



Keys to Success: Relationships and Adaptability

Lessons Learned about Secondary-Postsecondary Partnerships from the College and Career Readiness Expansion Project

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Introduction

Dual enrollment—students taking college courses while they are in high school—is dramatically expanding with about one-third of high school graduates across the country having taken such courses.¹ Successful implementation of dual enrollment requires strong partnerships between a school district or high school and a college. However, secondary and postsecondary institutions have different organizational structures and cultures that can pose a number of challenges to such partnerships.

This brief explores lessons learned about partnerships from the College and Career Readiness Expansion (CCRE) project, a regional effort to improve workforce readiness in the Central Ohio area. A collaboration between Columbus State Community College and seven K-12 school districts, CCRE was designed to increase the number of students graduating from high school prepared for enrollment and success in postsecondary education. The College and the districts were active participants in the partnership, which strengthened over the course of the project. This brief focuses on understanding the components of the partnership, how the College collaborated with the partners to resolve dual-enrollment-related challenges, and how the College customized project activities according to characteristics unique to the K-12 districts and student needs.

¹ Shivji, A. and Wilson, S. (2019) Dual Enrollment: Participation and Characteristics [High School Longitudinal Study of 2009]. NCES. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2019176>.

What does research say about partnerships between the secondary and postsecondary sectors?

Dual enrollment necessitates a partnership between a high school (or district) and a college; the high school has the students who are taking the courses and the college has the courses that the students take. We can think of a secondary-postsecondary partnership as a “coming together of diverse interests and people to achieve a common purpose via interactions, information sharing, and coordination activities.”² To successfully offer dual-enrollment courses, partnering institutions may need to negotiate a host of issues, including student eligibility; student registration; tuition, fees, and book costs; course scheduling details; instructor credentials; and student supports.

These partnerships may face challenges. As one researcher notes, “The obstacles to secondary-postsecondary partnerships are numerous and far more complex than the links between K-12 schools. Substantial differences in mission, organization, budgets, schedules, and stakeholders present many ‘sticking points.’ each must be negotiated in order to create a seamless transition.”³ For example, high schools have a more “custodial nature” in which they are responsible for the students in their care and exert control over activities and learning, whereas colleges provide less oversight and students have more personal freedom.⁴

Despite the challenges, successful partnerships are possible, and research suggests that effective partnerships share some characteristics, including interest in and commitment to the work, clarity of purpose, and agreement on who is responsible for which pieces.⁵ An effective partnership that connects high school and college can increase postsecondary matriculation and attendance by providing support to students who might not have the experience or support to prepare for or enroll in college courses while in high school.⁶

² Zuchelli, B. (2010). Early college partnerships: Relationships and success elements of an early college program between 25 rural school districts in southwestern Pennsylvania and a community college. Dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, p. 118.

Successful dual-enrollment partnerships also need flexibility and an understanding of each party’s needs.⁷ This brief describes the characteristics of the CCRE secondary-postsecondary partnership and how Columbus State and participating districts were able to negotiate some of the issues associated with dual enrollment.

What is the College and Career Readiness Expansion Project?

Led by Columbus State Community College, CCRE was a five-year research project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The project was based on the early college model, which combines dual-enrollment opportunities with broader changes at the high schools to enhance students’ postsecondary readiness. Schools participating in CCRE focused on restructuring their practices to better ensure student readiness for college and career. One of the project’s core goals was to increase the number of students taking college-level courses, with an emphasis on expanding access for historically underrepresented populations. Additionally, CCRE schools focused on improving instruction, increasing students’ postsecondary readiness, expanding supports for students, and implementing course pathways. Find more information about this project in the [final report](#).

The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro⁸ studied CCRE using a rigorous, quasi-experimental design. SERVE matched CCRE schools to non-CCRE schools in Ohio with similar demographics and academic characteristics; both treatment and comparison schools started with similar college course-taking levels. The evaluation also collected data on implementation through surveys, interviews, and three rounds of site visits to six schools, all of which contributed to this brief.

