Tested Experience as a Model for Dual Enrollment Certification

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I was working as a high school teacher several years ago when our district formed a dual enrollment partnership with a nearby community college. Our school had a disproportionate number of households living below the poverty level and dual enrollment was embraced by our administration as a way for our students to view college as a realistic pathway. The college we were partnering with for dual enrollment courses required instructors to hold content-related graduate degrees; on that basis I was assigned to teach a general psychology course. I replaced a veteran instructor who not only wrote the curriculum for this course, but also received numerous accolades over the years including a national teacher of the year nomination. Despite this record of teaching excellence, their MEd in educational leadership did not meet the college credentialing requirements to teach a freshmen-level social science course and our administration changed instructors. Subsequently, the college syllabus was less comprehensive than the one designed by the high school instructor so, as one might expect, this instructor felt undervalued for all they had done creating this course. I spent the semester borrowing lesson plans that the former teacher had previously developed, while also being in the awkward position of requesting their mentorship on providing the curriculum to a high school population. There were other experienced teachers at our school who faced similar challenges with dual enrollment.
enrollment certification. One was a retired surgeon who was only certified by the college after repeated explanations of why their medical school training might qualify them to teach freshman-level chemistry as much as a content-specific graduate degree would. Other instructors at our school without standard credentials did not fare as well and had their dual enrollment applications rejected. This included a business teacher who ran a successful tax service, as well as a published author who taught college composition courses for our English department. As a result of the rigid certification standards for DE instructors, students lost multiple dual enrollment opportunities due to lack of “qualified” instructors. This experience served as my first lesson in both the inequity and irregularity of dual enrollment certification.

In something of a role reversal I eventually left my teaching position to manage the aforementioned dual enrollment program at the community college. Today, I am fortunate to be working with a leadership team that understands the need for a flexible approach to partnering with our area high schools. Yet despite this support, we are part of a multi-college system that requires a degree of consistency in implementation of dual enrollment initiatives. A major challenge we face is securing qualified instructors for our high school-based courses. Credentialing standards for most of our courses require a graduate degree and until recently there was a strong preference toward a content-area specialization. This is particularly problematic for underfunded school districts unable to provide opportunities for faculty to obtain graduate degrees as part of their professional development pathway. Yet all school districts and dual enrollment programs stand to gain if skilled and knowledgeable instructors are provided the opportunity to teach dual enrollment courses to their students. Extending those opportunities to underserved students in underfunded districts will require applying some innovative strategies to instructor credentialing.

Reforming dual enrollment credentialing standards first requires that we navigate our way through the variety of differences between high school and college learning environments. From my experience administering dual enrollment observations these differences include, assessment, pedagogy, time management, and the accommodation of diverse learning styles. Most importantly, for our purposes, is the relative value placed on professional development and the types of graduate degrees held by instructors. Colleges tend to place higher value on content-area graduate degrees, while high schools have increasingly placed more value on graduate degrees in curriculum design, instructional technology, and administration. A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report from 2021 found that 51% of teachers had some type of graduate degree. A complementing study from NCES found that only 30% of high school teachers held a graduate degree in a specific content area and the remainder were in a range of educational specializations such
as secondary education, counseling, and administration (Horn & Jang, 2017; NCES, 2023). These percentages were also reflected when I reviewed the files of the 150 dual enrollment instructors I currently work with in New Hampshire and Vermont, neither of which require teachers to hold a graduate degree (Sartore, 2023). Of these, roughly two thirds of the graduate degrees are in some area of education. As part of their certification process I was required to ask each of them to provide additional documentation of content expertise.

If a graduate degree with content specialization is required (or strongly preferred) to teach dual enrollment courses, there is evidence indicating that students in underfunded school districts will be most affected by these lost opportunities (Connolly & Swisher, 2015). In the State of New Hampshire the equity gap between school districts in this regard is striking. There is a 40% differential between professional development funding in relation to districts with higher number of instructors who hold graduate degrees versus those districts with lower graduate degree attainment (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2023; US Census Bureau, 2023). Some troubling anecdotal evidence also suggests school districts with relatively low levels of professional development require a more targeted approach that would steer their staff to enroll in graduate programs with teaching-related applications. If that is the case, an instructor in that district would be encouraged to use those limited funds toward an English Master’s of Arts in Teaching (MAT), for example, as opposed to a Master’s of Fine Arts (MFA) in fiction writing, despite the fact that the latter degree would more readily be approved for dual enrollment by an academic affairs office.

