

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Dual Credit Students: Collegebound or Not? A Qualitative Analysis

By Polly Hulsey

The number of Idaho high school students earning college credit through participation in dual credit courses has risen dramatically over the last decade. This study aimed to investigate whether the sense of belonging among dual credit students influenced their choice to pursue higher education opportunities. The study took place at a small community college situated in a rural region (4) of Idaho and used a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The findings shed light on the critical role of students' sense of belonging and its impact on their transitions to postsecondary education.

The number of Idaho high school students earning college credit through participation in dual credit courses has risen dramatically from 12,624 unduplicated students in 2015 to 27,814 students in 2020, an astonishing 120 percent increase in students earning dual credit (Idaho State Board of Education 2020). The number of credits earned during the 2020 academic year was also as impressive with these students earning 203,571 credits through eleven different institutions across the state (Idaho State Board of Education 2020).

The State of Idaho has demonstrated a strong commitment to investing in the future educational pursuits of its high school students and providing them with the necessary support to transition to college. Since 1997, the *Advanced Opportunity* (Idaho State Department of Education 2020) program has been a key initiative, provid-

ing students with financial support and postsecondary assistance intended to motivate them in pursuing their long-term educational aspirations. Under this program, students in grades seventh through twelfth are eligible to receive a sum of \$4,125 if they enroll in a public institution within the state.

According to statistics from the State of Idaho's Advanced Opportunities program, more than half of high school juniors (13,032 students, equivalent to 56.77%) and seniors (12,785 students, equivalent to 58.06%) engaged with the program during the 2019–2020 academic year (Idaho State Department of Education 2019). This success has carried forward, as indicated in 2020, 758 students utilized their entire allotted amount of \$4,125. The State of Idaho Board of Education Fact Book (2019) reveals that 188 high school students in Idaho managed

to earn their associate degrees *before* their high school graduation, showcasing the program's potential for positive outcomes.

In addition to the state-supported Advanced Opportunities program, in 2012 the Idaho State Board of Education developed a plan entitled Complete College Idaho. This initiative aimed to provide resources and programs to achieve its objective of having 60 percent of individuals aged 25 to 34 in Idaho earn a degree or certificate by the year 2020 (Idaho State Board of Education 2019). A primary focus of Complete College Idaho was to offer support to high-achieving high school students aiming to pursue postsecondary education and career paths. To facilitate this objective, the State of Idaho implemented supportive programs geared toward encouraging high school students to further their education after graduating.

Statement of the Problem

Despite witnessing an increase in high school graduation rates from 77 percent in 2014 to 81 percent in 2018, the rate of students progressing to postsecondary education, referred to as the “go-on rate,” has not shown a corresponding rise, as reported by the Idaho State Board of Education Fact Book (2019). Regrettably, Idaho fell short of achieving the go-on goal. An article by Richert (2020) points out that even with the successful growth of dual credit programs for students, Idaho's go-on rate has remained unchanged.

To underscore this point further, Richert's analysis (2020) examined the issue within Idaho, focusing on students who entered college immediately after graduating high school in 2016. The findings indicated 81 percent of these students proceeded directly to college, of whom 88 percent persisted in their college studies. However, a decline was noted in the class of 2018, where the proportion of students immediately entering college upon high school graduation dropped to 76 percent, with a subsequent decrease in the retention rate to 82 percent.

Regrettably, Idaho has faced a significant downturn in the number of students making the transition to college in the fall following their high school graduation. Figure 1 (on page 13) highlights that while

the decline in fall go-on enrollment (2017–2020) was experienced state-wide, the disparities were especially significant in regions 3, 4, and 6 (Idaho State Board of Education 2022a).

Despite ongoing efforts by the state to encourage students to pursue higher education after high school, data suggests that dual credit students are not consistently continuing their education beyond this stage (Richert 2020). Existing research has indicated that students' perception of their social belonging within the college campus substantially influences their sense of community at the postsecondary institution (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007). While acknowledging the significance of a student's sense of belonging, it is crucial to emphasize the correlations with both their academic motivation and social adaptation (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007). This connection underscores the potential significance of dual credit students' sense of belonging, which could emerge as a pivotal factor influencing their decisions concerning postsecondary education.

However, what heightens this importance is that the concept of sense of belonging has remained unexplored within the realm of dual credit students. This uncharted territory underscores the compelling need to investigate whether the sense of belonging among dual credit students plays a role in shaping their commitment to continuing postsecondary education. This exploration is a pivotal undertaking that holds the key to comprehending the array of factors that influence students' decisions about their education.

Purpose of this Study

The primary objective of this study was to ascertain whether the perceived sense of belonging among high school dual credit students influenced their decision to pursue the completion of their certification/degree at their local community college. The concept of students' perceptions regarding their “fit” within an environment has been a subject of research for an extensive period, and the significance of belonging has garnered recognition and investigation over the years. This recognition can be traced back to the early 1950s with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which highlighted the fundamen-

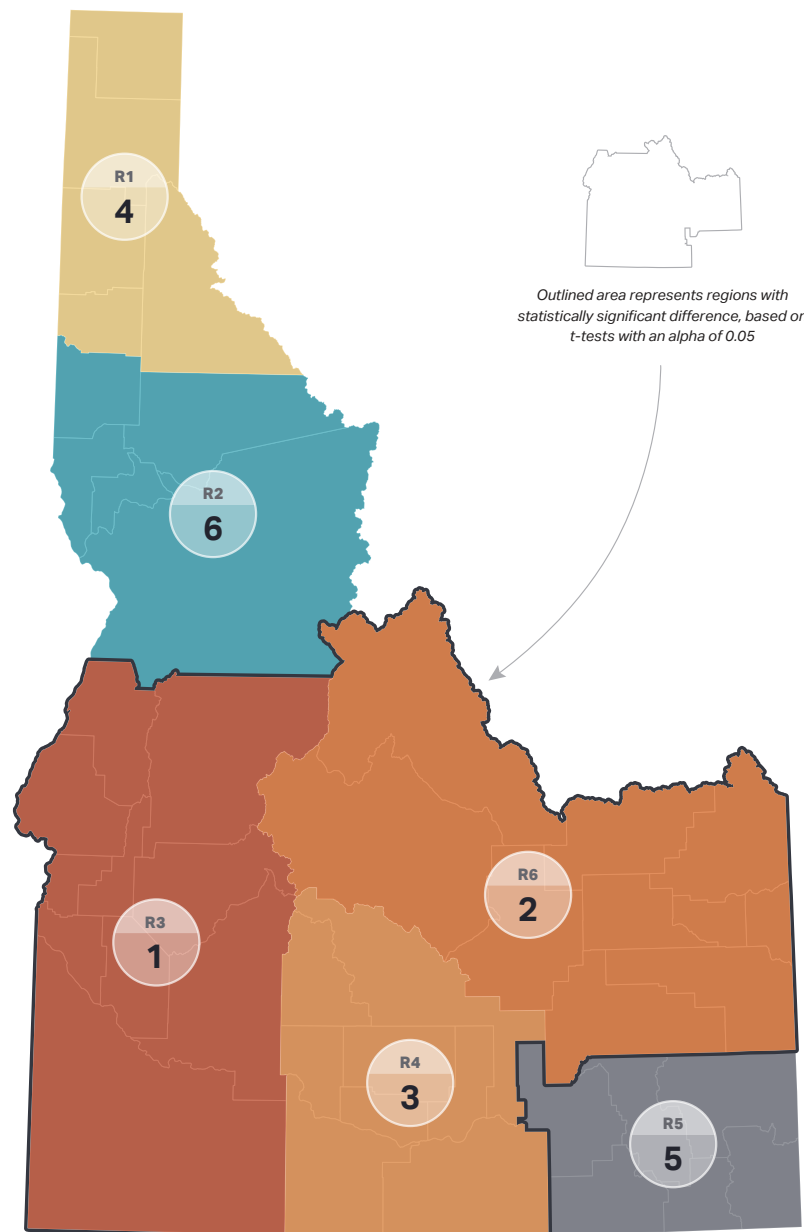


FIGURE 1 ► Idaho's Decline in "Go-On" Enrollment Rated by Region, Fall 2017 & 2018 versus Fall 2019 & 2020

Source: Idaho State Board of Education (2022a), Idaho State Department of Education (2021a)

Note: Rating is from 1 (worst) to 6 (least worst); all rates were negative during this period.

tal emotional human need for connection, affiliation, and inclusion as part of a collective unit, encompassing elements such as forming bonds, trust, affection, and acceptance (Maslow 1954). Exploring this need has con-

tinued through the work of other theorists like Hurtado and Carter (1997), and Tinto (1997, 1993), who have contributed to expanding the understanding of belonging. This research trajectory was further advanced through

the development of Terrell Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory (2019):

student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (4).

