High GPAs Aren't Enough: Why Some High-Achieving Students Struggle to Navigate Dual Admissions

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Many young people who performed well academically in high school enter community college aspiring to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Some of these students, though, leave higher education without a degree of any kind. California's dual admissions policy was designed to address this problem and ensure that students maintain momentum at community college and transfer and earn a BA in a timely manner. The dual admissions policy offers recent high school graduates who earned a 3.0 or above GPA in high school a guaranteed admission to one of six University of California (UC) campuses if they enroll in a California Community College, declare a major immediately upon matriculation, and commit to transferring within three years.

My dissertation research highlights a major challenge: **Highly successful students are often not provided with the skills or information necessary to navigate complex educational policies.** As part of this research, I interviewed 16 California students who were all eligible to use the dual admissions offer. Of the 16 students, three were the first in their family to attend college, and six had parents who attended college in their home country before immigrating to the US and were therefore unfamiliar with the American higher education system. Students came from a diversity of backgrounds, identifying as Mexican, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, Israeli, Vietnamese, Filipina, and Russian.

Despite graduating with high school GPAs of 3.0 and above, **many of the 16 students I interviewed who opted into dual admissions expressed a lack of preparation** when it came to meeting UC eligibility requirements, selecting a college, and choosing a major.

Five interview participants explicitly stated that they did not know what was required to gain admittance to a UC. As one student described,

> Neither of my parents attended college…. I didn't really understand what it meant to apply to college, and what it meant to be accepted and what was expected of me. So that is definitely why I didn't get accepted [to a UC] because I didn't even meet the bare requirements, and I don't think that was ever explained to me.

Once these students realized that they would not be enrolling in a four-year college and needed to select a community college instead, they struggled to select one that would meet their career goals. Students they said that they made choices based on limited information or advice that they crowd-sourced online:

> I still kind of laugh about this decision. There's two community colleges near me...and I [my college] just kind of on a whim, because I knew someone who had gone there, and he said it was nice.
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> First I was gonna go to [a nearby community college] but then I did more research... I searched up 'best community colleges near me' on reddit and it had [my community college] as the first one so I was like ok, that's the one it is.

Finally, though there were students in my sample who knew at the time of matriculation the major and career they wanted to pursue, these were the students who had relatives at home from whom they learned about these careers or had participated in selective high school programs that provided intense career exposure and preparation. Other students who did not have these opportunities entered community college with much less clarity and needed a significant amount of time to make a major selection or changed their mind later on, which ultimately meant not being able to use the dual admissions program.

The obstacles students encountered highlight both the advising capacity gap and the temporal misalignment of advisor availability.

While the dual admissions program itself is small and serves a specific group of students, namely recent high school graduates with high GPAs, these challenges related to UC eligibility, college choice and major selection affect many more students each year. High school counselors often have high numbers of students on their caseload and do not have the capacity to support students in understanding and navigating transfer pathways. Exacerbating this challenge, students have to make critical decisions over the summer about programs, majors and opportunities when they do not have access to their high school counselor.

Community colleges are similarly working under tight budget constraints and their advisors may also have high caseloads. As a result, they may feel forced to triage, or prioritize, students with certain at-risk indicators, such as missing assignments, failing the first exam or assignment of the semester, or excessive absences. As one advisor told me during my research: “I have to worry about the masses… when I have 39,000 students here.”

If we want transfer policies to deliver on their promise, higher education systems must recognize that strong academic performance often requires completely different skills than navigating college bureaucracy. Colleges must work to provide advising and career support at scale. For example, providing systematic career-exploration opportunities for undecided students upon entry at community college could save students a lot of time and frustration and ensure that they get on a path into a program early on.

Policymakers should also re-consider the timelines of college-related decisions, shifting them earlier or later so that students have access to either their high school counselor or their college advisor, or investing in programs such as College & Career Bridge that provide students with support from mentors during the summer. Given that dual admissions is under review by the State Legislature, now is the time to refine how the program operates so that more students can benefit from the opportunity.