³ Leonard, J. (2013) Negotiated issues in an early college partnership: Description and understanding through interorganizational theory. *Current Issues in Education*, 16: 3, p. 1.

⁴ Azinger, A. (2003). A K-12 perspective on partnerships with community colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 17-21.

⁵ Buys, N. & Bursnall, S. (2007). Establishing university-community partnerships: Processes and benefits. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 29:1, 73-86.

⁶ Barnett, E., & Hughes, K. (2010). *Community College and High School Partnerships*. Issue Brief prepared for: The White House Summit on Community College.

⁷ Zuchelli (2010).

⁸ SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro: serve.uncg.edu

How did the CCRE partnership operate?

Columbus State Community College managed CCRE, working in partnership with seven districts and two outside agencies (Jobs for the Future and the Educational Services Center of Central Ohio). Over the life of the project, Columbus State changed internal structures and the organization of personnel to ensure that the College could be responsive to the needs of districts' dual-enrollment students. Project staff at the College were determined to ensure the work and the accompanying changes became institutionalized, rather than viewed as one-off accommodations for a discretionary grant. One action was the development of the position of a Senior Director of K-12 Partnerships to align the work between the College and districts. The Senior Director reported to the Chief Academic Officer at the College. In addition, the team engaged the Office of Academic Affairs and Enrollment Management Students Services to integrate the different dual enrollment activities into the fabric of the College, aligning grant activities to the strategic priorities of the organization. The project's Principal Investigator described how the efforts created a more responsive system:

We reorganized the College, and we separated out Enrollment Management, Student Services from other divisions of the College. And Academic Affairs took a very different role in the work of dual enrollment. [The departments] actually took an active role [in the reorganization].

CCRE supported districts' involvement in the project by funding a project coordinator in each K-12 district whose primary responsibilities were to coordinate and implement the project activities within their own districts. One small district located the coordinator in the high school, and the coordinator worked directly with the staff and faculty on the CCRE project. In larger districts, the coordinators worked with several schools to implement the grant. The district coordinators and superintendents met regularly with Columbus State staff as a whole group and also in district-specific groups.

How did the partnership resolve specific challenges?

Districts and colleges have different systems in place to serve their students. These systems include managing student enrollment and attendance, supporting students in their courses, and utilizing data to support programs, to name a few. Because the goals of each type of institution are different, the systems that direct their functions are different. As Leonard (2013) points out, obstacles to seamlessly serving students simultaneously enrolled in both environments are numerous. For a K-12-community college partnership to successfully serve students taking college-credit courses, each partner needs to have an appreciation for the differences between the systems, understand the underlying factors that lead to these differences, and be willing to make adjustments to their own systems. Early in the project, the College president told the Principal Investigator, "Let's not impose our bureaucracy on K-12." The directive was to create a solution that focused on students.

In a project like this, it was not necessary for all systems to change. In fact, just an understanding that differences existed went a long way to making the work more seamless. The Principal Investigator said,

We felt it important as a foundational tenet of the grant that both the College and the districts had to recognize that we are obligated to put students at the center of our decision-making process, to move to a more student-centric environment. That is to say, it's not the institutions at the center—it's the student at the center.

This attitude made it easier for the partnership to negotiate challenges such as 1) calendar conflicts, 2) registration, 3) eligibility requirements for college classes, and 4) data sharing.

Calendar conflicts. One system that was initially overlooked was the academic calendar. The College academic calendar begins in late spring with summer school and ends after the spring semester; the K-12 academic calendar begins in the fall and ends after the following summer. Almost immediately, the College and the districts understood that this difference had the potential to cause scheduling issues and might also cause challenges for students who wanted to earn college credits before high school graduation. Although they did not modify the calendars, each partner built accommodations for the others' calendar into their own system.