In this study, Strayhorn's sense of belonging theory was employed as a framework to assess students' perceptions of their sense of belonging on the college campus. This theory served as a valuable lens through which to examine and understand how students perceived their connection and affiliation within the college environment.

This study took place at a small community college situated in a rural region (4) of Idaho. Through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, it delved into the sense of belonging experienced by high school dual credit students who were concurrently enrolled in courses at the College of Southern Idaho (CSI) campus. The utilization of a phenomenological study design facilitated the documentation of students' individual narratives and provided a comprehensive understanding of their unique journeys (Joyner, *et al.* 2018; Ravitch, *et al.* 2016). The overarching aim of this study was to gain insights into the significance that dual credit students attributed to their sense of belonging and its potential influence on their post-high school decisions.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

- What motivates dual credit students to continue their postsecondary education at the local community college after they graduate from high school?
- How does a dual credit student's sense of belonging help determine their decision to continue into postsecondary education?
- How do faculty-student interactions impact students' sense of belonging in the classroom environment?

These research questions served as the foundation for determining the factors influencing dual credit students' decisions and experiences in relation to their post-high school educational pathways.

Theoretical Perspective

The study's basic aim was to understand the determinants behind dual credit students' choice to embark on postsecondary education at their local community college. By nurturing a sense of belonging, students often establish a profound connection with the institution, creating a bond that manifests as a commitment, linking individuals to their group or community through challenging times (Tinto 1997). Research has consistently indicated the freshman year is a critical period, with studies suggesting that students are more prone to dropping out during this phase (Tinto and Goodsell 1993). In this context, the development of a sense of belonging emerges as a pivotal factor underpinning students' overall success (Strayhorn 2019).

The study aimed to explore the relationship between sense of belonging, institutional connection, and educational trajectories. By doing so, it sought to provide a deeper understanding of how these factors interplay and influence students' decisions regarding their ongoing higher education pursuits. This exploration can shed light on the complex dynamics that shape students' pathways within higher education and contribute to their continued aspirations for educational attainment.

Strayhorn's (2019) sense of belonging theory is fundamentally rooted in students' perceptions of the support and acceptance they encounter, alongside the degree to which they experience a sense of connection and value within the campus community. This theory underscores the significance of students understanding they are meaningful and cared about by their peers, staff, and faculty members. The framework highlights the intrinsic human need for students to feel acknowledged and cherished within their academic environment. This notion extends to their perception of fitting in, forging connections, and finding value in their contributions, all of which collectively bestow upon them

the sensation of being an indispensable component of the overarching college community (Brazzell 2001).

Given their age and high school status, dual credit students differ from the conventional degree-seeking student population. Notably, some dual credit students have encountered adverse experiences on campus, stemming from interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Oftentimes, they are subject to perceptions of immaturity and presumed incapability of excelling in college-level coursework. Consequently, some dual credit students encounter differential treatment from professors, staff, and other college peers. A student's recollection vividly captures the sentiment: "the professors didn't like us. They thought we were immature. They even said things like, 'I came to teach college students. If I wanted to teach high school students, I'd be teaching at a high school'" (Allison 2015, 66). Such attitudes directed toward dual credit students prompts feelings of fear, uncertainty, judgment, and isolation. Regrettably, these negative experiences might even culminate in dropped courses, influenced by the adverse interactions these students encounter while on campus.

The ability of dual credit students to establish a positive sense of belonging holds a crucial role in shaping their academic success. Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasize that the innate need for a sense of belonging can be comparable in importance to fundamental necessities like sustenance, with individuals naturally driven to actively seek out social connections. Establishing environments that foster and endorse interactions among peers, connections with faculty, and social opportunities can play a pivotal role in nurturing a robust sense of belonging among students (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007; Strayhorn 2012, 2019). Moreover, these forms of interactions notably heighten the likelihood of students persisting toward graduation (Nakajima, *et al.* 2012). Hence, it becomes imperative to gain insight into dual credit students' perspectives regarding their sense of belonging, as this understanding stands as a critical initiative to provide them with essential support for their educational endeavors.

Literature Review

Engaging in college-level coursework during high school through dual credit programs has been shown to enhance the likelihood of students entering and succeeding in higher education (Achieve 2015; College in High School Alliance n.d.a.; WWC 2017). By enrolling in dual credit courses, high school students can immerse themselves in the academic expectations of college while forging their own identity within the collegiate environment. These formative experiences enable students to accrue college credits and make progress toward their chosen degrees or certifications (Allen and Dadgar 2012). Dual enrollment courses offer high school students the chance to establish academic momentum and set a solid foundation for their higher education pursuits.

Research suggests dual credit students often experience a positive relationship between factors such as college enrollment rates, higher college GPAs, retention rates, and college completion (CCRC 2012; WWC 2017). A comprehensive exploration was conducted, encompassing a national perspective and historical context of dual credit programs, Idaho's implementation of dual credit and the Advanced Opportunities program, an examination of the advantages and challenges inherent in dual credit initiatives, an investigation into college enrollment rates (go-on rates), and an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework centered around the concept of "sense of belonging," which serves as the guiding principle for this research study.

Overview of Community Colleges

The landscape of higher education in the United States is rich and diverse, offering a multitude of options for students seeking postsecondary opportunities. This extensive array of higher education institutions provides the diverse range of opportunities available to students across the United States, with options spanning public, private non-profit, and for-profit institutions. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, for the 2023–24 academic year, the number of Title IV institutions decreased by approximately 2 percent, fall-

ing from 5,918 in the previous year to 5,819 (NCES 2024). Of the 5,819 Title IV institutions, 2,691 were classified as four-year institutions, offering bachelor's degrees and above. Another 1,496 were categorized as two-year institutions, typically community colleges and technical schools. The remaining 1,632 were less-than-two-year institutions, often providing specialized vocational training or certificates. These institutions play a crucial role in the educational landscape by providing diverse pathways for students seeking higher education opportunities across various fields and disciplines.

The history of community colleges, often referred to as junior colleges, traces its roots back to the Morrill Act of 1862, commonly known as the Land Grant Act. However, it wasn't until 1901 that the first junior college, Joliet Junior College, was established under the leadership of William Rainey Harper, who served as the President of the University of Chicago at the time (Drury 2003). The early 1900s to the 1920s marked a significant period of growth for junior colleges in the United States, with the number of institutions doubling during this time.

