Accelerate ED

Belonging by Design FOR DUAL ENROLLMENT STUDENTS

Accelerate ED

Accelerate ED is a learning community of state and regional cross-sector teams working to expand access to high-quality pathways that enable students—especially those historically underrepresented in advanced coursework—to earn substantial college credit and pursue aligned career pathways while in high school. The community advances this work through peer learning, convenings, and collaborative problem-solving that focus on developing coherent systems, aligning policy, and providing meaningful student support. The community is led by Education Strategy Group (ESG).

About This Resource

This resource is one of three interconnected public goods created through an Accelerate ED Designathon. Facilitated by ESG between August 2025 and January 2026, the Designathon brought together participants from community colleges, K–12 districts, intermediaries, and research organizations across Illinois, Louisiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia to address a critical question: *How might we strengthen the connection between dual enrollment and full postsecondary matriculation at the same institutions, creating seamless transitions that significantly increase the likelihood of students persisting in their chosen pathways?*

Through four virtual meetings; a three-day in-person design sprint in Charlotte, NC; and ongoing asynchronous collaboration, teams explored root causes, generated solutions, and rapidly prototyped practical tools. The process centered on real practitioner insights, iterative feedback, and a commitment to creating resources that could be immediately useful across diverse contexts. The result is three public goods that can be used independently or together to support practitioners and system leaders in strengthening dual enrollment transitions. **To view all of the public goods, visit https://edstrategy.org/resource/accelerate-ed-designathon.**

OVERVIEW

Dual enrollment gives students early access to college, but access alone does not guarantee that students will develop a strong connection to the partner college or university that would increase the likelihood of matriculation to that institution. For students moving between high school and college, belonging is shaped by small, everyday moments: who checks in, where they feel welcome, the messages they receive, and whether their experiences and contributions are recognized as part of the college community. This resource surfaces those opportunities and offers the field practical strategies and starting points for cultivating belonging for and with dual enrollment students. Designed in collaboration with K–12 educators, intermediaries, and college leaders—the same cross-sector partners who bring belonging to life for students—this resource is intended for advisors and practitioners, school counselors, and teams building dual enrollment pathways across systems.

WHY THIS MATTERS

By participating in dual enrollment, students gain early access to college instruction, academic rigor, and a lasting recognition of their achievements through their grade point average and transcript. At the same time, many have limited opportunities to experience the sense of belonging and broader benefits that come with being part of a college community. Dual enrollment can help provide these opportunities by giving high school students firsthand experience with college coursework, allowing them to learn the expectations, routines, and responsibilities of college life before they formally enroll (Karp, 2012). Belonging is the result of intentional, coordinated design choices made by high school, school district, and postsecondary partners. When students are welcomed into campus life, supported by aligned systems, and treated as full members of the college community, they are more likely to persist, succeed, and see college as a place for them. Over time, these small signals add up, shaping whether dual enrollment becomes a powerful on-ramp to postsecondary success or another program students must navigate alone.

Belonging strategies also strengthen institutional and cross-sector systems by fostering trust, building loyalty to the campus, and creating warm handoffs that help students move seamlessly between the two systems. Research shows that a strong sense of belonging is linked to important student outcomes: Students with a greater sense of connection to their institution are more likely to stay engaged, persist in their studies, and continue their enrollment over time. In fact, in a nationally representative sample of first-year college students, belonging was positively associated with persistence and engagement at the institution, highlighting the role of connection in long-term academic success (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). When applied to dual enrollment, fostering belonging and connection earlier—through intentional engagement with campus support systems and resources—can help students view college as a place where they belong and increase the likelihood that they will see themselves continuing their education after high school. In essence, these strategies both provide student support and bolster enrollment.

10 ACTIONS TO FOSTER BELONGING

To help the field build intentionally designed belonging strategies in dual enrollment, this resource includes 10 actions that systems and practitioners can take to foster belonging. Together, these actions create the conditions that make belonging possible for dual enrollment students.

1. **Authentic College Identity:** Students receive a college ID and email before classes start, giving them full access to systems, spaces, and resources and signaling that they truly belong on campus.

2. **Access Without Barriers:** Students are provided tours of and can use both physical and virtual common spaces such as the library, tutoring center, and student center like their peers without needing to ask for permission or wonder where they are allowed to go.

3. **Go-To Advisor:** Students receive comprehensive guidance to understand how their courses will help them progress toward their intended college degree, and they know exactly who their college advisor is and how to contact them.

4. **Onboarding That Fits Their Perspective:** Students take part in an orientation designed specifically for dual enrollment students, which sets clear expectations and demystifies what college classes and support look like.

5. **Cohorts That Build Connection:** Students are connected to other dual enrollment students and near-peer mentors who have recently navigated the process, ensuring that they are not alone in their college journey and have a network of peers for support, camaraderie, and connection.

6. **Student-Centered Feedback:** Dual enrollment students are asked regularly through one-on-one conversations, focus groups, and surveys to describe what is working and what is not about their experience. These students can see how their input shapes communication, services, and policies.