Course registration. Processes as simple as registering students for classes can become huge challenges because the K-12 and postsecondary systems are not connected. For example, registration of high school students into college classes can be a time-consuming process for a high school, requiring gathering student information (such as identification and course selection) that then must be converted into a format that the College can use. South-Western City School District, which has over 22,000 students, found that the process for students to take dual-credit courses was time- and labor-intensive. The district administration worked with the College to develop a system that would allow the high school and College enrollment systems to “talk” to each other (see box). Columbus State assisted in the design of a student information system that could upload data from the district's internal scheduling system once district students had been registered at the high schools.

Eligibility requirements for college classes. For students to enroll in college courses, they often must pass a placement exam, such as the ACCUPLACER. In the early phases of the project, the College provided staff to administer the assessments to students at their schools. In some cases, students would go to the College campus for the exam. After the early stages of the project, Columbus State staff provided professional development to K-12 staff to administer the ACCUPLACER at the schools to expand the number of students tested for admission to the college. This created more flexibility for schools to assess their students,

College Course Registration

The registration for a district our size was too cumbersome for our staff and students. So, I got my tech department to meet with Columbus State's tech department. And over the course of a half a year, we designed a process where our student information system now speaks to their student information system. So when we register students for courses—for our dual-credit courses or CCP courses—we put it in our Infinite Campus system [and] then upload that into Columbus State Community College[’s registration system]. We don't have to, any longer, go into the portal to do separate pages and spreadsheets and documents. ... When we register our kids for high school, [the College] pulls that information, and it automatically registers them for college.

—District staff member

accommodating each schools' processes and not making them dependent on the availability of College staff to get to the schools. Providing assessments in the schools also streamlined the registration process. One K-12 administrator described the expansion:

We're providing the placement tests in our buildings. So that we can [proctor the exams] and ... We're registering students for the college. Before you can even take the placement tests, you have to apply to the College. Then once you get that and you get your Cougar ID, ...then you can take the placement assessment. Well, all that used to happen somewhere else. Now it lives here.

During fall 2020, in response to COVID restrictions, the Chancellor of the Ohio State Department of Higher Education decreed that a high school GPA of 3.0 would replace passing the in-person ACCUPLACER assessments

(which were no longer being offered) to make students eligible for CCP. Columbus State staff believed that this 3.0 GPA requirement could disqualify students who had lower GPAs but who could otherwise show proficiency on the placement test and be successful in college classes. The College advocated for a policy waiver that would allow students who had a GPA between 2.5 and 2.99 to take college courses. Columbus State staff worked with each district that was interested in requesting a waiver from the 3.0 GPA requirement to develop alternative approaches to admission. As of spring 2021, the College had been informed that they could pilot the 2.5 to 2.99 GPA waiver with a limited number of districts. The pilot waived the GPA requirement only for college courses for which there were no other prerequisites.

Even before the pandemic, the College was interested in expanding eligibility to more students and had concerns that the ACCUPLACER exam, particularly the writing portion, was serving as an unnecessary barrier. An administrator at the College described the situation: “It’s not that students aren’t getting the right content; they’ve been learning for a long time how to write five-paragraph essays. But they’re not demonstrating that knowledge on the ACCUPLACER.” Columbus State proposed another policy waiver that would allow districts to work with them to develop and agree upon alternative benchmarks for entry. College and high school instructors worked together to create the Third Space English course (described in more depth below) to prepare students for college work. In the spring of 2021, successful completion of this course was approved as an alternative to the ACCUPLACER for demonstrating college readiness.