The establishment of community colleges was driven by the aim of addressing local communities' educational needs. This objective continues to influence the diverse range of community college models in existence today, each designed to cater to the unique goals of their respective communities. Community colleges have upheld five core principles that shape their mission and contributions: open access, comprehensiveness, community-centeredness, commitment to lifelong learning, and a focus on teaching (Kisker, Cohen, and Brawer 2023). Throughout their history, community colleges have maintained a vital role in higher education by providing accessible pathways to education, serving as hubs for comprehensive learning, engaging with their communities, promoting continuous learning opportunities, and prioritizing effective teaching methodologies.

Community college campuses are located throughout the nation, with at least one in every state. A significant portion of community college history has revolved around the enrollment and support of nontraditional, post-traditional, first-generation, underprepared, underrepresented, divested communities, and historical-

ly-marginalized populations (Kisker, Cohen, and Brawer 2023). In recent times, there has been a growing recognition by legislators of the valuable contributions that community colleges make to both students and their communities. Lawmakers have begun to view community colleges favorably, often referring to them as a notable aspect of the higher education system.

Across the nation, community colleges are at the forefront of providing opportunities for high school students to participate in dual credit programs. These programs enable high school students to enroll in college-level courses and earn credits that can be applied toward both their high school diplomas and future college degrees. The popularity of dual credit programs has grown significantly over the years. During the 2010–2011 academic year, approximately 1.4 million high school students across nearly 15,000 high schools engaged in dual enrollment, collectively completing more than two million college courses (NACEP 2013). This trend has continued to expand, with 82 percent of high school students participating in dual enrollment during the 2017–2018 academic year (Shivji and Wilson 2019). The substantial growth of dual credit programs underscores their deep-rooted history in the broader landscape of national education initiatives.

National History of Dual Credit

The history of dual credit programs in the United States dates back more than 70 years. A significant milestone in this history can be traced to the transition of Connecticut State College to the University of Connecticut on July 1, 1939, also becoming the state's designated land-grant institution (Roy 2016). This period also coincided with the onset of World War II, leading to concerns about the potential impact of the war on the institution and the broader workforce.

Among these measures was the decision to admit high-achieving high school juniors into the college, enabling them to begin their college education earlier than traditional enrollment timelines (Grant 2019). This initiative aimed to provide students with an opportunity to accelerate their academic progress, complete their studies ahead of schedule, and enter the workforce sooner.

The University of Connecticut's innovative approach to allowing high school students early access to college coursework laid the foundation for what would later evolve into the nation's early enrollment or dual credit programs (Grant 2019).

Following its inception in the early 1940s and amidst the post-war period in 1946, as veterans returned, and enrollment surged. The increase in enrollment prompted the exploration of innovative ways to accommodate the growing student population. This idea laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the nation's first concurrent enrollment cooperative program (Grant 2019). The culmination of these efforts occurred in December 1954, when a committee, along with high school administrators, convened to propose their visionary concept. This marked a significant turning point, as it paved the way for the launch of the nation's inaugural concurrent enrollment cooperative program in the 1955–1956 academic year.

This pioneering program was launched in collaboration with The University of Connecticut and was implemented across five distinct high schools: New Britain High School, Manchester High School, Norwich Free Academy, Rockville High School, and Woodbury High School. Through this innovative approach, high school students had the unique opportunity to enroll in college-level courses while remaining in their familiar high school setting. This trailblazing initiative represented a significant advancement in education and set the stage for the broader adoption and expansion of dual credit programs across the nation (Grant 2019).

The 1970s witnessed a surge in the development of dual enrollment programs across various states in the United States. During this period, states such as California, Illinois, Virginia, Texas, and cities such as Syracuse, and Vincennes initiated their own dual enrollment programs, contributing to the diversification and proliferation of this innovative educational approach (Young, *et al.* 2014). Among the states embracing dual enrollment, Idaho also joined this movement by creating and implementing its own version of the dual credit program in the 1990s. This marked an important step for the state in providing high school students with the opportunity to

earn college credit, thereby fostering a smoother transition into higher education (Young, *et al.* 2014).

Idaho History of Dual Credit

Idaho's journey with dual credit programs may not be extensive, yet it spans more than 25 years and stands as a testament to its continuous refinement and enhancement. The inception of Idaho's dual credit program dates to 1997 when it was established by the Idaho Legislature. The program was officially rolled out in 1998, and since then, it has undergone several iterations and improvements, solidifying its position in the state's educational landscape (ID Code § 33–5109).

8 in 6 Program

In 2012, the enactment of House Bill No. 426 led to a significant development in Idaho's dual credit landscape. This legislation introduced the 8 in 6 program, which marked a notable expansion of the state's efforts to support students' educational advancement (ID Code § 33–1628, 2013). The essence of this program was to enable students to complete eight years of schooling within a six-year time frame, encompassing junior high (2 years), high school (4 years), and two years of college education during their secondary schooling years (*Idaho Education News* 2012).

Dual Credit of Early Completers Program

In 2013, Idaho further strengthened its commitment to supporting students in their pursuit of higher education by introducing the Dual Credit of Early Completers Program, this established through Idaho Code 33–1626, marking a significant milestone as it represented the first instance of providing funding for students participating in dual credit courses (ID Code § 33–1628, 2013). The Dual Credit of Early Completers Program was a strategic enhancement designed to offer support and incentives to students aiming to earn college credits while graduating early from high school. This addition reflected the state's dedication to alleviate some of the financial challenges that students typically encounter when pursuing post-secondary education (*Idaho Education News* 2012).

Fast Forward Program

In 2014, the Idaho dual credit program underwent another transformation, implementing the Fast Forward program, a pivotal step in enhancing accessibility to college-level educational opportunities for high school students (ID Code § 33-1628, 2013). Under this program, the state introduced a more inclusive approach, shifting away from solely catering to early high school graduates. Instead, every eligible public high school junior and senior received funding to support their pursuit of higher education. The program provided each junior with \$200, while seniors were allocated \$400 to be utilized for college-level courses, professional-technical exams, and other qualifying college credit exams (Idaho State Department of Education n.d.).

Advanced Opportunities Program

In 2016, Idaho introduced House Bill 458a, a legislative effort aimed at enhancing and streamlining the existing program. As a result of this bill, the program underwent a consolidation and rebranding, becoming the Advanced Opportunities program as outlined in Idaho Statute 33-4602 (ID Code § 33-4602, 2016). This legislative change marked a significant step forward in advancing educational opportunities for students across the state. Under the Advanced Opportunities program, all students, regardless of grade level, who were enrolled in grades seven to 12 within public schools were granted the opportunity to access individualized funding of up to \$4,125 (Idaho State Department of Education n.d.). This comprehensive approach demonstrated the state's commitment to empowering students from various age groups to engage in educational pathways that align with their goals and aspirations.

This funding encompasses various aspects of a student's educational journey, including dual credit enrollment, overload courses, workforce training, early graduation initiatives, and the costs associated with examinations (Idaho State Board of Education 2021). This comprehensive approach reflects the program's dedication to addressing students' evolving needs and promoting their academic advancement.

The Student Opportunities Assistance Program

On July 1, 2021, the most recent version of the program, known as the Student Opportunities Assistance Program (SOAP), was introduced and incorporated into Idaho Code § 33-4603. This new iteration specifically extends the benefits of the program to a wider range of students. Now, not only students enrolled in public institutions, but also private school students and homeschoolers are eligible for dual credit and/or exam reimbursement (Idaho State Department of Education n.d.). This change represents a significant expansion of opportunities, as the previous version of the Advanced Opportunities Program was limited to students affiliated with public high schools. The SOAP program ensures students who do not attend public high school can also access state funding to support their educational endeavors.

Idaho Advanced Opportunities Growth

The enhancements and modifications implemented in the Advanced Opportunities Program have led to a remarkable surge in dual credit enrollment among Idaho students (Idaho State Board of Education 2021; Idaho State Department of Education 2021b; WICHE 2021). The appeal of the dual credit program is evident as 35,770 students (about twice the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden), accounting for 58 percent of Idaho's high school students, participated in FY2020, resulting in the attainment of 203,571 credits (14,214 through four-year institutions and 21,556 through community colleges).

