

A Mixed-Methods Study of Texas’ Financial Aid for Swift Transfer (FAST) Program: Examining Implementation, Participation, and Academic Momentum

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Background

Since summer 2023, Texas’ FAST program reimburses public colleges for the cost of delivering dual-credit (DC) courses to economically disadvantaged students, based on eligibility for federal Free- and Reduced-Lunch (FRL) programs.

This mixed-methods study aims to better understand the **process** of how colleges choose to participate in FAST and **implement** FAST, as well as the program’s **influences** on student outcomes. By capturing how practitioners make decisions in real-time about implementing the state-incentivized policy, this study provides nationally relevant, empirical evidence on state policies to enhance the affordability of DC programs.



Objective

This study aims to explore: (1) how both high school and community college practitioners make sense of explicit and implicit intended goals of FAST and implement it, and (2) the influence of FAST on postsecondary outcomes as measured by academic momentum.

Methodology

We used a parallel mixed methods approach in that quantitative and qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted concurrently and with equal priority.

Qualitative component:

- Data collection from document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 10 high school and 8 community college DC practitioners in the greater Houston region.

Quantitative component:

- Lee College administrative datasets: LC is a public community college and Hispanic-Serving Institution in the Houston suburbs, with about 3,300 students enrolled in its DC programs.

Analysis

Qualitative: A multiple or collective case study approach (Stake, 2008)

- Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2021)
- Trustworthiness

Quantitative: Regression-based analysis, including propensity score weighting (*in progress*)

- First-year academic momentum outcomes: immediate PSE enrollment, full-time enrollment status, first-semester/year GPA, # college-level credits earned after college matriculation
- Treatment: DC participation; FAST eligibility

Findings

Qualitative findings from high schools:

- K–12 staff valued initiatives by their partner CC to anticipate policy changes, track draft legislation, and clarify questions regarding FAST program requirements.
- K–12 staff faced challenges due to limited capacity and training, but they used different strategies to raise awareness among students and families about DC.

“With a small team and more students enrolling, if we’re not educated in FAST, then we’re misguiding our students ... So we always want to provide them with the most structured advice, where they receive the least excess hours, whatever would transition the best to their post-secondary plans.”

“Jumping into something while still under development, although it was exciting, when we’re talking about the possible impact it could have on students... Delaying to spring gave us those assurances that we can put together a good program before we do—and we still don’t know what’s going on with a lot of things.”

Qualitative findings from CCs:

- Local contexts influenced whether colleges were early or late implementers of the FAST program.
- Substantial differences in how CCs and HSs navigated ambiguity in state policy.
- Varied strategies to prevent escalating costs from deterring non-FAST students from participating in dual credit.

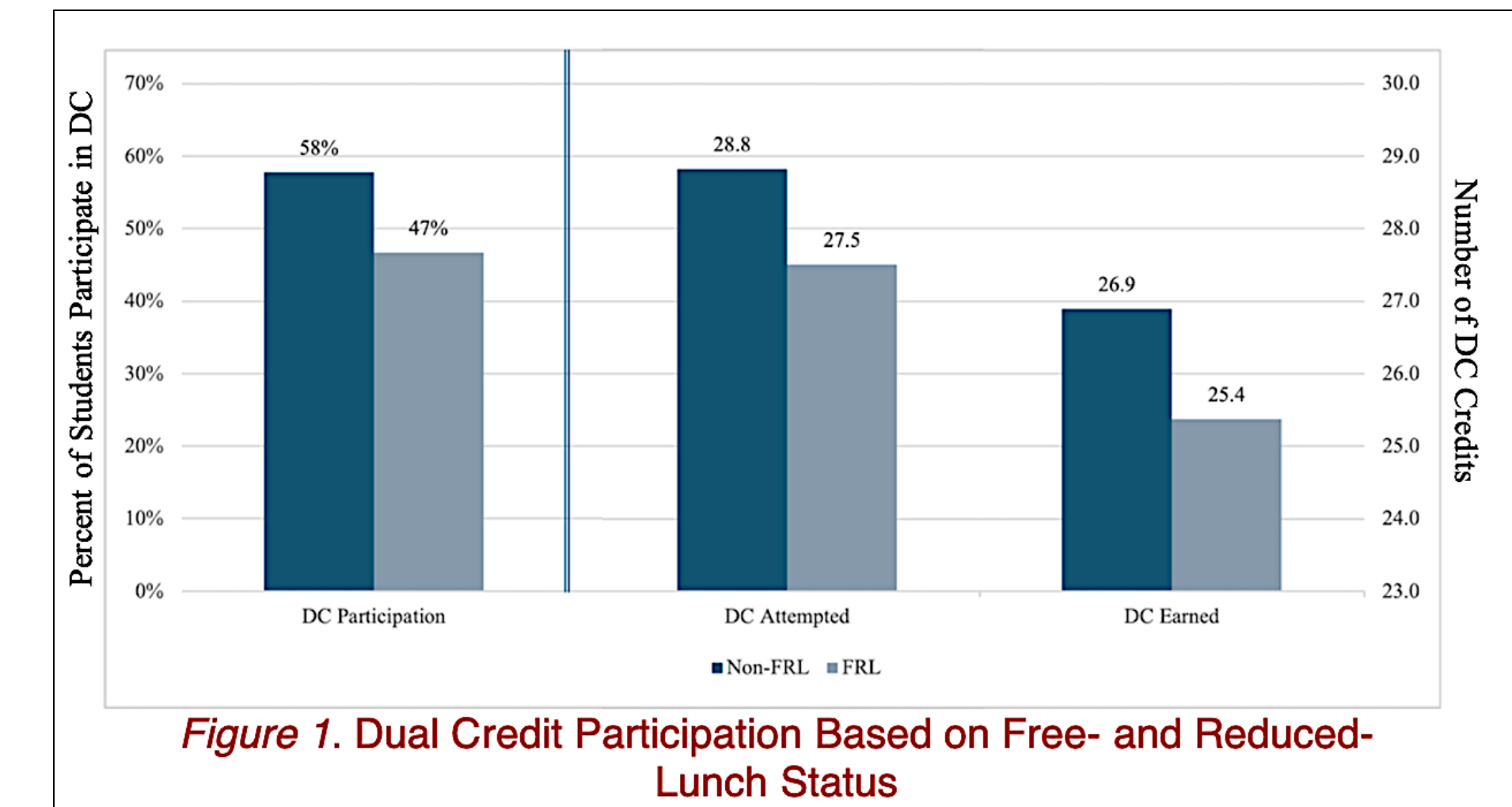
Discussion

This study highlights the promise of the FAST initiative and the on-the-ground complexities of policy implementation in educational settings

- Both K–12 and community college professionals exercise autonomy to implement state policy from the bottom up.
- To help students and families take full advantage of FAST, the state should consider: (1) increasing dual credit participation with strategies beyond tuition waivers; (2) sustaining FAST gains through rigorous dual credit programs; and (3) continuing to track FAST statewide and student outcomes.

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Descriptive summary:

- DC students had a higher probability of attending a postsecondary institution within one year after HS graduation. Compared to non-DC FRL students, FRL students who took DC were 1.97 times more likely to attend college within a year of HS graduation ($n = 1,500$).
- Among students who attended LC ($n = 525$), DC students, regardless of FRL status, earned 1.15 credits fewer than non-DC students with similar GPA during their first semester.



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