Data sharing. The approaches to education vary between K-12 and colleges, and the relationships of the institutions to the students also vary. Most high school students are minors, but when they matriculate into college courses their status becomes that of an adult. Federal laws, such as the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), protect the privacy of college students and their information, such as attendance and grades. These laws prevent sharing information of a high school student enrolled in college

courses with high school counselors and teachers, and with parents/families, posing a problem for high school students who still need guidance and support of their studies. It can also present a challenge for parents/guardians who have personal and financial interests in their child’s participation in college courses. Hamilton Township and Columbus State developed a novel approach to providing information to counselors and parents/guardians (see FERPA Waiver box). They were able to negotiate an option for staff and parents (or guardians) in the district to access information about the students. One district administrator praised the collaboration with Columbus State: “I think that’s a good example of how they’re responsive in something that is touchy, is very touchy. But they put their heads to it and worked with us and got it done. I can’t see that having happened years before.”

FERPA Waiver

We had discussed allowing our students to give consent to have our teachers actually put their grades in our progress book. That was a major issue, but Columbus State worked on it with us for about a year. And Columbus State and their lawyers, they came up with a form, a consent form that allows for this to happen. We can actually see what's going on with the students to an extent, and not just kind of leave it in the wind as far as what they're doing with Columbus State. We can actually give intervention. Parents, they can see it too. But that was only developed because Columbus State didn't give up on us with that.

—District Administrator

How did the institutions work together to support students?

In addition to resolving some of the logistical challenges arising from different institutional systems, the CCRE participants developed supports for students to prepare them for college courses and to help them succeed once they enrolled.

College readiness course. To prepare students for success in college courses, CCRE supported the implementation of a college-readiness class (COLS 1101), which offered students the opportunity to earn one college credit while learning skills to prepare them for future postsecondary classes. Columbus State made large-scale curriculum changes in the first year of CCRE to adapt the course for the high school environment, making the content more “high school-centric” and adding three projects designed to help students with future planning. In addition to aligning the course more to high school students’ needs, Columbus State was flexible with how the districts implemented the course. For example, two schools implemented COLS 1101 sections with as many of their 10th-graders as possible during either an advisory or a regular period. Two other schools focused on 9th-graders. In one high school, nearly all 9th-grade students took a course that built on the COLS 1101 syllabus; students had the opportunity to take the ACCUPLACER test and earn college credit for the class.

Preparatory course. The CCRE partnership also collaboratively developed a class that also functioned as a college readiness support structure called Third Space English (see box on next page). Faculty from Columbus State and English teachers from several of the districts met and designed what one of the course creators called “a semesterized course that could act as a recovery English course.” As described above, this course was also approved to serve as an alternative method of demonstrating college readiness, replacing the ACCUPLACER.

Supplementary instruction. Once students started taking college courses, academic support was essential to helping them succeed. Columbus State sought to find approaches to

supporting dual-enrollment students that could be sustained within existing funding streams. In order to provide tutoring and academic support to students, the College worked with selected districts to pilot a supplemental instruction model. Current high school students who had already completed a course received training in how to model effective learning practices in class and to lead peer study groups for students currently enrolled in the course. A Columbus State administrator described the supplemental instruction developed to support schools:

Supplemental instruction was pretty impactful for the districts that implemented that. It helped create a culture of peers helping peers do college coursework. And that doesn't only help with the student success supports that we tried to implement and increasing student attainment and success, but also supports that nurturing of that college-going culture.

The administrator went on to describe how supplemental instruction fostered a college-going culture by students seeing peers modeling college-going behavior, explaining that the school was, “building the college-going culture and the value of a college education, whether the student knows it or not.”

Early alert. Columbus State and the districts also collaborated to support high schools by providing all schools access to the College’s early alert system, Starfish. College instructors were expected to enter student performance data into the system. For dual-enrollment courses, the system sent an alert to a school-level contact, usually a guidance counselor. The counselor was then able to follow up with the student about academic or attendance concerns. A Columbus State staff person described how the system operated:

[The schools] have an early alert contact that is supposed to monitor Starfish. They have access to it, to keep track of their students, in addition to our advisors, monitoring it on our end as well. And so our advisors, when they see there's a flag that has been raised, they email the student and copy the counselor [regarding] that specific concern. Among our expectations is that they do that within seven days of that flag being raised.