Out of the total credits earned, 127,974 credits were achieved through community colleges, whereas 75,597 credits were earned through four-year institutions. The breakdown of credits earned revealed that 96 percent were academic credits while 4 percent pertained to Career Technical Education (CTE) (Idaho State Board of Education 2021). The subsequent year, FY2021, witnessed an increase of 3,886 students participating in the program, totaling 39,656 students. The most significant growth was observed among high school juniors (55 percent) and seniors (57 percent), underscoring the

TABLE 1 ► High School Graduates by Dual Credits Earned 2014–2019

Year	Dual Credits Earned								Associate Degree Earned	
	None		1–9		10–19		20+		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
2014	11,749	66	4,026	22	1,453	8	688	4	n/a	n/a
2015	10,540	62	4,439	26	1,560	9	531	3	n/a	n/a
2016	10,178	58	4,773	27	1,780	10	634	4	69	0
2017	9,112	51	5,130	29	2,289	13	1,089	6	114	1
2018	8,441	46	5,274	29	2,799	15	1,602	9	184	1
2019	8,278	43	5,436	28	3,143	16	2,237	12	188	1

Source: Idaho State Board of Education 2020, 10

program's expanding popularity and impact (Idaho State Department of Education 2021b).

There was a 55 percent increase in the number of students who took between 20–29 credits, and a significant 75 percent growth in the number of students who took 30–39 credits. In contrast, the number of high school students who earned under 20 dual credits remained relatively consistent from the 2013–14 academic year through the 2016–17 academic year. In the 2016–2017 academic year, 48 percent of high school graduating seniors participated in dual credit coursework (Laude 2018).

Table 1 offers a comprehensive view of high school graduates from 2014 to 2019, illustrating the quantity of dual credits acquired by the time of graduation. It's worth highlighting that most students who participate in dual credit courses earn nine or fewer credits. The most remarkable percentage shifts were identified in the category of students completing ten to nineteen credits and those completing 20 or more credits, both of which experienced an 8 percent increase over the course of five years (Idaho State Board of Education 2020). These patterns suggest an enduring and steady expansion within the program.

The data highlights that students are consistently capitalizing on the opportunities provided by the Advanced Opportunities funding, leading them to achieve certifications or even associate degrees before their high school graduation. The progression is evident in the statistics: in 2013–2014, 26 high school students earned an

associate degree (Laude 2018), which then increased to 188 in 2019 (Idaho State Board of Education 2019). Notably, in 2021, a substantial number of 1,758 students maximized the entirety of their available funding of \$4,125 (Idaho State Department of Education 2021b). These students have successfully completed certifications and/or their initial two years of college, positioning them to transition seamlessly to a four-year university upon high school graduation, explore further workforce training opportunities, or directly enter the workforce.

The State of Idaho Legislature has consistently demonstrated support for the Advanced Opportunities program, in ongoing legislative enhancements and financial backing. These program advancements have effectively created and facilitated valuable opportunities for students to earn college credits, certifications, and even degrees during their high school years. A unique feature of this program lies in its flexibility, affording every student the ability to shape their educational trajectory, all the while acquiring collegiate educational experience. Once students have accumulated fifteen college credits, academic advising becomes mandatory to continue accessing Advanced Opportunities funding. As articulated by Idaho's State Senator Steven Thayne, the program's philosophy centers on providing students with financial resources “we’re giving them some money. They’re accessing it on their terms. This is really a powerful concept” (Eden 2020, 2).

The State of Idaho's commitment to the program is evident in its escalating financial backing—from \$3

TABLE 2 ➤ **Estimated Cost Savings for Idaho Families Through Advanced Opportunities Dual Credit Milestones**

Scenario		Typical Cost for...		Cost to Idaho from A.O. Funding	Cost to Family After Using A.O.
Credits Earned	Milestone	In-State University ¹	Community College ²		
60	2 Years ³	23,095	8,243	4,125	375
30	1 Year	11,547	4,122	2,250	0
15	1 Semester	5,774	2,061	1,125	0

¹ Average In-State University costs per semester based on Boise State University (\$4,034), Idaho State University (\$3,936), Lewis-Clark State College (\$3,491) and University of Idaho (\$4,152)

² Average Community college costs per credit based on North Idaho College (\$141.50), College of Western Idaho (\$139), College of Southern Idaho (\$140), and College of Eastern Idaho (\$129)

³ Typical time and minimum credits to earn associates degree

Source: Idaho State Department of Education, n.d. Note that these data were retrieved from the 2021–2022 *Advanced Opportunities Booklet*, which has been replaced by the current year's edition (See Idaho State Department of Education 2024, 6).

million in FY16 to \$17.9 million in FY21. This investment has not only generated substantial savings for students in contrast to the overall program costs, but it has also led to an environment where students can actively participate in shaping their educational journey and accumulating meaningful credentials (WICHE 2021).

Table 2 provides a visual representation of the potential for significant student and family savings when the Advanced Opportunities funds are optimally utilized. Remarkably, students can attain 60 or more credits or even an associate degree for \$375. However, it is essential to note while the funding covers tuition costs, it does not extend to covering expenses related to books and supplies, which are prerequisites for courses taken on college campuses. It is also worth mentioning that many high school-based courses integrate the cost of books and supplies, yet students opting for courses on college campuses will need to procure their own funding for these materials. These supplementary expenses fall outside the scope of the Advanced Opportunities funding and thus must be covered independently (Idaho State Department of Education n.d.).

In the 2019–2020 fiscal year, the inaugural cohort that had access to the complete \$4,125 Advanced Opportunities funding became eligible for graduation. Over the initial four-year period, the program experienced a notable 3 percent escalation in both the median and the average count of dual credits earned. Moreover, there was an impressive 18 percent surge in the number of students graduating with dual credits (Idaho State Board

of Education 2021). While the introduction of the new funding model could naturally contribute to increased participation, it's noteworthy that students have also demonstrated exceptional performance in their coursework. Impressively, 94 percent of the credits attempted by students earned a grade of C or better (Idaho State Board of Education 2021).

Theoretical Framework

The primary objective of this study was to explore the perceptions of high school dual credit students regarding their sense of belonging within the college campus environment, and how this might impact their decision to pursue their degree at their local community college. The concept of sense of belonging is a fundamental human need that transcends various contexts (Baumeister and Leary 1995; WGU Labs 2022), including the college experience (Strayhorn 2019). Beyond mere academics, students seek a fulfilling and meaningful educational journey, echoing the principles set forth by Maslow (1954). Baumeister and Leary (1995) further emphasize this aspect is integral to human motivation.

Research Design

College of Southern Idaho

The qualitative study was conducted at the College of Southern Idaho (CSI), a small public community college in rural Idaho. In Idaho, there are eleven primary public higher education institutions, eight public, and

three private ones. CSI has one of the lowest tuition rates in the state for in-district students at \$140/credit or \$3,360 annually, out-of-district students at \$190/credit or \$4,560 annually, out-of-state and bachelor's degree at \$285/credit or \$6,840 annually. Dual credit students are eligible to participate in the state's Advanced Opportunities program and receive in-district tuition rates at \$75/credit and out-of-district at \$125. These rates are also provided to the students while taking courses on the college campus. The college has a very active and supportive foundation office, which awards more than \$2 million in scholarships each year.