A growing number of colleges are addressing the challenge of securing qualified dual enrollment instructors by providing their own faculty with a stipend to teach dual enrollment courses in high school classrooms in what the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) refers to as the “college provided faculty” model (CPF). This is offered as a solution to the lack of “qualified” instructors in underfunded school districts, as well as an enrollment-driven initiative for student matriculation that has increasingly been a focus of dual enrollment programs (NACEP, 2020). There are obvious complications with this model. A large degree of high school staff development is in pedagogy, assessment, and the use of educational technology. High school faculty are evaluated in these areas to a greater degree than content expertise. Student test scores are used in some states as “value added measures” (VAM’s) that comprise a large portion of a teacher’s evaluation (NASSP, 2019). From my own experience as a high school instructor I noticed a sharp increase in professional development offerings around assessment and test taking strategies that coincided with the increased use of standardized testing as a
primary measure of student achievement.

College faculty are generally not required to have any professional development around pedagogy and educational methods. As a result, high school administrators may be justifiably concerned about their courses being taught by unlicensed college faculty with little or no teacher training. In addition, most college instructors do not have a license to teach high school, nor do they have the skills necessary to teach that population (Hope & Robinson, 2013). Repurposing the term “academic integrity” (so often deployed by colleges to challenge the rigor of high school instruction) high school educators may push back on the notion that untrained college faculty can meet the learning needs of dual enrollment students more effectively than a certified high school instructor.

Of all the solutions offered for this dilemma the one most underutilized is the application of “tested experience” as a means to verify content area expertise for dual enrollment instructors. The term is not new and has been included in the dual enrollment guidelines of multiple accreditation organizations including the Higher Learning Commission:

[T]ested experience may substitute for an earned credential or portions thereof and allows an institution to determine that a faculty member is qualified based on experience that the institution determines is equivalent to the degree it would otherwise require for a faculty position. This experience should be tested experience in that it includes a breadth and depth of experience outside of the classroom in real-world situations relevant to the discipline in which the faculty member would be teaching. (HLC, 2020)

The University of Detroit-Mercy is one example of a college that explicitly incorporates tested experience as part of their standard faculty hiring practice, as well as for dual enrollment certification for instructors working in the Detroit Public School System (University of Detroit–Mercy, 2020; Detroit Public Schools, n.d.).

I would suggest an expanded view of this model that places greater emphasis on teaching experience and other concrete experiential factors and applying this model to the formulation of what defines a qualified dual enrollment instructor. Many classroom instructors have the lived experience of teaching a course for several years that is accompanied by the annual acquisition of increased content knowledge. One might even argue this type of lived experience is equivalent to the preparation graduate students undergo for comprehensive exams that are a standard component of graduate degree programs.

What are some approaches/metrics that colleges can use to form a consistent set of criteria for implementing teaching experience as a basis for dual enrollment
certification? Below are some criteria colleges might add to their credentialing policies. These pathways can be used in tandem when reviewing the qualifications of dual enrollment instructors or added as an addendum to existing policies that require the instructors to meet multiple measures:

- **Professional Development Hours:** colleges and universities can set a minimum number of content area professional development hours an instructor needs to qualify as a dual enrollment instructor. Most school districts require a specific number of these hours in the content area on a three-year cycle. A dual enrollment instructor could make content-focused activities a regular feature of their three-year plan that would meet the needs of both state and dual enrollment certification.

- **Post-Graduate Teacher Certification Programs:** these are designed as one-year post-graduate programs to provide teacher certification for students who already hold a BA in the content area. These are particularly helpful to candidates who have experience working in a content-related field but do not have a graduate degree. These programs include methods courses that are content-area specific, as well as a student teaching teaching component.