What factors made this partnership successful?

The examples in the preceding sections illustrate how the CCRE partners collaborated successfully to address some of the challenges and issues of dual enrollment. Overall, the College and the districts believed that the partnership between each district and the College had strengthened through the CCRE project. As one K-12 partner put it: “Columbus State has been willing to change the way, operationally, they do things to meet the needs of our students. That was one of the biggest accomplishments I think, that we’ve had as far as the operational side of things.” From the College’s perspective, they believed that districts

Third Space English

For many students from low-income K-12 districts, their preparedness for high school or college success is often viewed through a lens that emphasizes their supposed deficits as opposed to their possibilities.

Columbus State's Third Space English class is an effort to upend these false assumptions. Designed collaboratively by high school and postsecondary faculty, Third Space English is a pre-college composition course that Columbus State staff describe as, “neither and both high school and college.” This will be a high school class with the explicit goal of readying students for college composition, a gateway course to many other college classes. Based on a culturally relevant equity pedagogy, the class is intended to resonate with students' lived experiences, offering them a space to gain skills, confidence, and an understanding of how their voices can change the world.

—College Adjunct Faculty

began to appreciate and accommodate differences more so than previously, considering how actions or decisions made at the districts would impact their work with Columbus State. As one College staff member put it,

[Now] we are part of [the districts'] muscle memory. So things like snow days, or COVID, we are already on their mind—whereas prior to this work, [the College] didn't factor [into] what they were doing at all. I think now in some [districts], they're like, “Oh, yes. And also Columbus State. We've got to figure out how this impacts them and get there.”

These quotes, and other evaluation data, are evidence of some of the factors that have made the partnership successful, including 1) a commitment on the part of the College to meet districts where they were, 2) College and district staffs that could understand the other side’s perspective, and 3) College and district staff time dedicated to the project.

Willingness to start with districts' needs. Customization was a key characteristic of the CCRE project. Not only did partner K-12 districts vary in student demographics, staff capacity, enrollment, and school structures, they had different philosophies on serving students in their communities



and strategies for how they supported participation in dual-enrollment and courses. One district administrator described the reasons that each district required different supports from the College: “We embrace this work, but we can’t be expected to do it the same way as [other districts]. One, the demographics of [another district] are slightly different. And then two, they may have resources that we don’t and vice versa in terms of the number of pathways that are already established and things like that.”

CCRE supported districts in developing school-specific programs or enhancing locally-driven initiatives. The districts reported that they felt the College listened to them. For example, several years prior to the project, one district established their high schools as themed academies and provided pathway-specific education at each academy. As a result, they needed different supports than districts that did not have any pathways. A district stakeholder described the individualization that the districts sought: “Some of the CCRE schools really branched off into work-based learning. Others really branched off into bolstering their CCP options. And then others looked at really bolstering their career pathways opportunities.”

Customizing the Work

What we do is: we go in, and listen, and we talk, and we think through “what would they like the solution to be?” Sometimes we have a direction we’d like to steer the ship in. But we also recognize that if we go in with a prepackaged solution that worked really well in one district, we’re not going to get anywhere. I think that’s been the biggest evolution at the College, to recognize that we may have answers, but we don’t have answers for K–12 because it has to be what they want.

—College administrator



Involving staff who understand multiple perspectives. Many Columbus State staff members had worked in K-12 schools or districts in the region and understood the needs, practices, and policies of public school districts. At the same time, they understood community college policies, practices, and bureaucracies. The combination of experience and knowledge in both K-12 and the community college provided bridges between the districts and Columbus State that were unique to each district’s needs. Interviews revealed that the outward face of the project was not “college people running it.” It was important that the College was not seen as prescribing activities to the districts but working alongside districts to co-develop the program for their students: “We heard the districts, and we want to do it [implement CCRE] in a way that they can do best. And we had to default to [their expertise], because they know best how they can do it in their schools.”