CSI offers 22 Basic Technical Certificates, 30 Intermediate Technical Certificates, 32 Associate of Applied Science, 23 Associate of Arts, thirteen Associate of Science, and one Bachelor of Applied Science with, a 21–1 faculty-to-student ratio (CSI Common Data Set 2020–2021, 25). In the fall of 2021, there were 137 full-time faculty and 202 part-time faculty members. Dual credit students represent 62 percent of the student body at the college (T. Sharpe, personal communication, January 17, 2023).

Overall, in fall 2021, the college's total enrollment of 7,927 includes 63 percent female and 37 percent male students, the majority (65 percent) of students being white, with 77 percent part-time and 23 percent full-time students. Additional information shows 93 percent are in-state and 84 percent are 24 years and younger. CSI holds the distinction of becoming the first Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the state of Idaho. To become designated as an HSI, the institution "has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students" (U.S. Department of Education n.d.b., para 1).

Participant Review

The dual credit study participants took courses on the CSI main campus between 2021–2024. The majority (67 percent) of students began taking dual credit courses during their sophomore and junior year, with 62 percent taking their first class on campus during their senior year. During the current academic term, the majority, or 62 percent, of the students took their courses in a face-to-face modality. The fourteen students who par-

ticipated performed very well with the number of credits attempted and earned, while maintaining an overall GPA of 3.76. In addition to their average GPA of 3.76, there were also three students who earned distinctions of Cum Laude and two who earned Summa Cum Laude honors. These achievements highlight the students' dedication and academic excellence within the program.

As shown in Table 3 (on page 22), among the fourteen students, four students earned two degrees and three certificates while in high school attending as a dual credit student. The students who did not complete their certificate or degree while in high school, went on to CSI to finish associate degrees in liberal arts (2), digital media, STEM, biology, and health science. This demonstrates the students' commitment to their education during high school and their ability to successfully transition from high school to higher education.

Of these students who went onto CSI after their high school graduation, they noted they chose CSI because they were interested in completing their degree, transferring onto a university, obtaining workforce skills, or because it was close to home. Eighty-five percent of the students who chose CSI indicated it was for the cost savings, close to home, and to complete their degree. Overall, out of the fourteen student participants, seven of them earned or are currently earning their degree from CSI.

Limitations

- The results of the study are limited to CSI, a single institution.
- This open-ended, interview qualitative study was labor intensive and required interpretation of student narrative response.
- The dual credit students included in the study come from various circumstances, experiences, and high school backgrounds. Therefore, it was difficult to causality and outcome.
- Student survey and interview requests relied upon student responses to the research participants requests. Student responses were minimal.
- The College of Southern Idaho implemented a new CRM/SIS system in spring 2024. This system

TABLE 3 ► Student Certificate and Degrees Earned in and After High School Graduation¹

Participant	Discipline	Credential	Honors
Major/Certificates Earned While Dual Credit Student			
Emerald	Liberal Arts	Associate's Degree	Cum Laude
Emerald	Certified Nursing Assistant	Basic Technical Certificate	Cum Laude
Rowan	Health Science	Associate's Degree	Summa Cum Laude
Jade	Digital Media	Intermediate Technical Certificate	n/a
Rose	Surgical/Central Sterile Processing	Basic Technical Certificate	Cum Laude
Major Earned After Dual Credit			
Hazel	Liberal Arts	Associate's Degree	n/a
Jade	Digital Media	Associate's Degree	Summa Cum Laude
Pearl	STEM	Associate's Degree	n/a
Rose	Biology	Associates of Science Degree	Cum Laude
Opal	Liberal Arts	Associate's Degree	Cum Laude
Opal	Health Science	Associate's Degree	Cum Laude

¹ Student certificate and degrees earned in high school and after high school graduation from student interviews

conversion limited the system report availability to update potential student participants.

- Small student sample size.
- This was a sample study and cannot guarantee statistical representation of the entire dual credit student population.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological research approach, as it best aligns with the study's objectives. Phenomenology offers a pathway to comprehend students' lived experiences by capturing their narratives and perceptions through in-depth interviews (Giorgi 2009; Moustakas 1994). This method allows for a deep exploration of students' perceived experiences, providing rich, detailed insights into their personal interpretations of events and situations (Creswell 2014). By employing this approach, the research aims to uncover the essence of students'

experiences, offering a nuanced understanding that quantitative methods might not capture.

Phenomenological studies fit within the broader qualitative research tradition by emphasizing subjective experiences and meanings, but they distinguish themselves by focusing on the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by multiple individuals. As such, qualitative, phenomenological research emerged as the most suitable option for this study, allowing an in-depth exploration of participants' shared experiences while capturing the essence of their perceptions (Creswell 2014; Ravitch and Carl 2016). This approach is particularly valuable in educational research as it enables researchers to uncover the underlying structures of lived experiences, providing insights that can inform pedagogical practices and policy decisions (van Manen 2016). By delving into the commonalities and variations in how students experience a particular phenomenon, phenomenological research offers a nuanced under-

standing that can lead to more effective and empathetic educational strategies.

In essence, qualitative and phenomenological research methods work in harmony to provide a comprehensive understanding of the human experience in educational settings. They present a window through which the world can be perceived, and the essence of shared experiences can be understood (van Manen 2016; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). By capturing the richness of individual narratives and collective meanings, these approaches empower educators and researchers to foster more empathetic and effective learning environments (Creswell and Poth 2018). As Patton (2002) noted, this process allows researchers “to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (115), ultimately leading to deeper insights that can inform educational practice and policy.

Themes

The study revealed a range of themes, including students overwhelmingly reporting an (a) overall positive experience at the College of Southern Idaho; including two subthemes: (i) strong relationships with faculty and staff, and (ii) meaningful connections, (b) request to enhance more early engagement opportunities; and (c) student apprehensions, anxieties, including several subthemes, (i) sense of belonging, (ii) value of perception, (iii) not fitting in, (iv) academic rigor and expectations, and (V) commute concerns.

Theme: An Overall Positive Experience at the College of Southern Idaho

The primary theme that emerged from the student surveys and interviews was that of an overwhelmingly positive experience at the College of Southern Idaho (CSI), with 85 percent of students rating their experience as excellent and 15 percent as good. This high level of satisfaction reflects not only the quality of education provided but also the supportive environment fostered by the institution. According to Tinto (1997), a positive campus environment is crucial for student retention and success, which aligns with the sentiments

expressed by CSI dual credit students. Rose expressed her experiences on the main campus, as well as at the Jerome Center campus as being great:

I felt like both of them were super, super efficient, and like getting me to where I needed to be and just kind of getting the grasp of how to go through the coursework at a different pace as compared to high school, and I thought it was honestly really great.

Research on sense of belonging in higher education settings reveals a complex relationship between students' perceptions of support, engagement with campus resources, and overall academic success. When asked about feeling supported and welcomed at CSI, all interviewed students reported they either strongly agreed or agreed that they felt supported during their time on campus. Strayhorn (2019) emphasized that sense of belonging is not merely a psychological state but a critical factor in shaping students' interactions with and perceptions of institutional support structures. This concept is defined as “the extent to which students feel connected to their campus community” (Hurtado and Carter 1997), encompassing feelings of being cared for, accepted, valued, and respected within the larger campus community.

This suggests that when students feel they truly belong, they are more proactive in seeking out and engaging with institutional support mechanisms. The survey results further reinforced these findings, with 77 percent of students indicating they felt comfortable on campus. This high percentage suggests that many students are experiencing the benefits associated with a sense of belonging, including increased comfort and acceptance.