7. **Clear Course Pathways to a Credential:** Students understand early how their initial courses lead to a college certificate or degree and receive a streamlined navigational process to change their status from part-time dual enrollment student to full-time matriculated student.

8. **Inclusive Dual Enrollment Classrooms and Supported Instructors:** Instructors are fully integrated into the campus and dual enrollment systems and are supported to meet the needs of dual enrollment students.

9. **Caregivers in the Loop:** Families and caregivers have clear, accessible information about college and course expectations, financial implications, and key deadlines through multiple channels (email, text, family events), enabling them to support students in the process. Communications acknowledge that many caregivers may be navigating college systems for the first time alongside their students and provide specific ways they can offer support without needing to be experts themselves.

10. **One Message Across Systems:** High schools and colleges are aligned in their advising support, providing students with accurate, timely information about deadlines, expectations, and resources that are consistent across both systems. Colleges provide high school instructors and guidance counselors with training and resources on college advising.

DESIGNING BELONGING ACROSS THE STUDENT JOURNEY

The strategies described in the previous section illustrate *what belonging looks like by design*—through principles, conditions, and system-level signals that intentionally support dual enrollment students. The following table shows *how belonging shows up over time for students:* developmentally appropriate moments and opportunities for reflection across grades and transition points. Rather than focusing solely on programmatic or transactional milestones, the examples highlight how small, intentional choices reinforce students' sense of belonging as they move between high school and college systems.

A critical aspect of belonging is teacher support to ensure strong connections with students in dual enrollment courses. As dual enrollment continues to expand, the preparation and ongoing support provided to instructors—whether employed by the high school or college—play a central role in ensuring course quality and equity. However,

professional development for dual enrollment faculty is frequently uneven, limited, or delayed, leaving some faculty underprepared and undersupported to effectively engage high school students in college learning environments (Focarile & Denecker, 2024). For this reason, it is critical that faculty receive targeted support through Centers for Teaching and Learning or other professional development avenues. This support is often overlooked in conversations about belonging for dual enrollment students, yet it can yield significant gains in faculty–student connection and overall student experience.

The reflection prompts in the right column can be incorporated into existing advising sessions, classroom check-ins, or digital portfolio platforms. They are designed to help students articulate their evolving college-going identity and can inform how educators provide support.

GRADE/STAGE	BELONGING IN ACTION	STUDENT REFLECTION
9th Grade	I had a meaningful conversation with an adult about college and how I'm feeling as I consider my options.	*I am beginning to see myself as a future college student because …*
10th Grade	I participated in a campus tour or other dual enrollment experience and have a plan for how it fits into my post–high school goals.	*Something I learned this year that makes me want to take a dual enrollment course is …*
11th Grade	I completed my first dual enrollment course and have reflected on how it fits into my plans for life after high school.	*Taking college classes while in high school makes me feel …*
12th Grade	I completed the logistical steps to enroll in college and understand how college courses taken in high school support my degree or credential path.	*One way my dual enrollment experience helped me feel part of college was …*
Summer Before College	I attended orientation and learned how to access advising support and begin building campus connections.	*Before starting college, I feel most confident about …*
First Year of College	I have identified a potential major and connected with a trusted peer and/or adult on the college campus.	*I feel I belong in college because …*

CONCLUSION

Belonging cannot be an afterthought; it must be intentionally designed into dual enrollment from the outset and collectively owned by both K–12 and postsecondary advising teams. Cultivating belonging requires coordinated strategies that are developed with students and reinforced through consistent interactions with adults, peers, and campus resources across both systems. The strategies in this resource illustrate how aligned advising, shared messaging, and intentional touchpoints help students make informed choices and experience dual enrollment as a coherent, supportive ecosystem rather than a set of disconnected requirements. This work depends on sustained collaboration between K–12 and college partners, regular feedback loops with students, and a shared commitment to adjusting practices based on what students say they need.

When belonging is built in from the start and reinforced by both advising teams, dual enrollment becomes not just a stepping stone but a foundation that strengthens students' confidence, connection to the college, and likelihood of continuing at the partner institution after high school.

IMPLEMENTATION NOTE

These strategies work best when they are coordinated across both the high school and college. Use the accompanying Student Engagement Questionnaire to assess which belonging strategies are already in place and which need strengthening. Use the accompanying Data Sharing Framework to track whether belonging strategies are translating into matriculation and persistence outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

- Focarile, T., & Denecker, C. (2024). Utilizing Centers for Teaching and Learning to support dual enrollment educators. *Metropolitan Universities, 35*(3), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.18060/27208

- Gopalan, M., & Brady, S. T. (2020, March). College students' sense of belonging: A national perspective. *Educational Researcher, 49*(2), 134–137. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19897

- Karp, M. (2012). "I don't know, I've never been to college!" Dual enrollment as a college readiness strategy. *New Directions for Higher Education*, *2012*(158), 21–28. https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20011