Collaborative Relationships

“Columbus State's been extremely helpful in when we just call them on the phone or even text some of them. ... It really does seem like we can get their attention instantly, and they'll help us. That's something I think overall, on all the other things, we would have made a lot of progress with all this work anyway. The relationships now that we have with Columbus State are really the most beneficial part of our [project] participation.”

—District staff member

The meaningful connections that Columbus State had with Central Ohio K-12 districts lent an immediate a level of trust between the College and district staffs. As the project's Principal Investigator, who previously served as a district superintendent in the area, said:

I was fortunate to have many longstanding relationships with superintendents and others [in the public schools]. As a person in with whom they had a trusted relationship, we were able to move past the usual “forming, storming, norming” challenges associated with group development to focus immediately on the work. Additionally, many of our K-12 partners expressed confidence that there was somebody inside Columbus State who understood the culture of K-12. I think that's been really important to the success of our work together.



Having staff with dedicated time and responsibilities.

In addition to commitment and understanding, strong partnerships operate most effectively when people are specifically tasked with and given the time to do the work. As noted above, the grant funds paid for a coordinator to be embedded within each district. These individuals' time was dedicated to the partnership activities. One district administrator commented that they were only able to make as much progress as they had because of the coordinator moving the career and college readiness work forward. Columbus State also hired and reallocated staff dedicated to the partnership; this is particularly important as they look to grow the number of collaborations with area districts and schools.

Conclusion

Overall, the CCRE project provides a model of how colleges and districts can work together to improve college readiness and expand access to college-level courses for all students. From the outset of the grant, Columbus State created an atmosphere of collaboration with the district partners. Columbus State staff took an approach that involved a willingness to start with the needs of each of the districts as they expanded access to college courses for their students. This approach was encouraged by the College president, and project staff focused on putting students at the center of the project. As one college administrator described the work: “[Districts] don’t like to be told that ‘this is the game plan.’ So we aren’t telling [districts] what the game plan is, but we’re guiding them toward [similar outcomes]. So the ideas and the development of the outcomes are the same; the methodology for getting there is a little bit different.” The K-12 partners recognized and valued the individualization that the College provided. One district administrator expressed their appreciation for this:

Columbus State helped us sit down and look at the overall goals of the grant and stretch it so that we could stay within the confinements of the grant but also customize the experience. There's still a way that you can get things done without it being a separate thing that has no sustainability plan.

The Principal Investigator described how the collaboration was based on district needs:

We wanted to take districts where they were and [move] forward at their pace and their readiness level. It's kind of like the classroom; we ask teachers to do that all the time—meet students where they are and move them forward. ... So that's kind of what we were doing with our districts. How we implemented the COLS class is a great example because of the way we modify COLS (in at least four different ways) speaks to meeting the districts where they were.

By working with each district, Columbus State could find ways to address conflicting policies and practices and work through them to best serve students in the districts. In one case that was streamlining the college enrollment process; in another, creating an agreement to allow college students to share their progress information with counselors and parents or guardians. The partners were able to support students in preparation for enrolling in college by customizing the college readiness course to the district and assisting districts with implementing the course.

Although customization was critical, there were parts of the project that were implemented across all districts and critical for effective dual enrollment. For example, one important piece of student support was the early alert system that the College provided to all districts. Starfish provided course information to counselors so that students’ progress could be monitored.

In beginning a project like CCRE, it would benefit a college and their K-12 partners to try to understand the needs of the other and acknowledge that there are differences in mission and management that need to be accommodated. Many of the Columbus State project staff had experience in and connections to K-12 districts and understood the K-12 culture. They were able to use their experience to bridge the needs of the districts to the requirements of the College to provide a smooth transition for students. Although experience in the K-12 world is not a prerequisite for participating in a project like CCRE, in this case it was beneficial in creating opportunities for dialogue and streamlining dual-enrollment processes between the College and the districts.

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