Additionally, one hundred percent of the students indicated they felt welcomed and had a positive experience, with 85 percent rating their educational experience as excellent at CSI. Students stated CSI offered the certificate or degree they were seeking, with only one student indicating CSI did not offer Linguistics as a degree option. All students interviewed felt accepted and respected, and 92 percent were confident CSI would help them achieve their goals. This strong sense of acceptance and assurance in institutional support can be

largely attributed to the positive relationships students formed with faculty and staff.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of a positive campus culture in promoting student engagement and success. The study's insights into these themes are timely and relevant, supporting ongoing efforts to expand dual credit program participation and reinforce the state's investment in initiatives like the Advanced Opportunities program. By focusing on these key areas, CSI can continue to enhance its offerings and ensure that all students feel valued and supported throughout their educational journeys. Beyond the overwhelmingly positive student experience at CSI, several key subthemes emerged as contributors to these favorable perceptions, including strong relationships with faculty and staff and meaningful connections.

Subtheme: Strong Relationships With Faculty and Staff

During the interviews, students shared that their positive experiences were largely due to the care and support they received from faculty, staff, and administration. Ninety-two percent of the students interviewed reported having positive interactions with their faculty, feeling valued, accepted, and respected. The relationships students built with faculty and staff were particularly noteworthy, as many participants emphasized how approachable and supportive educators were. This accessibility helped create a nurturing academic environment where students felt comfortable seeking help and guidance. Strong faculty-student relationships can enhance student engagement, which is essential for academic success (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007).

Supportive faculty help foster a strong sense of belonging among students, significantly enhancing their confidence in seeking help, participating in academic activities, and forming meaningful connections. A strong sense of belonging is crucial for students' engagement and success in higher education, as it helps them feel accepted and valued within their academic community (Gopalan and Brady 2020). The responsiveness of faculty members fostered a supportive learning environment, enhancing students' sense of value and

engagement in their education. Emerald felt everyone cared about her success, stating:

I would say that everyone was very friendly and treated everyone with respect. There we all have the same goal to get the education that we want and need. I feel like the faculty cared very much about your education and about you reaching your goals so they're super friendly and will always reach out to you and will always care about you and you feel comfortable going to talk to them one-on-one versus a bigger college where there are a lot of students who might not get that opportunity to have professors who actually care about them passing their class.

These positive interactions highlight the crucial role that faculty engagement plays in cultivating a sense of belonging and confidence among students, especially for those navigating the unique challenges of dual enrollment.

This supportive perception is particularly important for students from underrepresented backgrounds who may struggle with feelings of isolation or imposter syndrome (Hurtado and Carter 1997). A sense of belonging can lead students to perceive their courses as more valuable and relevant, as they feel more engaged and connected to the learning environment (Harper and Hurtado, *et al.* 2007). Faculty who foster a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere contribute significantly to this sense of belonging, which in turn enhances the overall educational experience (Gopalan and Brady 2020).

Strayhorn (2019) emphasizes that "positive interpersonal, peer interactions increase students' sense of belonging and sense of belonging leads to student success" (3). Students stated they had positive experiences with faculty and staff, and made connections with other students in class. Sky indicated that she made connections when she stated, "I definitely felt like I was part, especially in my classes that I was part of like a community, even though I wasn't like necessarily in the same boat." Ruby provided insight from her experience on campus by adding:

I really enjoyed my time on campus. I made a lot of friends with the kids like in my class, because it seems like we were

all dual credit students, instead of just being like some college, some high school. My professor was excellent, and was always very respectful of our time, and especially very understanding that as well as college students we are also high school students. And so, being in dual credit, she was very understanding of it.

Frequent interactions with faculty lead to greater student satisfaction compared to other forms of engagement (Astin 1985). These interactions create an atmosphere of collaboration, respect, and mentorship, helping students develop a stronger sense of self-worth and purpose. By fostering a classroom environment filled with support and encouragement, faculty can greatly influence students' academic success and their sense of belonging within the campus community (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007).

Students also spoke positively about their interactions with campus staff. Ninety-two percent of the students interviewed reported having positive experiences with the staff, while 85 percent felt the staff was friendly, helpful, and approachable. This positive perception can be closely linked to their sense of belonging, as they are more likely to perceive interactions as supportive and genuine (Lewis, *et al.* 2016). Seventy-six percent of the students interviewed stated they strongly agreed or agreed that the CSI staff cared about their success. These experiences highlight the significance of supportive and understanding staff in helping dual credit students navigate their unique academic journey at CSI.

The research and student experiences at CSI highlight the critical role of sense of belonging in higher education. By cultivating an environment where students feel connected, supported, and valued, institutions can significantly enhance students' engagement with campus resources, academic achievement, and overall college experience. Central to this sense of belonging are the meaningful connections students form during their academic journey, which serve as a foundation for their personal and professional growth.

Subtheme: Meaningful Connections

A sense of belonging brings about several positive outcomes, such as happiness, academic achievement, engagement, and overall well-being. These attributes are crucial for young adults as they navigate self-discovery and identity formation (Strayhorn 2019). When students feel connected to their educational environment, they are more likely to engage actively in their studies and perceive their courses as valuable and relevant (Gopalan and Brady 2020). In fact, 92 percent of the students interviewed reported making connections with other students in their classes, highlighting the importance of social interactions in fostering a sense of belonging.

Connections formed within the classroom were identified as essential, with engaging discussions and collaborative projects enhancing learning experiences. Such interactions not only enrich academic knowledge but also foster a sense of community among peers (Museus 2014). Strayhorn (2019) underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships, particularly peer interactions, in fostering student success by increasing their sense of belonging. This assertion is strongly supported by the experiences of students at CSI, who consistently reported positive interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students. These connections, formed both inside and outside the classroom, played a crucial role in shaping their educational journey.

Particularly noteworthy were the relationships students developed with specific instructors, which they frequently highlighted as having a significant and positive impact on their overall academic experience. These meaningful connections not only enhanced students' sense of belonging but also contributed to their academic engagement and success. Supportive and engaging faculty are crucial in enhancing the dual credit experience and fostering a sense of belonging for students transitioning between high school and college environments.

Theme: Request to Enhance More Early Engagement Opportunities

This study highlights the need for increased early engagement opportunities for dual credit students to improve their transition to college and enhance their overall

success. Many dual credit students face challenges navigating the college environment and developing a sense of belonging. This issue is compounded by a lack of awareness regarding available resources and support. Students expressed a desire to meet with an advisor or attend a session on campus before starting their courses, underscoring their need for guidance and information.

When asked about services such as career advising, peer tutoring, Eagle Central, and computer labs, many students were unaware these options were accessible to them. For instance, Jade and Lilly did not know they could obtain a dual credit student ID card, which negatively affected their sense of belonging. These responses highlight the need for better communication and outreach to dual credit students about available campus resources.

The study revealed a significant gap in awareness and utilization of available resources among dual credit students. Many were unaware of certain services or that they were eligible to use them. Additionally, students like Rowan and Lilly faced difficulties navigating the campus, finding classrooms, and understanding where to park, which further impacted their sense of belonging. Opal's experience with digital systems used by CSI for coursework highlights the technological adaptations required of students transitioning from high school to college-level courses. She found the unfamiliarity with these systems intimidating and frustrating, which added to her anxiety.

Strayhorn (2019) proposes several strategies to foster an environment that enhances students' sense of belonging, including facilitating positive peer interactions, nurturing faculty-student connections, and creating opportunities for student involvement. Building on Strayhorn's framework, students like Lilly and Amber emphasized the importance of early advisor meetings and personalized guidance. Lilly suggested that knowing about resources like the library and student ID cards would have made her feel more connected to the campus. Amber highlighted the need for a trusted advisor early in the process to make the transition smoother.

These comments underscore the significance of providing early, personalized guidance to help dual credit

students feel connected to the campus and navigate their academic journeys with greater confidence. Students expressed a strong desire for early engagement with campus resources, specifically requesting meetings with advisors or attendance at orientation sessions before beginning their courses. This aligns with the sense of belonging framework, which suggests that students who feel connected to their campus are more likely to utilize available resources effectively (Strayhorn 2012).