- **State Teacher Exams /Praxis II Scores:** Praxis is a series of teacher certification exams administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). Most states require these tests for teacher certification, but even those that do not require the test for state certification will sometimes use them as a metric in the hiring process. Praxis I exams measure basic skills in reading, writing, and math. Praxis II is a content-specific exam and most states that utilize them require the student to take multiple Praxis II exams, which cover many different subject areas. Each state requires a different combination of Praxis II exams for certification. For example, a student who plans to teach US History might be required to take separate exams in pedagogy and content. In many states, these include a content knowledge and a pedagogy exam (ETS, 2023). As a tool for dual enrollment credentialing, a benchmark can be set for the instructor to have received an above average score on a range of these tests.

- **Graduate Comprehensive Exams:** A college academic department might require that dual enrollment faculty without an MA take a comprehensive content exam similar to the one a graduate student might take. This can be codified into policy with a specific score
required to certify the dual enrollment instructor.

- Graduate Teaching Assistant Status: Colleges can certify dual enrollment instructors that have been accepted into a graduate program and are actively working towards a degree. They will be assigned a college-based faculty partner and the dual enrollment instructor could teach the course at their high school under the same governance that a graduate teaching assistant would. This approach is consistent with graduate students teaching entry-level courses at a university while pursuing a degree.

- GRE Scores: Although most subject area GRE exams have been discontinued, they are still offered in math, physics, and psychology. There also appears to be a decreasing number of colleges that require these scores for graduate programs (Langin, 2019). In any case, a college may choose to look at subject area GRE performance as a means for determining graduate-level content knowledge. The verbal and quantitative reasoning sections of the general test might be utilized by the college department as a qualifier as well. These tests have been widely criticized for cultural bias over the years, so it may not be advisable to use them as a sole determinant in certifying dual enrollment instructors (Langin, 2019).

- Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) Certificate: Although requirements for HQT status have been scaled back after passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), instructors who received this status prior to 2015 were required to meet the following criteria: 1) hold at least a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution; 2) hold full state certification; and 3) demonstrate competence in each core academic subject in which a teacher teaches (Professional Learning Exchange, 2016).

- Adjunct Credentialing Programs: some colleges offer adjunct faculty teaching programs that provide a certificate validating the development of skills necessary for teaching excellence in a college classroom. These programs come in the form of an asynchronous online course that high school dual enrollment instructors can enroll in prior (or in conjunction with) their dual enrollment teaching assignment. The University of Denver launched an adjunct teaching program in academic year 2022-2023, but there are also outside organizations that provide this training as well (University of Denver, 2023).
The above pathways, which can be used separately or paired together, are all examples of how we might utilize the professional experience of high school instructors for the purpose of dual enrollment certification. Separately, we should also consider lived experience outside of teaching to meet this same goal. Below are examples in specific academic disciplines of how we might apply this to dual enrollment certification under the tested experience model we are exploring.

- **English**: publication of poetry, journal articles, business writing, novels, journalism experience.
- **Humanities**: music production, art exhibits, arts management, sign language training, world language proficiency.
- **Science**: lab work, inventions, published research, patents.
- **Math**: use of math in workplace settings, engineering, production.
- **Social Sciences**: publication, social and human services related work.
- **Advanced Manufacturing**: industry certification, entrepreneurship, work experience.
- **Computer Technology**: industry certifications, entrepreneurship, work experience.
- **Health Sciences**: healthcare experience, EMS, healthcare administration.

It is important to emphasize that high school communities have as much at stake in securing quality instructors as do partnering colleges. This is often overlooked as colleges sometimes view dual enrollment in adversarial terms, as “academic integrity” is weaponized to raise concern that high school dual enrollment courses are “watered down” or otherwise compromised. Remembering that high schools benefit from rigorous dual enrollment programs as much as their college partners will go a long way in enacting mutually beneficial reforms that will provide opportunities to a larger number of students. As dual enrollment programs are growing exponentially and are currently being offered as a gateway for first generation students (as well as a partial solution to the student debt crisis) it is time to reconceptualize the qualifications required of dual enrollment instructors. This requires that colleges enact certification policies that embrace the broad array of untapped skills and lived experiences held by high school educators. This will allow colleges to design intentional certification policies that substitute for content-based graduate degrees and thereby increase dual enrollment opportunities for a more diverse range of students. The tested experience model presented here offers one pathway to reaching that goal.
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