptions of what it means to be a college student, at the middle of the semester to document their dual enrollment experiences, and at the end of the semester in order to revisit their understanding of the role of college student. In total, this study draws on seventy-six student interviews and eighteen classroom observations.

Data were analyzed using a case-construction method in order to determine changes in role conceptions. I coded students' knowledge of the role into four categories: none or little, idealistic or highly generalized, realistic but vague, or strong and accurate. I examined each case to see if students moved up the continuum between their first and third interviews; I then looked across cases to understand how and why changes in role-related learning occurred. The following findings were associated with dual enrollment.

Students in Dual Enrollment Learn about the Role of College Student. As one would expect, students did not start the semester with well-defined notions of what it means to be a college student. Only one student in the sample was able to articulate strongly college student norms and expectations. By the end of the semester, though, most students—seventeen of the twenty-six—had increased their understanding of the role.

During Maria's first interview, she was barely able to describe a college student, and what she did know was very general and uncertain.

[College students] could pick like what times they wanna go in and what times they wanna leave. They can go to class if they want, or not, and I guess, the teachers don't really mark them there. Or something. They have to do their homework and the projects or whatever. . . . They're more mature, I'm guessing.

When probed for more detail, she exclaimed, "I don't know, I've never been to college!"

By the end of the semester Maria was able to describe the role in much more detail. In her case report, her initial knowledge could be summarized

in three short paragraphs; it took nearly a page to do so at semester's end. In her third interview, she also touched on a range of skills, behaviors, and attitudes required of college students, and—perhaps most important—was able to provide strategies for college success. She knew, for example, that college students are not coddled like high school students; therefore, they must seek out help.

In classroom observations, it was clear that some dual enrollment courses more than others closely mirrored the demands of classes on college campuses. Well-implemented dual enrollment courses reflected the content and pedagogical structures of high-quality, equivalent courses offered on the college campus. They therefore provided students with more authentic opportunities to practice the role of college student and were better at making the difference between high school and college visible to students. Students in these “authentic” courses were expected to complete work independently, engage in complex and analytic discussions, and take responsibility for their own learning by doing things such as following a syllabus. In authentic courses, students are required to engage in what are most likely new behaviors, and they experience a variety of new norms and expectations.

In contrast, students in “inauthentic” courses were generally given fewer opportunities to practice responsibility; for example, they were given notes instead of taking them on their own. Inauthentic courses also usually had fewer assignments and less interpersonal interaction around academic and intellectual topics. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of students in authentic courses increased their understanding of the role whereas only 45 percent of students in inauthentic courses did so.

Dual Enrollment Helps Students Practice College Expectations. Many students did not only learn about college expectations in their dual enrollment course; they actively practiced behaviors that helped them adhere to these expectations. Engaging in role rehearsal was strongly related to increased understanding of what it means to be a college student and how to be successful in postsecondary education.

Raul started the semester with an idealistic and not very useful understanding of what it means to be in college. At one point, he even noted that it is “better” to have classes back to back during the day, because “you probably stay in school two, three hours and then you go, leave. . . . And you actually get to go home, have your nap and relax. Wake up and do whatever it is you gotta do. Watch TV.”

Through his college course, however, Raul discovered that successful college students take responsibility for their own learning. He began to review his notes on his own in order to keep up with the quick pace of the course. He took the initiative to get notes from his friend when he was absent. By the end of the semester, Raul was taking such responsibility for his coursework that he came to class even when his mother was in the hospital.

This practice translated into a new understanding of what it means to be a college student. In his third interview, Raul explained that in college, “you gotta do it [be academically successful] all on your own.” He added that college students’ success “all depends on how willing they are, or independent and committed they are to getting a good grade. . . . They gotta keep it in their head, ‘I gotta study, gotta come to class, gotta do my work, gotta pay attention.’” This is quite a different image from the one he gave previously.

It is important to note that Raul did not learn about the expectations college professors have of their students because someone told him about them or because he observed others engage in them. Rather, he experienced them for himself: he was expected to act as a college student and came to understand the demands placed upon role incumbents.

Both role rehearsal and anticipatory socialization helped students learn about the college student role by exposing them to role-related expectations. This exposure came from the explicit and implicit demands made by their dual enrollment instructor, the feedback students received on their course performance from the instructor and their peers, and classroom norms developed by the instructor and peers. Students generalized these experiences to their broader image of “college student.” It should be noted that, although authentic courses were more effective in transmitting this type of learning, students in all dual enrollment courses in this study increased their role-related learning, and no student ended the semester with a more poorly formed or more inaccurate role conception than the one held at the beginning.

Conclusions and Implications

As we focus on increasing college completion rates, it is important to remember that college readiness entails more than academic skill. Successful college students learn new ways of behaving, thinking, and interacting with others. Helping all students understand these expectations and learn how to live up to them is likely to increase the number who make it to college graduation. Dual enrollment is a strategy that can help provide students with such knowledge.

Given this broader understanding of college readiness and the role dual enrollment can play, policymakers and practitioners should consider a few things.

Authenticity Matters. Role-related learning is dependent upon students actually experiencing the college student role, and they cannot do this in courses that do not accurately reflect the expectations placed on college students. Practitioners often pay close attention to making sure that the academic component of dual enrollment courses mirrors those of on-campus college courses. But the findings presented here indicate that broader attention should be paid so that the normative, behavioral, and

attitudinal expectations of dual enrollment courses reflect well-implemented on-campus courses as well.

Dual Enrollment—Thus College—Is Different from High School. Given the program's location on a high school campus, some students in the study did not grasp this difference; their role-related-learning was muted as a result. Finding ways to shift dual enrollees' experiences more dramatically, such as moving dual enrollment to the college campus or at least expecting students to spend significant time on a campus, is likely to increase the program's impact on college readiness.

Opportunity to Practice the Role. Role rehearsal is related to increased understanding of what it means to be a college student. Students not only need to hear about college expectations, but they also must be given ample opportunities to try them out. Practice gives participants the chance to understand truly what they need to do to be successful in their new role.

This last point has implications beyond dual enrollment. *All* potential college students need to understand the role that they are entering. As we turn our attention to college preparation in order to increase postsecondary completion, we must pay attention to the entire spectrum of college readiness. Dual enrollment and programs like it have an important role to play in helping students learn all facets of college readiness so that they may achieve their educational goals.

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