Providing opportunities for students to learn more about the campus, understand course structures, and become familiar with various resources could significantly enhance their sense of belonging. Ivy expressed a need for more information about what to expect from the campus in terms of classes and campus life. These comments highlight the importance of proactive orientation and ongoing support in fostering a sense of belonging among dual credit students. By helping students understand and navigate the college environment, institutions can create a more supportive atmosphere, which is crucial for student success and persistence (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007; Strayhorn 2019).

Theme: Student Apprehensions, Anxieties, and Barriers

Dual credit students navigating the main campus environment faced a complex array of emotions and challenges. Their experiences were characterized by several interconnected themes that shed light on the unique hurdles they encounter. They voiced concerns through several subthemes, including (i) sense of belonging, (ii) value of perception, (iii) not fitting in, (iv) academic rigor and expectations, and (v) commute concerns. These unique concerns highlight the challenges dual credit students face as they transition into a college setting, underscoring the need for supportive resources and guidance to help them feel more confident and integrated into the campus community.

Subtheme: Sense of Belonging

Belonging stems from mutual relationships where individuals and groups benefit from shared interactions (Strayhorn 2019). While belonging drives people to seek

connections within organizations that align with their values, 75 percent of students reported not forming peer connections outside of class, revealing a gap in their sense of belonging. A supportive campus culture is essential for student success, as academic and social integration help students navigate college life, build networks, and gain confidence (Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007; Strayhorn 2019).

A stronger campus connection emerged as a significant concern among dual credit students. They expressed anxiety about navigating the college environment, fitting in with older students, and meeting academic expectations, aligning with Strayhorn's (2019) core element three, which emphasizes the heightened importance of belonging during certain times and contexts. Many students reported feeling out of place and worried about their academic readiness, with 69 percent indicating they wouldn't be missed if absent from school. These concerns highlight the need for supportive measures to ease their transition into the college environment.

For dual credit students, daily interactions with faculty, peers, and staff significantly shape their sense of belonging and academic success (Boysen, *et al.* 2009; Strayhorn 2012). Students must see themselves as valuable contributors to the college community (Bean and Eaton 2000; Strayhorn 2012). Students expressed a desire for more engagement opportunities, such as intramural sports, to foster connections. Although busy schedules and shyness were barriers, students acknowledged the importance of seeking support and building relationships. McMillan and Chavis's (1986) definition of community—membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection—underscores the need for an environment where students feel they belong. Prioritizing these elements can enhance the student experience and promote greater campus engagement at CSI.

Subtheme: Value of Perception

Understanding how dual credit students perceive their value within the college environment is crucial, as it significantly influences their sense of belonging and overall experience. While a majority felt valued at CSI, with 92 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing, students

were less confident about their own contributions to the community. Notably, 69 percent of students were neutral about whether they would be missed if absent, and 15 percent believed they wouldn't be missed at all.

These findings align with research on sense of belonging in educational settings, particularly Strayhorn's (2012) emphasis on the importance of feeling valued and mattering to others. The high percentage of neutral responses suggests that many dual credit students may not have developed strong connections within the college community. This lack of belonging can have significant implications, as Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation.

In the context of higher education, these results relate to Schlossberg's (1989) concept of mattering and Tinto's (1993) model of student retention, both of which highlight the importance of social and academic integration for student success and persistence. The challenge of fitting in, therefore, becomes a crucial factor in a student's academic journey, influencing not only their sense of belonging but also their overall educational experience and likelihood of completing their studies.

Subtheme: Not Fitting In

Dual credit students face unique challenges as they navigate their dual identities as high school and college students. Sky expressed a common concern about not fitting in with traditional college students, while Ruby focused on the intimidating physical environment of a larger campus. Pearl voiced apprehensions about managing her schedule and potentially impacting team dynamics due to her age difference.

Many students shared anxiety about navigating the campus, with Hazel specifically mentioning fears of not being able to find classrooms. The feeling of being out of place was prevalent, as students perceived that everyone else knew what they were doing. Ruby summed up this sentiment, expressing nervousness about the atmosphere and the sheer size of the college compared to high school.

Sky expressed a common concern, saying she was “mostly concerned with like not fitting the like traditional college student, because I was in high school.”

This sentiment reflects the dual identity these students must navigate. Rose's experience further illustrates these challenges:

I was just so new to the whole higher education. I did it when I was still fairly new into high school, so it was hard to adjust, and I had never been on campus so it was kind of hard to find my way around. I felt like an outsider in that sense. As I spent more time there, I got more comfortable. I think one of my biggest concerns was just the time management of getting from Jerome to Twin Falls in a timely manner, just because I did have to have early release from my high school. So then instantly, after one class, I would go drive over and try to get there on time, and that was a bit stressful, just because I hadn't been driving for very long and just doing that commute was a little tedious, but it wasn't too bad. I was a new driver too.

Ruby echoed these sentiments, focusing on the physical environment: "I was nervous and like the fact that I didn't know where things would be. I wasn't nervous about taking a class; I was just nervous about the atmosphere because it's so much bigger than the high school."

These testimonies highlight the multifaceted nature of the challenges dual credit students face. Beyond the physical and social aspects of adapting to college life, they also grappled with apprehensions about meeting increased academic demands and expectations of higher education. This complex set of concerns underscores the unique position these students occupy as they straddle the worlds of high school and college simultaneously.

Subtheme: Academic Rigor and Expectations

Dual enrollment students face a unique set of challenges as they navigate college-level coursework while still in high school. Their concerns span academic, social, and practical domains, creating a complex landscape of opportunities and potential stressors. Academically, students expressed apprehension about course difficulty, teaching styles, and curriculum. Many worried about being on par with traditional college peers and whether they were adequately prepared for college-level work. Rowan's concern about professors' teaching and grading

styles, and Amber's anxiety about being on the same level as everybody else, exemplify these academic worries.

Socially, dual credit students grappled with feeling out of place. Sky and Lilly articulated the challenge of straddling both worlds—high school and college—and not fully belonging to either. This social disconnect extended to interactions with faculty, as Lilly and Hazel expressed reluctance to approach professors due to their status as high school students. Practically, students faced logistical challenges such as navigating a larger campus, managing complex schedules, and dealing with parking and commuting issues. These practical concerns added another layer of complexity to their dual enrollment experience.

As Walton and Cohen (2007) note, social belonging—"feeling socially connected and having positive relations with others"—is crucial for student success and persistence in higher education. For dual credit students, developing this sense of belonging is particularly challenging as they balance the demands of two distinct educational environments.

Subtheme: Commute Concerns

Dual credit students face unique logistical challenges that significantly impact their college experience. Many reported high stress levels due to tight schedules between high school and college classes, often struggling with parking and punctuality. Rose's experience exemplifies these issues, highlighting the difficulties of adjusting to higher education while still in high school, navigating an unfamiliar campus, and managing the commute between schools as a new driver. Students reported experiencing significant stress due to tight schedules between their high school and college classes, often struggling to find parking and arriving at their campus classes on time. Rose highlighted this challenge, stating that one of her biggest concerns was managing the time required to travel from her high school to the CSI campus. She explained, "instantly after one class, I would go drive over and try to get there on time and that was a bit stressful, just because I hadn't been driving for very long and just doing that commute was a little tedious." Rose further added, "I

think there was a couple of times where I just like didn't make it to class on time just because of the commute." Jade stated she,

mostly signed up for classes that wouldn't make me come to campus because I was kind of scared to contact campus" and also expressed concern regarding she "had just started driving and I was super worried to drive all of the way out here that long and even the weather. Yeah it was scary to think like, oh, I have a high school class at 9:00 and you're gonna have my college class at 10:00 and then I have to drive and be back here by 11:00 for my other high school class when I'm late. What if traffic makes me late like it was super scary.

Several of the students noted the parking outside of the Hepworth building as being a point of contention. Rose provided additional insight into her parking concerns:

The commute time cause you're on a strict schedule. And so that's kind of one of the things that I would think about when I think about barriers is like, cause I can't get there, perhaps on time or traffic, or there's been an accident, or something like I think there was a couple of times where I just like didn't make it to class on time just because of the commute, and also I think it was my last year as a dual credit student, I had an injury in a sport, so I couldn't drive, and I had a classmate drive me to class, and I obviously had to wait for her to get out, and then we'd commute over together. So, there was a little bit of that going on I did have a driver had people hold the door open for me. I had the crutches and everything.

Jade echoed these concerns, emphasizing the anxiety associated with driving to campus and the fear of being late due to traffic or weather conditions. The combination of academic pressures and logistical hurdles creates a complex set of stressors affecting students' academic performance and sense of belonging on campus. Parking emerged as a particular point of contention, especially around the Hepworth building. Rose further elaborated on how commute times, traffic accidents, and personal circumstances like injuries can impact class attendance and punctuality.

These testimonies underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by dual credit students, particularly those commuting between high school and college campuses. The stress of navigating unfamiliar environments, finding parking, and managing tight schedules can significantly impact students' ability to fully engage in their college courses and overall campus experience.

Implications and Recommendations

To effectively integrate dual credit students into the campus community, institutions need to re-evaluate their support programs to extend beyond logistical briefings. These programs should work to foster a sense of belonging to combat student anxiety related to navigating the college environment, fitting in with older students, and meeting academic expectations. Many dual credit students feel out of place and worry about academic readiness, with 69 percent feeling they wouldn't be missed if absent.

Institutions should prioritize orientation programs specifically for dual credit students and their families, addressing academic and logistical concerns to ease the transition from high school to college. Dedicated orientation teams collaborating with high schools and current college students can help design inclusive programming tailored to this population. Peer mentorship programs, pairing dual credit students with college mentors, can guide them through academic expectations, social opportunities, and campus resources. Creating a "Bridge to Success" dual credit program and interactive workshops can build confidence and reduce anxiety. A dedicated physical space for dual credit students, including study areas, advising offices, and community events, can also serve as a practical resource and demonstrate institutional commitment. Academic advisors in these spaces can provide individualized support with course selection, transfer credits, and long-term academic planning.

Fostering social integration through club participation, student organizations, athletic games, academic fairs, and tailored events can help dual credit students engage with peers and campus life. Faculty engagement is critical for fostering a sense of belonging, and institutions should provide professional development on

the unique needs of dual credit students and encourage mentorship opportunities. Overcoming logistical barriers through transportation solutions, flexible scheduling, and collaboration with high schools is crucial for dual credit student participation. Effective communication strategies, involving parents and utilizing accessible platforms, are vital for keeping dual credit students informed and engaged. Highlighting success stories from former dual credit participants and increasing opportunities for dual credit students to feel a sense of belonging on campus can improve higher education trajectories and increase college enrollment rates.

Future research should focus on larger and more diverse student samples, varied academic backgrounds, longitudinal tracking, and mixed-method approaches to understand the long-term outcomes and factors influencing dual credit students' sense of belonging and educational success. Further studies are needed, especially concerning two-year colleges, to assess the potential effects on students' academic outcomes, and future research should be centered around dual credit students' experience and support on campus.

Conclusion

This research explored dual credit students' sense of belonging on campus, revealing that students valued their educational experiences in on-campus courses. They reported positive interactions with instructors and high-quality education at the College of Southern Idaho (CSI), viewing on-campus attendance as crucial for their educational goals. Students expressed a desire for better information, resource connection, and involvement with peers, which will inform future planning to enhance their sense of belonging. The dual credit students who participated in this research shared their positive on-campus experiences and provided recommendations for further student support. Students attend college for a variety of reasons, and "given the goals that lead students to begin college, it is argued that the impact of student college experience on motivation can be understood as the outcome of the interaction among student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived worth or relevance of the curriculum" (Tinto 2017, 255).

Throughout their educational journey, students encounter numerous challenges and uncertainties, and their motivations may differ.

The way institutions provide support, encouragement, and foster a sense of belonging is crucial in determining students' persistence in completing their degrees. Students' sense of belonging is influenced by prior experiences, daily campus interactions, and perceived compatibility (Strayhorn 2019; Tinto 2017). Engagement with the campus community fosters this sense of belonging (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Strayhorn 2012). The process of establishing and realizing a sense of belonging through interconnected relationships on campus is mutual and relational, fostering a belief that they are valued, cared for, and positioned for academic success (Strayhorn 2019). Ultimately, students need reassurance that they are not only welcomed but also genuinely supported, with others taking an interest in and caring about their achievements (Rosenberg and McCullough 1981). This support system significantly influences students' determination to persist and achieve their degree. Institutions play a key role in creating supportive environments that help students overcome challenges and commit to their educational goals.

Dual credit programs offering on-campus courses benefit students, institutions, and the broader educational landscape. They allow students to experience college-level rigor, accelerate academic progress, and potentially reduce higher education costs (Field 2021). Research indicates that dual enrollment participants are more likely to enroll in and complete college compared to non-participants. The growth in dual enrollment participation underscores its increasing value. By focusing on encompassing practices and targeted support, dual credit programs can serve as a powerful tool for increasing college access, improving student outcomes, and bridging educational gaps across diverse student populations (Roughton 2016).

The myriad of emotions and challenges experienced by dual credit students paints a vivid picture of their unique journey as they step into the college world. These students find themselves at a crossroads, simultaneously navigating the familiar terrain of high school

while venturing into the uncharted territory of higher education. This delicate balancing act calls for a thoughtful and targeted approach from educational institutions.

To truly support dual credit students, colleges must recognize the complexity of their situation and respond with tailored resources. This means developing programs and support systems that not only address academic needs but also nurture students' confidence and sense of belonging. By doing so, institutions can help dual credit students find their footing in the college community, bridging the gap between their high school and college identities. Ultimately, the goal is to empower these students to thrive in both worlds, equipping them with the tools to manage their dual responsibilities effectively. With the right support, dual credit students can transform their unique position into

a strength, leveraging their early college experience to build a strong foundation for future academic and personal success.

CSI demonstrates a strong commitment to dual credit students through comprehensive support. To maintain this commitment, the institution should focus on faculty engagement, dynamic learning environments, and student support services. Incorporating student feedback will be crucial for enhancing the dual credit student experience. In conclusion, this study highlights the transformative potential of dual credit programs when implemented with a focus on student belonging and support. As institutions like CSI continue to refine and expand these programs, they pave the way for a more inclusive, accessible, and effective higher education landscape.

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About the Author



Polly Hulsey

Polly Hulsey, Ed.D., has served as a Grant Administrator and is currently the Dean of Student Access for the College of Southern Idaho. She oversees Admissions, Bridge to Success, Events and Outreach, Early College (Dual Credit and Transition Coordination), and the Off-Campus Centers. Additionally, she has previously served in City Administration, managed an accounting firm, and held various roles within the banking industry. She earned her master's degree in management and organizational leadership from George Fox University and her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership

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In December 2023, she graduated from the AACRAO SEM Endorsement Program (SEM-EP) and was a conference presenter. In 2024, she was selected as an AACRAO Grant Award Recipient for her doctoral work. Additionally, in 2024, she led a SEM Field Study at the College of Southern Idaho for the AACRAO SEM-EP certification program. In 2025, she presented at the AACRAO annual conference and participated in a conference focus group.

Additionally, she has been involved with the National Alliance of Concur-

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